

The hope of the Righteous.
by Gabriele Nissim

Speech held at the Garden of the Righteous in Milan

There are certain events that we, as the people in charge of the Milan Garden of the Righteous, cannot be silent about.

The tragedy that struck Poland struck us too.

Just as Russia was finally preparing to hold a remembrance ceremony for the victims of the atrocious Katyn massacre and the entire world was waking up to one of the worst crimes of Soviet totalitarianism, a paradoxical fate awaited the delegation led by the Polish President, who was about to commemorate those painful and tragic events.

For the second time, as Lech Walesa pointed out, Poland's leadership has been decimated.

On the day dedicated to honouring Marek Edelman, the commander of the Warsaw Uprising, we are here to make the following pledge: we undertake always to tell the young about the Katyn tragedy.

Nazism killed people because of their identity, Communism invented the enemies to be eliminated case by case.

Europe must never stop remembering the two forms of totalitarianism. Our commitment is to teach the young to savour pluralism and democracy.

The Milan Garden is like an open book. We remember the moral examples provided by the Righteous not because we wish to promote a political idea, offer solutions for life or present miracle cures, but because we like to think that these stories teach people, and especially the young, to listen to their own conscience. We like to think that they will be able to form their own opinions not based on stereotypes, but according to what they see and hear. The wisest judgements are made by those who are able to put themselves in the other man's shoes. This is the power of our minds, which Hannah Arendt called an "enlarged mentality", the ability to undertake an imaginary journey into another man's soul in order to judge for yourself.

Thinking, judging for yourself and telling the truth is a unique power that we all possess.

Havel called it "the power of the powerless".

The secret of the Righteous whom we honour today was aptly explained by the philosopher Jan Patočka, when he launched the idea of Charta 77 in Prague.

A man's first duty towards himself is to defend his own sense of "humanity".

This means that for his own self-esteem, a man can no longer lie to himself or deny his authenticity for the sake of a quiet life. He can no longer behave like a slave towards the powers that be.

Men and women can no longer enjoy their "humanity" if their basic human rights – recognized by international institutions – such as freedom of speech, freedom of association, religious freedom and the right to life, are trampled on.

As Patocka maintains, man has the duty to defend himself against any arbitrary act committed against others or against himself.

Vasilij Grossman, the great Russian writer whom we are honouring today, told us an important thing: totalitarianism causes terrible damage, but it never manages to win or to impose absolute evil. It cannot change human nature and it cannot destroy our yearning for freedom. Sooner or later this rises to the surface and explodes like magma compressed inside a volcano¹.

This is the great hope of the Righteous.

Evil failed to win completely both in Salonika, in Armenia and in Latin America: all places where certain Italian consuls, namely Enrico Calamai, Giacomo Gorrini and Guelfo Zamboni, did everything in their power to save human lives, by refusing to obey the laws imposed by political criminals.

Nor is it winning today in Iran, where, after Neda's murder, her example of moral resistance shines like a beacon for that country's youth.

This may seem too little, but, as the Bible says, the Righteous are the foundations of the world. It is up to us to tell their stories, as we are trying to do in this Garden.

¹ " Does human nature undergo any alteration in the grip of totalitarian violence? Does it change? Does man lose his longing for freedom?"

"The answers to these questions provide the necessary clue to predict the fate of man and totalitarianism. A mutation of human nature would imply the universal triumph of dictatorship, whereas the inviolable yearning to freedom would condemn totalitarianism to death."

Vasily Grossman, *Life and fate*, Adelphi, Milan, 2008,p.198.