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Fighting for the Truth in the Wallenberg Case

By Susanne Berger

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The story of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish businessman and diplomat 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 — when he was arrested by Soviet forces in Hungary in January 1945. As such, his case seamlessly links the two defining events of the 20th century — the Holocaust and the Cold War.

The full circumstances of his fate after July 23, 1947, the last confirmed date of his presence in the Soviet prison system, have never been established, and the search for him continues to this day. But in the age of conflicts in Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur, weapons of mass destruction and global warming, does it make sense to insist on the truth about one man who disappeared 67 years ago?

Over time, Wallenberg has come to personify the importance of individual action

and individual rights — first as a rescuer of tens of thousands of lives in Budapest and later as a victim of Stalinist terror in the Soviet Union.

Wallenberg's humanitarian achievements are widely recognized and are the focus of attention during the current centennial celebrations of his birth.

In a few short months after his arrival as Sweden's special envoy in Budapest in 1944, Wallenberg created a complex bureaucracy that provided persecuted Jews with desperately needed aid. They received special protective papers, the so called Schutzpass, and were housed in separate buildings that flew the Swedish flag, indicating that they were officially protected by that country's neutral status.

Wallenberg's organization employed 340 people and included a hospital to care for the sick as well as an orphanage. He bought huge food stores on the black market that enabled him to feed more than 1,000 people per day. Already by the end of the war, Wallenberg's reputation had achieved legendary status.

In contrast, his importance as a victim is much harder to define. In the Soviet Union alone, roughly 27 million people died during World War II, while about 20 million more suffered in the gulag.

For these victims and their families to arrive at a sense of justice, the truth about events must be established. As the well-known international judge Thomas Buergenthal, himself a survivor of Auschwitz, said in an interview with The Washington Post several years ago, this process begins and ends with each individual life: "Six million Jews means nothing. If you want to have an impact, talk about one person."

Indeed, the insistence on the truth about one man marks the starting point in the ongoing struggle to define and protect universal rights for all human beings. Remembrance, too, is vital, but it is not enough on its own. Victims need more than memorials. Wallenberg's brother, Guy von Dardel, expressed this 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 question of how one balances the rights of the individual versus 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 about his fate will be yet another lasting legacy of his case.

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