

## **The Gardens of the Righteous**

*Lecture by Pietro Kuciukian*

Both the real and the virtual Gardens of the Righteous keep the memory of Good.

Every tree dedicated to a Righteous reminds of the founding value of human coexistence. We honour the exemplary figures that have responded to extreme Evil by trying to help, to rescue, to bear witness.

The Gardens of the Righteous are places that pass on the power of a commitment to get peoples and cultures closer to each other, to substantiate the ideals of solidarity and pursuit of the common Good.

My search for the Righteous and witnesses of the truth in the Armenian affair is not a fruit of sentimentality or a kind of acceptance and political co-operation. It is a struggle for the truth and justice that arises from the history of my family and my people. At the bottom there is an unavoidable question: what is the way for human beings not to lose their humanity in the tragic historical events?

During the Hamidian massacres of 1896 the Armenian victims were over 300,000. My father's family in Constantinople was rescued by a Turk who stood in front of the house door and diverted the Kurdish gang bands by shouting at them: "Here there are no Armenians!". Later, at the beginning of the genocide perpetrated by the Young Turks in 1915, a ship would take into safety, to Venice, my father, who was a child at that time. We wouldn't hear from my Grandfather any longer.

I reopened the pages of this story, I travelled through Turkey, in the land of my father, I listened to tales and pieces of testimony, I met the survivors who had met the eyewitnesses.

I deeply felt what it means to be the victims of a denied memory and I have sought to understand how Evil springs up, how tragedies interrupt the chain of solidarity between human beings, how extreme Evil hurls itself unexpectedly against human beings; I asked myself about the importance of institutions, ideologies, fanaticism, extremism and the conditions enabling Evil to spread far and wide.

I felt the weigh of a memory, which was focused only on Evil, and the guilt of the "willing executioners". I felt uneasy, resentful, angry and worried. Why recall all this?

The time of Evil though showed me also another face, the one of the "Good people", the men and women who have overcome fear and have responded before, during and after the genocide, those who have gone on to see humanity and not a threat in the others.

Focusing only on the Evil that has been carried out is a sort of a memory "abuse". It does not allow us to overcome the cleavage that genocide creates in the history of a people.

I went in search for the survivors of the Armenian genocide in many Countries around the world, I collected their pieces of testimony which showed me the way not only for those who had helped or rescued them, but also to find those witnesses of the truth who had uncovered the events occurring in waste lands, ravaged by horror by the means of papers, documents, and speeches.

I travelled among the Armenians of the Diaspora and in the Caucasus, I looked for the graveyards where the Righteous rest and thus I made the decision to reconstruct their biographies and the tales of such men and women who have been able to fight Evil and show the way for moral resistance.

There are those who have directly confronted with the persecutors in the attempt to stop deportation; those who helped and rescued the victims; those who dissociated themselves and defied the orders and then there are the "memory activists" who have paid and still pay personally for their commitment to defend the truth and to bear witness.

This is how the *International Committee of the Righteous for the Armenians. Memory is the future*, was born. I have devoted myself to it for many years and I still put this initiative forward, with a renewed enthusiasm after I founded "The Forest of the Righteous" against all genocides worldwide with Gabriele Nissim. I recovered, took to Yerevan and interred into the Wall of Remembrance the earth or ashes from the tombs of the Righteous for the Armenians, including German officer Armin

Wegner, pastor Johannes Lepsius, the writer from Prague Franz Werfel, American Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, the historian of Irish descent James Bryce, Norwegian Nobel Prize Laureate Fridtjof Nansen, Italian Consul Giacomo Gorrini, French writer Anatole France, Karen Jeppe from Denmark, Jacob Kunzler from Switzerland, and the Arab Moslem Fayed El Gossheini .

Also the Turks have had their moral opponents, people who have helped and defended the victims. Now my goal, as soon as there are the suitable conditions, is that to honour the memory of these Turkish “outlaws” who opposed the “legal barbarity”. I would like to inter their tomb earth into the Wall of Remembrance and write our history together with them, as persuaded that the memory of witnesses of the truth and those who defied the genocidal orders in the past and in the present will have the power to get everybody to recognize the events and undertake the road of dialogue and reconciliation. This is the best way to honour the victims.

The essence of Evil is investigated very often; it is far less frequent that people ask questions about the fundamental nature of Good.

Enriching the Garden of the Righteous with the memories of the Good is also useful for the survivors’ children not to be enslaved by their resentment, to review cultures and institutions, which have fostered the grey zone and have weakened the principle of responsibilities. It is also useful to turn individual remembrances into a common historical memory, at the basis of a common democratic citizenship.

It is useful for the new generations who open themselves to hope thanks to the exemplary figures freed from oblivion.