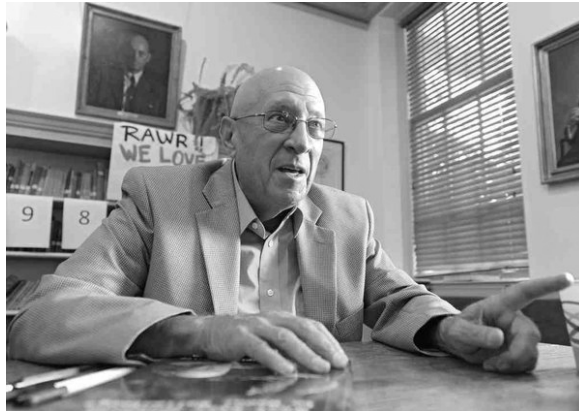


Seeking Raoul

Philadelphia lawyer pursues justice in Soviet-era jailing of Wallenberg.

May 08, 2011|By Carolyn Davis, Inquirer Staff Writer

Source: Philadelphia Inquirer, The (PA);



Lawyer Morris H. Wolff says he believes the long-missing Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg is...

Morris H. Wolff was back at his alma mater, Germantown Friends School, Friday to teach anyone who would listen about a Swedish diplomat and humanitarian hero named Raoul Wallenberg.

Wolff, 74, gave two lessons at once. The overt one was about Wallenberg, a Christian who helped save as many as 100,000 Hungarian Jews from Nazi execution during World War II. The other was about Wolff himself and how passion can fuel a life.

Wolff has spent much of the last 28 years, since Wallenberg's brother phoned to ask for his help, trying to hold the Soviet Union and the current Russian government accountable for Wallenberg - and seeking the truth about what happened to him.

"I think he's still alive," Wolff says.

In 1944, the U.S. War Refugee Board asked Sweden, officially neutral in World War II, to dispatch an envoy who would try to save Hungary's remaining Jews. German forces had just occupied the country and deported about 440,000 Jews to their deaths. Nearly 200,000 remained in Budapest when Wallenberg, a successful businessman with a degree from the University of Michigan, arrived to be chief rescuer.

Wallenberg established social services and safe houses for Jews who held documents from neutral countries. He went beyond his orders by distributing more Swedish

protective passports than he was authorized to - and then personally pulled Jews with those documents off trains or out of columns headed for extermination camps.

When the Soviet Union liberated Budapest in 1945, 100,000 Jews were still alive, thanks in large part to Wallenberg and others who worked with him.

It also was in 1945 that Wallenberg disappeared. Years later, Soviet officials admitted they had put him in prison. They claimed he died of natural causes in custody in 1947, when he would have been 35.

Wolff offered possible motives for the Soviets' actions, including suspicion that Wallenberg was a spy for the United States.

Wallenberg's half-brother, Guy Von Dardel, didn't believe Raoul was dead, especially after a freed Russian prisoner said in the 1980s that Wallenberg was still imprisoned. Von Dardel had heard of Wolff, then a Chestnut Hill lawyer and professor of international law at Delaware's Widener University law school, and in 1983, he called him early one day to ask for help.

"If I had any idea what I was taking on, I would have gone back to bed," Wolff said. "I thought I was taking on a mild inquiry."

Wolff found an old legal provision on which to hang a lawsuit in U.S. District Court. In 1984, three years after Congress and President Ronald Reagan made Wallenberg an honorary American citizen, Wolff sued the Soviet Union on behalf of Wallenberg's family and asked for \$39 million in damages for illegally imprisoning the diplomat.

He won, but the judgment was reversed in legal maneuvering that Wolff says was driven by Soviet-U.S. foreign relations.

Wolff loved telling his stories to the Germantown students, in a visit that took place during the National Days of Remembrance. When Harri Plotnick, 18, said she wrote a report on Wallenberg in fourth grade, Wolff beamed and opened his book, *What Ever Happened to Raoul Wallenberg?* When a history teacher greeted him, Wolff asked whether he could speak to the teacher's class; a pop quiz made that impossible.

In September, Wolff plans to file a petition with the U.S. Supreme Court to reinstate the original judgment.

Why does he persevere? Wallenberg's brother has died. The odds seem low that the hero is still alive; he would be 98. Wolff keeps on partly for himself. He has met interesting people and the work has kept his mind and body healthy.

"I know God wants me to do this, and if I do good things, God will keep me healthy," he said.

There's one more reason: "I was overwhelmed by the idea that he was held in custody for 39 years for doing nothing. It was a terrible injustice."

Wolff, who lives in Daytona Beach, Fla., described himself as a "fortunate Jewish man who grew up in Elkins Park" and is grateful that Wallenberg did so much to help Jews.

The copy of his book that Wolff showed the students is thick with handwritten notes. It's printed on-demand, so he constantly revises it as information emerges from Soviet archives and other sources.

So, when does Wolff think the last revision will come?

He is not sure. Whenever it is, Wolff said, he wants to make sure it's done with the same dignity that distinguished Wallenberg's work.