

Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a pleasure to open this conference dedicated to the memory of Raoul Wallenberg, here in Brussels, in front of such distinguished guests.

The memory of Raoul Wallenberg is alive in Hungary. As a child growing up in Budapest, I was well aware that the yard where I played was in the immediate vicinity of the former Swedish embassy. This is where Wallenberg and his colleagues issued the documents that saved the lives of thousands of Hungarian Jews. The Hungarian government declared the year 2012, the 100th anniversary of his birth, the Raoul Wallenberg memorial year. There are several events dedicated to his memory: conferences, concerts and even a children's drawing contest. A touring exhibition of posters has also been assembled, taking images and memorabilia of Wallenberg's courageous rescue work amidst the Shoah in Hungary to different locations around the globe, from Jerusalem to Washington. Today it is in Brussels.

Wallenberg's native Sweden is also celebrating his 100th anniversary. The State of Israel that granted Wallenberg honorary citizenship in 1986 and honored him at the Yad Vashem memorial as one of the Righteous Among the Nations, is also remembering his acts of courage. The House of Representatives of the United States awarded him the Congressional Gold Medal in April.

Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to share with you a couple of thoughts on the role of diplomats in times of conflict and times of peace. I will first present a couple of illustrations of exemplary conduct by diplomats. As a second point, I will argue that the values they held dear are essential for the proper performance of our daily diplomatic duties. As minimizing the risk of the development of conflict situations lays upon our daily work.

There are several statues of Wallenberg in Budapest. One of these is in a leafy suburb on the Buda side of the Danube. It is a powerful work of art, its copy was erected in Tel Aviv on Raoul Wallenberg Street. I would like you to imagine the slender figure of a man, carefully treading on a narrow path between two huge boulders that are about to close in on him. They may represent Nazism, the evil that he fought, and Communism, the one that finally consumed him. Another possible interpretation is that Wallenberg is breaking through a wall: the wall of silence and indifference. Maybe the two rocks represent the conflict between the instinct of self-preservation and the command of morality?

Whichever interpretation you will choose, let me concentrate here on the importance of finding that narrow path between the boulders. For us diplomats, the adequate performance of our work means exactly that: finding the thin line between the simple delivery of demarches from the capital and the consideration of the cultural, political and historic context of our operations. In this respect, Wallenberg's life-testimony carries very practical lessons that we should contemplate in our everyday work.

In the 20th century in Hungary several diplomats performed their duties to universal acclaim, often against overwhelming odds in a context where many choose other ways, including collaboration or indifference. Allow me to present a couple of examples, both Hungarian and foreign.

First of all, I would like to mention the actions during the Second World War of the Swedish legation in Budapest. Ambassador Ivan Danielson, Per Anger, the second secretary and their colleagues had already been heavily involved in the rescue effort before the arrival of Wallenberg. They did not act alone. The embassies of other neutral countries mounted a serious rescue effort, too. Carl Lutz, the legendary Swiss consul or Angelo Rota, the Apostolic Nuncio with their allies, colleagues and friends also saved thousands.

Géza Soos, Swiss, Finnish and Swedish desk officer of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, later Hungarian ambassador to Rome, was also involved in the rescue effort. We have proof from Wallenberg's diary that they had met shortly after his arrival to Budapest. Soos was a member of the Hungarian resistance movement. He participated in the translation and distribution of the Auschwitz Protocol. This is a document written by two escapees, the first authentic description of the horrors of a concentration camp. Together with colonel Ferenc Koszorus and his troops he participated in the defense of the Budapest ghetto. It was supposed to be razed to the ground by the Eichmann commando. After the war, when Géza Soos refused to join the Communist party he was forced into exile. He died shortly thereafter in the United States.

The service of Paul Bang-Jensen to the freedom of Hungary is another instance of exemplary conduct by a diplomat. A Dane, he was the Deputy Secretary of the United Nations Special Committee set up to examine the reprisals following the defeat of the 1956 revolution. In order to protect the friends and relatives of witnesses, he refused to hand over the list containing their names to the UN archives. He was afraid that it would be leaked. Paul Bang-Jensen was dismissed from the UN shortly after misconduct. A year later, found dead from a gunshot wound in a park in New York. It was officially ruled suicide but foul play by a communist secret service is widely presumed.

Hungarian diplomats in Tripoli lived up to their duties during the uprising that led to the downfall of the regime of colonel Gadhafi, representing the EU, Canada, Greece, Croatia and Italy, and also assuming the protection of American diplomatic and consular interests. Today, Hungary ensures the diplomatic and consular representation of the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia in Syria, another hot-spot.

To conclude on this first point of my presentation, in times of conflict doing the right thing may carry immense personal risks. The examples mentioned above prove this. Nevertheless, the situation is unambiguous. There is no place for moral relativism, right and wrong are sharply defined and the road one must follow is clear. As if the streaks of tracer bullets in the night sky would clearly draw the line between good and evil.

Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde was a member of the German Constitutional Court. His famous paradox states that "the secularized liberal state lives by presuppositions that it cannot guarantee." We need, therefore, a set of values that is external to this system. He suggests religion, our common Judeo-Christian and European heritage. The example set by Wallenberg and the other diplomats mentioned above, is a reminder of the existence of these essential values. Wallenberg's firm set of values was his compass in times of crisis: an uncompromising sense of duty and compassion. I firmly believe that the debate on the future of the European Union is essentially a debate about values. If only we would be in possession of a similarly unerring compass...

The majority of us, diplomats, thankfully, are not called upon to perform heroic deeds, risking our lives or livelihood. We still need, however, to transpose these values into our “business-as-usual” days in the office. This is a difficult task amidst routine errands, diplomatic cables, national day receptions and mid-day conferences. Although, the fact that Wallenberg managed to do so facing the SS and the Arrow Cross is a loud wake up call.

Time stands frozen in stone on the Wallenberg memorial in Buda. In the moment captured by the artist, survival may still be possible. We know, however, that Wallenberg dodged the boulder of Nazism but he was mercilessly crushed under the rock representing Communism. Accused of being an American spy, he was detained, imprisoned and probably executed by the Soviets. Meanwhile in Hungary, Nazi occupation gave way to an increasingly brutal puppet regime installed by the Red Army.

On the panels of the touring exhibition you will see pictures of the memorabilia of Wallenberg’s life and work, testimonials from his colleagues and the recollections of survivors. The greatest tribute to his success, however, is the recent cultural and religious revival of the Jewish community in Budapest, one of the largest in Europe.

To conclude, allow me to propose taking the opportunity of the Wallenberg memorial year to reflect upon the meaning of responsibility. Responsibility as individuals, communities and countries for past deeds is certainly very important. This is not enough, however, if assuming responsibility does not lead us to feeling responsible for those who need our help today, wherever they may be in the world.

This is the real lesson of Wallenberg’s accomplishments.

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