

COMMENTARY

Raoul Wallenberg: His Lessons for the Social Work Profession

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With globalization and what Willem Blok (2012) has described as the development of a singular international identity and growing joint body of knowledge for social work, there is no better time to reexamine and reevaluate that identity and body of knowledge. Furthermore, there may be no better addition to this body of knowledge than the work of Raoul Wallenberg, as it presents us with invaluable opportunities to learn in the following contexts: Blok spoke of the difficulty of social work always having two faces, helping people on the one hand and supporting the established order and relations in society on the other, even when they are controversial. He concluded:

It is a continuous challenge to uphold the initial ideals of social work: to support persons, groups, organisations, and communities, to stimulate participation, empowerment, and democracy, and to contribute to a fair and humane society. To continue doing these things, it is vital . . . to be a living example of a good person and citizen yourself.

(Blok, 2012, p. 177)

These years of turmoil have highlighted that social work has to be defined not by its function for the state but by its value base. Above all, it has been a stark lesson in the need for collective organization, both to defend a vision of social work based on social justice and to defend the working conditions that make it possible (Jones, Ferguson, Lavalette, & Penketh, 2007). Human rights can provide social workers with a moral basis for their practice, both at the level of day-to-day work with clients and in community development and policy advocacy and activism. Indeed, a human rights perspective can help to link these varying roles into a unified and

holistic view of social work practice. Human rights is a universalist discourse, based on ideas of a common humanity and global citizenship. Maslow's hierarchy of needs offers a useful way of thinking about human rights. Needs are strongly linked to rights. Because needs imply rights, all five levels of Maslow's hierarchy have rights implicit in them (Ife, 2001). Even if it is not possible to change the system from within, an individual's actions within the system do matter. We can accept or reject, promote or hinder the state's agenda (Alfred, 2000). The dual role of practitioner and manager has been relatively unexplored in the social work literature (Murdoch, 2012). However, through his work, Raoul Wallenberg gives us a perspective, a framework, and a model of both best practice and delivery of it. His is the story of both the very best and the very worst, showing us the extremes of possibility and of risk—a "one-stop shop" of learning in principles and practice, action, impact, and inspiration. We frequently see conferences now on themes such as social work and social development, global health, and well-being. Wallenberg has already been there and done that—he is the standard bearer, and his work is the benchmark.

WHO WAS RAOUL WALLENBERG?

The Holocaust was an exception in history, a systematic plan to eradicate an entire people, the Jewish people, the prime victims of the Nazi regime. By 1945, two out of every three European Jews had been killed. There were more than 11 million victims in total, 6 million Jews and more than 5 million additional victims, targeted because of nationality, ethnicity, religious beliefs, political affiliations, disability, or sexual orientation. In July 1944, at the request of President Roosevelt and the United States War Refugees Board, Raoul Wallenberg was sent by the Swedish foreign minister under diplomatic cover to

Budapest, Hungary, to make efforts to save the Jewish community of Budapest, which was the last left in Europe. Hungary had allied with Germany in 1941. Between May and July 1944 alone, Adolf Eichmann, the architect of the Nazis' "Final Solution," had successfully deported over 400,000 Jews by freight train, the vast majority sent to their deaths at the Auschwitz concentration camp. Against this backdrop, Wallenberg did his work and succeeded in achieving the impossible, with death, obstacles, and treachery all around, saving approximately 100,000 Jewish lives, a record-breaking achievement, and effectively countering the Nazi's purpose, their Final Solution. He did this in a six-month timeframe, at the age of 32. How? The extraordinary efforts of the "Righteous Gentile" (Bierman, 1981) succeeded through a combination of elements of social work and managerial best practice as follows:

- His approach was task centered—One of Wallenberg's tactics was to issue as many Swedish protective passes as possible (Schutzpass), which normally saved the holders from deportation to the death camps. He redesigned the diplomatic immunity pass to great effect and went to extraordinary lengths to deliver them to those in need, by intervening in the "death marches," by reading hundreds of names off blank rosters so that the victims would get the message and help him to save them by claiming a pass that did not strictly exist, and by climbing onto the roofs of the trains to hand passes in through doors that were not yet sealed, ignoring orders, threats, and bullets. Other embassies of neutral countries were in turn inspired by Wallenberg's work, as were the partisans who started manufacturing their own.
- He drew on support services to great effect—Wallenberg acquired numerous buildings in Budapest, declaring them extraterritorial and protected by diplomatic immunity. To drive this cover home, he put signs up outside these buildings denoting them the "Swedish Library" and the "Swedish Research Institute," for example, and he decorated them with oversized Swedish flags, emblems, colors, and anything else that might help to keep people safe. Arrangements were made for all survival necessities, and he opened and maintained an orphanage in partnership with the Swedish Red Cross.

- He intervened in crisis situations—Wallenberg intervened in crisis situations, for example, the "turkey shoots," as they were known, in which Nazi officials would bind three people together with a rope, so that they had to shoot only the person in the middle and all would fall into the frozen Danube. Wallenberg was outraged by such a cold-blooded tactic. He asked for volunteer swimmers (Rodriguez, 2006). Wallenberg found out the locations of the planned turkey shoots and stationed ambulances and swimmers out of sight at these locations until they heard shots. Then they would jump into the river to pull the living out and taking them to ambulances. By means of a note delivered at Wallenberg's request to the commander of the German Army in Hungary, which threatened prosecution for war crimes once the war was over, he succeeded in blocking a plan to blow up a Budapest ghetto and kill an estimated 70,000 Jews as well as an effort to organize a death march of the remaining Jews. Two days later, the Russians arrived and found 97,000 Jews alive in Budapest's two Jewish ghettos. In total, 120,000 Jews survived the Nazi extermination in Hungary. Wallenberg stemmed the tide.
- He practiced strategic management—As far back as the beginning of November 1944, Wallenberg had set up a small department of his C Section with a brief to work out a detailed social and economic relief plan to be put into effect after the Nazi defeat. It was, he stressed, "a plan which will help its participants to help themselves in a co-operative way" (Wallenberg, cited in Bierman, 1981, p. 117). The main headings of the plan reveal its comprehensive and practical aspects: the search for missing persons and the reuniting of families; emergency food distribution; help with housing and the distribution of household essentials, such as furniture and bedding; medical care; orphans' homes; an information service; the reestablishment of commercial and business life; and the creation of employment opportunities (Bierman, 1981).
- He displayed proactive, innovative, and courageous leadership at a level that was unique, distinguishing him and acting as a major deterrent. He was liberal in the application of non-violent tactics that assisted him in his mission, sabotaging the work of the enemy to great

effect—Raoul Wallenberg did not use traditional diplomacy. He more or less shocked other diplomats at the Swedish Legation with his unconventional methods. He successfully used everything from bribery to threats of blackmail. But when other members of the Legation staff saw the results of Wallenberg's efforts, he quickly gained their full support. Armed only with courage, determination, and imagination, Raoul Wallenberg saved approximately 100,000 Jews from slaughter (see <http://www.auschwitz.dk/#undefined>).

Jeno Levai, biographer of Wallenberg, highlighted a crucial aspect of Wallenberg's success. Of greatest importance is the fact that the Nazis and Arrow Cross men were not free to run amok. They had to take into consideration that all their moves were being watched by the young Swedish diplomat. There were no secrets from Wallenberg. The Arrow Cross was unable to delude him. They were unable to act with impunity. Wallenberg was the world's observing eye, the one who constantly demanded the criminals' conviction. This is the great significance of Wallenberg's struggle in Budapest (Bierman, 1981).

LOOKING AHEAD: COMBINING SOCIAL SERVICE WITH SOCIAL CHANGE

Paul Kivel (2006) stated that the key question we must confront is this: "To whom are we accountable?" We can begin to answer this question by analyzing the effects of our work on communities at the bottom of the pyramid. Are we perpetuating inequality or promoting social justice? As we become dependent on this work for our livelihood, professionalized, and caught up in the demands of doing the work, there is a strong tendency for us to become ever more disconnected from the everyday political struggles in our communities for economic, racial, and gender-based justice, for an end of various forms of violence and for collective power—those social justice issues out of which our work originally grew. I am suggesting a bottom-up accountability guided by those on the frontlines of grassroots struggles for justice. In which direction does your accountability lie? You may be fearful of losing your job and livelihood or lowering your standard of living if you take risks. These are real concerns. But this is also a time of increasing and extensive organizing for social

justice. It is an opportunity for many of us to realign ourselves clearly with those organizing efforts and reclaim the original vision of an end to the violence and exploitation that brought us into this work. This is a vision of social justice and true equity, built from community leadership and collective power (Kivel, 2006). Wallenberg showed us what can be achieved in reality, against all odds, in circumstances beyond our comprehension, so there is nothing we cannot do.

Though assigned to the war effort as a diplomat, Raoul Wallenberg went far beyond the strict remit of a diplomatic role or indeed of any one role to deliver the results he did. As a manager, he excelled in all roles, informational, interpersonal, and decisional. In addition, he went very deeply into the remit of professional social work. It is the combination of these roles and skill sets that made him so powerfully effective. His approach was a total package: ordered, coordinated, and comprehensive enough to achieve what was strictly impossible. It was multidimensional and interdisciplinary, holistic, rights based, and needs based; it embraced social service and social change and operations and strategic management; it always operated on the basis of the values and skill set of professional social work, all underpinned by Wallenberg's outstanding humanity. He pushed boundaries and broke through them when necessary. "I'd never be able to go back to Stockholm without knowing inside myself I'd done all a man could do" (see <http://www.auschwitz.dk/#undefined.htm>). A week after making this statement, Wallenberg was arrested by the Soviets and never seen again as a free man. His surviving family continue their fight for some justice to this day (see *Searching for Raoul Wallenberg* at <http://www.raoul-wallenberg.eu>). We can help.

CONCLUSION

The International Federation of Social Workers speaks of the social work profession as promoting social change, problem solving, and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Social work intervenes at points of interaction between people and their environments, and principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental. Martin Luther King once said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Equality is key. Inequality is shaped around three interlinked forms of injustice:

economic, cultural, and political. The moral case for equality is strong. Equality affirms human dignity and worth. Discrimination diminishes human dignity. Disadvantage denies human worth. However, equality is not only good for people who experience inequality. Equality is good for business and economic development. International evidence demonstrates that equality is good for business (Crowley, 2010). A commitment was made in the Declaration of Stockholm in 2000, when the 44 signatory countries undertook to commemorate and teach about the Holocaust every year. The hope is that doing so will combat all forms of racism, discrimination, and intolerance and encourage the acceptance of diversity. It provides an opportunity to establish a lasting legacy in honor of the millions who perished. This is a timeless message, and there is no better way to convey it than through Wallenberg's story. We must tell it for him now and give his work due recognition.

It is all too easy in our profession to get overly complicated and move away from the fundamentals. Raoul Wallenberg reminds us not to. "Don't worry. Don't worry. I'll come back for you," he said. They thought they must be imagining things, but when he did come back, she said 500 people, who had not uttered a word all night long, said as one Shema Yisrael, "Hear, O Israel". . . They said it, she said, not because he saved their lives, but because there was somebody who found them worthy of saving. I tell young people that the Holocaust, the experiences of the Holocaust, are not just 60-plus-year-old history; they're all around us (Goodkin, n.d.). Wallenberg's achievements are unparalleled, but at the core of those achievements is simply that he truly found them "worthy of saving," and when so many did not want to know. He went back for them, and we as a profession must go back for him now and to what he represents. If we do not find Raoul Wallenberg "worthy of saving," by practicing social work in his example, learning what he can teach us, just what and who are we truly representing, both as professional social workers and as human beings? We do not need to reinvent the wheel. He gave us that, it is up to us to use it, and we must. **SW**

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