

Moral examples for today's youth

by Svetlana Broz

How did Tito manage to keep Yugoslavia united? That's a difficult question, but I think my grandfather saw politics in terms of brotherhood and he tried to promote brotherly coexistence in this country of twenty million people. That type of approach worked for over 40 years and I am very sad to see how certain politicians intent on destroying the country actually succeeded in doing so with the terrible wars in Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Today I have been invited to speak about the Forest of the Righteous, about the Garden of the Righteous for Sarajevo, which I have managed since 2001. Over a number of years my work has brought me into contact with righteous people who have helped others and who have overcome the barriers of war. In addition, I have done research into the survivors, into those who helped the victims and even into people who, at that time, were perhaps considered enemies. I started collecting first-hand accounts in 1993 and in 2001 I accepted Gabriele Nissim's proposal to run a branch of the Gardens of the Righteous in my own country. This has given me the opportunity to meet numerous young people, starting from those of Bosnia and its neighbours. Through my research into this subject I have already met 90,000 people and I believe the testimony of those who have risked their own lives or anyway something very dear to them by helping the persecuted is absolutely vital. They are examples of special importance for the new generations, for the young people born during or maybe after the war. Why? Because it is always important to have a model to look up to. It is important to realize that we can all behave decently, even in the direst straits. Those who have behaved decently are also those that have convinced us that it is the only thing to do when faced with situations that call for decisions of this kind.

When I met those who had helped other people to survive the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia or in other circumstances and other genocides, I would ask them: "But what prompted you to act as you did?" Their answers were all different but they had one thing in common: before them there had been someone else in their family or in another religious group who had acted in that way; or maybe they had read about this type of experience in wars, catastrophes and in the more recent genocides. This was the message common to all those who had behaved as committed human beings, risking their lives, their livelihoods or everything they possessed. So the common denominator was another Righteous person who had set the example for them. This was fundamental when we decided to define a programme that we called "Education for civil courage". We used examples from the recent past, from the Bosnian or Croatian wars, to educate the new generations and teach them how to behave in future. We linked the past with the future through today's educational process.

I firmly believe that the most important thing for all of us is to know that we always have an option to behave decently. And that is why we organize a whole series of educational initiatives and always offer practical examples of people who have sacrificed their own lives to protect others, people that have risked everything, and by doing so, have succeeded in rescuing their fellow human beings. We considered the young generations as university and high school students, but we have now prepared a programme for primary schools too and also hope to work one day in play schools, because I am convinced that the key targets for these really significant issues are precisely young children, even as young as four. In Italy, in Rimini, I worked in a school with a group of children of that age and their reaction was amazing. It was a truly memorable experience. This is the best way to teach children. Obviously a programme has to be prepared. We need to develop the instruments for working with such small children, but anyway, for our war-torn societies it is important to speak to the new generations, regardless of their age.

This may be less true in the United States and in Italy, but I am convinced that examples are important for young people all over the world. That is why we have contacted fifty US universities: because they have realized that this is universal message. This educational process is something we would like to share with Italian schools and universities and we have already done so with some, such as Bologna with its various faculties. This type of partnership has already taken off. Later it will be developed further, but I am very happy today to see young people here in the audience too. The fact that young people are interested in our past, even in its worst aspects, is a good sign, and we should think about these shining examples of humankind because they restore our hope in the future. We cannot build a future based on evil, but we can build a future based on human kindness.

This is why, in the countries that have experienced war in recent times, such as the Balkans and certain other States, the example of people who have acted courageously, who have resisted, who have disobeyed negative authorities to prevent war crimes taking place, such examples play a vital role in the process of reconciliation. This is our experience in the Balkans: similar examples offer extremely valuable contributions to society as a whole. First of all, nobody can blame a member of their own or an opposing religious group as such since we are not all the same: each individual has to make his or her own decisions. Some committed war crimes, others behaved as brilliant human beings. Most did not behave at all, simply limiting themselves to the role of bystanders. Many passive bystanders, who did neither evil nor good, started to behave differently when they were faced with making a choice, which means that in the last analysis, we always have the option of changing our behaviour. The first time we may make a mistake, but as long as we know that it is possible, we can always improve. This is why these examples are perfect.

Thank you for inviting me to take part.