

The Gardens of the Righteous **Moral resistance against totalitarianism in Europe**

27 September 2010

Milan - Fondazione Corriere della Sera

Concluding question and answer session

From the audience “I know you aren’t subject to pressure, and that nonetheless you would oppose them, but has politics ever tried to interfere with the Gardens of the Righteous Committee’s activity, or not?”

Answer of the Committee’s Chairman **Gabriele Nissim**: “I believe we made a great effort to avoid labels because the foundation of our work, as Konstanty Gebert reminded us before, is that the Righteous have no political shade.

They can be those who crossed Evil and changed their mind, they can have been fascists, communists, fundamentalists or terrorists, but if they changed their minds and performed some righteous deeds they are Righteous for us.

Yet giving this message in our world is not easy, because we are always keen on political labelling.

Thus when you present some figures who are ambiguous in a way, there are often problems: here we heard Borsani’s granddaughter. When I spoke about her grandfather I was attacked by the *Corriere della Sera* because I spoke about a fascist. When I described Peshev’s deeds I was told: “You talk about Peshev who is a fascist”... This is the most serious pressure we are subject to.

I would like to answer the question whether there are “one-sided” Righteous, i.e. Righteous who are honoured only in that they were “antiCommunists” or “antiNazis”.

The problem is that the Righteous obviously live under definite circumstances. One finds himself in fascism, we can’t think he can deal with everything. People find themselves in given situations. The issue instead is about the way we deal with Memory and the fact that we wanted to recognize the Righteous for Armenians.

We enriched the cultural debate with the idea that the concept of Righteous cannot be labeled, but must be found in all situation. This has been our effort and to tell the truth we met many obstructions, many difficulties on our way.

I don’t want to argue, but this is true also for the Garden of the Righteous. We had to work really hard because somebody wanted it to be functional to single officials or City Hall representatives who wanted to use the Garden for their purposes and we said no. And this will be our commitment: to keep our independence and go our way face all possible attempts to influence us politically”.

Answer of the We For Project Director **Ulianova Radice**: “This project putting the new technological tools to a good use is exactly the proof that we don’t want political pressure, that we want to be completely free from the snares and the traps of politics. We use virtual reality to be completely free to express ourselves, make our choices and propose the figures and the cultural path that we deem as suitable”.

Question from the debate coordinator **Antonio Ferrari**: “Mr. Halter, please describe your two proposals. Would you please tell us something more about this Righteous Day and the teaching of the Righteous at school and university? How can these initiatives develop?”

Answer of writer **Marek Halter**: “Pascal, a great Catholic philosopher, said something very beautiful: Evil chats, Good is dumb. When those who rescued the others die we have no news about them. We can say they are exemplary figures, but we don’t have to wait for a genocide to perform good deeds. Of course we need to talk about genocides, exceptional cases in History, but there are also ordinary situations: someone drowns in the river, people come, they call the police and the firemen and only one dives into the river and takes him into safety. Without this rescuer the individual would die while waiting for the firemen. This man who rescued the individual will take

him to the beach and will go away. He won't wait for the people's applause. What I want to do is to turn Good into an adventure. We need pupils to understand that performing good deeds is a beautiful, gripping and, when it comes to clashing with political system, also dangerous adventure. As interesting an adventure as Evil. We need explain this concept to the children who haven't understood it, yet. Nowadays in France, maybe also in Italy, there are groups of youths, gangs who meet to fight. Instead there are no groups who gather to help other children, to rescue them or provide food to the children who starve. There are charities, of course, and this is an old Christian tradition based on solidarity. I don't like the word "charity" though. I prefer the definition of "solidarity" and this is what I fight for: to introduce in France the idea that Good is an adventure and it is necessary to tell about the adventures of Good. This is why I was happy to share this wish with you when Mr. Nissim invited me here.

Furthermore Europe already exists and works more or less well. When it does work well, we are all happy. As soon as there is a crisis we forget that also the others belong to Europe – we have handed out charity to Greece, rather than bringing her our solidarity. Charity and solidarity are two different things, thus it is necessary that Europe introduces a day to honour the Righteous.

On this day all towns, universities, villages and schools should feature a presentation in which the adventures of the Righteous are told. Maybe just the Righteous of a village, we don't need to seek such great heroes as Marek Edelman. Of course, we all care about Edelman or Perlasca, or also Irena Sendler who saved thousands children from the ghettos and then fell into oblivion, and when her deeds were uncovered she didn't understand why people talked about her since she thought she could have done more. These are the adventures of Good. You who run this beautiful initiative of the Righteous Forest should remember the book "The Garden of the Finzi-Continis". It was another story, but always one about gardens. I like the fact that you talk about Gardens of the Righteous. If you put forward this idea we will be many in Europe to support you and we will have achieved a great result already".

Question of the debate coordinator **Antonio Ferrari**: Dr. Broz, remembering Dusko Kondor who was the victim of a political murder, do you feel you could become a target? Are you afraid of doing your work?

Answer of **Svetlana Broz**: Just as you reminded, Dusko Kondor was killed for political reasons. I started working as a cardiologist in 1992 in Bosnia-Herzegovina. I was a volunteer, I tried to help even just one human being, thus I don't consider myself as a target or a victim, otherwise I would flee Bosnia. Of course it could happen, but then they have a problem, not me.

Question of the debate coordinator **Antonio Ferrari**: Consul Kuciukian, you mentioned those generous Turks who were able to say no. Fine. In Turkey another thing happened now: that many intellectuals have exposed themselves for the first time to voice and demonstrate also for that page of history. I think it is a huge step forward for Turkey. Do you agree?

Answer of **Pietro Kuciukian**: About 30 thousand Turkish intellectuals signed an online petition to remember what the Armenians were subject to at the time of the genocide. Therefore there is an evolution. Let's hope things improve. The results of the latest elections are very interesting. It seems that Turkey is heading towards a more accomplished form of democracy. It will take some more steps, because there is still a deep resistance of some sector of the States who are trying to keep their privileges, but there are steps forward. Thus there is hope. The litmus test will eventually be the opening of the frontier between Armenia and Turkey, which is still blocked.

Question of the debate coordinator **Antonio Ferrari**: Mr. Gebert, 1/3 of the Yad Vashem Righteous are Polish. Poland is a great Country. Though it has still antisemitism, maybe more than in Germany, right?

Answer of **Konstanty Gebert**: We are in Europe. Europe's most antisemitic Country nowadays is Spain, followed by Greece... Again: no surprise. We are in Europe. The Holocaust didn't stem from scratch, it is an ancient European tradition. I am ashamed, but in my Country there is still antisemitism, which occasionally is also quite virulent.

Question from the audience: "Is the discourse on Good and Evil entailed in a wider discourse about the moral education of people?"

Answer of **Gabriele Nissim**: we haven't sure cures, we don't want to tell people what to do. We want to launch this message: "You, young boy or girl, learn to think for yourself, to judge by your own standards Based on these moral examples learn to do what you deem to be the right thing according to your conscience". This is the difference between us and other traditions. We don't say: "Behave that way for a political reason". Not at all. We say: "Think for yourself", and I think this is the main point concerning the education of the new generations, that is to say the fact that people must be called back to their responsibilities. Pay attention: this thing of thinking for oneself is the hardest thing, but it is from there that miracles stem, as Hans Jonas put it. The Righteous are hence those people who regardless of political, social and cultural pressure were able to take sides and act independently. There is even a Canadian researcher of Polish descent who made a survey to understand who were the Righteous and in the end reached this conclusion: there is no category of Righteous people, but the Righteous are essentially those who lived a bit at the edge, either territorially or because they were able to be independent. This is hence the point: it is not possible to teach how become Righteous, but it is possible to teach to think for oneself.

Greetings of the President of the Corriere Foundation **Piergaetano Marchetti**: Let me thank you for this evening and say we are not merely materially hosting this event, but the activity of our Foundation goes in the same direction. Our motto is: "The freedom of ideas", a basic human right. The milestone of our editorial and Foundation-related activity is the respect of basic human rights. I believe we want to get the young and less young people to reflect about the meaning of differences, because genocides are the product of a diversity-denying process. We need to teach children that here mother say: "Beware of the black man", but in Africa they tell the children to beware of the white man. So they will understand the value of diversity. Thank you again for this evening. I interpret it as a meeting to get to know those people who defied general conformity and compulsion to be able and have the courage to be different.