

Why Raoul Wallenberg Matters

The Ongoing Search for Universal Values

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The story of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish businessman who went to Hungary in 1944 to rescue the Jews of Budapest, bears all the hallmarks of a Greek tragedy: Young and idealistic, he fought one totalitarian regime (Nazism) only to fall victim to another (Stalinism). As such, his case seamlessly links the two defining events of the 20th Century, the Holocaust and the Cold War. After having helped thousands of Hungarian Jews to survive, Raoul Wallenberg was arrested by Soviet troops in January 1945 and disappeared. The official Soviet claim that Wallenberg died or was killed in a Moscow prison on July 17, 1947 has never been substantiated and the search for him continues. However, in the age of Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur, spreading WMDs and global warming: Does it make sense and is there any justification to insist on the truth about one man who disappeared sixty-two years ago?

Over time, Wallenberg has come to personify the importance of individual action and individual rights, first as a rescuer in Budapest and later, as a victim of Stalinist terror in the Soviet Union. While Raoul Wallenberg's humanitarian achievements are widely recognized, his importance as a victim is much harder to define. In Russia alone twenty million people died during World War II, about twenty million more suffered in the Gulag. Today, untold numbers all over the world endure human rights abuses; as child laborers, as sex slaves, as victims of ethnic, religious, political and domestic strife.

In Europe especially, much has been done to help the next generation understand the complex dynamics of 20th century history which includes two world wars and the perfidy of the Holocaust. Yet, since the end of World War II, gruesome conflicts have flared, from Bosnia to Cambodia, which leave one to wonder: Are there any valid lessons we can draw from the Raoul Wallenberg case for today's world? Or, put differently, is there really such a thing as learning from history?

Arne Ruth, former editor-in-chief of Sweden's largest daily, *Dagens Nyheter* and a leading analyst of European social issues, worries that when it comes to human rights, we are stuck in an inherent contradiction, a type of moral relativism. "We advocate and believe in universal (human) rights," Ruth says, "but we do not attach to them an absolute value. Plus the rights we do have are neither adequately codified nor enforceable. The Geneva conventions (on the rules of war) are of course a laudable exception, but as current events show, they too can be undermined. "

In the short run, the ability of global institutions like the U.N. to ensure respect for human rights will remain in doubt as long as a large number of its member states are among the worst offenders. Still, there have been notable efforts recently to implement universal rights, like in the 2000 U.N. Millennium Declaration which lists a number of fundamental values and sets specific targets for making basic education, health care and clean water a reality for everyone. 2002 saw the realization of the long sought International Criminal Court which has the authority – with serious restrictions – to prosecute individuals for the crimes of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

And just this year the U.N. General Assembly adopted a landmark convention on enforced disappearance that explicitly protects the rights of both the disappeared and their families, a first in international human rights law. Its true importance, however, will depend on how many countries choose to ratify it in coming years.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former U.S. National Security Advisor under President Carter, calls the search for universal values, “the worldwide yearning for human dignity”, as he puts it, the defining movement of our time. In his new book, *Second Chance: Three Presidents and the Crisis of American Superpower*, (Basic Books, 2007), Brzezinski chastises in particular the current U.S. political leadership for thoroughly misreading basic human aspirations. In doing so, he argues, the U.S. has not only failed to alleviate the persistent sense of injustice among the world’s disadvantaged, but has added fuel to the main wellspring of violence and unrest.

According to most experts, it would be relatively easy to close the glaring loopholes in the international legal system which leave the most vulnerable segments of populations poorly protected. So why do we not do it more effectively?

Arne Ruth points to historical factors: A post war liberated Europe sought implementation of universal values but did so by reconstituting sovereign power, i.e. the nation state system. As Ruth sees it, our continued focus on sovereignty inherently jeopardizes minority rights. (The conflicts in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s serve as graphic illustration.) Oddly enough, our tendency towards universalism can actually enhance this situation. In the case of Sweden, neutrality after World War II created the illusion that Sweden’s “separateness” from the fray somehow made it “better”, more global in outlook. While it basked in its image as a beacon of universal rights, it buried its head in the sand when it came to its own failings. “At home, (Swedish) idealism turned into arrogance and negligence,” Ruth explains. “The official attitude towards the Baltic countries – regarding them as non-existent – is a prime example. Reluctance to press the Soviet Union ... about Raoul Wallenberg is another.”

In a fascinating study which appeared a decade ago, entitled *The Splendid Blond Beast: Money, Law and Genocide in the 20th Century* (Common Courage Press, 1995), Christopher Simpson of the American University in Washington, D.C. emphasized a systemic problem. Simpson found that exploitation of minorities functions as an integral part of a world in which the interests of social and economic elites of various countries cross national boundaries. The law remains a refuge, he stressed, but also finds itself under attack. Those who seek supremacy – irrespective

of ideology – use and subvert the existing legal structure, which works in turn to isolate and ultimately get rid of unwanted competitors. As such, the system itself facilitates and enhances the danger of excesses such as genocide.

One of the most respected human rights experts today, Thomas Buergenthal, a survivor of Auschwitz and currently a judge on the International Court of Justice in The Hague, was so troubled by the repeating cycle of violence that he tried to do more than just write another report when in 1993 he headed an official U.N. Truth Commission charged with investigating the 1981 massacre of more than 800 civilians in El Mozote, El Salvador. As Buergenthal explained in an interview with *The Washington Post* at the time, he wanted to present a study that did not just simply establish the facts, but which addressed the root causes of human rights abuses.

Buergenthal found that in the case of El Mozote, general concepts of moral behavior had little meaning to the perpetrators. In fact, none of them expressed regret for their actions and all invoked references to the alleged “guilt” of the victims as primary justification for their deeds. His findings strongly echoed those of U.S. psychologist Ervin Staub and his 1989 seminal analysis “The Roots of Evil.” The “moral justification of evil,” Buergenthal and Staub concluded, is fundamental to all human rights violations.

Arguably, even the most well intentioned discussion of morality and its definition can quickly get lost in the jungle of hypocrisy and double standards. (For example, it is hard not to get cynical when the U.S.’s new best friend in the war on terror is Uzbekistan, one of the world’s most repressive regimes.)

Nowhere is the tension so acutely felt as at the intersection of politics and economics. The concept of political neutrality during World War II serves again as a case in point. Neutrality was the sine qua non for Raoul Wallenberg’s humanitarian mission, almost all of the Danish and Norwegian Jews were saved thanks to the haven they found in Sweden and by maintaining close economic relations with Nazi Germany, Sweden avoided painful occupation. But where exactly lies the distinction between forced collaboration with Nazism and blatant opportunism?

One who was keenly aware of this quandary was Sweden’s postwar Prime Minister, Tage Erlander. Guided by the social-democratic economist Gunnar Myrdal who served as his Minister of Trade, he suggested for the post war world a formal separation of politics and economics (in the area of foreign trade.) One set of rules should apply in the political and social interactions of states; another, purely pragmatic one, in the economic arena. An unworkable proposal, but indicative of the degree of the Swedish government’s concern.

Unfortunately, the “structural dilemma” of our system, as Simpson calls it, may run even deeper than we think: Our most basic form of organization for human interaction, the exchange of goods and services, is, in its fundamental nature, competitive and utilitarian, not idealistic. Free trade has unquestioningly wide benefits, but that does not make it inherently benevolent. Whatever our human instincts may be to do good, from the beginning they had to operate in a

reality which was and is fundamentally amoral. As Tage Erlander saw only too clearly, this tension haunts us and to reconcile its contradictions remains our greatest challenge.

While there are no absolutes, not always a definitive “right” or “wrong”, we do have points of reference that show the way. Throughout history, societies have tried to define these footholds, as have various religions and philosophies. However incomplete and maddeningly slow, the definition and implementation of fundamental values is ongoing. In the West, the Renaissance, with its focus on the individual human being, gave rise to “humanism.” The U.S. Bill of Rights (1791) explicitly states everyone’s right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” – but initially left out of that definition a large part of the American population. For African Americans, it took another seventy years to formally end slavery and another 100 for the U.S. civil rights movement to move the markers forward once again.

At the core of this process is the integrity, value and dignity of each and every individual. When that line is crossed, we get into trouble, independent of our different religious, philosophical, political or cultural affiliations. Blowing up children seeking candy from U.S. soldiers in Iraq crosses that line. Attaching electrodes to hooded prisoners facing mock electrocution crosses that line. Publicly decrying but secretly financing and profiting from dictatorships crosses that line. Raping dark skinned women in Darfur in order to lighten the blood line crosses that line. As does displaying political opponents’ heads in the market squares of Chechnya and rewarding the man responsible for these horrors with the presidency of the state.

But, as these examples and – in less bold outline – the Wallenberg case show, the idea(l) that every person matters very quickly runs headlong into the cold realism of overarching interests. The resulting compromises and rationalizations lead to the kind of abuses just mentioned.

So what can each and all of us do? When it comes to genocide, says Christopher Simpson, the key is to expose crimes and criminals for what they are and to unrelentingly “confront anyone ...who allows institutionalized murder to take on the appearance of reason, wisdom or even justice”. This is where Raoul Wallenberg and others like him come in. Individuals have to stand up and draw a line – which, admittedly, is not always easy. Activism frequently imposes oppressive and unequal burdens on those who speak out. While it may be edifying to watch Aung San Suu Kyi for years resolutely oppose Burma’s generals, we have only a very limited sense of the deprivations this principled stand has meant to her in daily life.

Our main – and very reasonable – rationale for avoiding confrontation is fear; fear of being marginalized, to be left on the losing end of competition or simply the fear for one’s life and loved ones. Russia’s neighbors know what will happen if they openly criticize Moscow’s policies. It may turn off their natural gas supply or place them at a huge cost disadvantage whose effects will ripple throughout their country’s economy. (The consequences for individual rebellion may turn out to be even more dire, evidenced in the brutal assassinations of Paul Klebnikov, Anna Politkovskaya and Alexander Litvinenko)

Many countries are simply not in a position to stand up to this pressure. Others, like Germany are showing signs that they will not be bullied. In a 2006 interview with the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's human rights representative, Günter Nooke, summarized Germany's position: "Even if one is dependent on Russian gas, one is free enough to insist on human rights."

And in several meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin over the past year, and now, as current President of the European Union, Merkel has done just that. In Nooke's view, Merkel, a product of formerly communist East Germany, understands perhaps better than other (Western) European leaders that even though countries like Russia and China appear to have leverage on certain issues, they do worry about their image. While they reflexively reject outside "lecturing", they equally strenuously wish to avoid negative publicity. (Like China's worries about negative headlines in the run-up to the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing)

In short, public exposure of misdeeds is key to fighting abuse. Related tactics are also increasingly employed by business leaders, through increased anti-corruption and self-policing initiatives, aimed at getting a handle on exploitative practices.

In 2000, in an attempt to formulate a universal business ethic, the U.N. Global Compact initiative, outlined ten fundamental principles. (see www.unglobalcompact.org) But ambiguity remains. How does one define standards for dignity, for example? And what exactly is "fair trade"? More importantly, when the stakes are high enough, good intentions are usually the first to go. Without enforceable laws, loss of face and minimal fines for global corporations amount to little more than the equivalent of a parking ticket.

This is precisely the same conclusion Buergenthal reached in El Salvador: Information and, ultimately, public accountability are the only way to move forward. The truth about events must be established for people to arrive at a sense of justice. As Buergenthal made clear in the Washington Post interview, this begins and ends with each individual, victim as well as perpetrator: "...To the victim the worst thing that can happen is to be told nothing happened. ...One really has to hold people individually responsible. Six million Jews means nothing. If you want to have an impact, talk about one person."

The search for historic truth then is not just a laborious exercise but is vital for learning from history. Such persistence, however, is rarely met with full support, especially when the crime in question took place long ago.

In the Raoul Wallenberg case, sixty-two years have passed. Some argue it is time to move on, to accept the past, in order to be able to deal with new realities.

In Buergenthal's experience, many prefer to simply forget, particularly the perpetrators:

"(In El Salvador) ... They called us "insolent." There is something wonderful in that word. We were insolent because we dared to tell them what they had done."

Similar arguments have been put forth in both Russia and Sweden in the Wallenberg investigation. Russia has reacted with unmitigated irritation every time the question of Wallenberg's fate is raised. It claims to have no further documents about the issue; a claim which most Wallenberg experts and Russia specialists agree is patently untrue.

So far, public rhetoric notwithstanding, Sweden has done very little to press the Russians for access to this material and the government remains reluctant to address in depth the complex Swedish aspects of the case. Viewed against this backdrop, Sweden's attempt to present Raoul Wallenberg as the personification of Swedish activism in the world, while steadfastly preventing a full investigation of his case, is particularly ironic. All involved parties clearly prefer the status quo in the Raoul Wallenberg investigation, each for very different reasons.

But aside from a moral obligation, David Matas, a leading Canadian human rights attorney who provided an official analysis of the Wallenberg case for the Canadian government in 1998, stresses that the new U.N. convention places legal demands on Sweden as well as Russia to continue the inquiry into Wallenberg's fate. Even though both countries have yet to ratify the convention, which is binding only for states who have done so, Matas points out that the treaty is in fact "indicative of customary international law which binds all states. It provides that an investigation into the fate of a disappeared person should be able to be conducted for as long as the fate of the victim ... remains unclear. Cutting off the investigation into the fate of Raoul Wallenberg prematurely would violate this provision."

In the end, Matas, Ruth, Simpson and Buergenthal all agree on one thing: The insistence on the truth about one man is ground zero for the concept of universal values. Remembrance, too, is vital, but by itself it is not enough. Victims need more than memorials. Guy von Dardel, Wallenberg's brother, expressed the sentiment in a speech some years back: "The truth can and will be found and it will be ...a monument more durable than marble."

The Wallenberg case is not and was never just about the fate of one man. The question of how one balances the rights of the individual vs. the interests of the state is as current today as it ever was. For this debate alone historic truth is critical and a democratic society has to insist on full disclosure. That is precisely why Raoul Wallenberg matters so much today. One can only hope that the continued insistence on the truth will be a lasting legacy of his case.