

Like Hounds on the Tracks of the Past
or
The Voyage in Martina's Memory
by Antonia Grasselli

A brief introduction.

The title I have given to my essay is important in understanding the outlook that I have followed and the objectives I have made for myself. The expression "like hounds on the tracks of the past" is by Marc Bloch, who used it in his "The Historian's Craft" to explain the trade of the historian. I have always maintained a historiographic research method in my history laboratories. The subtitle of "The Voyage in Martina's Memory" (Martina is one of my students) explains that my intention is to take the point of view of the real protagonists of these memory trips: my students. I therefore do not set out to offer a theoretical or methodological reflection, but rather to provide a description of an educational experience evaluated in its motivations and its results.

It is also important to first provide the necessary elements for understanding how these paths have been structured.

In the past few years, the starting point has been based upon the study and reflection of two books by Gabriele Nissim: "The Tribunal of the Good: The story of Moshe Bejski, the man who created the Garden of the Righteous" and "A Girl against Stalin: The Italian woman that fought for the truth of her father." These provided the cultural hypothesis to begin. The next step consisted of a philosophical and historical inquiry. The path then included specific research on a particular theme and ended in a trip to a place of memory.

The Gesture

We brought it home

This year in Krakow, during a public meeting that took place on 9 April, we were able to tell about our experience and to bring it to Poland. At this meeting we wanted to commemorate Moshe Bejski a year after his death. Practically unknown in his country of origin, he returned through us, and with our commitment and our passion we are the best demonstration of the truth of his happy intuition of the memory of the Righteous.¹

On 9 April of last year in Krakow a public event took place that saw the participation of Italian and Polish students and teachers, with several first-hand accounts. At that time we commemorated Moshe Bejski, a citizen of Krakow, in his home town a year after his death. We believe that the memory of the Righteous is the inheritance that Moshe Bejski has left us², a rescuer of Oscar Schindler, who was head of Yad Vashem's Commission from 1970 to 1995.

The word commemoration may not be the best to express the meaning we attribute to this event. In Krakow we not only communicated the results of our research, we did much more: we publicly spoke to tell how much we had found out about ourselves and our job in history through what we define as the memory of the Righteous. When you receive someone's legacy, it lives within you.

It was from the accounts in Moshe Bejski's work that we began.

¹ Speech by Enrico Guerri at the Convention "Exemplary Figures of the 1900s" on 18-19 April 2008
http://www.storiamemoria.it/2008/convegno08/convegno_gn.htm

² For Moshe Bejski's story: G. Nissim, *The Tribunal of the Good: The story of Moshe Bejski, the man who created the Garden of the Righteous*, Mondadori, 2003

The Beginning **Dear Moshe Bejski**

Dear Moshe, Dear Fisherman of Pearls,

Discovering your story reading “The Tribunal of the Good” by Gabriele Nissim, I was astonished by all the stories of heroes, by these pearls that many people disregard but who we should all be aware of, in order to prevent what happened from happening again.

In order to prevent another case of utter evil, where evil is sanctioned by law, and in order to not commit the same mistakes by learning from the past, everybody should talk with themselves and revolt.

It all started with the Eichmann trial, the man responsible for transporting Jews to the concentration camps. The trial you were called to testify in, to come to terms with his terrible past, where you told the whole world about the worst evil in the history of humanity. [...]

It’s amazing that you were able to find good in such a dark moment, living through it thanks to the first person that treated you like a person in that moment, which gave back your faith in humanity, by offering you a cigarette butt and shaking your hand. Finding Oscar Schindler, finding a good German, a friend in a line of enemies must have been like a rebirth. To thank him you began the search for the Righteous, because in your heart every time you found a Righteous person it was a way of thanking him, thanking your savior. I can’t even imagine how you felt when you saw Schindler added to the Righteous and when his tree was planted. [...]

I believe that giving life to the Garden of the Righteous was a great work of bravery and goodness. You were able to demonstrate and teach that even in the worst and darkest times in history, good can still be found, so that if something similar were to happen again we would acknowledge his teachings.

Marco Cameran³

Moshe Bejski’s personal path was an example for us.

For Bejski, taking responsibility for his past coincides with taking up and concluding a work that risked being negated by the oblivion of contemporaries and not being influential on the destiny of humanity: the memory of the Righteous.

Moshe Bejski’s story opened up the meaning of the Holocaust and thus introduced us to the work of understanding the period’s historical coordinates. Students wrote *Letters to Moshe Bejski* in late November 2006 when he was still alive.

Amazement and *gratitude*, two positive feelings, are the dominating notes. The first *opens the mind to understanding* while the second *opens the mind to taking responsibility*.

The Path **We fisherman of pearls**

In the face of destruction and annihilation caused by evil, it is not enough to say, “Never forget that this has happened. Remember these words. Engrave them in your hearts, When at home or in the street,” as Primo Levi said in *If This is a Man*. Bejski’s message adds something new: remember the good as well, to make everyone understand that good is possible when one is capable of acting responsibly. That is how the miracle of the Righteous is constantly carried out.

Maria Teresa Nicolini⁴

These considerations are simply a starting point. The key concepts of the memory of the good and their actions must also be specified as they are necessary in exerting and constructing memory.

³ *Letters to Moshe Bejski*, Academic Year 2006/2007

⁴ Report on G. Nissim’s book, *The Tribunal of the Good*, Academic Year 2007/2008

The leaflet prepared for the 9 April Krakow event can be seen as the Manifest for the Memory of the Righteous.

Here is its text:

We fisherman of pearls
the stories of the Righteous in dark times for humanity today as yesterday
We Italian and Polish kids
search, tell about, testify
in an action of identification
to understand the secret of the Righteous we, like them, become guarantors and the foundation of civil living
In honor of Moshe Bejski, creator of the Garden of the Righteous of Yad Vashem
Citizen of Krakow (Krakow 1921 – Tel Avivi 2007)

“Moshe Bejski had an odd job. He was a fisherman of pearls.”⁵ This is the opening of Moshe Bejski’s story, written by Gabriele Nissim.

The figure of the fisherman of pearls was taken up by Hannah Arendt as well. The pearls that fisherman look for on the bottom of the deeps, unrecognizable because of the transformations the sea has put them through are “behaviors of excellence on the level of human dignity that apparently don’t leave tracks on history, but that we can discover and investigate in totalitarian events.”⁶

Gabriele Nissim speaks about “invisible men,” about “apparently invisible behavior without concrete tracks that only poets can appreciate. Thus talking about them, they can be transformed into historical fact. Poetic memory,” he concludes, “is perhaps the tool for rediscovering the hidden Righteous.”⁷

How? “We search, tell about, testify in an action of identification.” We search because research lets us acquire those critical tools that free the mind from prejudice, thus making it capable of receiving and recognizing data that it meets during the work; we tell about because it is the telling that helps us find the sense of what happened; we testify because testimony is the aim of this path.

We testify about what was discovered and interiorized, information that has become experience, an integral part of ourselves. Identification is therefore essential.

The secret of the Righteous. In the collective climate of lies that have characterized totalitarian regimes, the Righteous have known how to think autonomously. They have thus been separate. In their actions they have cracked that grey area, which makes it possible to assert themselves in a totalitarian system, asking others to take responsibility, to reassess their positions, to be ashamed of the accepted compromises.

The antidote for extreme evil, as Hannah Arendt recalls, is identified in intense Socratic thought, as in a continuous dialogue with oneself, because “I speak to myself, I am not simply conscious of myself.”⁸

The self-evidence of moral norms is only for men trained to dialogue with themselves.

“Someone was needed,” writes Nissim of Dimitar Pesev, the Vice President of the Bulgarian Parliament who was able to prevent the deportation of Jews from his country, “who, finding the courage to *think*, could remove false alibis from first his own conscience and then those of everyone else.”⁹

⁵ G. Nissim, op. cit. p.3

⁶ G. Nissim *The Poetic Memory* in A. Grasselli, S. Maletta (edited by) *From Memory to History: Educational experiences and theoretical issues*, Rubbettino 2008, p.145

⁷ Ibid, p.154

⁸ H. Arendt, *Several Matters of Philosophical Morality*, Einaudi, 2006, p.48

⁹ G. Nissim, *The Man that Stopped Hitler*, Mondadori, 2009, p.170

That “mysterious and indecipherable mechanism” for which a man cannot remove the feeling of compassion for the other, is reactivated from the ability to think from the point of view of another, from the imagination (which is a form of thinking) that, allowing identification, allows understanding.

This mechanism can only be intuited. We see its effects, we gather its external expressions. We need to look in the sources of memory (testimony, letters, diaries) for those steps that represent openings onto the interior world of the men that have this in action, that attest to the existence of this dialogue in action, its dynamics, which is perhaps more important to gather than its results.

The many testimonies collected by Angelo Picariello in his biography by Giovanni Palatucci¹⁰ allowed us to perceive even more clearly what allowed Palatucci to take charge of the pain of others instead of turning the other way.

Palatucci put himself at stake. His choice, the uncontrollable drive to do good, his commitment to the work of saving was unconditional, straight from the heart. This shows that the evidence of good in him was due to that habit of dialoguing with himself that is called thought.

This same dialogue allowed him to rediscover his Christian convictions as true and to recognize his God in every circumstance. It was therefore possible for us to discover that mysterious mechanism with which man, instead of turning the other way, takes charge of the pain of others.¹¹

The Landing **Know yourself**

In conclusion I would like to express my great amazement: man is a strange animal, with spectacular yet underhanded abilities, and must know himself to live well, aware, without following instinct. Continuing research, in the active memory of the good, it is also possible to broaden the knowledge of oneself and of others, as we are also men, like the Righteous. I believe that their abilities were certainly personal abilities, but they are capabilities that every man discovers they possess and can take advantage of as they live. Thus, carrying forward this memory of the good, working hard in the search for the Righteous also means carrying forward the awareness of man and his enormous abilities and receiving moral examples of life and its beauty. Alessandro Cuppi¹²

Luciana therefore contrived a method to keep her father with her so she would not forget him: she established an interior dialogue with him. Animated by this dialogue she reserved a place within herself that no one could remove. He stayed alive forever in her memory, and in the most difficult moments she received strength thinking that one day she would find him again. According to Hannah Arendt it is through this ability and the strength to keep a given promise that one can live through the unpredictability of life. [...] Therefore, the promise as an element of salvation to resist what life gives us, and in the case of Luciana de Marchi this promise was fed by the memory and memories of her father, by the interior dialogue with him as “you cannot remember something that you have not thought about and talked about with yourself.”

Enrico Carnevali¹³

Under totalitarian regimes, resistance is quite difficult [...] The only way a man can defend himself is to not surrender in his own private area, to not stoop to compromises with himself, to not give up his dignity in intimacy, to not “surrender the soul” [...] This is what Luciana did, who never stopped thinking with her mind [...] who, in her own way, went against the mainstream, keeping her ability to analyze reality and therefore how to formulate judgement. Thinking with her own mind, abstaining from doing harm, refusing unjust compromises is the way of moral and individual resistance that may not seem influential but that does

¹⁰ A. Picariello, *Capuozzo Pleases This Boy: The life of Giovanni Palatucci*, Edizioni San Paolo 2007

¹¹ Speech by Federico De Maria at the Conference “Exemplar Figures of the 1900s” on 18/19 April 2008
http://www.storiamedia.it/2008/convegno08/convegno_gn.htm

¹² Report on G. Nissim’s book, *The Tribunal of the Good*, Academic Year 2007/2008

¹³ Report on G. Nissim’s book, *A Girl against Stalin: The Italian woman that fought for the truth of her father*, Mondadori 2007. Academic Year 2008/2009

represent a positive example that human beings can offer in situations characterized by atrocities and horrible crimes.

Tommaso Toschi¹⁴

These texts, which are the result of two different but convergent paths, represent the arrival of the first and foremost objective: the discovery of oneself, of “that mysterious and undecipherable mechanism” that is the *secret* of the Righteous. Reawakened thanks to identification, the dialogue that contains the movement of thought is recognized as the place where questions provoked by the impact with the reality of things are received and answered, it is where to look for meaning. It is the place that puts oneself in motion, making them capable of responsibility and of acting against the mainstream.

If the memory of the good is a memory full of responsibility, this is its condition.

The Responsibility of Memory **Vanquished or winners?**

The memory of the good is a way of reading the past, but also of living through the present. It is the discovery of having a role in the history of man. It has to be an active memory characterized by hope and responsibility, and it is a duty that is assumed. [...] “That in the end there are vanquished or winners depends on us,” writes Nissim in his book. With these words we are given a difficult task, challenging but fundamental. The moral of the whole book, and therefore of the Moshe Bejski’s story, the man that created the Garden of the Righteous, is in this amazing phrase: “Individual responsibility is the only antidote. There will never be an end to history, the birth of a pure society, capable of expelling the perverse mechanism of extreme evil from their bowels. There will only be Righteous men who seek to oppose and to resist. They are the only certain hope for humanity, even after Auschwitz, thought Moshe Bejski.” It is now our duty to continue this memory of good, receiving the values and moral examples from it.

Alessandro Cuppi¹⁵

Luciana De Marchi, a life marked by the regime of the ex-Soviet Union from a young age, through a life dedicated to making the truth about her father resurface, can be considered among the category of the “Righteous.” In the historical experience of totalitarianism, the figure of the Righteous emerges through two forms of resistance: the conservation of human dignity and the conservation of truth of oneself. [...] With her experience Luciana gave us a testimony to treasure. The difficult path of remembering, the painful and risky choice of memory, reveals a form of resistance and defence of truth. It provides us with the essential tools necessary in understanding the new realities and risks that are always present in history, putting us on our guard for the illusion of defeating evil forever and for the claim that any ideology to establish a collective good beforehand to pursue at any price.

Mazzanti Nicola¹⁶

Luciana was able to take on the duty of returning justice to her father’s story, that justice that in life was denied him. She was not only able to keep Gino’s memory alive, but she gave truth, dignity and justice back to this memory. She succeeded in her intent of building a public memory of her father [...] The memory certainly does not repair the lost that was underwent, but it is as if it brought something back to life. This “rebirth” is not an artificial reconstruction but it is the taking back inside oneself of the sense of past events. It is a necessary and essential procedure for building a coherent, correct, clear and just present.

Michele Toschi¹⁷

¹⁴ Report on G. Nissim’s book, *A Girl against Stalin*. Academic Year 2008/2009

¹⁵ Report on G. Nissim’s book, *The Tribunal of the Good*, Academic Year 2007/2008

¹⁶ Report on G. Nissim’s book, *A Girl against Stalin*. Academic Year 2008/2009

¹⁷ Report on G. Nissim’s book, *A Girl against Stalin*. Academic Year 2008/2009

In studying history the main objective is to cultivate a sense of the past (historical sense). Contributing to this is both critical investigation, with its tools, and exercising memory through the transformations that have been highlighted. The awareness of having a responsibility for the present is part of historical sensibility.

The memory of the good develops this awareness: entrust a task to the person that will exert it. We made them equal to the task carried out by the witness. The witness makes justice with his or words and actions. History can, thanks to a witness, change its course and choose a new direction. In this way the exercise of memory is the also a form of resistance to evil on an individual level first of all (it helps a person preserve their integrity), but also on the level of the collective awareness.

Memory can carry out a repairing function against injustices that are committed. Every injustice, every trampled upon dignity, every spoken lie is like a tear in the fabric of humanity's historic life. Critical analysis and denouncement therefore cannot be enough, and reparative gestures are needed that, restoring truth, allow a reconciliation. These are symbolic gestures (committed evil cannot be erased), but they are real if they are the result of an examination of conscience, a result of putting positions taken and functions carried out into discussion.

The work done by Luciana De Marchi regarding the memory of her father is not very different from the work done by Moshe Bejski regarding the memory of the Holocaust. They rendered justice to the past by recovering from the risk of forgetting exemplary behavior (Gino was not just a victim) but they themselves should be considered exemplary figures and students strongly perceived their appeal.

The symbolic gesture of planting a tree for each Righteous person, the commemorative headstones of the victims of Stalinism, the street dedicated De Marchi in Fossano have value and produce an effect if they are the result of a voyage that led to a precise opening of awareness. Then the remembering acquires the full sense of memory: it becomes fact.

Our commemoration of Moshe Bejski in Krakow on 9 April 2008 had a long journey behind it, which for us made it truly "bringing him back home."