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THE RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS: A NEW REMEMBRANCE OF THE HOLOCAUST

1. The project: content and methodology

The research for the Righteous Among the Nations is an integral part of a much wider-ranging two-year history project. In the first year, this project examined "The Conditions of Bolognese Jews from the Promulgation of the Race Laws to September 8, 1943," while in the second year it looked at "The 60th Anniversary of the Liberation: Jews from the persecution of rights to the persecution of lives: escape routes and the commitment to salvation in the Bolognese territory (September 8, 1943 - April 21, 1945)." The latter was achieved with the support and contribution of the Committee for the Celebration of the 60th anniversary of the resistance and liberation of the Emilia Romagna Region in Italy.

It is important to keep in mind the contest in which this project was created to understand the aim and the ways it was carried out.

The starting point of the project was on the *didactic importance of teaching history*.¹ It must be asked, What and in what way does the study of history contribute to the overall formation of a person? The didactic objective of teaching history is the *creation of a historical sensibility*, or rather opening young people's eyes to historical dimensions. This includes changing the ability to perceive the distance of the past and at the same time its permanence in the present, its diversity and its durability, as well as the idea that the connection that links the past to the present is vital and necessary.

History provides the ability to understand temporal dimensions of the phenomena which surround us. This dimension is not seen immediately as it requires specific techniques to make it visible.² It is thus necessary to implement a kind of teaching that has a historiographical research methodology as its learning objective.³

Based on this premise, this history project was structured and planned using these steps: historiographical study in its preliminary phases, the research of a specific theme, and the visitation of historic locations.

1.1 The main topic of the history Laboratory "The Righteous among the Nations: The case of Odoardo Foicherini" was developed following the aforementioned steps and thanks to the collaboration of two students enrolled in the Higher School for Secondary Education (SSIS) of the University of Bologna.⁴

This paper describes only the way the work was carried out, the methodologies

¹ "Shouldn't we look at the topic again in its completeness and understand the study not only by its historical facts, but, more accurately, in the very student of historical education, an education that demonstrates the necessity of a literal sense of education?" R. Pernoud, *Medioevo un secolare pregiudizio*, Compiani, p. 168.

² Silvia Pizzetti, *Il passato dentro il presente: il sapere storico oggi*, in *Lineatempo*, Dec. 2003, p. 12

³ Antonia Grasselli, *Stranieri in patria. Gli ebrei bolognesi dalla promulgazione delle leggi antiebraiche all'8 settembre 1943*, Pendragon, p. 43.

⁴ Andrea Lederer – Davide Valentini, *Sessantesimo anniversario della liberazione. Gli ebrei dalla persecuzione dei diritti alla persecuzione delle vite: vie di fuga e impegno per la salvezza nel territorio bolognese (8 settembre 1943 – 21 aprile 1945)*. Dissertation on Secondary Education, University of Bologna.

followed, and the instruments used.

The textbook used is Gabriele Nissim's "The Tribunal of Good: The story of Moshè Bejski, the man that created The Garden of the Righteous."

Reading and reflecting upon this text opened up our minds to the possibility of a new interpretation of the Holocaust and thus a new interpretation of history in a more general sense, as well as a new way of interpreting the past, the present, and the future.

Studying the historiography of the persecution of Jews in Italy entailed the examination of different interpretations and represented the next step.⁵

By studying how history is written, students consciously acquire knowledge that history is reconstructed through a complex happening of events and through the connections that link them. Moreover, students understand that a rigorous scientific study is necessary so that this reconstruction corresponds as much as possible to the reality of the past.

What emerges, therefore, is a reality that, because of its complexity, is deeply problematic.

Both analytical and problematic aspects were discovered after studying the persecution of Italian Jews between 1943 and 1945.

After defining the historical context, participants moved on to the task of research. This was mainly focused on the personage and works of Odoardo Focherini (born Carpi, June 1907, died Hersbruck, December 1944), the "righteous man among nations," and for whom the Catholic Church began a beatification procedure.

Through inductive didactic analysis of the sources⁶ as well as the construction of interpretative hypotheses, students were able to reconstruct Odoardo Focherini's biography, understand the motives of his behavior and actions, and link this to the historical-political and religious context of his time.

The students not only acquired understanding of a historical dimension through the application of a correct historiographical methodology, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the study of historical texts allowed students to have a personal relationship and identify with Odoardo Focherini.

The "cognitive dynamism" which is executed by this didactic methodology has activated an "existential dynamism" which involved much more of their personality and touched it more profoundly.

Encounters with direct witnesses completed the project. A morning of study at university organized for the January 27, 2005 Memorial Day allowed us to hear the testimony of Maria Peri (Odoardo Focherini's niece), Franco Varini (ex-deportee to Fossoli, Flossenbürg, Dachau), and Grazia Fiorentini (an Imolese Jewish man saved by Amedeo Ruggi).

The seminar was held at Liceo Fermi on February 9, 2005 and was entitled, "The saved and their Saviors: Cotignola the landing place of salvation for the Jews and politically persecuted during the war." It fostered the understanding of a particular kind of refuge guided by two Righteous Men, Vittorio Zanzi and Luigi Varoli, fervent

⁵ The following texts were used:

Renzo De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*, Einaudi.

Michele Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei dell'Italia fascista*, Einaudi.

Giovanni Sale, *Hitler, la Santa Sede, gli Ebrei*. Jaca Book.

⁶ The references used to study Odoardo Focherini were :

Positivo super martyrio, Roma 2003

Odoardo Focherini, *Lettere dal carcere e dai campi di concentramento*, Carpi, 2004

G.Lampronti, *Mio fratello Odoardo*, Bologna 1948.

Mazziniani, as well as by Father Stefano Casadio.

The oral testimony (that was not studied here specifically because of its limits and its complexity compared to the written sources as it was in the previous project) contains a strong evocative capacity, since, transmitting a life, it brings the remembered past to the present, thus bringing the object of study closer.

1.2 Finally, the visitation of historical locations is essential as it projects the reality of the past as it becomes concrete in front of our eyes. This is because places constitute the scenery in which the facts we study actually happened.

Because of the themes investigated the places that were visited were the transition camp of Fossoli and the Museum of Deportees of Carpi and, to conclude the project an instructional field trip was organized to Poland in March. Here we visited Krakow (dedicating particular attention to Jewish places), Auschwitz Birchenau, Czestochowa, and Wieliczka.

2. The Righteous Men and Remembering the Good

This paper will now look at the main issue of last year's history project. The project was able to enlarge the visual angle with which the Holocaust is studied, not only because it opened up new understandings, but most of all because it was able to single out the characteristics (and content) remembering of the past must contain in order to open up the present to the future, thus leading to hope.⁷

In essence, our research and reflection that was produced, both from studying the Holocaust as well as by teaching it, an answer was found to the question, How can the memory of tragic events prevent its repetition?

There are two main aspects connected to the issues of the Righteous.

Gabriele Nissim, to whom we owe the credit of bringing the issue of the Righteous to an Italian and international level, defines them with extreme clarity: a new ethic dimension taken on by the definition of Righteous; the utilization of the concept of Righteous as a new category (the righteous men against genocide) to read the phenomenon of totalitarianism and history in a general sense (remembering the good).⁸

2.1 The concept of Righteous was first developed in the context of genocide on the historical reflection of the Holocaust. The term does not mean simply the continuous model behavior shown by a person but "the ethical choice of an individual in front of a crime against humanity perpetrated by a State."⁹

Moshe Bejski, the president of the Commission of the Righteous from 1945-1970 is credited with having defined the "profile" of the Righteous.

"He didn't want," writes Gabriele Nissim in "The Tribunal of Good," "to build a garden of heroes, but a garden of normal men on that hill in Jerusalem. He wanted to celebrate the risk that every man takes, not only the extreme one that consciously takes death into account... Bejski liked to think that by going up the hill in Jerusalem men could rediscover the small steps the Righteous had attempted. He wanted each visitor to come out of that place of meditation with a memory of thousands of unknown names

⁷ Massimo Borghesi, *Educare alla memoria*, in *Lineatempo*, Dec.2003, p.24-27

⁸ Sante Maletta, *Testimonianza e perdono. Note per una memoria felice*, in *Lineatempo*, Dec. 2003, p.41-42

⁹ *Storie di uomini giusti nel Gulag* (introduction by Gabriele Nissim), Bruno Mondatori, p.3

imprinted on their minds, as opposed to the bombastic image of a few dozen heroes."¹⁰

The Righteous Man is "he who does not give up being a man, and, because of an indecipherable and mysterious mechanism, does not want to accept letting go of his internal feeling of compassion for the other."¹¹

Next to the "grey scale of evil" revealed by writer Primo Levi, there is an analogous scale of good, a grey area of good. The men recognized as the Righteous by Yad Vashem's Commission are not consistent, perfect men, but normal people with limits and defects who chose to act differently than the majority when faced with a historic request. The acts of responsibility that they performed for the Jews which jeopardized their personal safety contain value that was not only immediately usable, but also prophetic. They tell us that "the individual responsibility is the only antidote. History will never end, a new society capable of discharging the perverse mechanism of extreme evil from its bowels will never be born. There will only be the Righteous who will try to oppose it and withstand."¹²

2.2 This ascertainment brings us to the Righteous Men's other problematic issue, remembering the good: "An unlimited memory of a crime against humanity should consider not only the memory of the evil committed by a totalitarian system but also the memory of the men that tried to withstand the machine of annihilation."¹³

This does not involve showing the ambivalence of history but rather of continually trying to better understand the nature of totalitarian systems that were responsible for crimes against humanity.

Gabriele Nissim describes the Righteous with the phrases the "dark times" and the "obscure times" of humanity, citing Bertold Brecht's expressions.

Times are "dark" or "obscure" because they are those in which that which is considered human, human thought and action, has become impossible or nearly impossible.¹⁴

In a social or political context like the one set by totalitarian systems, characterized by a strong ideological pressure (that prevents the recognition of the reality as it is and thus prevents thought) and by a homogenization of behavior (that inhibits free will),¹⁵ in which evil is not perceived as a temptation but as a duty. Thus, as "the predominant way of thought brings an entire society to believe in the moral value of genocide,"¹⁶ the Righteous Men acting as normal men in exceptional circumstances, in that context, demonstrate the existence of the possibility of living like men.

"The testimonies of solidarity towards the victims," writes Nissim of Bejski, "were the only deeds showing the potential and freedom of man. The more stories of help and rescue were revealed and taken note of, the more the world was shown how to stop the extermination machine. For him, remembering the good was the most radical and revolutionary exposure of the indifference and cowardice that surrounded the fate of the Jews."¹⁷

¹⁰ G.Nissim, *Il tribunale del bene. La storia di Moshe Bejski, l'uomo che creò il Giardino dei Giusti*, Oscar Mondadori, pp.158-159

¹¹ *Storia di uomini giusti*, p.4

¹² G.Nissim, *Il tribunale del bene*, p.267

¹³ *Storie di uomini giusti*, p.27-28

¹⁴ Sante Maletta, *Memoria dei giusti e costruzione della città a partire da Hannah Arendt*, in this volume.

¹⁵ Mariano Vezzali, *Hannah Arendt: un'indagatrice curiosa*, in *La nuova Europa*, n.1/2004, pg.56/58

¹⁶ *Storie di uomini giusti*, p.4

¹⁷ G.Nissim, *Il tribunale del bene*, p.274

The Righteous Men, preserving the fundamental idea of hope in man, defended human civilization.

The "decent German" whose existence Etty Hillesum nearly predicted in his diary¹⁸ introduced to us a new vision of history, open to hope and full of responsibility for us.

The personal history of Moshe Bejski helps to understand. "Bejski realized that the only thing that would have allowed him to live with his past was the memory of the happiness due from a good deed. But this memory needed to be stimulated by an experience of happiness for this to not become mere nostalgia. This experience was the one brought about by the discovery of the new Righteous Men: each time I found out about a new story I felt recompensated for all the sacrificed I was forced to make."¹⁹

High-court public prosecutor Gideon Hausner's question at Eichman's trial that sentenced him to the chair was, "There were 15,000 prisoners against a few hundred SS. Why didn't you attack them? Why didn't you rebel?"²⁰ forced him to think about his past. We are reminded of Schindler, the man that saved him and felt the need to pay homage to him. Remembering the good received allowed Bejski to regain his past and to take responsibility, giving him a task for the future.

The small steps the Righteous attempted represent the positive possibility present in history, whose realization is entrusted to our present responsibility: "from that moment on he decided to dedicate his existence to completing a work that began in the past, risking the possibility of being canceled out by the oblivion of the contemporaries and of not influencing the future of humanity: remembering the good."²¹

The memory of the Righteous thus opens to the dimension of hope.

2.3 Studying Gabriele Nissim's book, "The Tribunal of Good," which tells the story and describes the activity of Yad Vashem's Commission of Righteous in the years of Moshe Bejski's chairmanship identified this issues.

Reflections made by the students, shown in their papers, documenting the relevance of this way of studying the Holocaust, represent a further enrichment from an educational and cultural viewpoint. The work done on remembrance, laid out using this method, supports the importance of the undertaking of the Day of Remembrance.

An article written by two students, presented on the morning of study organized at the university on the Righteous among Nations on January 27, 2005, was truly a revelation. The point of view of the Righteous was clarified in this paper. It was them who both decreased the distance felt when faced with such terrible events as well as indicated a new beginning with an end entrusted to each person.

They wrote, "This strong and stupefying memory of evil is not entirely understandable and graspable for me. It's far from my brief experience during my 18 years of life in a peaceful and comfortable environment. I realized that this distance can be dangerous since its a threat to the remembrance of events that should not be forgotten, its decreased by starting from a different point of view, or discovering the signs of good

¹⁸ "It's a modern problem: a great hatred for the Germans who poisoned our spirit. ... And then suddenly, a few weeks ago, the liberator thought came forward, like a young, hesitant flower in a desert of weeds: even if not one decent German remained, this particular German would deserve to be defended against that group of barbarians, and, thanks to him, no one would have the right to direct their hatred towards an entire people," Etty Hillesum, *Diario 1941/1943*, Adelphi Edizioni, p.29

¹⁹ Sante Maletta, *Testimonianza e perdono*, p.41

²⁰ G.Nissim, *Il tribunale del bene*, p.90

²¹ Sante Maletta, *Testimonianza e perdono*, p.41

that, in a completely degenerated inhuman world, even if these signs are few or hidden, they do exist! ... After all the reflection made on this topic I have started to think of the Righteous as the rope to an old well: without which the water could not be drunk, without which the well would only be seen as a black hole, deep and growing smaller, and the presence of the vital liquid would not be understood. The black hole, this deep well built by man, is all that has ever been, is and will be of evil, while the Righteous is all that allows us to discover life, hope in the moment in which the majority of the world has forgotten it. ... Nissim's work was the one that fascinated me the most: its extraordinary how the small actions these men completed (I don't know if I would have had the courage to do so in their place) had such vast consequences to such a large extent. Their model is even useful in everyday life and for matters of lesser importance: you can always quit being alone to look around and start to dive in" (Chiara Imbriaco e Silvia Beghelli).

3. The history laboratory on Odoardo Focherini: Me and Odoardo Focherini

The garden of the Righteous is the garden of normal men who found the resources to react inside themselves, opposing the ideological, political, and social context of a totalitarian system, and who, in this way, represented an alternative to the system. The Righteous is not a superhero.

This historical approach to the Holocaust contains a high educational value, exactly because it allows everyone, not only young people, to identify with these men, who were actually people like us.

To understand this not only intellectually, but to discover it through a fascinating and touching story, permits this identification and leads naturally to the question, "Could I react like him?" as well as to understanding that we could possibly be face with this as well one day.

An example of this method can be seen in the laboratory on Odoardo Focherini. The structure using seminars and the analysis of documents (letters and testimonies) used to construct interpretative hypotheses on the reasons behind Focherini's actions and his well-made choices in relation to the historical context in which he lived, provided Odoardo Focherini with a real face, an actual personality, a story interwoven with meetings, behaviors, actions, and feelings.

The class was divided into two groups that examined his life, his job as manager of the daily Catholic newspaper, "L'Avvenire d'Italia," the role of his family, the help given to the Jews (in collaboration with Father Dante Sala) and to the evacuees, in collaboration with the CLN. The two groups then tackled the reasons behind his actions and behavior, through the analysis of several letters written in the months of detention in San Giovanni in Monte prison in Bologna, then in the transition camp in Fossoli (Carpi, Modena) and finally in the Gries camp near Bolzano.

The letters clearly showed Focherini's inner world, the depth of his emotional ties with his wife, his children, his friend Sacchetti, and his mother.

The cardinal and theological virtues, because of which a process of beatification has been initiated, are seen as a daily, almost unconscious exercise, interwoven with a passionate and anxious humanity, which is, at times, tired and scared.

The other interesting aspect was the representation of the relationship Odoardo Focherini held with the ecclesiastical and historical context. After the German occupation the maneuvering power of the ecclesiastical hierarchy was progressively reduced until it was practically eliminated in the fall of 1944, after the occupational regime worsened to

close in on the front and stop the Allied advancement on the Gothic Line.

While Focherini lets his reader believe in his faith in an effective intervention from the Church authorities in his letters from Bologna and Fossoli, an exception of his destiny emerges in his subsequent letters. He began to accept the destiny while achieving a larger, more realistic vision of his situation.

As the testimonies left and gathered showed the vitality, energy and passion of the man, the sense of concreteness demonstrated in his work life and his helping of others, so too did the letters hit upon the maturity of the man and Christian.

The reconstruction of the last moments of Odoardo Focherini's life was made possible thanks to the testimony of a Sardinian carabinieri, Salvatore Becciu, inmate at Hersbruk. Becciu's account is second-hand from Teresio Olivelli who assisted Focherini during the final agonies of death, and who died a short time later from the blows suffered for trying to defend several prisoners from the harassment of the SS soldiers.

The individual work assigned to the students at the end of the seminar called for the writing of an essay or a creative writing piece that required, in both cases, the application of the method used in the seminar. This called for reading the texts (letters and testimonies) gathered in a study book as well as a short composition entitled "Me and Odoardo Focherini."

These compositions described how students were able to interiorize an interpretative category to study history and how they could assimilate it enough to transform it using a point of view with which they can look at themselves and their lives.

"Do you know the difference between a superhero and a hero?" asks Nicola Cominetti in her essay, "Me and Odoardo Focherini." The answer perfectly grasps the nature of the "righteous" man, describing the exemplar figure.

In Maria Rotondo's story, "An afternoon with my memories," Odoardo Focherini comes back to life: his physical appearance, his spirit, his suffering, his convictions, his feeling about his own existence come to life in the thoughts of the judge that recognizes him as a Righteous among Nations.

4. The visit to the Auschwitz Birkenau camp: the existential characteristics of this remembrance trip

Visiting historical places is one of the ways to plan and structure history projects and constitutes an essential part. These in fact represent the context in which the events studied actually took place, they help to throw the student into the reality of the past.

The imagination, or rather, the ability to imaginatively penetrate into past events is of fundamental importance not only to recreate the very past, but also because of its interpretation as the possibility to experiment with its effectiveness must be thought of when teaching history.

In fact, "when the didactic activities set and follow a historical research methodology, not only is a real critical sense developed in regards to the subject of study, but an ability to identify with that subject is also developed. Studying historiography, reconstructing a well-known memory, creating a state archive stimulated the spirit of investigation, but at the same time fed the creativity of the imagination to the point of being able to recreate inside us that world that is no longer and to almost materialize in from of our eyes thanks to the evocative power of the places in which the events of the

past took place."²²

As the descriptions of the Remembrance of the Good and the laboratory on Odoardo Focherini confirm the achievement of these objectives, that is the development of a critical distance and, at the same time, of the ability to identify with the events and men of the past to the point that knowledge acquired have entered to become part of the complex experience of the person.

Visiting the Auschwitz and Birkenau camps can be seen in this perspective as well as a conclusion to the path of study.

The uniqueness of the place and the way in which the visit took place lent the experience a strong existential connotation.

After a guided visit to Auschwitz in the morning, the students were given the afternoon to visit Birkenau as they wished, either individually or in groups.

After the initial feeling of bewilderment and anxiety, the place's impact, with its physical characteristics, the remains, the ruins, the silence, the relative isolation, came the desire to "see, understand, touch," which kicked off a process in which all the person's faculties were involved.

The almost physical perception of what took place at one time in the camp, felt as something real and still alive, provoked a profound internal silence ("emptiness") that was confronted with a never before experienced directness and clarity (questions, rage, fear, flight, pain).

There is no adequate explanation other than one's own search for an appropriate answer to heal the memory.

And remembering the Righteous? Something Focherini said to his brother-in-law when he visited the San Giovanni in Monte prison comes to mind. "If you had only seen how they were treated here, you'd regret not having saved more."

This thought helps maintain the stare, gives the courage to not flee in the face of feelings of death, that sends a "shiver down your spine," supports the hard work needed to not "escape from reality" and to accept a suffering from the heart, because only "with a sufferance from the heart can you grow and love."

These, along with many other observations were written by the students in their responses to my letter. These response letters are gathered and published in this volume.

5. The Righteous still exist

Genesis (Gen. 18, 20-23) describes God's deal with Abraham to save Sodom and Gomorrah if he could track down at least 10 righteous men. Abraham desperately searched for these men, but he found only and for this reason the two cities were not saved. The meaning of the conclusion of this incident should be seen clearly because "in the tormented dialogue with God [Abraham] understood that to save the world from the contamination of evil, righteous men need to be on one side to withstand and those who listen to and take care of them need to be on another."²³ We could say that "the action of the righteous is complete when someone has the power and wisdom to recognize it."²⁴

In other words, remembering the Righteous requires the work of men and institutions that search it out and take care of it, that foster research, disclosure and

²² Antonia Grasselli, *Il potere evocativo dell'immaginazione*, in www.lineatempo/esperienze/ilcarsodellagrandeguerra.org

²³ *Storie di uomini giusti*, p.25

²⁴ *ivi*, p.3

education.

The school is one of these institutions. Along with other institutions, the school is entrusted with the task of not allowing the remembrance of Good to fall into oblivion.

The Righteous, when interiorized as a category, can become a criteria used to read contemporaneity, a way of feeling yourself in the world, an interpretive hypothesis of past history and of our entire culture.²⁵

When considered with a wider perspective, remembering the Good can contribute to solving two important issues of the present day: that regarding the *transversal remembrance* of ethnic and social genocide of the 1900s, and the so-called issue of *passing testimony*.

A memory with watertight compartments is a dangerous memory, easily instrumentalized. It is a memory that does not allow for an effective comprehension of what is studied and what the memory needs to keep alive.

As the Righteous (and the remembrance of the Good) showed that only a complete memory can uncover the true nature of evil (the Righteous with their actions that went against the grain revealed the radicality of conditioning consciences in a totalitarian system). Thus, a transversal memory that goes beyond crimes to comprehend not only a kind of victim, but also a kind of Righteous Men can truly help comprehension of the phenomenon of totalitarianism and the history of the 1900s.

The issue of passing testimony is much more complex. It tries to answer the question, How can listening to a testimony make me a witness in turn?

The use of oral history in the study of contemporary history will not be pondered here, but rather if a person can play the role of a witness without the all the characteristics of a direct witness, who has the rights of witness because of living through an event.

It is an issue of citizen testimony.²⁶ The citizen, a flesh and blood human being, capable of facing events using personal sensibility, experience and values, but also conscious of their limits, can pass a moral judgment on historical events because "he is not only informed and capable of judging, but he is also personally involved, to the point of promising to prevent it from taking place again."²⁷

From direct testimony to citizen testimony, from a testimony that asks to not be forgotten, and thus completed with the work of the listener, to the testimony of he who, exercising the right to make moral judgment and assuming the responsibility that goes along with it, this task is personally assumed.

Remembering the Good can implement these dynamics and citizen testimony can replace other kinds of testimony.

The memory of the Righteous and the memory of the Good are therefore important not only a educational and cultural level, but have a greater significance on a civil level.

²⁵ Six out of twenty-three students performed their State exam using material elaborated from the issue of the Righteous and applied to various disciplinary subjects.

²⁶ Sante Maletta, *Testimonianza e perdono*, p.39-40

²⁷ *ivi.* p. 40.