

Human Rights – Conversations Across Generations

Episode: Bill Schabas

Original Release: February 2026

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:04

Hi, welcome to our podcast, Human Rights, Conversations Across Generations. I'm Meredith Lockwood, founder of Lockwood Creative, a purpose-driven creative agency. And I'm here with my dad.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:16

And I'm Professor Bert Lockwood, the director of the Urban Morgan Institute for Human Rights at the University of Cincinnati College of Law.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:27

Together, we are your father-daughter co-hosts.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:29

For over 50 years, I've had a front-row seat to the evolution of international human rights.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:35

And now, we're sharing that expertise with you by connecting to the powerful stories and insights of human rights voices from around the world.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:43

We bridge the past and the present, making complex human rights issues more approachable and understandable.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:50

So, pull up a chair and join our table as we speak with Nobel Peace Prize recipients, political leaders and the world's leading human rights scholars and activists.

Our guest today is Bill Schabas, who is tuning in from his lovely farmhouse in France. Bill is one of the world's foremost scholars of international criminal law and genocide. Bill's work has shaped how the international community defines, investigates, and prosecutes mass atrocity crimes. He has served with the tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, advising the International Criminal Court, and chaired the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on the 2014 Gaza Conflict. He is the author of *Genocide and International Law*, now in its third edition, a foundational text in the field. In our conversation, Bill reflects on a lifetime of scholarship and public service. From the racial dimensions of war and the abolition of the death penalty to the role of universities, student activism, and international institutions in moments of political strain, In our discussion today, my dad and I reflect on shared memories, including a cherished evening with Bill in Galway, Ireland, that brought together human rights,

art, and friendship. Reminding us how personal relationships often sit quietly behind public work. Let's tune in now.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 2:20

Bill, thank you so much for joining us today. We really appreciate it. I always like to get started, how you and my dad, two met and when did you

BILL SCHABAS 2:31

Well, we about 30 years ago, but I say precisely when. And I knew about Burt because he was already a big name in the field, uh, before he knew about me, I think. just can't remember.

BERT LOCKWOOD 2:48

I'm thinking that it was at, uh, Washington and Lee.

BILL SCHABAS 2:51

I think that was it. and it would have been around 1998 uh, Hurst Hannum was there because Hurst stayed. Did he stay in the same house or there were, there were a few of these guest houses.

BERT LOCKWOOD 3:05

and, and didn't we then move up to Saturday retreat or a Sunday retreat?

BILL SCHABAS 3:09

Yeah. On top of a hill near, you know.

BERT LOCKWOOD 3:13

Some alumnus had given, uh, to them his house up I guess it's the Blue Ridge mountains.

BILL SCHABAS 3:19

That's right. Yeah.

BERT LOCKWOOD 3:20

the other, story that I wanted to share with bill uh, sister Helen Prejean, was here, uh, a couple of weeks ago. and I, Reminded her uh, meeting her at a dinner party that you gave in Galway, for her s said- and I said to her, you know, I saw something remarkable that I've- I've mentioned a number of times to different students and classes, but that I've never seen before and that was that there were about 30 people there and it was a real eclectic mix. You had some people from the town, they weren't all human rights people, and Meredith was there and my wife, and she managed to speak to everyone during the course of the- the evening, but that she had uncanny ability, which I hadn't seen, of being able to make you feel like at the moment she was speaking to you that there would be no other person in the world that she'd rather be talking to. And she said, "Oh yeah, that's..." ...part of my nun training. It's like, "Nun 101". It's called "In the Moment".

I didn't, I, I found it humorous that it's actually, you know, part of their training, how, how to achieve ability, but,

BILL SCHABAS 4:48

doesn't just come naturally to them. They need to be trained.

BERT LOCKWOOD 4:51

You know, and I don't, but, uh, yeah.

BILL SCHABAS 4:52

Well, she was remarkable. It was a remarkable visit, and, uh, I think you were there just, it was a coincidence that you were there. You'd have to come there specifically to hear her, I think, but she did come. We gave her an honorary doctorate at the university. It's now called the University of Galway. And, Penelope, my wife and I, we would regularly host parties. I was a director of the Human Rights Center there for 11 years and, you know, instead of taking people to a restaurant or getting something catered, we would cook and we would host parties. And this was one of the best we ever had. She sat around in our big kitchen, our Irish country kitchen. We were in the, you know, in a little Irish village with one post office and one dry cleaner and 13 pubs. And, and Helen sat there on the table with Michael D. Higgins, who was then a local politician, but well known in Ireland and who has now been the president of Ireland for the last 14 years. He's finishing his second term. and he's got that. I don't think it's just nuns who get that, uh, have that, uh, trick, that little, uh, because, you know these politicians have it too.

BERT LOCKWOOD 6:08

I

BILL SCHABAS 6:08

don't know if university professors always have it, we tend to have the opposite impression that we're just tolerating the people we're with. But, uh, and they were so entertaining. The two of them sat around in our kitchen,

BERT LOCKWOOD 6:23

um,

BILL SCHABAS 6:23

with a big crowd, they're telling jokes.

It probably couldn't happen today either because, you know, some of the jokes would be, you know, they'd be a little, uh, what's the term

BERT LOCKWOOD 6:37

Politically incorrect.

BILL SCHABAS 6:39

Yeah, I think that's an old fashioned term now,

BERT LOCKWOOD 6:41

Yeah.

BILL SCHABAS 6:41

but you know what I need. It's

BERT LOCKWOOD 6:42

Yeah.

BILL SCHABAS 6:42

this people be nervous about, she was making them about Cajuns in Louisiana and Michael Dean was making them about Irish country people. And, uh, but it was, it was very entertaining. And there was a journalist there who we knew he was a, he wasn't on the staff of the Irish times, which is the main newspaper in Ireland. But he was, uh, he did freelance for them from time, from time to time. And he wrote it up and it was published, an account of it. And Irish times about a week later, they have a kind of an op-ed column. I don't know if they still do it, but they called it an Irishman's diary. And lots of famous writers in Ireland have written for it. And he wrote a little account about the party at our house and Sister Helen and Michael D and all of that. So yeah. Historic moment.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 7:34

So I, I was there that evening. and I must've been 16, um, accompanied my dad and my mom to Galway. we absolutely loved Galway. what a beautiful Irish city. for our listeners, um, this is sister Helen Prejean, who, is maybe most famous for Dead Man Walking, where she was played, by Susan Sarandon. absolutely Film where she supported inmate an inmate on death row. and then in recent times, um, there is a new documentary about Sister Helen's life by Joe Cardona. Bill, I don't know if you got to see that documentary. It's about a 90 minute. I will send it to you and for our listeners, I will add show notes about, Sister Helen's Dead Man Walking film. It's also a famous book. and Bill, I don't know if you got caught up with my dad, but he recently got to reunite with Sister, and he got a signed copy of Dead Man Walking from her and she signed it "to Meredith choose life, Helen. "So an honor to have a signed copy of her book. and then Bill, a little bit something about me is, you know, I've been very lucky to travel the world with my parents, uh, through my dad's work. And I have humbly bragged to many that I had got to meet Sister Helen at a beautiful Galway farmhouse. Um, and that evening was very memorable for me, even as a teenager. you know, like my dad said, when she locked eyes with you and connected with you, you felt like you were the only person in the room that she was focused on. but I'm also a huge fan of, uh, Michael Higgins. I had, I did not recall that I've had the honor of meeting the president of Ireland. I have met Mary Robinson, the former president of Ireland a couple of times in my life. so now it is an utmost honor that at your house I've met the other current president. So now I will be bragging to everybody that

I can, that I have met him, even though it's a little hazy of a memory. Cause Helen, Helen did take the evening by storm, um, with those great stories.

BILL SCHABAS 9:35

Well, he's, I mean, he's not just a very personable individual, Michael D. Higgins, but he has also taken some very, very fine, very advanced and progressive positions on a range of human rights issues. And, uh, he's done things that few presidents, in the world do right now. He's a really extraordinary person. I'm trying to place his age. He must be mid -eighties. And he is, I think his second term ends, uh, this year. And so he's, he's done as president of Ireland, having done two terms. but yes, a very, very special person. And I, I think I think I last saw him in London when he came here to meet her majesty, the Queen, he was part of the, you know, the symbolic reconciliation between the heads of state of Ireland and of the United kingdom. Um, and, uh, he did a, uh, he did a memorable visit, you know, now probably about a decade ago I didn't see the parade, but they had a state banquet at Windsor Castle Um, and I got my name on the invitation list and it wasn't because the queen put it there.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 10:46

I, he is 86 years old.

BILL SCHABAS 10:48

Okay. That's about

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 10:49

so

BILL SCHABAS 10:49

right.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 10:50

yeah, he's absolutely a remarkable figure. and what an honor back in 2000, I believe our Galway evening was 2002.

is when we came over to visit. and then with recent events, even with your accent, you are indeed Canadian.

BILL SCHABAS 11:08

Yes. Canadian accent. Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 11:10

Yes.

BERT LOCKWOOD 11:12

Bill. Don't. You're actually an American.

BILL SCHABAS 11:15

Well, I was born in the United States. That's how, that's how I described myself. I, I left when I was about a year and a half, not quite two years old. My mother's Canadian. My dad was, you know, wasn't born in New York and raised there and he was in the U S army, but they moved to Canada. And so that's where I grew up and that's where I learned to talk. And that's where I got this accent when I speak English.

BERT LOCKWOOD 11:37

I see. Yeah. I was misremembering. I thought you had left to avoid the Vietnam War

BILL SCHABAS 11:43

Well, I did indirectly, but 18, I had become a naturalized Canadian citizen. And, uh, and my, my dad. Do, um, at the time to do it before you were of age, your, your parent had to do it. My dad, uh, for him, it was a big thing because he had to give up his U S nationality. He'd been in the army, but he did it so that his boys, my brother, Dick and I, uh, would then be able to renounce our citizenship on our 18th birthday. Uh, which we did. And, uh, that, uh, then protected us from the draft, uh, which was, uh, in those days, wasn't just, you know, he always thought that a few years in the army would have, wouldn't have been bad for teaching us a little discipline, but he realized that we might very well have been sent to Vietnam and come back in the body bag. So, you know, that's, that was, that's what it was like in those days.

BERT LOCKWOOD 12:41

Remember it well. I wanted to mention we're still sending, u, students, each summer to, uh, Galway. It's been one of uh, regular places. I have two people going, uh, this summer. uh, but the, the human rights program and, uh, I appreciate what, one of the things you were very gracious about, uh, was permitting the students. I think you did, I don't know if it was a week or two-week session where you together, like, the leading, people in international criminal law for a, um, a conference. And, uh, my human rights students were permitted to attend that, but I guess sort of assist in the administrative, Want to know what their dealings, but they always had a absolutely wonderful experience, um, at, at Galway.

BILL SCHABAS 13:31

Yeah, that was a course I started, I moved to Galway from, from Canada where I was, I was a legal academic in Montreal and got this job setting up this human rights center, at a university that I had never visited before, that I had never heard of before. And they had obtained a very substantial, uh, grant from an Irish American millionaire to set up a human rights center. I think they competed with other Irish universities for the project. the, And then they advertised this job and by chance, I learned of it and applied and got the job. So I went there and one of the first things I did, because I had been, I was then very excited about the international criminal court. I had attended the conference where the Rome statute was adopted. And, you know, that was in 1998. So I arrived there in nine, in 2000. And one of the first things I did was say, well, I'm going to have a one week course on the international criminal court, which, uh, your students, yeah, as you say, participated in and attended and they're still doing it. So I left Galway 14 years ago. Um, I did 11 years in that job, but the, the course is, is still going strong.

and I go there every year to lecture on it, and I'll be there in a few weeks for the 25th edition of this summer

BERT LOCKWOOD 14:52

Oh,

BILL SCHABAS 14:52

course.

BERT LOCKWOOD 14:53

fantastic. O, I really appreciate your filling in that history in fact, Kevin came to Cincinnati, one of the things that he and the president of Galway wanted to do to raise money for Human Rights Center. And so a pro bono in Cincinnati, drafted him the necessary documents so that Americans could tax deductions. And they made a number of trips to the U. S. with this idea that Irish-Americans would be interested in funding. And what they discovered, after number of was their conclusion that Americans were Irish on March St. Patrick's Day, and that it didn't extend beyond that. And other than a few radicals that wanted to fund the IRA kind of activity, which, obviously, they weren't interested in. But they were unsuccessful in raising money for the Human Rights Center. But I'm glad to hear they found an Irish-American that made a gift.

BILL SCHABAS 16:19

I, I'd never heard that before. They did actually start something that they called the Irish Centre for Human Rights in the early eighties. Mary Robinson was involved, but they never had any funding. And it was really like, you know, a lot of universities have a, something that's called a centre, but it's just a drawer in a filing cabinet. and, uh, they host an event every once in a while. And so it never really took off. And I suppose they were hoping that they would Get the money. The the, the money money came. as a dividend really from the Good Friday Agreement, which brought fees to Northern Ireland. And so if there was any, you know, uh, call upon Irish Americans to give their money to help the IRA buy guns, that was in principle over. And so this, Irish American billionaire who had a, I, now I've read, I've called him a billionaire now. I don't know. He's, he was just very rich. Um, they were, he was always doing duty-free, which they invented in the, in the old days, when the planes had to stop in Shannon airport to make it across the, uh, the ocean, the Irish figured out that you could get everyone off the plane and get them to buy a whiskey and cigarettes.

So he had, he had a foundation. He'd given all of his money. He was a man who lived very modestly and he gave all his idea was, I'm going to give it all away. And so he put it all in this foundation. you know, he would, he would, he would, he would fly economy class and stay in cheap hotels. He was that kind of a guy, but he had made a fortune. So he, this, so the idea was that now that we had peace in Ireland, as a result of the, of the, what's called the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, that then one of the appropriate things for this foundation to do to give money for a human rights center. And that's, that's how mine, my talk about. Yeah. and Kevin Boyle, who you mentioned was of course, very helpful. He was very, uh, friendly and, and, and he had left

BERT LOCKWOOD 18:20

Yeah.

BILL SCHABAS 18:20

Galway. He'd been there in the early 1980s, but he had left before 1990 to go to, uh, Essex University in the United Kingdom where they had human rights.

BERT LOCKWOOD 18:32

Well, well, he went first to Article 19.

BILL SCHABAS 18:36

he went to the NGO first

BERT LOCKWOOD 18:38

Yeah.

BILL SCHABAS 18:38

and then he went and worked for, and then he got a teaching, you know, an appointment at the University of Essex. And so I would visit him there and we became very close when I was in Ireland. He was very helpful to me. He was a bit, you know, I would call on him for advice and, uh, and he was very wise.

BERT LOCKWOOD 18:57

So, this is, this is before email. and so he, um, wrote to me he had decided to leave Galway and that he was going to new NGO. it was being funded by the Baby MacArthur Foundation, uh, Article 19. And so wrote him back that it was uncanny I had just decided to leave Morgan Institute. And I, was going to, uh, uh, uh, a new NGO, uh, Article And I looked forward to having a, um, uh, a leisurely chat with him about our work and I predicted and he that the first thing he did, you know, vi ourselves as these great human rights guys say, what the hell is Article 24? Article 24? And

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 19:50

24?

BERT LOCKWOOD 19:51

Article

Article 24 is the, right to, uh, rest, leisure, paint holidays, uh, you know, that, that, that one. he realized he'd been spoofed. Uh, so.

BILL SCHABAS 20:04

Well, very good. an article of, of considerable importance and, uh, you know, you want to be careful in trying to, you know, ridicule it too.

BERT LOCKWOOD 20:15

I just had the, the leading Nigerian, uh, human rights lawyer that's uh, taken Hurst Hannum's position, at Tufts. uh, he's just written an article in the Quarterly on that Article 24, the right to leisure. Okay. Uh, and , and, and thinking it through.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 20:33

Well, I also think Europeans in the UK do Article 24 a little better than Americans. Some days we only get, like, five days off for a year. the Europeans know how to do

Yeah, I thought so,

BILL SCHABAS 20:49

And

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 20:49

yes.

BILL SCHABAS 20:49

they do it all very well, you know, very strict about not working even on weekends. And we a day off last week when everything pretty much was closed for the first of May, the Workers' Day. You know, a national holiday, perhaps one of the most sacred in terms of everything stops. I often relate it, I've done some work on another more obscure right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is Article 27, which is about the, it's about the right to science, but also the right to enjoy the arts, which is a phrase I love in the Universal Declaration. It doesn't graduate into the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. It gets lost a bit, al there is something. Um, the arts in, in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. But the link with Article 24 is that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is sending us a message that we should be doing something constructive in our spare time. so that with the idea of being on, we're on this planet, so that we can enjoy the arts and create things and do that sort of thing and not just work.

BERT LOCKWOOD 22:01

Well, Meredith, didn't you have dinner last night someone who did a number of meetings on, uh, human rights in the arts?

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 22:09

Julian Pfeiffer? Juli Pfeiffer, yes. Yes, yes.

BERT LOCKWOOD 22:12

Manfred Nowak, mentioned to me that in Portland, Oregon, which is where Meredith is, is fellow. He's retired now, but that he, sort of specialized in that area of human rights and the, and the arts.

BILL SCHABAS 22:27

yeah, we used to in Galway, we would do a, uh, an event at least once a year on human rights and the arts. sometimes it'd be a musical program, we would have an art exhibit, and so we, we always, we did stuff like that at the Human Rights Center.

BERT LOCKWOOD 22:43

I have on my wall a number of these, uh, tapestries that were done Chilean families. the disappeared and, and repression. Marjor Agosin, who unfortunately died a couple weeks ago, um, was a professor at Wellesley. And she, gifted these to me, but it's a traditional form of art where, Chilean women used scraps of cloth, colorful, and they weave, scenes that depict their life. And during Pinochet, they began doing this with, uh, scenes that have sort of political messages to them, uh, as well. And, I can remember, I, I had a number on display in our library, and according to one of the librarians, students would come in and they'd be drawn to the colorful scenes, and they'd look down at them. Um, and you could sort of see tears forming in their eyes as they realized what they were sort of, uh, looking at. I absolutely agree the arts are very important in terms of, extending that message.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 23:59

And, I really appreciate that Bill brought up the arts. cause this is a subject I'm quite passionate about. Um, and I think for some of our listeners who are not human rights lawyers, nor human rights academics or scholars, but they're very passionate about human rights and they're curious how they can get more involved in human rights. particularly since we're seeing the melting of our democracy here in the United States and the rise of fascism across the world. I myself am not a human rights lawyer. it would have been one of my dad's dreams. I think, um, for one of his children to be a lawyer. I think until I was about 35, he kept asking if I wanted to go to law school, but I think he's given up. we used to walk around, I lived in New York city for about 13 years and my dad taught at NYU and we would walk around campus and he'd be like, are you sure there's the law school? but you know, truly just studying law did not interest me. Um, I started off my career in magazines, and I love the arts. Um, I'm a designer. I do graphic design. Um, I've evolved. Um, and I've evolved into video editing and video storytelling. and there, I think there is a lot of arts that the human rights world Um, you can do incredible work around the world and work with the ICC and, you know, work against genocide. Uh, but to tell your story, to tell the story of your work and the benefactors of your um, storytelling is incredibly important. And that is through the eyes of art, documentaries, video storytelling, graphics, newsletters, we. I continue to try to encourage Bert to, um, come to the 21st century with me into the world of web design and graphic design. so I think for our listeners, it's important to know that even if you don't have a law degree in human rights, um, and you have a passion for arts and design and storytelling, you can be involved in this world, and make a difference.

BILL SCHABAS 25:45

Well, I never, uh, I have two daughters and I never, ever suggested that they become lawyers and they never did. But one of them is a production. She's an artist. She's a production designer in films. Um, she wins awards. She's been in some very important films, produced in

Canada. and the other is a musician and she in a senior position at the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto. So...

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 26:14

Incredible.

BILL SCHABAS 26:14

and, and... Yeah. So both of them are in the arts.

BERT LOCKWOOD 26:17

And, and where's the first daughter? In Canada, right? But...

BILL SCHABAS 26:21

First daughter is in Mon... They're both in Canada. The, the, the, the daughter, uh, the first, she's actually the younger of the two. She lives in Montreal and she works in, in the film industry. A then the musician lives in Toronto in English Canada.

BERT LOCKWOOD 26:35

when you were at McGill, was John Humphrey still alive?

BILL SCHABAS 26:39

Yes, he was. I, actually, I, I was, uh, only, uh, a lecturer, a sessional lecturer at McGill University. my full-time position was at the French, the University of Quebec at Montreal. that's one of the French universities in Montreal. And that was my, day job. Uh, but when John Humphrey, who was the, um, you know, as you knew him, I, I know that. And John had been the drafter of the first draft of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights back in 1947. And he worked for the UN as the head of the Human Rights Section for about 20 years. And then he returned to McGill University. And so I knew him when he was, you know, an old man. He was well into his 80s. And when he, stepped down at McGill, the dean called me and I was asked to teach his course on minority rights, which I thought was quite an honor. I, you know, I can't claim to have known him very well, we, we knew each other and our paths crossed in meetings and so on. So, yeah, absolutely. I knew Humphrey. That's my, one of my, that's my one layer of distance from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

BERT LOCKWOOD 27:49

When I, when I, uh, was at the World Peace Through Law Center, this would have been in, uh, like, around 1974 or something like uh, he was the, uh, chair of our Human Committee. And this center put on these huge conferences every other year where they'd get about 5,000, uh, lawyers from 100 countries, come for a week-long session. And, and I was in charge the one that was held in, in Washington. And one of the things they would do at the end of the conference was to, um, uh, sponsor resolutions. And so-- John Humphreys submitted this resolution which said that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was customary international law. And so I called him, and I said, you know, John, 1975, I'm willing to accept that parts of the Universal Declaration are customary international law, but, you know, there's

no way the whole content is. And I've used his answer to question, which I'll give you in a second, when I'm how customary international law develops. One of the sources you look at is experts say it is. And so he says to me, well, Bert, you know, and I know that it's not, but if enough of us say it is, it will become customary international law. And it was sort of, I, I refer to it as sort of the, the, the "tinker bell phenomenon" of customary international law. If enough of us clap, it'll come to life kind of, uh, being,

BILL SCHABAS 29:42

uh, that's a good story.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 29:44

if I may segue Bill, um, and chat with you about some current, um, topics. one that I know is extremely pressing in today's world is, what's happening in Gaza. and I know from the United Nations, you on the conflict in 2014 and now we are 11 years and I was wondering, you know, what were some of the key challenges in investigating such a complex and politically charged situation, back in 2014 and what were some of your findings then? And if you could bring us up to present day, um, I would love to hear from you on that.

BILL SCHABAS 30:19

Sure. Of course, you know, we're, we're doing this now in, um, early May of 2025 and this is a fast changing situation. Um, you know, the developments in some ways, they, they resemble one day looks like the next, but speaking to you today, we're in a situation where we're clearly, you know, little children are now dying of malnutrition in Gaza because of the, uh, refusal of Israel to allow any you know, uh, fresh potable drinking water and so on into Gaza and they control it, access to it. And, uh, so I don't know where this is going to end. my wife was reminding me today and she said, you called it at the beginning in the early October of, uh, of 2023 when the, when the, the recent campaign began, when I said Trump's Trump's dream for Gaza is to have a beach with a row of, uh, of fancy hotels on it. And they're getting to that, to point. so yeah, I, I was appointed to the UN commission of inquiry. Uh, that was set up for the 2014 conflict, which lasted a few months. Speaking from memory, there were about 2000 Palestinians who were killed then, of which we used to say, perha two thirds, abo 1400, 1300 were non-combatants civilians, mainly children and women. So this was terrible, but of course it pales in comparison with what we're seeing now, and have seen since October of, of 2023. Um, there were, there were obstacles of, um, well, there was an access obstacle. We couldn't get in to do the, the commission of inquiry. Uh, we, could occasionally get Palestinians to come out, uh, of the West Bank and meet us in Jordan. We, we, we couldn't go in because Israel wouldn't let us. And that remains the situation. Although, you know, I think maybe that there was a tendency to exaggerate the significance of that because we were able to do a lot of, uh, hearings and, uh, meetings and, and so on uh, with, with Zoom, it was already beginning. I mean, those, that technology had existed already in 2014. And we made a lot of use of that. Uh, but also we held hearings in Jordan, neighboring Jordan, where people could come and meet with us. but that was, there was practical difficulty. and then of course there were the, the the political difficulties, mainly vicious attacks from Israel. So, you know, amongst others, when, uh, I was, I was personally subject to some, some terrible, uh, attacks the, when, wh it

was announced that I was, had been appointed to chair this commission in, I think the beginning of August of 2014, a few days later, full page ads appeared in the first section of the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal with you know, rather unflattering photograph of me and the claim that I was an agent of the Iranian government. And, oh, there was really, a photograph of, uh, the then president of Iran with his hand raised in a, in a salute that resembled a Nazi raised arm salute, the kind that he

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 33:42

got, uh,

BILL SCHABAS 33:43

Elon Musk. And I, was like, ...All right, so, so the two of us were there. So, you know, this was, was quite brutal. And uh, I'm told, and the only, you know, the only flattering part of it is that, uh, apparently it was something like 200 grand a page. Now, somebody thought highly enough of how dangerous I was to Israel, uh, this, this academic, uh, law professor to invest a half a million or more in these, in these ads. But that was typical of the kind of, uh, attacks that we have from the Israelis. And of course, all of that now is well known. We, we had news last, u, year about their attempts to, uh, intimidate, uh, and threaten and corrupt the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. So these things which people may have suspected are now clearly part of, of, of public knowledge. I've been working on it, uh, since then. And in, you know, I've been working on the Palestine issue, at the International Criminal Court. And I'm currently working, helping, some of the, uh, the teams of lawyers at the International Court of Justice, working on the South African case. this is the case that South Africa filed against, uh, Israel based on the Genocide Convention. And as, as, as you know, one of the arrows in my quiver is the, is the Genocide Convention. I've written the book on the subject just about to come out in its third edition. And so I've been, been contributing with my legal knowledge and expertise on the, the subject of, of genocide and the application of the convention. I do think this is one of the, clearest cases, the Gaza situation in Gaza of genocide, in recent decades, you know, going back, I mean, if we go back to the ones that have been adjudicated, uh, in a, in a serious way, we have the Rwandan genocide, which of course is, uh, on, you know, unquestioned. And we have the Srebrenica genocide of 1995. The word gets used a great deal that the United States government, by the way, although they were dismissive of the charge of genocide in Gaza, there was a statement by Blinken who I forget the word he used, but he talked about how they thought it was. I think the word was meritless and yet the U S government, will regularly denounce genocide when it's committed by people they don't like the Chinese government, uh, of the Uyghurs, which there's no comparison between what's happened to the Uyghurs or what's happening to them and what's happening to the Palestinians or the Yazidi in, Sudan where they, you know, there's a, there's a case now at the international court of justice on Sudan and the main evidence that Sudan is giving with its charge that the United Arab Emirates is committing genocide it's, it's the U S secretary of state and I don't mean Blinken. I mean, the new guy, Trump's guy. So it's evidence coming from the Trump administration. but, but, you know, the U S government is, very loose with the term genocide, except of course, in the most, compelling, demonstrable of genocide in recent decades.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 37:03

And Bill, this might be a wishful question that I'm hoping you have some inkling none is, um, we know aid has not reached Gaza, in well over 40, 50 days. do you have any hope that they will allow the aid trucks in, because starvation, um, patients are dying, there's no medicine, do you have any inkling when they will allow the aid trucks to enter Gaza today being May 5th, 2025?

BILL SCHABAS 37:30

I do not. And I'm, I think that, uh, I would not ever underestimate what the current Israeli government is capable of. and I would also not underestimate the level of tolerance of the friends of. Of Israel who are, and

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 37:49

Mm-hmm.

BILL SCHABAS 37:49

the supporters of it, I could say the liberal democracies. I'm not sure I want to include the United States in that. We, in that now, but you know, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, where are they, uh, watching little children, emaciated... I saw them last night on the television news. I don't know if they're, they're probably not getting on CNN the same way they get on Al Jazeera, which has regular news every night. And we see these emaciated children, vulnerable children, and they have no food. And how can human beings do that to each other? And how can government stand by saying, with this little mantra, well, Israel's acting in self-defense?

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 38:34

Exactly. It's just the absolute worst of humanity. And you know, from October 2023, when you saw what happened and commented that Trump saw this as a real estate opportunity, I recall in March 2024, Jared Kushner, um, former, you know, he was, I mean, he's his son-in-law, but he was also the former White House Um, he was discussing Gaza, um, being recorded on television about how Gaza is a waterfront property and, quote, very valuable. So, you know, this has been a scheme all along. And then I'm sure you both have seen that vile AI generated video advertisement of

Okay.

BILL SCHABAS 39:19

let me tell you how I see it. I mean, it's, this isn't just about building resort hotels on the Mediterranean Sea, but clearly, there is a within Israel, within the government as a whole. And that has fairly broad appeal to the, to the Jewish, Israeli population population as well, that they are going to expand the borders of Israel, that they will create this greater Israel, which will go from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. And that it will be a, one state, it will be a single state, that the two state, the idea, when we say the two state solution, in other

words, the idea of a Palestinian state, which was promised to the Palestinian people as early as 1919 at the Paris peace conference, when they made, uh, when they made, gave Palestine entrusted it to the United Kingdom. And as a mandate, they were to see to eventually to the self-determination of the population of Palestine. And so that idea is a, is totally a compromise by what the Israeli government is going to do. But the problem is, if they have a one state, a single state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, they end up with a territory with a majority Arab Palestinian population. And they can't, that doesn't work for them. Uh, and I can understand why. I don't have a serious problem with the idea of a democratic state from the, from one state, from, from Jordan to the Mediterranean, in principle that would work for me. I think that that would be acceptable, but that's not what they have in mind. Uh, and what they have in mind is one where they will, that will remain a Jewish state. And the only way that could happen is to get rid of the Palestinian Arab, the Arab Palestinian population. That's the only way that could happen. And, and they would like to drive them out the same way the Nazi Germany tried to drive the Jews out. When they got frustrated doing that, when they realized that it was impossible to do all of that, they said, well, now we're going to have to have some other solution to them. And that, and that I'm afraid is what's at work in Israel. It, it, it pains me to say it because I'm of Jewish background myself. My, I come from a family of people who fled Nazi Germany, who survived the Holocaust. But, but, but we're, we're seeing this terrible, terrible crime being committed. And what is, as I say, I keep going back to it as particularly shocking as it's, it's going by with the tolerance. Of, so many powerful, rich countries who have the ability to actually put the brakes on it and to stop it, and they're not doing that.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 41:59

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. And it does feel significant that we as human beings are not learning from history. I visited Auschwitz and Treblinka, and, you know, Holocaust survivors always said we can never forget. You know, they encourage people to go visit those concentration camps so that we may never forget and not repeat history. and, you know, through history and Bill, you being one of the leading human rights experts on genocide. And, you know, even with your third edition of your book on genocide, we recently, you know, had the Rwandan Day of Remembrance for the victims, um, United Nations declared the day April 7th. so we just recently, had that day of observance, from 1994. I was wondering if you could also share some of your work on genocide through the Rwandan perspective, and perhaps how we continue not to learn from different aspects of genocide through history.

BILL SCHABAS 42:53

Yes, well, you mentioned Rwanda. u, this was my introduction to international human rights and it happened, uh, not by design, but just by, by coincidence. I had finished my uh, my PhD at the University of Montreal in uh, late I'm sorry 20, 1, 1992, uh, in November of 1992. I, I defended my thesis and it was on the abolition of capital punishment and it was an international law. But, you know, I didn't know anybody, outside of my little world in Montreal, Canada. I didn't know Bert Lockwood and I didn't know, Kevin Boyle and I wasn't part of that world. I'd never been involved in it. And I was asked within a few weeks by a Canadian NGO if I would be their representative on a commission of inquiry an NGO commission that was going to visit Rwanda in January of 1993. And so I joined them and they sort of viewed me as the

international law expert. Although I was clearly in over my head when it came to. my head when it came to genocide, because this was not something we studied in those days. It was, you know, we had other issues that were on our plate, other concerns. It was more of a historic anomaly. I did carry around in my knapsack, in my backpack, a little book of, remember, Bert, in the old days before the internet, we had these little books of treaties of human rights instruments.

BERT LOCKWOOD 44:23

Oh, yeah.

BILL SCHABAS 44:24

And I used to travel around with one of those. So I had the genocide convention there. In any case, we watched this in Rwanda in early 93, unfolding, and we made a call in our report that we saw the danger of genocide. The genocide was either underway or was about to take place. And so we made this early warning It was not heeded. And the following year, of course, full-blown genocide took place in Rwanda. People have asked me regularly, you know, what was it? Why did it stand out? Why was this, you know, why were you accurate, in a sense, in forecasting genocide when others, you know, use the term for all kinds of things and doesn't really click. And I think that it was something that we've seen again in the recent conflict in Gaza was, we saw, you know, an ethnic terrible violence being committed to some extent on both sides, but where one side was on the receiving end mainly. But where there was an official condemnation of, where the, where the government appeared to be condemning hate speech. there was strong evidence of genocidal, really openly genocidal hate speech going on. When we did our report in 93, we were, were challenged by people who said, come on, you know, how many people have been killed? Are you talking hundreds, a few thousands? But, it wasn't just the fact that there were, that there was large scale killing, you know, relatively nothing in comparison to what happened in 1994. But it was the idea that this was combined with, with calls to destroy the Tutsi. And that they were sanctioned or approved of or encouraged by the people in authority. And that was the extraordinary part. And that we, we don't see that in many of the cases wh, where people say genocide is taking place. We actually don't see that. We see ethnic conflict. We see racist speech. We see racist killing. But the idea of calls to destroy a people where this is officially sanctioned at the highest level and encouraged it's rare. And that's a good thing, of course, it's a good thing, but it's rare. And, but it was present there in Rwanda in 1992 and 1993. And, uh, I'm sorry to say it's present again in Israel as it has been for the last two years.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 47:02

Absolutely. I just really your work that you've done in Rwanda, and being able to, hear that background. and if you'll be so kind, I just have two more questions for our listeners. one, one is, more of a curiosity for myself. Um, as I recently read a novel about World War I, it's a great novel called In Memoriam by Alice Nguyen, uh, for our listeners. Um, it starts off in 1914 when World War I is ceaselessly churning through thousands of young men, losing their lives on both sides of the fight. and Bill, my dad my dad was, um, generous to share some correspondence you and him had through email. and I had read that you've done some perhaps light research

in the treatment of African troops during World Wars. and it's also a powerful reminder of the racial dimensions we have of conflicts. and I was wondering for our listeners, if you could share a little bit about your findings, and why this area of history is important.

BILL SCHABAS 48:00

Sure. Yeah. This is a subject of great interest to me. I'm not sure that I know the way forward to get more evidence of it, but there was a lot of, um, w, let me, let me talk. We don't, I don't have an unlimited time here, but one facet of it that I've been reading about and trying to learn more about, and that is in early part of the second world war in about May and June of 1940, when Germany had invaded France, France was fighting. Everybody knows that France eventually gave up and made a deal. And that led to Pétain and the, the Vichy regime and everything. Um, but that came in June of 1940. Um, but until then the French were fighting off the Germans in North Eastern France, whi is where I currently, um, it's where I'm being, I'm coming to you from today in Normandy. It's where I, I live most of the time. And the French had, uh, in battle, their African troops, they called them the Senegalese sharpshooters. In French, we say the, Tirailleurs Senegalais was a generic name because they weren't just from Senegal, but they were from all over Africa, but they were essentially men of color who were in, uh, units that were fighting, for the French. And they had done this in the first world war as well. And so the Germans would capture these units in these battles and they would capture both French, uh, troops of European origin, in other words, white men and black men from the, from the French army and the French, uh, the European French men would be taken to prisoner of war camps. And many of the, uh, A men were just summarily executed. And there were many instances of this. know, uh, enough that would make one think that this was more than just, individual racist soldiers doing this, but there was something broader afoot and people are still discovering them in the city of Rouen, which is a, you know, a large city in Northern France the, on the Seine river downstream from Paris, uh, near to the channel. There came to light only two or three years ago, uh, seven black soldiers who were murdered. And they erected a, a small memorial there in their honor. A few years ago, I visited at last summer with a couple of my grand of my grandsons. And we, uh, it wasn't, uh, it's not a great memorial. It should be bigger, should be more important. and there are, there are others throughout Northeastern France that I just want to learn more about this phenomenon, how it took place. And one of the things I've done, which is more related to my real area of expertise, if we're talking that the history of this, I'm, I'm not, a professional historian really, bu I am a professional when it comes to war crimes and international law. A so, I've tried to get more information about the investigation of these atrocities. So, these documents, we have them from a body called the UN War Crimes Commission. There was a lot of investigation, while the war was underway, the Second World War, and then when it was over, of war crimes and atrocities. I can't find anything about this. My suspicion is that maybe, of course, it's coming to light now, but it's one of those things that people knew about. People knew about then, knew about all along, but didn't understand it as being something of significance that needed to be, um, highlighted and need to be, needed to be spoken about more. And, uh, so this is part of the, you know, this, this, this fascinating dynamic of international law, attitudes toward accountability and dealing with atrocities. And at the same time, our, uh, recognition that there were his atrocities that were neglected, overlooked, forgotten. And I think this is one of

them. So I'm, I'm following this now, trying to read more about it. Maybe one of these days I'll, I'll submit an article to the Human Rights Quarterly about, about the subject.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 52:25

I would love to be kept up to date on that. Um, I can speak for my dad and and Bill, you've been so kind with your time. And, um, the way we end our podcast a reflective moment. an this is speaking directly to our audience, is made up of, you know, aspiring human rights advocates, international law practitioners, law um, considering your extensive career and legacy. Um, is there any advice you could offer to our community and our listeners, um, about the current affairs of the world and how they might be able to make a difference, as advocates and also human rights practitioners?

BILL SCHABAS 53:01

Well, that's a very big question. Uh, you know, I'm often recognizing, I'm often advising, uh, students of mine who want to have careers and human rights about how to do it. And I, I suggest, I say, yes, there's the place for this, but that they have to an open mind about the sort of things that they can do, because my, one of the things in my career is that none of it was ever mapped out or planned. I'm not in a place that I, and I didn't work on issues that I said, I want to work on that issue. Um, they were sort of thrust upon me by chance, by, by fate. And so that was just a matter of picking up things that, that appeared to be important at the time. In terms of the future of the um, it's, uh, kind of frightening on, on the one hand, you know, I'm a, a subscriber to some people called the Whig view of history or what Marx called historical materialism. Um, the idea that we are generally on a, you progressive trajectory, what Martin Luther King called the moral arc of the universe, which he said tends towards justice, but it's long and it has setbacks. And it's always hard when you're looking up close to see whether we're in the middle of one of these setbacks. I think if there's a, yo know, two things that have been in my life, which is, it's not over yet, but I'm an old, I'm, you know, reasonably old man now at point that I have seen changed. one of them that I saw very directly in my family and my own personal, surroundings is the quality of women, how that's changed just so hugely, over 50 or 60 years. And the other thing that is more remote from my daily experience and my reality, but that is still as continues to transform the world is rectifying of the imbalance between the North and the South. Uh, so when I started my, my, uh, wo career, my working life, and even when in the 1990s, when I became very engaged in, in human rights, countries like, like China and, and India were really, uh, they were outliers, but they were also countries that were very poorly off. And then we spoke, we called them developing countries, but or underdeveloped countries, which I guess a term people don't use anymore, but they are increasingly, uh, powerful. And, uh, we are one of the things that I've been, uh, Devoting a lot of energy to in recent years is, again, r the history of human rights, going back to the early days of Eleanor Roosevelt and John Humphrey and others in the 1940s and 1950s, and seeing the significant and often overlooked role of the underrepresented countries of the global south, even then. One of my favorites, and I hope to do more work on this in the future, is Haiti, which is today one of the most unhappy and miserable places on the planet. If you go and read the contributions of the Haitian diplomats to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to those very early years, they were extraordinary. And

they had the most advanced ideas and they contributed actively. Um, so there's a, there's that history, which more needs to be written and that needs to be revived. But also the world is going to be, clearly this balance is going to be corrected from one that is top heavy to the global north. And I, for one, welcome it entirely

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:44

Absolutely, and I think we need to keep our eyes on Haiti, because I just that the Dominican Republic is detaining pregnant Haitian women and sending them back, um, in a very inhumane way. & dad, you have a significant tie to Haiti.

BERT LOCKWOOD 56:57

That's where I got married. I got married, uh, just as I was coming to, uh, C in 1979. the, fellow who, um, officiated, or was the witness, the Haitian fellow, was a young human rights lawyer named Guy Malary. he, eventually the, uh, reform attorney Um, but,

yeah, you know, Haiti's, well, it's terrible situation today. I mean, it's sort of being run by gangs at this uh, Bill, I wanted to, um, thank you ever so much, your friendship and your enormous, uh, contributions to human rights field. You, you' one of the giants it, it's so important, uh, your scholarship and activism. um, thank you very much for sharing your, your thoughts, uh, with us. And as I say, I very much appreciate your, your friendship over the years.

BILL SCHABAS 58:07

And I, of course, feel the same way about, about you, Bert.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 58:12

And this, this is an honor, Bill. Thank you for allowing us your time. And, um, for me to be able to witness my dad's profound friendships with, uh, fellow human rights heroes and giants in the it's, it's truly an utmost honor. And I will always be fond of our time at your farmhouse in Galway. And I hope we could maybe visit you now in your French farmhouse. Um, I, I will put in a ticket to come visit. So you just let us

BILL SCHABAS 58:36

When we have guest rooms, by all means

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 58:39

Oh, wonderful. And I see there might be a cello in the background, so maybe we would have an evening of music as well like we did in Galway?

BILL SCHABAS 58:46

That's my cello. Yeah,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 58:48

Darina

BILL SCHABAS 58:48

yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 58:48

Is that your cello? Oh, incredible. Well, for you and your daughter, I will send you the link to Julian Pfeiffer, who is a famous musician who started the non-profit. which is called musiciansforhumanrights. org. So I'll, I'll send you that website, as it might tie two of your passions together.

BILL SCHABAS 59:06

Wonderful.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 59:07

Okay. Thank you so much, Bill. Have a wonderful evening. We appreciate it.

BILL SCHABAS 59:10

Bye-bye.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 59:13

Thanks for joining us today. As I reflect on our conversation, Bill offers something rare in this moment, a long view. Drawing on decades of engagement with genocide, international courts, and the evolution of human rights law, he reminds us that progress is neither linear nor guaranteed. His His reflections on history, scholarship, and activism but invite all of us to think carefully about the institutions we rely on and the responsibilities that come with knowledge and voice. This This conversation asks us to slow down, to situate today's crises within deeper historical patterns, and to consider what endurance, memory, and principled work can look like over a lifetime. As always, my dad and I are grateful for Bill's generosity, his time, his wisdom, and his steady commitment to justice. If you enjoy our podcast, and if you yourself have a topic, theme, or guest you'd like for us to host, send us an email at humanrightsconversations@gmail.com. Don't forget to rate, review, and subscribe. Until next time.