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Summary of the paper read at the seminar on 8 March 2010

*“What purpose do the Righteous serve? A reflection on remembering good”*

The most significant contributions to our elaboration of the concept of the Righteous, which is key to our reflections on remembering good, have come from a number of intellectuals and writers on the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Moshe Bejski, Hannah Arendt and Vasilij Grossman share the common premise that it is impossible to eradicate evil from history. With different experiences and from different angles they analyzed the century of totalitarian regimes and genocides and reached the conclusion that mankind had and has the chance to combat evil with good deeds, to overcome passivity and find a way to rekindle hope.

Moshe Bejski – the leading light of the Yad Vashem Garden of the Righteous – insisted on the theme of remembering good.

Bejski, “the pearl diver” (a concept dear to Walter Benjamin and Hanna Arendt), devoted his life to tracing the Righteous of the Holocaust, offering them as moral examples, convinced that they represent an element of continuity in history. It is all about thoughts and actions with a universal value. As Bejski wrote :

“Every time I heard about a rescue, I felt much better and found the strength to carry on with my work. I realized that there was no place on earth where there had not been somebody who tried to help. I had dual feelings. In every space, be it a parliament, a block of flats, a factory, an office or even a concentration camp, there was always something that could have been done to save Jewish lives. This was my regret. But, in actual fact, someone had always tried and so I continued to hope”.

Looking back over history from this perspective, with the “view from above”, to borrow Pierre Hadot’s celebrated phrase, is also helpful for the survivors. Thinking back over their own suffering and realizing that there had been good deeds as well as criminal acts, helped victims to reconcile themselves with the world, to overcome their fear and cynicism and restore some sense to their lives.

According to Etty Hillesum – who died in a concentration camp – God can be saved and for Hans Jonas the only miracles that happened were worked by human beings.

On a historic plane, remembering good enables you to grasp the complexity of the experience. Dotted among victims and slaughterers there are the figures of the Righteous, not heroes or saints but ordinary people that feel compelled to react in order not to succumb to the “banality of evil”. For Hannah Arendt the criterion of what is right and what is wrong, the answer to the question “what must I do”, does not depend on one’s background, habits or customs, on a command from on high or from another human being, but on your predisposition to live with yourself, on the unspoken dialogue between you and yourself that concerns the category of your thinking, which is accompanied by the ability to judge, to want, to forgive. Judging goes one step further than just abstaining from evil for your own sake. As Hanna Arendt wrote:

“Judging means feeling others within us and being aware of human plurality, but also anticipating with our imagination what others may be thinking. Our ego grows and takes the destiny of others into account”.

Save the Jews in order not to corrupt the Poles, said Sofia Kossak, founder of the *Zegota Movement*; save the Jews in order to mark Germany and the German people with an indelible badge of shame, pleaded Armin T. Wegner in his open letter to Hitler, which cost him imprisonment and exile; save the Jews in order not to disgrace Bulgaria, wrote Dimitar Peshev in his famous letter to Parliament, thanks to which he successfully rescued some 50,000 Bulgarian Jews. All three acted and judged starting with themselves. Evil inflicted on others is inflicted on ourselves.

Jan Karski went one step further. He took all the suffering he had witnessed onto his own shoulders. The exterminated Jews became his family and he no longer felt himself to be a Polish nationalist, but a Jewish Polish nationalist. A practicing Catholic and a Jewish Christian who judged the Holocaust from the point of view of his faith: mankind has committed a second original sin, the sin of omission, of conniving with evil: this sin "will pursue mankind till the end of time".

In totalitarian systems evil is more insidious, because it disguises itself as good. The very worst things were done in the name of good, affirms Vasilij Grossman, author of *Life and Fate*. He traces the silent majority's chain of passivity, informing on others and indifference to the great tragedies of totalitarian terror back to the concept of "ideological good". The idea of social good was "a great little idea, it killed mercilessly and ruined the lives of thousands". He contrasts this with the "senseless kindness" of those who oppose the system. There were people who – out of affection, love, shame and above all that sense of freedom that not even the grip of violence can uproot – reacted with "deeds of human kindness". Grossman is the intellectual who opened our reflection on opposition in the countries of Eastern Europe. Many of the moral opponents to the totalitarianism of the former Soviet Union, from Václav Havel to Alexandr Solženicyn and Varlam Šalamov, are indebted to him. Freedom can be suffocated but not destroyed:

" man never voluntarily gives up his freedom and this conclusion is the beacon of our era, a beacon that shines into our future".

Vasilij Grossman, Hannah Arendt and Moshe Bejski made a fundamental contribution to the reflection on the role of the Righteous in the totalitarian regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. People can make a difference and this is the basis for realistic hope: not to eradicate evil from history, but the chance to interact with evil by doing "good deeds".

"Never hope to achieve Plato's Republic" - wrote Marcus Aurelius - "but be content that one small thing makes progress and think that that is not such a small achievement". The Righteous save hope.