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Opening Remarks

International RWI-70 Round Table in Budapest

“The Art of the Impossible”

Good morning and a warm welcome to all of you.

I am so happy to see everyone gathered here, including members of Raoul Wallenberg's family – to celebrate Raoul's extraordinary courage and accomplishments, but also united in the wish to finally determine the full circumstances of his fate.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the official government and diplomatic representatives who have so generously agreed to join us for this special event.

And most of all, I would like to give very special thanks to our host, Professor Szabolcs Szita. When we first were looking for a venue to hold the Raoul Wallenberg International Roundtable, his response was immediate – How can we help? What can we do? Such generosity of spirit is a rare gift and we are profoundly grateful to him and his staff for allowing us to be here today.

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Our thoughts this morning are with the thousands of victims of the Holocaust in Hungary and the many brave men and women who gave their lives to save others.

There has been much debate in recent years about how to assess Raoul Wallenberg's actions and achievements – How effective were his rescue efforts? How many people did he really save?

One could argue that Wallenberg's humanitarian mission was little more than a small ray of light in an otherwise disastrous failure to stem the tide of the Holocaust. Before

Raoul ever arrived in Hungary, more than 500,000 Hungarian Jews had been deported and killed by the gruesomely effective Nazi death machinery; the Allies essentially stood by, unable and in part unwilling to intervene.

Raoul's own mission, backed by the United States and the Swedish government, was conceived late and haphazardly at best. It was seriously underfunded and had no organizational plan to speak of. Yet in the hell that was Budapest in the second half of 1944, his efforts – carried out with crucial support from the Hungarian resistance and the diplomatic representatives from other neutral countries – managed to protect, house and feed many of the close to 200,000 Jews left in the city. It required an almost super human effort, one that tested every ounce of Raoul's resourcefulness and strength.

Some historians have rightly argued that Wallenberg's success was made possible only because by the end of the war, the Nazi leadership in Hungary wished to accommodate international opinion. One must realize, however, how very small indeed this opening was and what extraordinary determination and commitment it took for Raoul Wallenberg and others to take advantage of it.

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Here I want to make special mention of the many unsung heroes of the Hungarian resistance who have not been properly recognized. Thousands of not-so-ordinary citizens risked their lives every day in the streets of Budapest, on behalf of their fellow human beings, against overwhelming odds.

Special credit should also be reserved for those members of the Horthy government who worked hard to turn the tide of Nazism and the Holocaust from abroad, men like Dr. Antal Ullein-Reviczky, the Hungarian Minister to Stockholm, who helped to realize Raoul Wallenberg's mission and who personally saw him off the day before he left Sweden. [It is a great pleasure that his daughter Lovice Ullein-Reviczky has joined us here today]

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In the end, the number of people Raoul Wallenberg was able to save was certainly significant, but still relatively small. And yet, at the end of hostilities, there was an almost instantaneous outpouring of emotion from survivors who grieved when he disappeared and who held a moving memorial service for him.

The late Swedish diplomat Per Anger once said about his friend that what made Raoul different is that he was "a true humanitarian". Raoul's extraordinary spirit – his almost

reflexive determination to jump into the fray to help others – is the enduring legacy that has captured the world's imagination.

And it is precisely this spirit that makes Raoul Wallenberg so special and so rare. His mission was true humanistic philosophy in action. He showed us that if we truly want to protect our core values as human beings, if we want to counter horrendous crimes like genocide, every one of us is called upon to take a stand.

We all know how difficult this really is. Let's be honest – how many of us have packed our bags and gone off to Idomeni or Damascus, or have even considered doing so? Activism all too frequently imposes a brutal price on those who dare to speak out as some of you here today can attest to only too well.

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Unfortunately, Raoul himself was no exception.

While Raoul Wallenberg's achievements are unique (his status as a hero is clear), his status as a victim is much harder to define. In Russia alone twenty million people died during World War II; about twenty million more perished in the Gulag. Today, untold numbers all over the world endure horrible human rights abuses.

With so much suffering in the here and now, is there really any justification to insist on the truth about one man who disappeared 70 years ago?

The respected international jurist Professor Dr. Thomas Buergenthal, himself a survivor of Auschwitz, answers this question with a resounding "yes". As Buergenthal sees it, the truth about events *must* be established so people can arrive at a sense of justice. This process begins and ends with each individual victim (and I quote):

"...Six million Jews means nothing. If you want to have an impact, talk about one person."

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The theme of our Roundtable today is 'The Art of the Impossible' – a phrase coined by the former political prisoner and later Czech President Vaclav Havel.

Havel saw only too clearly that the line separating democratic societies from authoritarian regimes is a very thin one. He knew that while compromise may be necessary and the ideal perhaps cannot be fully realized, it must be retained as the [ultimate] goal one hopes to attain and strives for.

The search for historic truth then, however arduous and 'idealistic', is not just a laborious and potentially futile exercise but a vitally important process, especially for members of democratic societies. Together with remembrance, it is the key step that enables us to learn from history, to avoid repeating the same mistakes over and over.

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Miguel Cervantes once said that “in order to attain the impossible, one must attempt the absurd.” Raoul's brother Guy von Dardel certainly knew what it was like to fight the nearly impossible fight and the derision such tenacity engendered from certain quarters. Yet Guy was undaunted. He held a deep affection for his missing sibling, but more than that, he considered the search for Raoul a sacred duty to his parents who, together with their daughter Nina, led the campaign until their deaths in the late 1970s.

In this commitment Guy was as uncompromising as his brother was about saving lives in Budapest. With his defiance and in his quiet way, Guy forged his own heroic path. He did not live to see what he fought for, but one day in the hopefully not too distant future, the full truth about his brother will emerge. And it will be due in large part to the thousands of hours of strenuous effort that Guy invested, when there was little hope of success.

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Determining the full circumstances of Raoul Wallenberg's fate is undoubtedly difficult. But we have come here together in the spirit of making the impossible possible, as a matter of principle and as a matter of justice for him, for his family, and for the millions of victims of repression like him, past and present, who do not have a voice.

Thank you very much.

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