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The Righteous and the Resistance to Totalitarianism
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The Resistance to Totalitarianism: the Righteous among nations and the Righteous within the experience of Communist Totalitarianism?

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Premise

When dealing with the righteous we find ourselves within a reality of genocide, within a situation in which a state intentionally commits a crime against humanity. Generally, the genocidal state is also a totalitarian state, the latter notion being a modern historical realization and a source of debate, both on a conceptual level and following the analytical examination of the distinct historical experiences. To these experiences one can apply the instrument of comparison. The analysis of both the similarities and the differences between the modalities and structures of dictatorships, of terror and of consensus, but also of dissent and moral resistance, both enriches the historical picture and offers us the possibility of a better understanding. Concentration camps and Gulag are the extreme manifestations of the totalitarian regimes of the XX century. That these manifestations carried within them a new nature is observable in the unnamed crimes they perpetrated. The juridical elaboration of the term “genocide”, followed by a tortuous recognition of the same by those nations, is “posthumous”; and from this reality and scenario without precedent germinates a necessity among historians, researchers and educators to recognize that mere historical reconstruction of those events is not sufficient.

One enters the realm of ethical questions, of values, of choices we make today, since we live in that modernity which produced Auschwitz and the Kolyma. Historiography wove together with the paths of remembrance, with the literary and lyrical production, all became sources and documents which ask civil society crucial questions¹.

How does one educate after Auschwitz and the Kolyma? How does one foster within our youth the concept of ethical protest when faced with examples of violations of human rights and episodes of racism? One gives voice to those who witnessed the truth, one fights falsehoods, one analyses one’s personal indifferences and passivity. “An education which requires no courage, no imagination, no empathy, no individual responsibility, can do nothing but turn against the new generations, and against democracy itself”². The labor of remembrance focused on the subject of the Righteous has been found to be a very effective tool to foster all of the above.

Heroic Virtues and Ordinary Virtues

Tzvetan Todorov,³ doubts upon the fact that totalitarian reality was characterized solely by a dimension of negativity, and promotes the idea of goodness, of the behavior of men, and the concept of responsibility, distinguishing between heroic and ordinary virtues.

Our work, both as the “Gardens of the Righteous Committee”⁴ and as educators in schools, was based upon that assumption of goodness, and it honed itself into researching, collecting, and exposing the stories of those who resisted totalitarianism within the framework of ordinary life. There existed, and still exists, an ordinary goodness which one needs to pay attention to. Personal autonomy and the freedom of choice, both unacceptable within a totalitarian regime, allow us to foster a communal core of humanity.

The righteous are not hero. They are ordinary people, they can find themselves on the wrong side. At a certain point, though, they will listen to the voices of the victims and find within themselves the ability to oppose evil. If one accepts the dimension of responsibility that link us together, one discovers the reasons for

¹ E.Traverso (edited by) *Insegnare Auschwitz*, IRRSAE Piemonte, Bollati Boringhieri Torino 1995

² Ernst Tugendhat, cit. by Enzo Traverso, ibidem pag. 18

³ T. Todorov, *Face a l’extreme*, Edition du Seuil, 1991; cit. Italian edition *Di fronte all’estremo. Quale etica per il secolo dei Gulag e dei campi di sterminio?* Garzanti, Milano 1992

⁴ Founded in Milan in 2001 by Gabriele Nissim, Pietro Kuciukian, Anna Maria Samuelli, Ulianova Radice

living⁵. We enter the virtuous cycle of the banality of goodness. We once again find the capacity for judgment and the capacity for thought.⁶

The Concept of the Righteous

The definition of righteous collects within itself concepts dialectically connected such as good/evil, truth/falsehood, freedom/necessity, selflessness/selfishness, and consequently there is no admissible confusion between victim and perpetrator; anyway it is necessary to fully embrace the concept of a “gray area” as presented in the *The Drowned and the Saved* by Primo Levi, and it is not admissible to think of the perpetrator or the righteous as the embodiment of absolute evil or absolute good. The contemplation of the memory of good which renders more real the memory of evil, requires the abandonment of all forms of manichaeism⁷. We can choose to not remain indifferent, if we recognize our original “relational existence”, our weakness and the need we have for each other. It is true that within concentration camps or the Gulag the threshold for suffering and “useless” violence was so heightened to create irreversible corruption. “Constraint and repression,” writes Vasilij Grossman, “inevitably transform within the heart of man good into evil”⁸.

But alongside the recounting of evil which is witness to the disappearance of all mercy, we find the recounting of goodness. The testimonies which bring together the experiences of those who survived the hell of the concentration camp or the Gulag reveal the fact that survival without aid and without preserving the core of humanity we carry within us, would have been impossible.

The fact that there were “good people in evil times”⁹ has for us a moral value. Those who tried to resist totalitarian logic contributed in the long run to the crisis of the regimes (and this is true especially of communist totalitarianism).

In a time of resurgent denialism moral resistance stories have a particular value.

Robert Satloff’s essay *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands*¹⁰ highlighted a dual type of denialism. Those who deny the Shoah deny even the memory of goodness. The figure of the righteous, of he who renders aid and witness, is always a product of recognition. As Gabriele Nissim writes, “the actions of the righteous reach completeness when one finds the strength and wisdom to recognized them”¹¹.

Figures of the Righteous: Shoah and Metz Yeghérn

The definition of righteous embodies different characteristics depending on the different historical contexts surrounding the genocides or genocidal crimes.

The Righteous among Nations are the saviors, those who, while not Jewish, rescued the Jews, and who saw their actions recognized by the Committee for the Righteous in the Yad Vashem memorial. Not men with exemplary conduct, according to the principles affirmed by judge Landau, but rather men who accomplished righteous actions while retaining the human fallibilities and fragilities proper of those who do not aspire to the title of saint and hero, as under the direction of Moshe Bejski¹². The smallest gesture of aid and resistance had to be recognized. It was a tough battle for Bejski. The energy to fight that battle came from the debt of gratitude he felt towards his own rescuer.

⁵ P. Kuciukian, *Voci nel deserto. Giusti e testimoni per gli armeni*, Guerini, Milano 2000, pag. 241

⁶ S. Maletta, “Memoria dei giusti e costruzione della città a partire da Hannah Arendt”, in *I giusti e la memoria del bene*, (edited by), A. Grasselli e S. Maletta Ufficio Scolastico Regionale per l’Emilia e Romagna, CusI, Milano 2006

⁷ “When faced with the extreme,” notes Tzvetan Todorov, “Primo Levi knows how to remain human, simply human. And when he speaks of evil, as source of offence, it is not to accusingly point it out in others, but to more scrupulously, more mercilessly observe himself.” *Memoria del male, tentazione del bene. Inchiesta su un secolo tragico*, Garzanti, Milano 2000, pag. 217

⁸ V. Grossman, *Tutto scorre...* Adelphi, Milano 1987, pag. 110

⁹ S. Broz, *Good people in a evil time*, Graficar Promet d.o.o., Sarajevo 2002

¹⁰ R. Satloff, *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands*, published in the USA by Public Affairs, 2006. Italian Ed. *Tra i giusti. Storie perdute dell’olocausto nei paesi arabi*, by Marsilio Venezia 2008, His research on the righteous within the Arab communities was of difficult acceptance and recognition: even today, the Imam of the mosque in Paris is not ready to confirm the numerical data concerning the aid offered to many Jews by his predecessors during the German occupation of France. Yet, someone must have signed the 1732 certificates attesting the adherence to the Islamic faith of Jews of North African descent.

¹¹ G. Nissim, *Storie di uomini Giusti nel Gulag*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2004, pag. 110

¹² G. Nissim, *Il tribunale del bene. La storia di Moshe Bejski, l’uomo che creò il Giardino dei giusti*, Mondadori, Milano 2003

Exemplary cases of this change in conception of the very figure of Righteous among Nations, are the recognitions granted to Oskar Schindler and Kurt Gerstein, to Dimităr Peshëv, to Zofia Kossak and to Giorgio Perlasca.

A very interesting Righteous figure is that of the German official Armin T. Wegner¹³.

All his life was dedicated to the remembrance of past crimes and the resistance against new crimes. Within his person, a concurrence was created between the Armenian tragedy and the Jewish tragedy, between the Metz Yeghèrn (the Great Calamity) and the Shoah. In the Garden of the Righteous of the Yad Washem there is a tree with his name for the letter of denouncement of the anti-Semitic behaviour of the regime sent to Hitler in 1933. Armenia honors him, and recognizes him as Righteous for witness he rendered. In this specific case, the search for the righteous who said no to evil, highlighted a relationship between the memories of persecuted peoples and eased a dialogue between them.

The Righteous within Communist Totalitarianism?

Is it possible to speak of the Righteous within the atomized society of communist totalitarianism ?

The very concept needs to be redefined in a way which accounts for the specificity of the experience.

“Blaming everything on villains is too easy”, writes Izrail Metter “We were probably already afraid of each other [...] this vile mistrust which renders you very self despicable was absorbed through our blood, swallowed with air. Soaked with this poison which would have maddened any animal, us men continued to live normally...It was no longer necessary to engage them. Pushing their way through the crowds, they ran towards the podiums”¹⁴.

Suspicion and fear were the measures of existence, both collective and individual. Denouncement was a constant practice. Adapting to survive empties one’s soul. But there are those who did not adapt, who retained the ability to understand and to strive against falsehoods.

“Falsehoods,” writes Martin Buber “are the peculiar evil which man introduced in nature... our specific invention [...] In falsehoods our spirit commits treason against itself”¹⁵. Falsehoods contaminate the life of a community, and corrode its very foundations which are constituted of mutual trust and of “good intentions”. Falsehoods as a way of life “alter even the relationship between the other and the world and places both one and the other in a state of mere appearance”¹⁶

The battle for truth is one of the tenets of moral resistance within communist totalitarianism. Both inside and outside the Gulag, where the historical conscience of entire generations was manipulated and dignity denied, speaking of the Righteous refers to those who abstained from harming others, those who tried to find through their writings, their poetry, their art, their work, and in various others forms, a way to disclose their extraneousness to totalitarian ideology, of those who maintained and protected their dignity and preserved within themselves human virtues. While it was difficult to, within communist totalitarianism, act to help another, it was not impossible to abstain from harming another.

Figures of the Righteous within communist totalitarianism

The broadening of the term Righteous to include those who opposed communist totalitarianism raised some doubts and negative reactions. In 2003, we organized an International Conference in Milan titled “The Righteous within the Gulag: the value of moral resistance to soviet totalitarianism”. That wall of resistance collapsed, though, before the testimonies of the lecturers, who explored the lives and works of known and less known men and women¹⁷, all of them united because of a common denominator: dissent, the

¹³ A.T. Wegner (Wuppertal 1876-Rome 1978). In 1915, Wegner is a volunteer for health services, first in Poland and then in the Middle East. In the Anatolian desert, he is an eyewitness to the deportation and extermination of the Armenians at the hands of the government of the Young Turks. He took photographs, collected letters and appeals from those being deported, he wrote a diary which has been a precious testimony for the Armenian people. When he returned to Germany, he organized conferences, debates, and appeals to those in power, to demand mercy for those victimized. The letter he sent to the Führer, has been recognized by the court of Yad Vashem as a courageous act of opposition, at the risk of his own life.

¹⁴ I. Metter, *Ritratto di un secolo*, Einaudi, Torino 1998, pp. 203-2004

¹⁵ M Buber, *Il cammino del Giusto*, Gribaudi, Milano 1999, pag. 22

¹⁶ Ibidem, cit. pag. 24

¹⁷ Pavel Florenskij, Anna Achmatova, Osip and Nadezda Mandel’shtam, Alexander Solženicyn, Vassilij Grossman, Lev Razgon, Varlam Šalamov, Andrei Sacharov, Julij Daniel’, Gustav Herling and others, exemplary figures of scientists, poets, writers, journalists, military heroes such as Pietro Grigorenko, but also factory workers such as Anatolij Marcenko, religious figures, political members of staunch communist belief (as is the case of the Italian victims of the Stalinist regime).

denouncement of falsehoods, of terror, and of crimes. A moral resistance through clandestine circles, oftentimes discovered, with the consequent arrests, imprisonment in Gulags, forced exiles, commitment in psychiatric hospitals; the few survivors, once released, were mostly marginalized in their own country, and those exiled experienced, even abroad, the shameful close-mindedness of civil society. A representative case is that of Gustav Herling, censored by his Italian editor in 1999.

European culture resisted to using comparison method while analyzing the totalitarianisms of the 20th century. Furthermore, as noted by Marcello Flores¹⁸, the process of recognizing the extension as well as the intrinsic and structural nature of the repression and terror within the USSR and the other ex-communist countries was greatly delayed.

If we add to all this the difficulties those who fight for remembrance find within the ex USSR what space can we dedicate to the memory of goodness?

Outside the Gulag, within the experience of communist totalitarianism and in the countries of the so-called real socialism, there were those who reacted, who tried to break this chain of evil; within the Gulag there were persons capable of preserving their own dignity and capable of not devouring the space around them at the expense of someone else.

Florenskij writes: “[...] I tend to think that a loved one could find him or herself in the same condition as this person whom I met along the path of life, so I try to do something for them [...] I hate philanthropy and the condescension which humiliate both he who grants it and he who receives it, in the name of some abstract concept of duty. But this is a spontaneous action, in a given moment, towards a specific person”¹⁹.

One of the most incisive testimonies coming from the literature of the Gulag is that of Varlam Šalamov, found within his *Tales of the Kolyma*: “I am proud to have decided from the start, from 1937, that I would never have become a squad leader if that meant having the power of life or death over another [...] I am proud to never have caused the death of someone, or to have prolonged their sentence, and to never have denounced anyone”²⁰.

Two hundred and twenty seven people entrusted their experiences to Alexandr Solženicyn, and thus *The Gulag Archipelago* was born, a collective work which presents itself as a monument to memory: “I dedicate this book to all those whose life was not long enough to tell their tale. May they forgive me if I did not see everything, remember everything, sense everything”.

It must be said, though, that Šalamov and Solženicyn agree on one point: the denouncement of the totalitarian lie, alone, is not enough; there needs to also be a sentence from the courts and a comprehension of an entire people. “God doesn’t need the Righteous, who will nevertheless be fine. God needs repentant sinners,” wrote Šalamov. “If we do not punish, if we do not hold even the villains accountable, we do not merely protect their sterile old age, we also rip away from the new generations any fundament of justice. This is why they grow up to be indifferent, insufficient education is not to blame. Young people learn that a shameful action is never punished on this earth, but rather brings wealth and comfort. That will not be a welcoming country, rather one will be afraid of living there”, wrote Solženicyn²¹.

Then and now, it is men who need the Righteous.

A particular way to resist within the Gulag system is to be found in the figure of Joseph Czapski²², member of an aristocratic Polish family, condemned in 1940 to the Giazowietz Gulag. He manages to organize a clandestine university of sorts and lectures on Proust’s *Recherche* which stems into a refined critical and philosophical work, of prophetic and tragic relevance to the subjects of life and death. This activity of the mind and the spirit, an exercise for thought and judgment as an antidote to evil.

We have just celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of the UN’s Declaration of Human Rights. There are some people who consciously fought to uphold those rights and whose profiles are taken from the only Gulag museum that exists in Russia, “Perm-36”. This was a Gulag conceived for correctional labor of political

¹⁸ Cfr. M. Flores, “Cosa sappiamo del Gulag”, in *XX secolo*, n° 2, ottobre 1977, pag. 7

¹⁹ P. Florenskij, *Non dimenticatemi*, Mondadori, Milano 2000, pp. 285-286

²⁰ V. Šalamov, “Ciò che ho visto e capito nel lager”, cit. by Irina Sirotinskaja in *Storie di uomini giusti nel Gulag*, cit. pag. 96

²¹ A. Solženicyn, *Arcipelago Gulag*, Oscar Mondadori, Milano 1995, pag. 189

²² J. Czapski, *La morte indifferente: Proust nel Gulag*, L’Ancora del Mediterraneo, Napoli 2005

Born in Prague in 1896, he died in Paris in 1993. Czapski was one of the more prominent exponents of the exiled Polish *intelligenza*. His literary production, though very prolific, is almost unknown in Italy, with the exception of the above mentioned book.

dissenters now turned into a museum. From this originated an exposition subsequently brought to Milan in 2003 by the curator, Victor Šmyrov, in the occasion of our convention on the Righteous within the Gulag. This Gulag, built in 1943 as a forestry colony for correctional labor was used until the end of the 80s. In particular, we would like to note the Ukrainians Ivan Gel', Levko Luk'janenko and Vasil Stus, the Lithuanian Balis Gajauskas and the Russian Sergej Kovalëv. They all distinguished themselves for their ability to preserve their dignity as men and to nourish their ideals, so much that after their release they carried on their fight for human rights. Vasil Stus, who died in a punishment cell in 1985 before release, guilty of loving poetry and his country – Ukraine –, left this message: “The most important thing is to keep your head high. Even when it barely stands atop your neck”. Heinrich Böll had nominated him for a Nobel Prize for Literature

In the Valsesia Park in Milan, on the 10th of November 2005, and in the cemetery of Levašovo, the 29th of June 2007, tombstones were placed in remembrance of the Italian victims of the Gulag, in the presence of their families, of local authorities, of some members of the cultural elite, but especially many young people. Luciana de Marchi, daughter of an Italian victim of the Gulag, was present at both ceremonies. Gabriele Nissim titled the retelling of her story *A Girl Against Stalin*. With stubbornness and bravery, Luciana de Marchi, did not accept the verdict of her father's death, and fought all her life to unearth his fate and to renew that link of affection for her father she had preserved within herself as a precious memento²³. The narration of this story and many others constitutes, for the families of the victims, the first step towards a self-reconciliation. The same did Elena Dundovich²⁴ reconstructing many other stories of torture and of breaking points, but also of exemplary moral and physical resistance, “with the bitterness of the knowledge that many will remain hidden in the anonymity of history”. Our hope is that many “books of remembrance” will be born of this and that, as Anatolij Rumazov writes, cemeteries will be filled with light. “From the darkness of time emerge faces. We only have the time to follow one road. From the dead to the living”²⁵.

²³ G. Nissim, *Una bambina contro Stalin*, A. Mondatori, Milano 2007

²⁴ E. Dundovich, “I giusti che in occidente e in Italia hanno denunciato il Gulag. Alcune storie esemplari”, in *Storie di uomini giusti nel Gulag*, cit. pag. 249

²⁵ A. Razumov, “Il martirologio di Leningrado: la memoria popolare delle vittime del grande terrore”, in *Storie di uomini giusti nel Gulag*, cit. pag. 329