

**The International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation
Swedish Embassy in Paris
June 24, 2013**

Keynote Address by Dr. Samuel Pisar*

Ambassador Gunnar Lund, Director General Irina Bokova, Prime Minister Michel Rocard, Louise Wallenberg von Dardel, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is with humility and emotion that I accept the centennial medal bestowed upon me by the International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation. I will always cherish this singular honor, which belongs to the skeletal adolescent I was when I witnessed, in Auschwitz, the extermination of 450,000 Hungarian Jews whom neither Wallenberg nor God himself could save.

Eduardo Eurekaian, Baruch Tenenbaum, Danny Reiner: before turning to the immense saga of Raoul Wallenberg, I must thank you who lead the illustrious foundation that bears his name, and the distinguished Ambassador of Sweden, for organizing this auspicious event and assembling so many notables and friends from near and far.

Excellency, this is not the first time I enjoy lavish Swedish hospitality. Already in 1955, after graduating from Harvard, I was welcomed into the office of your legendary compatriot, Dag Hammarskjöld, then Secretary General of the United Nations, who sparked my life-long quest for world peace. A decade later, after I published a book that urged normalized coexistence and commerce between East and West – the sworn enemies of the Cold War -- your formidable Prime Minister, Olof Palme, invited me to Stockholm for a friendly debate at the Nobel Foundation.

While our eminent hosts, including your King, did not give me a Nobel Prize for eloquence, they understood that whatever insights I had into the harsh realities of the contemporary human condition came to me not only from lofty academies of the West, but also the gruesome infernos of the East. Following the dismemberment of my native Poland in 1939, brainwashed by Stalin who wanted me red, enslaved by Hitler who wanted me dead, I learned the hard way that there were many murderous tyrants and ideologues, but very few Wallenbergs in our genocidal and fratricidal world.

I also figured out that peoples and nations of different stripes, if linked by normal economic, cultural and human ties, would not remain sworn enemies, let alone slaughter one another forever, be they Germans and French, Americans and Russians, Japanese and Chinese, Whites and Blacks in South Africa or Catholics and Protestants in Ireland. This has actually happened. And the same logic will, with luck, reconcile Israelis and Palestinians as well.

Today, threatening new clouds are relentlessly engulfing other continents, in the wake of terrorist attacks on America, violent convulsions within Islam and divisive eco-political upheavals in Europe that spread unemployment, insecurity and fear reminiscent of the 1930s and 1940s.

Against this turbulent background, a fragment of direct and authentic testimony on what I, the victim and he the,

savior, have lived in body and soul during those cursed years, might help to explain why Raoul Wallenberg's noble legacy has acquired such emblematic and universal importance today.

We are in 1944. Having lost all my loved ones, I am now in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Wallenberg is in Budapest. The Red Army has recaptured Stalingrad. The Western Allies have landed in Italy and France. Hitler and his henchmen know that they have lost the war. Yet they have no higher priority than to accelerate the « Final Solution » and devastate Hungary's great Jewish community, which is still mostly intact.

A 15-year old laborer assigned to cleaning the gigantic railway ramp of the camp, I observe that carnage day after day. Cattle trains packed with fragile human cargo arrive every few hours, while the gas chambers and crematoria spew fire and smoke. The death toll now exceeds 10,000 innocents per day, more than that of General Eisenhower's combined debarkation troops on D-Day – their bloodiest and longest day.

I see the infamous Dr. Mengele selecting those who will die immediately, and those who will live a little longer. I hear the last laments and prayers of the condemned. Once the steel doors are shut, they have only three minutes to live. Yet they find enough strength to dig their fingernails into the walls, and scratch in the words: "Never Forget!"

Is it really time to forget the horrors we experienced then? Dare we ignore what is at stake for us now? That heart-wrenching cry from the epicenter of the greatest catastrophe ever perpetrated by man against man, which eclipsed Dante's vision of inferno and nearly sank the proud ship of our civilization, remains an existential warning for mankind to this day.

As ambassador and special envoy of UNESCO, I have recently permitted myself to declare, in the precincts of the United States Congress, the European Parliament and other global forums, that in our newly inflamed and destabilized universe, with its growing arsenals of toxic gas, chemical weapons, nuclear bombs and ballistic missiles in the hands of new despots and fanatics, that message has never been more relevant.

Those who are still easily seduced by incendiary demagogues who negate the Holocaust, the subsequent genocides and the other recurrent crimes against humanity, those who preach again racism, xenophobia and violence against vulnerable peoples, should ponder that call to vigilance and solidarity. In the largely uncaring world where millions of innocents were being industrially annihilated, Wallenberg responded to that call in exemplary ways that speak to us not only about the past, but also the present and the future.

When that young Swedish diplomat, scion of an old and grand family, arrived in the Budapest ruled by Nazis killers under the personal supervision of Eichmann, nothing indicated that he was destined to become a savior, a saint and finally a martyr in the sinister cellars of Stalin's secret police.

Yet he immediately began moving heaven and earth to save men, women and children with an audacity and courage that knew no bounds. He persuaded some like-minded Hungarians to assist him, and Swiss, Italian and Spanish diplomats to emulate him. Together they distributed protection passports by the thousands, and established dozens of

safe houses, soup kitchens and hospitals for those in desperate need of help.

Many other Europeans, notably in Denmark, Bulgaria and France, also acted compassionately amid myriad perpetrators and collaborators. The brave villagers of Chambon-sur-Lignon rescued collectively 5,000 Jews, including a French branch of my family that then found me in the ruins of post-war Europe after my liberation by American G.I.s.

The Yad Vashem Memorial for martyrs and heroes of the Shoah, on whose boards I serve, has identified more than 25,000 such Righteous among nations. In addition to Wallenberg the Swede, Schindler the German, Sousa-Mendes the Portuguese, Sugihara the Japanese and Ulkumen the Turk, I must cite Pope John XXIII, a protector of Jewish war orphans whom I knew and revered when he was still Cardinal Roncalli, the Vatican's Apostolic Nuncio in France.

Other saviors, many still unrecognized, were for the most part humble, anonymous, generous gentiles who simply did what they instinctively perceived as their moral or religious obligation. Compared with the six million Jews that perished, their numbers are small. But they are all indispensable models for building networks of human solidarity that can awaken the conscience of many others, against mass atrocities that may still lie ahead.

Permit me to conclude with an extract from my libretto KADDISH – an ode to life and peace I have written for Leonard Bernstein's monumental Symphony No. 3. It is a layman's prayer addressed to the common Abrahamic God of Christians, Muslims and Jews:

“As one of the last living survivors of the Shoah,
I have a duty transmit the awesome legacy
of its martyrs and heroes to younger generations
of every race, color and faith,
lest new genocides destroy their world
as they once destroyed mine.
For man remains capable of the worst, as of the best,
of hatred as of love, of madness as of genius.
Unless we heed the bitter lessons of the past,
cherish the sanctity and dignity of human life,
and uphold the core values of all great creeds
-- religious and secular –
the forces of darkness will return with vengeance
to doom our chances for a better and safer future.

*Dr. Samuel Pizar is ambassador and special envoy at UNESCO and an international lawyer in New York, London and Paris. His books include the celebrated memoir “Of Blood and Hope”.