

Perlasca Forest: Remembering the Righteous of the Nations

A 10,000 tree forest was recently dedicated in Ahihud Forest in the Galilee in memory of **Giorgio Perlasca**, one of the Righteous among the Nations. Perlasca was an Italian Catholic who risked his life to save Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust. The dedication of



R to L: Franco Perlasca and his wife, Avi Dickstien, Silvan Shalom, Walter Arbib

the forest was made possible thanks to a contribution by **Walter Arbib**, a Canadian Jew who is well-known for his love and support of Israel.

"The story of Perlasca's heroism touched me deeply," Arbib explained. "It is important that there should be sites that commemorate such special people. Planting trees in the soil of Israel is a very meaningful act. I can imagine Israeli children and their families coming to spend time in the forest, enjoying nature and also learning about an important chapter in our people's history." Arbib celebrated his seventieth birthday at the ceremony, together with dozens of family members and friends from Israel and Italy.

Avi Dickstein, Executive Director of KKL-JNF Resources and Development Division, emceed the moving event and noted: "KKL-JNF develops many sites throughout Israel, but there



is something very special about this site, which commemorates the name of a person who risked his life in order to save Jews during the Holocaust."

The ceremony took place in the presence of **Franco Perlasca**, the son of Giorgio Perlasca. "My father was not a hero, he was a regular person who could not turn away when he saw human suffering," his son said.

Many dignitaries came to honor Perlasca's memory and to thank Arbib for his contribution, including **Silvan Shalom**, the Vice Prime Minister and Minister for Negev and Galilee Development: "We must always remember what happened during the Holocaust, when Jews were like dust in the wind and millions of our people were murdered," the minister said. "Giorgio Perlasca was a different sort of person, someone who saved thousands of Jews. He acted out of a deep belief in humanity and every person's right to live."

Regarding KKL-JNF activities, the minister said: "This forest is yet another example of the important afforestation work KKL-JNF is doing throughout the country. By doing so, it enables our country's citizens to spend time in nature, and what is no less important – it strengthens our hold of the land of Israel. Our roots are planted deep in our land, and every new tree that is planted is a victory and unequivocal witness that we are here to stay."



Giorgio Perlasca participated in the Spanish Civil War, and in appreciation, he was awarded free passage to Spanish embassies. When the Nazis conquered Hungary in 1944, he disguised himself as a Spanish diplomat and helped smuggle Jews out of Hungary, together with other diplomats from neutral countries. Perlasca helped to hide and feed more than 5,000 Jews from Budapest, and tried to get travel certificates for them. For these deeds, he received honorary citations from the governments of Italy, Hungary and Spain. In Israel, he was declared one of the Righteous among the Nations by Yad Vashem. He passed away in 1992.



Franco Perlasca was very moved as he told the audience that his father never told his family about what he did to save Jewish lives. They heard about it by chance, when a family of survivors came to thank him and give him a symbolic gift – a number of personal artifacts that they still had from the time of the Holocaust: a cup, a spoon and a medal. When Perlasca begged them to keep the artifacts for themselves and to give them to their grandchildren, they insisted that he take them, saying: "If not for what you did, we would not be here today and would never have had any grandchildren."

In a conversation with Perlasca after the ceremony, he added: "I am very happy to be here today and remember my father and his great deeds. I am very proud of him, and his extreme modesty makes my pride in him even greater."

Perlasca Forest is part of Ahihud Forest, which covers about 6,000 dunams in the Lower Western Galilee. The forest was first planted in the 1950s, and KKL-JNF has recently been doing extensive forest renewal work, planting trees that are indigenous to the land of Israel and various types of conifers. The forest is traversed by a scenic road and includes many



visitor and nature recreation spots – scenic lookouts, recreation areas and trails, all of which were built with the help of KKL-JNF's friends throughout the world.

Shaya Ben Yehuda, Yad Vashem Director of International Relations, related that before his death, Perlasca specifically requested that his having been declared one of the Righteous of the Nations be inscribed in Hebrew on his gravestone. "We are all grateful to Perlasca and his family, to the donor of the forest and of course to KKL-JNF, which has made Israel green."



Victor Yagouda, one of the directors of the United Israel Appeal of Canada (UIA), told how Perlasca saved the lives of two Jewish children when he confronted an SS officer by the name of Adolph Eichmann: "Fifty years after Eichmann's trial, many of the people saved by Perlasca are currently living in Israel," he said.

The First Secretary of the Canadian Embassy in Israel was also present to honor his fellow Canadian, Walter Arbib, who has also

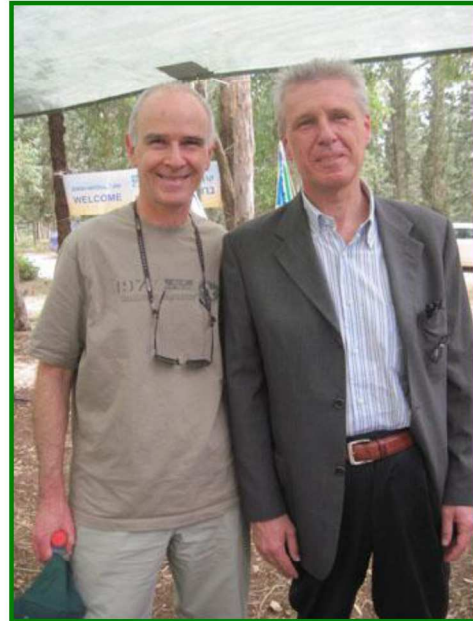
contributed towards other important projects, in addition to the forest.

Riccardo Pacifici, president of the Rome Jewish Community, emphasized in his remarks that the Jewish people must always remember the deeds of the Righteous among the Nations, just as we must never forget the crimes of the Nazis and their helpers: "My father's life was saved thanks to righteous people



who hid him in a monastery," Pacifici said. "As a son of Holocaust survivors, I feel that it's a miracle that we are all here together."

One of the day's most emotional moments was a meeting between Franco Perlasca and **Tamir Freizler** from Tel Aviv, a person who many members of his family were saved thanks to Giorgio Perlasca. Freizler was surprised by the meeting, since he had come to the ceremony in order to celebrate the birthday of his boss, Walter Arbib. "I heard the name Perlasca many times from my grandfather and grandmother. They spoke with great admiration about the diplomat who saved Jews, including a number of members of our family. It is a great honor for me to shake his son's hand and to thank him on behalf of my entire family."



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