

(July 1, 2013)

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

**Keynote Address by Dr. Samuel Pisar\***

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

It is with great 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 neither Raoul Wallenberg nor God himself could save.

Before turning to the immense Wallenberg saga and what it tells us about the past and the present, I thank you dear Baruch Tenenbaum, Eduardo Eurnekian and Danny Rainer who lead the illustrious foundation that bears his name, and you dear Ambassador, for organizing this auspicious event and assembling so many notables and friends from near and afar.

Excellency, this is not the first time I am hosted by Swedes. Already in 1955, after graduating from Harvard, I worked for your compatriot, Dag Hammarskjöld, the legendary Secretary General of the United Nations who sparked my life-long devotion to world peace. A decade later, when I published a book urging peaceful coexistence and commerce between East and West, your formidable Prime Minister, Olof Palme, invited me for a friendly debate at the Nobel Foundation. While my eminent hosts, including your King, did not award me their coveted Prize, they understood that my modest insights into the harsh realities of the contemporary human condition were forged not only in lofty academies, but also in gruesome infernos.

Following the dismemberment of my native Poland in 1939, I was first brainwashed by Stalin who wanted me red, then enslaved by Hitler who wanted me dead. Thus, I learned the hard way that there were many murderous tyrants in our genocidal and fratricidal world, but precious few Wallenbergs. I also figured out that nations of different stripes, if linked economically, culturally and humanly, would not remain sworn enemies forever, be they Americans and Russians, Germans and French, Japanese and Chinese, South African Blacks and Whites or Irish Catholics and Protestants. This vision, widely perceived as a harbinger of the Nixon-Kissinger policy of détente, is now a reality. With luck its logic will reconcile Israelis and Palestinians as well.

Today, in the wake of terrorist attacks on America, grave convulsions within Islam and divisive eco-political upheavals in Europe, rampant intolerance, insecurity and violence reminiscent of the 1930s and 1940s, are again devastating civilian populations. Against this background, a fragment of testimony on what Wallenberg, the emblematic savior of innocent lives, and I a direct witness of unspeakable slaughters, have seen and felt during those cursed years, may explain why his noble legacy has acquired such symbolic and universal importance.

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

An emaciated 15-year old convict assigned to commandos cleaning the gigantic railway ramps 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!" This heart-wrenching cry from the epicenter of the greatest catastrophe ever perpetrated by man against man in a largely indifferent world, which nearly sank the proud ship of our civilization, resonates as an existential warning for mankind.

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, nuclear bombs, chemical poisons and ballistic missiles in the hands of new despots and fanatics, that warning has never been more relevant.

Those who are easily seduced by incendiary demagogues who go on negating the Holocaust, the subsequent genocides and other recurrent crimes against humanity, those who go on preaching racism, xenophobia and violence against vulnerable peoples, should ponder that call to vigilance

and solidarity. In an era when millions of innocents were being industrially annihilated, Wallenberg responded to that call in exemplary ways that speak to us indelibly to this day.

When that young Swedish diplomat, a scion of an old and grand family, arrived in the Budapest ruled by fascist 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 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. Together with some like-minded Hungarians to assist him, and Swiss, Italian and Spanish diplomats to emulate him, he distributed protection passports by the thousands, and established dozens of safe houses, soup kitchens and hospitals for those who were in desperate need of help.

Many other Europeans, notably in Denmark, Bulgaria and France, also acted compassionately amid myriad perpetrators, collaborators and idle bystanders. The brave villagers of Chambon-sur-Lignon rescued collectively more than 5,000 Jews, including the French branch of my family, which 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 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 single out Pope John XXIII, a protector of war orphans whom I knew and revered when he was still Cardinal Roncalli, the Vatican's Apostolic Nuncio to France and UNESCO.

Others saviors, some of them still unknown, were for the most part humble, anonymous generous gentiles who did instinctively what they felt was their moral or religious obligation, and often at the peril of their own lives. Compared with the six million Jews that perished, their numbers are small. But all of them are indispensable models for building networks of human solidarity that can awaken the conscience of many, against mass atrocities that may still lie ahead.

Permit me to conclude with a brief extract from my libretto KADDISH, an ode to life and peace written for Leonard Bernstein's monumental Symphony No. 3, which I have performed with renowned orchestras in many capitals of the world. 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 am duty-bound to 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 is 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 an American, French and British jurist, a diplomat and an author. His books, published in 20 languages, include the celebrated memoir “Of Blood and Hope”.