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"The *Gariwo* website and the *We For* project: the Web Forest of the Righteous"
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The birth of the GARIWO website and of the Committee for the Gardens of the Righteous Worldwide: widening our horizons

Since the Committee for the Gardens of the Righteous was first set up in the late 1990s, the *gariwo* website has been its main mouthpiece.

GA RI WO stands, in fact, for: "Gardens of the Righteous Worldwide".

Ten years ago, especially in Italy, the Internet was an unusual and avant-garde medium, used almost exclusively by the "initiated", but still an innovation for the world of culture and civil society.

The need to communicate through this new medium and to use a "younger", more up-to-date language arose when we organized our first conference:

"There is always an option to say 'yes' or 'no'. The Righteous against the genocides of Armenians and Jews", held in Padua in December 2000. This event aroused great interest and effectively prompted reflection on the role of the Righteous and on whether the paradigm of horror applied to the Holocaust could be extended to other genocides. We wondered whether this could be done without denying the uniqueness of the Holocaust but by emphasizing features that it shared with other mass exterminations, particularly in Europe, during the 20th century.

The conference also provided an opportunity for the meeting of two worlds – with very different but singularly parallel experiences – those of Gabriele Nissim and Pietro Kuciukian, both active since the mid '90s.

In 1994 Nissim had published "L'uomo che fermò Hitler" [The man who stopped Hitler], about the figure of Dimitar Peshev, and he was working on "Il Tribunale del Bene" [The Tribunal of Good], based on lengthy interviews with its leading light, Moshe Bejski, in Tel Aviv.

Peshev, vice president of the Bulgarian parliament, had rescued the entire Jewish community of his country by taking decisive steps to stop their deportation, planned by the Nazi allies in 1943, from going ahead.

Bejski, a Polish Jew who escaped the Holocaust thanks to Oskar Schindler's famous list, had emigrated to Israel at the end of the war and in the '60s had become president of the Yad Vashem Commission of the Righteous. Prompted by the huge debt of gratitude felt by the rescued, for thirty years Bejski strove to demonstrate that the rescuers were "normal" people: not heroes, but ordinary men and women whose consciences had urged them to take personal responsibility for their fellows in distress, and who had refused to become passive bystanders and hence conniving accomplices.

Kuciukian – a child of the Armenian diaspora – had begun researching the genocide of his people and, like Bejski, had thought long and hard about how to acknowledge their debt of gratitude to those who had tried to stop the

massacres and had denounced them to the world at large. Kuciukian had set up an International Committee dedicated to the "Righteous for the Armenians". The Committee underlined the vital role of witnesses in the struggle both against genocide denial and in favour of rebuilding the identity of a people who had even been denied the right to mourn their dead. It is no coincidence that the International Committee is entitled: "Memory is the future"; every year, in Yerevan, it renews its commitment to commemorate a "Righteous person for the Armenians", with a stone in his/her name in the "Wall of Remembrance", on the occasion of the ceremony marking the anniversary of the genocide, on 24 April.

The role of the individual in history

The decision to set up the "Committee for the Gardens of the Righteous" was just as innovative as setting up our website. It marked a widening of horizons, a new perspective on historical events and their leading actors: focusing not only on movements, politics, the economy, social mechanisms, but also the individuals themselves and their ability to oppose standardization and terror. Up until then, individual behaviour and a sense of individual responsibility for one's fellows had been considered marginal.

Nissim encouraged further reflection on the significance of individuals acting as leading players and not just as second leads. He spoke of their value as investors of internal resources capable of reacting to external events when human dignity is at stake.

Kuciukian grasped the same cognitive and normative significance of the role of the Righteous, the incarnation of human beings who rise above indifference to the tragic fate of their fellows, heed the voice of their conscience and find some way of standing up in their defence. In the case of the Armenian genocide, after almost a century of efforts to get Turkey to acknowledge the responsibility of the Turkish government of that time, the most profound sense of the role of the Righteous is that of their testimony, as Kuciukian himself so eloquently explained in his talk.

Exemplary figures of moral resistance

The Righteous, therefore, as exemplary figures of opposition to Extreme Evil. This is where our reflections began: exemplary because they can act as beacons, in new situations, pointing the way for future generations to understand and act, starting from two cornerstones: the ability to heed one's own conscience and the impulse to stand up in defence of human dignity. Over the years since then, we have tackled the problem of the annihilation of personality in totalitarian regimes, which use the pervasiveness of their power to control every single aspect of the life of the individual and to subject that person to the ideological dimension of "absolute good", established *a priori* by the regime. Opposition to these attempts to crush individual identity has taken numerous forms, from refusing to betray one's fellows (which could effectively be compared to a rescue), right through to the silent resistance of so many courageous women who refused to bow to pressure to repudiate their loved ones, especially their husbands, arrested and dispatched to the gulags.

In December 2003, we organized another international conference in Milan – three days of first-hand accounts and debate in the presence of numerous students and teachers – on “The Righteous and moral resistance to Soviet totalitarianism”. The conference was attended by key Soviet dissidents who had witnessed this moral resistance both in and outside the gulag: in the extreme situations of forced labour in Kolyma - as Varlam Shalamov explained – and in shared lodgings where people were unable to protect their children from the freezing temperatures and risked being reported for a simple phrase. A host of small, apparently useless and desperate details, which belied the Soviet authorities’ claim to holding the entire population in their grip. In the end, when this “intimate” resistance managed to join forces, as it did within the ranks of the dissidents, its devastating potential turned into a material force that successfully toppled a regime that thought it would last forever. In her talk, Annalia Guglielmi described how the leaders of the movements formed in the 1980s in Eastern Europe, from “Charta ’77” to Solidarnosc, were inspired above all by the desire to express themselves as individuals, to see the universal values of human rights prevail – and above all by the compelling desire for freedom as an intimate necessity – what Vaclav Havel called the spirit of “living in truth”.

Civil courage and the defence of human dignity

The next step in our reflections on forms of moral resistance led us to focus on the present day and on the theme of civil courage in the light of exemplary figures struggling for human rights today. These are people who refuse to submit to any rationale that clashes with the dictates of their own conscience and they represent yet another way of safeguarding human dignity. Anna Politkovskaja, for example – just to mention one of the most famous – denounced not only the atrocities in Chechnya, but also the censorship that prevented her from doing her job as a journalist with dignity. She refused to compromise and paid the ultimate price for the sense of responsibility she felt towards others.

THE RIGHTEOUS on our website: types and interactivity

*The **RIGHTEOUS** section of our website reflects the outcome of our efforts to broaden our horizons. In the introduction to the section we explain the innovative guiding principles that have characterized the search for and definition of types of exemplary figures from various historic contexts. It is no coincidence that, alongside the **RIGHTEOUS** officially recognized by institutions such as Yad Vashem or the International Committee of the “Righteous for the Armenians”, there are also **EXEMPLARY FIGURES** that have emerged in other cases of human rights violations around the world. Another section features **TALES AND TESTIMONY**, i.e. stories sent in by our users, related to rescues or episodes of particular significance described by those directly involved or by witnesses. Our website has thus become a guardian of memory, preserving memories of local, personal stories, no matter how small but anyway crucial for safeguarding collective awareness of the past; in addition, it serves as a link with our users, an interactive relationship that fosters exchanges of knowledge and appraisals. In this way, Gariwo is not*

simply a virtual place for static communications, but an opportunity for direct encounters fostered by the extraordinary potential of the Internet.

Genocides, historic contexts and extension of interpretative categories

When analyzing the historic contexts in which Righteous people have been moved to act, our Committee has also examined the theoretical horizons, especially mindful of the debate on the term "genocide" and on the variants of its application. In doing so, we have tried to keep the same open but rigorous approach that guided us in our analysis of the Righteous. As Marcello Flores underlined in his paper, over the last few years there has been an increasing tendency to identify episodes as genocidal when in fact they are no such thing; this is accompanied by a rush to secure the status of "victims of genocide" which risks debasing the perception of the phenomenon.

Hence the need to assess, with great care, the limits within which the historic category of "genocide" can be legitimately applied. This does not mean that the classic definition of genocide as the extermination of national, ethnic, religious or racial groups has not been or cannot be revised once the historic conditions that determined it have passed. It is common knowledge that the 1948 declaration made by the United Nations General Assembly was seriously conditioned by the USSR's refusal to include "political" groups among those at risk of persecution.

The limit has been exceeded by some national regulations, such as those of France and Canada, which have extended the definition. In particular the French one refers to any group targeted by the State for extermination, even if such a group has been identified according to completely arbitrary criteria with no connection to reality, but is said to present risk factors that can be used as a pretext for persecution. In the USSR, for example, the regime justified the internment of millions of people in the GULag by applying the notorious article 58 of the penal code, which arbitrarily allowed them to be defined as "enemies of the people": anyone could end up either as a victim or as a persecutor, and former persecutors would then frequently find themselves numbered among the victims.

The GENOCIDES section

*A site dedicated to the subject of the RIGHTEOUS necessarily has to feature a section on **GENOCIDES** and more in general to **CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY**. The introduction summarizes how the terms that define the tragic historic events of the 20th century have evolved from "war crimes" to "genocide" and to "crimes against humanity". The way the section is structured reflects both the attention paid to the expansion of the interpretative categories, and the need to keep the crime of genocide separate from other non-comparable events. This is why, in addition to the "classic" genocides, such as the **HOLOCAUST** and the **METZ YEGHERN** (the Armenian genocide) – plus more recent ones such as **RWANDA** – we have included other types of mass exterminations, such as the **GULAG**, **THE HOLODOMOR** (the famine induced by Stalin in the Ukraine) and **CAMBODIA**. We believe it is important to point out these and other massacres not entirely definable as genocides, while still distinguishing them*

from the former, such as **ETHNIC CLEANSING IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA** or the massacres in **GUATEMALA**. Others are currently being researched by historians, and others still will be investigated further.

Our website's editorial staff is constantly engaged in collecting material to add new voices and documents useful for research and for further analysis.

In a complete file for each item, the dedicated pages include a breakdown of the various stages of the analysis: the "when and where" (with an interactive map illustrating the crucial moments of the extermination), the numbers of victims, the perpetrators, the ideological motivation and the methods of execution.

General analysis of the website

As well as reflecting the Committee's work in the layout of the contents, gariwo aims to:

- keep its users up to date about the activities of the Committee for the Gardens of the Righteous plus other events

In the **HOME PAGE**, the central part highlights events organized by the Committee or anyway of particular importance; it is divided into announcements in sequence containing explanations and useful, technical and content references; by clicking on "more" you enter the specific page, with further information and other material;

- **interact with users (members of the public, teachers, students, intellectuals)**. In addition to the **TALES AND TESTIMONY** of the **RIGHTEOUS** section, we publish papers (in **LECTURES AND DOCUMENTS**), material for the various sections (**VIDEOS, LINKS**) and we advertise forthcoming events (in the **NEWS BOX**); in the right-hand box of the *Homepage* you can click on the links to our page on *Facebook* and on *You Tube*, for anyone wishing to join, as well as videos;

- window on the world (news and forthcoming events)

The **NEWS** that rolls through the box framed in red on the homepage contains the latest news and initiatives on subjects involving human rights and the Righteous (debates, exhibitions, book publications, conferences, seminars, essays). Every day our editorial staff collects international press reviews from the daily papers and from websites to provide a global vision of what is happening in the world;

- finalità di servizio (materials for teaching, research and analysis purposes)

The sections included in the *second box on the left of the homepage* provide our website users with useful indications:

- in **TALES AND DOCUMENTS** a vast array of documents, articles and essays, all downloadable in pdf;
- in **THESES AND ESSAYS** a long list of research titles, divided per subject;

Commento [R1]: Puoi essere più precisa? I termini "interventi" e "indicazioni" sono molto generici e per la traduzione ho bisogno di avere un'idea più specifica di quello che intendi.

- in **VIDEOS** a rich collection of video and audio tapes, including trailers and descriptions of films and documentaries;
- in **LINKS** an overview of websites worldwide that deal with the issues covered by gariwo.

The items listed under **UPDATES** and **SITE MAP** help you to find your way around our website and to keep up to date with any new additions.

In all its expressions, the gariwo website responds to the basic aim that inspires our Committee: **TO SAFEGUARD THE MEMORY OF THE RIGHTEOUS.**

To examine the past, the historic circumstances in which the Righteous were the leading players and their commitment to preventing extreme evil from prevailing, is the highest example for the new generations and the only guarantee for the future of mankind.

To accomplish this task we have engaged the cooperation and support of prestigious academics, prominent cultural figures in Italy and in the rest of the world, intellectuals of international renown, who have taken part in our initiatives and contributed with stimulating reports, lectures and proposals.

This has given rise to the **GARIWO INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE** described in the website at this link:

http://www.gariwo.net/eng_new/attivita/attivita.php?cod=283

The GARDENS section and the European WE FOR project

Special mention goes to the **GARDENS** section, which lists and describes the "historic" Gardens of the Righteous, such as that of Yad Vashem, and more recently those in Yerevan and Milan, the latter being the "Garden of the Righteous all over the world", set up at the Committee's request and involving the Milan City Council and the city's Jewish community.

To extend and systematize the experience of the Gardens, we have proposed a project to the European Community that would include the memory of the Righteous throughout Europe, the theatre of the rise and misdeeds of the two totalitarian regimes that stained the history of the 20th century with blood.

The project, entitled "WE FOR - Web European Forest Righteous - The Righteous against all forms of totalitarianism. European identity and conscience on the Web", has been approved and is currently being prepared. It will be on line, in English and Italian, by summer 2010.

Its publication on the web will be announced in the gariwo website. For a presentation, check the following link:

<http://www.wefor.eu/>

and for a preview of the project see the slides posted on:

http://www.wefor.eu/doc/wefor_project_050310.pdf

Alongside the existing real Gardens, we present some imaginary Gardens in Europe's capitals that commemorate the exemplary figures

that distinguished themselves for their moral resistance – in a variety of historic circumstances – to the 20th century's two totalitarian regimes.

Trees in these gardens will be dedicated to the Righteous of the Holocaust against Nazism and to the Righteous of the Gulag and of "dissent" against the communist regimes of Eastern Europe.

These virtual Gardens will be displayed in 3D, which will make them lifelike and will enable users to interact with them and also chat with each other.

The space will also contain reproductions of original documents, videos, interviews and in-depth analyses.

The site will include educational kits, exhibitions and other material for students and teachers, gathered from the experience in Italy and in other European countries.

Users can see interventions from the public, tributes, interactivity, research, and contributions from the users themselves will be published on line.