A Friend’s Death in Bosnia – Gerd Wagner

Gerd Wagner was of the helping kind.

In our last meeting the day before he left Washington in July, Gerd Wagner explained what pulled him back to Bosnia, away from family and from career track in Bonn. A diplomat of surprisingly few flowery words, Wagner settled for this uncluttered sentiment: It offered a chance to do something in a place he cared about, for people he cared about.

Perhaps embarrassed by this moment of emotion, we rushed on to analysis of the latest on Radovan Karadzic and the Dayton peace agreement. But I don’t recall a word of the analysis today. It is the mission Wagner set for himself that lingers.

That mission came to an end on Wednesday as Wagner and 11 others died when their U.N. helicopter crashed in the fog on a Bosnian mountainside. The midmorning news bulletin noted that the world had lost a senior international negotiator on Bosnia. Those of us who knew Gerd lost even more: We lost another friend trying to do good in striped pants.

We are frequently a ridiculous tribe – diplomats, journalists, relief workers, politicians and others who rush off to ease or consume the calamity of others in distant places, seeking to extend a helping or manipulative hand, depending on our own needs. Wagner was of the helping kind.

This German diplomat had served in ex-Yugoslavia in happier days, and learned Serbo-Croatian. He spent three years in Washington analyzing political-military affairs, and missing the more complex, life-and-death politics of the Balkans. He

volunteered for a one-year tour as a negotiator that began in August.

The accidental death of a friend triggers sorrow for his family and rage at others. I silently stormed at my German friend for riding in an antiquated Soviet-made helicopter piloted by Ukrainian strangers. What were you thinking? I demanded petulantly.

But I already knew the answer. It applied to the three American diplomats who died in a horrible road accident in Bosnia two years ago, and to Commerce Secretary Ron Brown and 34 others aboard his doomed plane last year. Wagner and his American, British, German and Polish colleagues were on that helicopter trying to roll the heavy Bosnian boulder an inch higher up the hill that day.

The deaths of a few more Western diplomats can only be a footnote for the ex-Yugoslavs. They have experienced, witnessed or caused hundreds of thousands of atrocious deaths, rapes, disappearances and loss of homes in six years of savage war. They must rush on to “the importance and noise of tomorrow,” in the phrase W. H. Auden used to describe a heedless world reacting to William Butler Yeats’s death in 1939.

But Auden continued, “A few thousand will think of this day, as one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.” The day Gerd Wagner, 55, and the others died was such a day for his profession and mine. It brought home something that hovers in many conversations here about Bosnia but rarely gets said directly.

A column I wrote on Bosnia 18 months ago attracted Wagner’s attention and gentle ire. Might he try to explain why things were — and here he added softly those words a journalist most dreads hearing from a diplomat — not quite as simple as they

seemed?

I listened with a healthy but gradually diminishing skepticism over the months as Wagner pointed out that there were failings on all sides in Bosnia. He worried that we Americans were arming the Bosnian Federation forces too heavily. And so on.

It was not the details or analysis he offered that eroded my professionally honed wariness. Those matters are always subject to debate. But I came to see and respect Wagner's deep personal investment in ending the bloodshed. He was scarcely alone in this; but he expressed that investment in a compelling way.

Bosnia has become the touchstone for many in this generation of Europeans posted in Washington. Americans can look at this conflict from a distance and thus see it largely in moral, black-and-white terms. In Europe, the dangerous consequences and human pain of a nearby conflict racing out of control concentrate the mind differently.

Wagner and many other Europeans have set out to educate Americans not so much about Balkan politics but about the complex human forces that the end of the Cold War has unleashed in parts of Europe. They have emphasized the need for an almost un-American patience and attention to detail in this crisis. But they have also listened and learned: Without American determination to solve problems and get on with the business at hand, there would be no cease-fire in Bosnia today.

A European friend's sad death far away recalls what men and women of goodwill can do, working together and listening to each other.