The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The FSB Should Open Up the Wallenberg Files

By Vadim Birstein

October 10, 2011



Next year marks the 100th birthday of one of the 20th century's most admired figures: Raoul Wallenberg, who saved thousands of Jews from Nazi persecution in World War II Hungary only to be swallowed up himself in 1945 by Stalin's Gulag. Although Soviet leaders claimed in 1957 that Wallenberg had died suddenly in the Lubyanka prison on July 17, 1947, the full circumstances of his fate in Soviet captivity have never been established.

In a recent interview with The Associated Press, the current chief of the Federal Security Service's registration and archives directorate, Lieutenant General Vasily Khristoforov, emphasized that he, too, considers Wallenberg a hero and that FSB officials are doing everything to uncover more documentation. He strongly denied withholding any information that would shed light on the truth.

Yet it is indisputable that Russian officials for decades chose to mislead not only the general public but also an official Swedish-Russian Working Group that investigated the case from

1991-2001. This group included official Swedish representatives as well as Raoul Wallenberg's brother, Guy von Dardel. Russia did not merely obscure inconsequential details of the case but also failed to provide documentation that goes to the very heart of the Wallenberg inquiry.

Chief among these are copies of the Lubyanka prison register from July 23, 1947. They show that a "Prisoner No. 7" was questioned on that day, six days after Wallenberg's alleged death. Russian officials have since acknowledged that "Prisoner No. 7" almost certainly was Wallenberg. Researchers have yet to receive a copy of the full page of this Lubyanka interrogation register, in uncensored form, showing the complete list of interrogated prisoners and other details.

Researchers also never received important investigative material about Willy Rödel, Raoul Wallenberg's long-term cellmate in Lefortovo prison from 1945 to 1947. In 1993, Russian officials provided the working group with only seven slightly censored copied pages, without page numbers, from his file. The officials specifically denied that any of Rödel's interrogation protocols had survived. Just a few weeks ago, however, two of his statements written for interrogators surfaced in a new publication of the FSB central archive. Khristoforov now confirms that 57 pages referring to Rödel's case have been withheld.

Khristoforov states that none of the preserved statements by Rödel refer to Wallenberg. That may well be true, but researchers should be allowed to confirm that this is, indeed, the case and that the papers contain no other document relating to Wallenberg. Interestingly, Khristoforov brought the file allegedly containing Rödel's materials, titled "File of Operational Correspondence on Prisoners of War," to his interview with The Associated Press but did not permit the reporters to open it or to review the pages. The collection of documents concerning Rödel could provide important clues as to how the Wallenberg case was handled by Soviet authorities.

The mere fact that large parts of Rödel's file survive raises serious questions about whether similar documentation still exists for other key persons in the case, including Wallenberg. After all, where exactly did Wallenberg's possessions magically come from after they reappeared in 1989, when Russian officials returned them to his family?

Did Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989 know about "Prisoner No. 7" as well as Rödel's file when he invited Wallenberg's family to Moscow to present them with his belongings? Several years later, did then-President Boris Yeltsin, whose government oversaw the Swedish-Russian Working Group, know anything about these materials? Former KGB archivists certainly understood the importance of the material; otherwise they would not have censored it.

But if Wallenberg's trail indeed broke off in 1947, why this grand effort at deception?

At the moment, only one answer seems plausible: Both Soviet and later Russian officials did not want to complicate matters, which this information undoubtedly would have. If researchers had learned in 1989 or in 1991, at the start of the working group, that Wallenberg was alive six days after his supposed death on July 17, 1947, then an all-out effort would have followed to uncover the full truth about of his fate. It is extremely disappointing that Russia allowed an official commission to waste countless years and valuable research monies on trying to track down information that Russian archivists literally had at their fingertips.

Researchers can be excused for wondering whether the working group's task was in fact to confirm the idea that Wallenberg had died in July, 1947, rather than to conduct a serious investigation that considered all possible scenarios.

Khristoforov claims that due to extensive document destruction, the full circumstances of Wallenberg's fate will never be learned. He argues that based on his experience with similar cases, Wallenberg was most likely "helped to die" (read: executed) "a few days" after July 23, 1947. But Khristoforov fails to mention that the current evidence does not exclude the possibility that Wallenberg survived in prison for a considerable time, maybe weeks, months or even years.

He also does not explain why document collections directly connected to the Wallenberg case in Russian intelligence archives are completely inaccessible to researchers. These include important files in the archival collections of the FSB and Foreign Intelligence Service, as well as crucial correspondence records between the security services and the Soviet leadership from the decisive 1945-47 years and beyond.

Researchers therefore currently have no proper way of assessing whether missing documentation has been indeed destroyed or simply continues to be withheld. Contrary to Khristoforov's assertions, it is quite likely that knowledge of Wallenberg's fate was preserved and is known today.

Most important, Russian officials have never revealed the source of a key document in the Wallenberg case, the so-called Smoltsov note, which was presented in an official statement in February, 1957, by Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. This note, supposedly authored by the Lubyanka prison doctor, Smoltsov, claimed that Wallenberg died suddenly of a heart attack on July 17, 1947. The paper carries important notations, including a page number, which should make it possible to identify its original collection.

Why do Russian authorities not allow researchers unhindered access to documentation in a case that is 66 years old? Let us conduct an investigation that meets the standards of academic inquiry with original documents presented in uncensored form in their original file contexts — and with research findings independently confirmed by a formal peer review. Only then can we begin to conduct a meaningful evaluation and discussion of Wallenberg's fate.

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