

Human Rights Conversations Across Generations

Hans Thoolen episode

Transcript of edited conversation

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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 0:26

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.

Hi, listeners. Today, I have the pleasure of welcoming a longtime colleague and friend of my dad, Hans Thoolen, who joins us from his home in Greece. For more than five decades, Hans has been at the center of the global human rights movement, working with organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Commission of Jurists. A the way, he has helped build systems that protect vulnerable communities and support human rights defenders around the world. He is the co-founder of the Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders, often called the Nobel Prize for Human Rights, and serves on the board of True Heroes Films, a Geneva-based organization that uses visual storytelling to bring the work of defenders to international audiences. In our conversation, we explore the institutions Hans has built, the defenders whose stories he has helped bring to the world stage, as well as what it means to resist, disrupt, and transform in a world that has never needed those words more. Without further ado, let's tune in now.

HANS THOOLEN 2:13

You look good, Bert.

BERT LOCKWOOD 2:15

As do you, yeah.

HANS THOOLEN 2:17

Well, I have the advantage of spending time in Crete. That helps.

BERT LOCKWOOD 2:22

Cincinnati doesn't carry the same allure.

HANS THOOLEN 2:26

No, there's a lack of stress here, which is probably very, very helpful.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 2:30

So, Hans, one of our connections is where you are from, the Netherlands, um, which is one of my favorite places. I got to live in Amsterdam for three years, one of the stories that really stood out to me about you is your childhood. And where you were actually born. You were born in an Indonesian restaurant in Harlem.

HANS THOOLEN 2:53

In Harlem,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 2:54

Could you tell our listeners about that?

HANS THOOLEN 2:57

what happened is that my parents, after the war, had to start a new thing to make money because their old hotel had been blown up by the Germans and they got a bit of money from the government and then they bought a restaurant, Indonesian Chinese Dutch restaurant. called Corona, like the virus. Anyway, and it was in Harlem. think they didn't know that during the war it was a place where many Nazi collaborators got together. So in the beginning it didn't run very well. It had not a very good

BERT LOCKWOOD 3:28

ha, ha.

HANS THOOLEN 3:29

reputation. But anyway, a while, people came for the food. And so when I was born in 1947, in the first six seven years of my life my parents had that restaurant. So what happens when a boy when you grow up you know you go to the kitchen where you have all kind of cooks and these are mostly Indonesian some Chinese Indonesian or half Dutch and they were all aunts.

In Indonesia they used the word everybody is an auntie so for me they were all aunties and of course they are fond of children especially the children of the boss so you got spoiled rotten by and so yeah for me it was very normal if you want to come home and be surrounded by Indonesian and Chinese people although it was in the midst of Netherlands. felt normal and I remember when I many many years 40 years later I came to Indonesia for several times for the study on Indonesia I did for the international commission of led to a quite a big book and the first time I arrived the NGO people picked me up at the airport and we drove back from the airport to Jakarta and I opened the window and I could smell literally smell my youth the kitchen and we went to Indonesian warung place stall where you can eat and I quickly had a few bites before we went to dinner.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 5:10

well the the Indonesian connection was really special for my dad and I to learn that you were born and raised in an Indonesian restaurant um one of our fondest memories was with Twan Vendogen who our listeners may have also heard us talk about who unfortunately also passed but he took us to the Hague and we had one of the most memorable meals at sober s-o-e-b-e-r we must have been there four hours just talking and reminiscing so that's such a special memory and your mom sounds like she was woman generous community oriented raised you surrounded by kindness and showed you how important it is to have a village around you

HANS THOOLEN 5:58

yeah well I just don't know maybe to be honest mother got divorced from my father when I was about six seven and then she stood there alone with three boys without financial support because he didn't pay anything and so she really had to work very very hard and therefore she hadn't have much time for us but that was compensated and like in the restaurant when they were still married later she started a pension hotel pension in near Highland were you also had 10-15 permanent guests that all became aunties and uncles and so you had a whole kind of a group of people that are not direct family but uh ...a wider group that you, you develop in. So I had a very social education if you want. And then later I went to a seminary, a boarding school, because I wanted to become priest. the seminary again, you had 100 boys that you all grow up with, you play football with, you do theater with, etc. So you could say that I had my whole youth was spent with other kids, other children, other adults, people around you that somewhere had a role that gave you pocket money, that asked you for little services, etc. So my mother, you could say, had a... she was a wonderful woman anyway, but I think her contribution was both her own, uh, educational ideas to let us develop, and secondly, to accept that you can grow up not only with parental guidance, but with guidance from society about you. And she was quite, kind of, tolerant in that way.

BERT LOCKWOOD 7:44

Why did decide not to continue, toward the priesthood?

HANS THOOLEN 7:49

Well, I come from a Catholic background. my mother was very Catholic. and when you grow up in Catholic families, very often the second or third son is supposed to become a anyway, very

important and on top of it, you please everybody in your family. My grandmother, the village priest, my mother, everybody was very happy when I said I had vocation. So, you know, it's kind of positive. I did it because I liked the idea, but to be honest, I wasn't so sure. I wanted to become a missionary. I wanted to travel to Africa and faraway places that I always dreamed about. I read every book about discovering the world, but I didn't come from a rich diplomatic family. So the only way to actually go and see the world was to become a missionary. But in order to be a missionary, you first have to become a priest. So that second step, I had not really thought through.

years, I had discovered that there were women in the world. And the school discovered that I had discovered it. And so I was kicked out.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 8:58

Hans, from there, what led you to Leiden University

HANS THOOLEN 9:01

in honest answer, I think I was too lazy to work, uh, basically. I mean, after you finish school, you have to do something you couldn't imagine. I had had lots of jobs because I needed, I didn't come from a rich family, so I was working everywhere in all the holidays. So I had about 10 different jobs and realized that work is so. When I got the chance, because I got a scholarship, I got the chance to study with a state scholarship, I decided to go and study law, simply because I didn't know what else to study and that was the most general. A lot of people in Holland study law but don't become lawyers. So I studied law for two, three years and only halfway my studies, I still had to do my military service in between, and so halfway my studies, I realized suddenly I got interested in law. Don't ask me why, this is kind of Damascus, road to Damascus moment, I sort of like, especially there was one professor, Koopmans, who was teaching constitutional law, and he was a brilliant man, really brilliant, gave marvelous lectures, and somewhere, somehow I got suddenly interested, after two years. Oh, yeah, and, and, um, eh, and what happened is that, I then started studying for the first time. Before that, I never studied. I just passed exams, like, enough to keep my scholarship. And then suddenly, I started, I even had to buy books that I had already done the exam for. Because I had never read them before. And then they, I managed, I don't know why, somebody thought it was a good idea to propose me for us a, uh, uh, the Dutch law review, like you have in, uh, editors for the law review, our students, student law review. But, uh, uh, but the difference is, it is one law review for all law faculties in, in, in, in, in, in Holland. So, all eight together have formed the board of directors of the law review. And so, each university, each faculty has the right to appoint two editors. And somewhere, somehow, ask, don't ask me why, I landed into it. And so, suddenly, I, I was a serious legal scholar. And God, I had to work hard for two years, in order to understand what I was, I worked very hard, I admit. And I caught up. And then, when I had almost finished my studies, this professor Koopmans, who, who I liked a lot. And he liked me because we both smoked golovaise, uh, French cigarettes, and we were both Francophile. And so, uh, anyway, he then said, could I become his assistant for six months? Because he had become the dean of the law faculty, and he was free to pick a research assistant. So, I said, yes. So, he gave me an assignment. I, I went to work. When I came back with it after two, three months, he

read it. And he said, completely useless. It's not what I wanted. But, it is very interesting. I' do something else with it. So, he, he took what I had written, which was basically not what he had asked for, but turned it into a real article later on. and so, I got a bit interested in academia, not too much. And, when I'd finished my studies, he then said, uh, I could take the place of a, uh, lecturer who had left, which was Cees Flinterman.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 12:22

Oh. Ah,

BERT LOCKWOOD 12:23

Oh.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 12:23

our dear friend, Cees.

HANS THOOLEN 12:24

friend... went to for a few

BERT LOCKWOOD 12:27

Oh,

HANS THOOLEN 12:28

And so, Koopmans had a temporary opening that he could fill without too much trouble, because it was not a full-fledged job. so I got the job. So, I... suddenly I was a lecturer and I... I had to do... deal with students and teach, seminar... seminars, etc. and then, what happened is that I also got interested at the same time, not because of that, in more social issues for all kinds of reasons, like more a feeling of justice and injustice. Uh, I could get upset about injustice somewhere, somehow... And, then I was drinking in a bar in Leiden and next to me was sitting a black guy, uh, colored from South Africa. So we started talking. His name was Ezard DuPlessis. A beautiful South African name, French origin. and you know, he told me his story about South Africa, Apartheid, etc. And I... I said that I would glad to help him then a week later, he called me. He said, "Hans, we need you." I said, "Why?" Well, he said, "You know, we are leading the Outspan, action. Now, the Outspan are oranges that were flooding the markets in Europe, and they were from South Africa, very cheap. And why were they so cheap? Because they were being, they used slave labor, basically. Blacks in South Africa who had been condemned under the race law were then forced to work in the fields. And that's where they could produce extremely cheap, lovely, nice oranges. And so they were trying to boycott it. And they had an action group, the boycott's Outspan Action, BOA. And they did all kinds of things, like, uh, a very beautiful was they had a, uh, citrus press and then, uh, an orange on top and then they squeezed it. And the orange looked like the, the head of a, of a black worker. And they were called blood oranges. There was blood coming out.

BERT LOCKWOOD 14:27

Yes.

HANS THOOLEN 14:28

so they were doing all kinds of, b actions and they tried to get Albert Heijn. You remember Albert Heijn, the biggest chain in Holland to boycott these oranges and Albert Heijn had not up until now really wanted to do it, but they were doing actions, loading the the chopping car full of oranges and then say, Oh no, it's outspun like, you know, that's the job, this kind of stuff.

he called me, I said, look, Albert Heijn has called me. They want to talk. They're sending one of their representatives to come and talk to us. But I don't know who else to ask you or lawyer. I said, I'm not a lawyer. I haven't even finished my studies. And he said, no, but you must have a suit somewhere. okay, fine, why not? So I went there, adventurous. So I go to Albert's Corner, which is a shop owned by Albert Heijn, that's where the agreement, and I'm sitting there at 11 o'clock in the morning and there's nobody. was something wrong. What happened? There was only one guy sitting at the bar. It was a hippie. So to the bar and looked at him and he looked at me and he said, are you from the BOA? I said, yes. Are you from Albert Heijn? He said, yes. So Albert Heijn had the same idea to send somebody they can talk to. But anyway, we both started laughing at that moment.

I learned a bit more later on, but what happened, Albert Heijn is a Christian, Protestant Christian family who lived near Bloemendal, where I born and they were told by their church people do something about this. And they had done some interviews with clients and the clients all said, basically sent the ball back to them saying, well, Albert Heijn, you decide what is today's special, what is cheap, what is the sale. You also tell us, don't let us You tell us whether you should boycott or not. And so they put the ball back to them. And on that basis, they decided basically not to do it. But they didn't want to be seen giving in. And they were a bit afraid of what other shops would say. So the idea was they stop selling them, but they couldn't make publicity with it. That was the deal. I advised the ASA to take the deal. I said, we can always leak it to the press after all.

what a successful little story taught me and said, yeah, there are human rights groups in the world and in Holland, all kind of groups. It was already there. But a lot of them don't have any legal support. They have no money to pay lawyers. The other side has well-paid lawyers. And what they need is legal advice, free legal advice. And so then I got the idea, let's create a committee of lawyers, including students, for human rights. So then we the Dutch Lawyers Committee for Human Rights. our idea was not necessarily to ourselves, chain ourselves to, but to provide advice to human rights groups. And, so there were two things that happened. On the one hand, I was at the university and my professor, Koppens, allowed me to spend a lot of time on developing it instead of writing my doctoral thesis, on the condition that I would not complain if I lost my position after three, four years, because I had nothing to progress. and I'd accepted that deal because I would rather do this than a boring, uh, thesis. And the second thing was that I could use my position at the university as a base to work from, because I even started using students in seminars to research on cases that were brought to us.

BERT LOCKWOOD 18:32

about what year was this?

HANS THOOLEN 18:34

That was

74, 75.

so the Dutch lawyers committee is now 50 years old. I went last to the 50th anniversary gala. And one of the things I noticed in my speeches saying, I'm so glad to see that half the people in the room were not even born when we started this.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 18:57

Yeah.

HANS THOOLEN 18:57

and this certainly using the students was also a clever idea because the students liked it. I gave them concrete things to do.

BERT LOCKWOOD 19:03

Um, I, uh,

HANS THOOLEN 19:04

at one point, for example, I had given an interview on the radio for somewhere and that, and the next day the guard at the university, the doorman comes and calls me and says, look, you have to come down there's a, uh, somebody wants to see you. He said, yeah, but can you send them up? No, I don't know. He, he's rather strange. What do you mean? It's the king. I said, the king, yeah, he's, he calls himself King Coco Petalo, the gypsy king. He had come in a big limo the faculty, he heard about me on the radio, and then he came and he came in, you know, big fat guy, golden rings everywhere, and said, and his people were being discriminated and we should do something about it. So that's how you roll into things. And then I got students to work on that. was also the Mozambique foundation, a bit of the left-wing foundation. They wanted to collect money in the streets, but the mayor said no in many places. And so I said, b why was that? And then the argument was, there is a national collection plan made in the Hague in the ministry somewhere, by which only certain big, like Queen Juliana fund, they were allowed to collect, but not, not this kind of thing. So, and then put a group of students on it to find out. They, they loved it, they went to, to the Hague to interview parliamentarians. And we all came to the conclusion it was utterly etc. And we made a report and parliament accepted, accepted it immediately and changed the regulation. So, it an improvement. The students did real work and, and, and got real experience. And it does the heart of the Dutch sections work, it is to help human rights NGOs in legal ways. and, and you remember I told you about this head on the press, advertisement, a newspaper refused to publish it because they said it was against the, the advertising code. because it was a, because it was too shocking. And, sued, we sued the newspaper. And, and, and it went up to the Supreme Court, the Dutch Supreme Court. And in two cases, BOA 1 and BOA 2, the Supreme Court agreed with us that

there was a distinction between political speech and commercial speech. That commercial speech can be regulated, but not political speech. And as a result of that, the government many years later changed the constitution on the freedom of expression and on freedom of expression is now in the Dutch, is a distinction made between commercial and political speech. One that cannot be curtailed and the other one that can be regulated. And funny enough, one of my first disagreements within the human rights movement was years later when Human Rights Watch criticized the change in the constitution as a limitation of of speech. Because the American concept, of course, is that all speech should be protected.

BERT LOCKWOOD 22:18

Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 22:19

Right.

HANS THOOLEN 22:19

Well, I have no problem with communication of commercial speech, but that's, that's a difference maybe in a cultural difference. So I wrote an angry note to Human Rights Watch, never got the reply, yeah.

BERT LOCKWOOD 22:32

Well, I remember Kevin Boyle, he came and at the time, that he was visiting, he was working on a there, there was one of these skinhead groups. That were demonstrating. And The Danish government, banned them. he was bringing an action. And what I contributed to it that needed to consider the audience. They, they had done a TV program and it was sort of like, we have something called 60 In the U. S.

HANS THOOLEN 23:06

Yeah.

BERT LOCKWOOD 23:07

and, and so it's an intelligent audience, if you will,

HANS THOOLEN 23:09

no.

BERT LOCKWOOD 23:09

that it's directed toward. they ought make that distinction as, this audience, had the skinheads, uh, basically letting them speak.

government was trying to say they needed to be condemning them on, on air. And, won that case because the audience would understand. that in many ways they were their own worst enemies, these skinheads, uh, you know, with the, the hatred. And, uh, he was successful in winning that, uh, case in the European.

HANS THOOLEN 23:47

Uh, Kevin did that probably when he was with article 19.

BERT LOCKWOOD 23:51

Yes.

HANS THOOLEN 23:52

Yeah.

BERT LOCKWOOD 23:52

Yeah. there's, there's a funny story on Um, This is before email. So he wrote me a letter indicating that he was leaving Galway, and that he was going to this new organization, that the baby MacArthur was funding article 19.

HANS THOOLEN 24:12

Yeah. Yeah. I know about it because I was, I was with him and Martin Ennels

BERT LOCKWOOD 24:15

Okay.

HANS THOOLEN 24:16

when it was created.

BERT LOCKWOOD 24:18

so I wrote him back a letter and, said to him, it's crazy that our careers were so parallel because, I had just decided to leave the Morgan Institute and I was, uh, uh, founding a new organization, article 24. And I look forward to having a long leisurely chat with him about our work. I knew the first thing he was going to say was, you know, what the hell's article 24? And it's, it's the one uh, includes, the right to rest and leisure. paid vacations,

HANS THOOLEN 24:58

Ah,

BERT LOCKWOOD 24:59

and,

HANS THOOLEN 24:59

okay.

BERT LOCKWOOD 24:59

and so he, he realized he'd been had.

HANS THOOLEN 25:04

No,

43, which is not bad.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 25:12

and then Hans, as your career progressed into global human rights, I actually wanted to of step back for some of our listeners who. Many times I've heard of these great big institutions that are internationally recognized, but they may not know exactly what the institutions do. So after you established the Netherlands Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, your path expanded into working at the International Commission of Juris.

HANS THOOLEN 25:43

Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 25:43

For you and my dad, could you tell our listeners what that institution is?

HANS THOOLEN 25:49

well, in those days, this is in 1977 approximately, uh, the International Commission had already been created, after the second world war, partly as a counterweight against the democratic lawyers, uh, who were kind of communist-inspired international group. that's why there were always accusations that the ICJ got money from the CIA, which was probably true because somebody had to pay for it, Europe didn't have the money. so the idea was to create a commission of outstanding legal minds, top jurists, uh, judges from, Supreme Courts, uh, Advocate Generals, professors, they could become commissioners, and the commission as a whole was the governing body. And then there was an executive committee chosen by them that oversaw the secretariat. And the secretariat was based in Geneva. but it quickly run out uh, financial support. And, the one who was, uh, the best known, uh, S General was, uh, Sean McBride, So, when he left, uh, after this, the scandal about possible CIA money, he left, went back to England, and set up Amnesty International, by the way. so he then asked Neil McDermott, uh, British, uh, uh, Queen's Council, to take over. He was a labor MP, uh, Neil McDermott. He had been touted as a possible successor for, prime minister, even. Uh, he was quite a very well-regarded high-level labor MP. But because he married a Russian refugee, there were some doubts about vetting, and, et cetera, anyway. So, he then decided to forget the political career and accepted the job in Geneva. uh, this was in fact, by then, uh, greatly diminished organization, uh, still a very big reputation, a big name. if you look up in 1977, for example, and until then, there was always, Amnesty International and international jury set today. uh, it was really one of the big voices. and he got money, if I remember well, he got money from Ford Foundation to wind up the ICJ in a proper way. And instead of doing that, he used the money to hire more staff, including an executive, assistant. Um, so, I became the

that was so funny story

he wanted, he had come to Holland. we discovered that there were international organizations for lawyers, including the ICJ and others. So we

somebody, one of us went on holiday to Switzerland, and decided to stop by by the ICJ, and reported back to us that, you know, they were very nice people. He said the same guy, who opened the door turned out to be the Secretary General. Um, which we

we as a new, young organization liked, and so we decided to suggest that we become their national affiliate, and that's how I started talking to Neil McDiarmid, as the head of the Dutch section, And he said there is already a Dutch section. I said, "Oh, never heard of it, totally." Old people's cold war organization that, you know, nobody knew about, they came together once a year to drink sherry. And so we decided, well, we could take it over. and so then we invited the head of that old league, to come to see us in the building of the university where I had some colleagues, some of them had no idea what it was about. And I took over the room of Koopmans, who was on a trip. So I received him in a big professor's room. We got the secretary to bring him coffee and we discussed, you know, but why don't you join us? I said, well, why don't you join us? You know, so in the end, he decided that he was so happy to see so many young people, et cetera, that he was right. He would write to McDermott to say we should, we should be accepted as national section. So we became the national section. And then Neil McDermott came to Leiden to give a speech, a very interesting speech. It was just after Carter had become the president of the United States and started his human rights policy.

his speech is about the fragmentation of human rights organizations in fact, because he noticed that the support for human rights had not necessarily led to the strengthening of, of existing institutions, but to creation of a lot of new organizations, including the watch committees, and this and that, etc. but it was generally very positive about Carter's human rights policy. so when he went back to Geneva, he called me about this vacancy. He said, do you know somebody from Holland? Because he felt that if he had a Dutch guy, maybe the funding in Holland would become easier or something like that. So I found a friend of mine because he needed somebody who was around

And he was interested. And then suddenly the guy calls me a week before the deadline and said "sorry. I've decided not to do it for personal reasons". Neil McDermott asked me, So what do I do now? I said, Do you know somebody else? I said, Well, yeah, I know one person. He said, Who? Myself.

was kind of dead silence, because I was much, I was too young. I was something like 30 years But on the other hand, of course, he had seen that I was able to organize locally things. So he said, Okay, I'll give you a chance. Six months on trial. So I accepted it, then resigned from the university, gave a reception as if I was going to go get a high level post in Geneva.

And so I left Leiden, for a higher crunch. And then I came in with Neil McDermott, in the ICJ, and the ICJ said, was very much doing it. Well, it's, it has a lot of national section. And national

sections, unlike Amnesty, have no say whatsoever in the ICJ itself. That's only the commissioners, the national sections. the most national sections worked on law reform, rule of law. And it was not Amnesty like adopting in prisoners or political prisoners. It was mostly interested in, say, the legal aspect, the rule of law. That somebody got a fair trial, etc. And that sometimes leads to different positions. For example, on the recognition of draft evasion. Amnesty International was simply against us, they had a standard that was more likely against war, etc. And the ICJ looked more at the legal side. Is there a fair alternative, if so, e. Or the recognition of draft evaders as refugees, which Amnesty is in favour of, and always was. And the ICJ was not. The ICJ said no. If, the person refused to follow the law, the draft, in this country, then that person should be punished. He should get a reasonable punishment. Not go to jail for two years and not be tortured. But if he or she is offered an alternative kind of service, that's fine. Or a short prison sentence, that's fine. You should obey the law and serve your country. You can be sent back. So you see that sometimes the, the more legal approach ends, ends up in a different result. so the ICJ did very good work, especially on the Neil McDermott who was a brilliant mind, on international treaties like a torture convention that he, he did a number of work on, also starting seminars on the rule of law in rural areas in Asia, So I learned a lot from this guy, because I knew really very little. I thought I knew, but when I was working with him, I realized I knew completely nothing and that even my English was not good enough. So I would write things and then put it in his entry and got it back with all kind of red pencil and that over the years became less. and we had only one phone between us, in those days was, uh, so this phone was on That was on a big hook and that could swing to him and to me. Uhm, because we were facing each other and after a while, I was able to read his mood from the speed by which the phone was pushed in my direction.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 34:46

make the phone and that's the way that you were doing it. It's a really great way to get to know your

HANS THOOLEN 34:49

But it was marvelous for me to see him and see and hear him at work. When he was speaking with ambassadors or whatever, I could hear the tone he used, the arguments he used. He was fluent in English and French, excellent draughtsman, could be very tough and so yeah, I admired him greatly. Anyway, so he, for about almost five years, I worked in the ICJ on all kinds of things. drafting articles for the review, doing missions after a while I was allowed to go on mission sometimes to replace Neil McDermott. Of course, he was getting older and didn't want to travel everywhere, so there was an invitation to come to Thailand for the 200th anniversary or something off the bar association. And he decided in the end he didn't want to go, so he sent me and I remember arriving there, you know, and the guys didn't even look at me. They were waiting for Neil McDermott or somebody that looked like him. So when I was back in Geneva, I decided to, really, I put gray, gray on

BERT LOCKWOOD 35:51

head.

HANS THOOLEN 35:51

my sides of my

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 35:55

And was that effective?

HANS THOOLEN 35:56

Yeah. No, it helped. For a few years, it

BERT LOCKWOOD 35:59

Yeah,

HANS THOOLEN 35:59

was needed.

BERT LOCKWOOD 36:00

you, you felt older.

HANS THOOLEN 36:03

So, he allowed me to do a work which I very much wanted to do a study on the rule of law in Indonesia, which normally we would farm out to others. But this time, I managed to convince him that I could do it, because I wanted to, because maybe of my past link in Indonesia. I was very keen on that, and that took years and years. I finished it. oh, oh, three years after I had left the ICJ.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 36:28

God,

BERT LOCKWOOD 36:28

Oh my

HANS THOOLEN 36:30

there was a lot of delay for all kinds of reasons so in the ICJ, yeah, we had Bill Butler, who was, you know, Bill Butler, of course.

BERT LOCKWOOD 36:39

Yes.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 36:40

And for our listeners, can we share who Bill Butler is, Dad, just for the connection?

BERT LOCKWOOD 36:44

Well, Bill Butler, was a New York lawyer, one of the things he did, was to head up the American branch of uh, International Commission of Jurists, which was the, key organization in the

international human rights field, um, and was based in, uh, Geneva. and, Bill Butler was lawyer for estate of Urban Morgan. so he was the key to, setting up the first program in international human rights, at a law school in the world, and that's the Urban Morgan for human rights at the University of Cincinnati, which, they recruited me in 1979 to put the program, uh, t, and I've been Blessed with uh, opportunity build program, it's been very fortunate.

HANS THOOLEN 37:43

so was a bit of a, how do you call that, a strong man, uh. tough and often, quick, uh, too quick maybe, but, and, and always was looking out for American interest, because he had good links to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to the State Department. lot. but, I mean, he was, competent lawyer and a competent, member of the, of the, he was the chairman of the executive

BERT LOCKWOOD 38:10

uh,

HANS THOOLEN 38:10

committee. and so he chaired the meeting, the regular meeting, three times a year. And so I got to know him very well. I had to bring him his documents, pick them up from the hotel and, and I had this kind of hate love relationship with him. on the one hand, he clearly didn't agree with many of my, in his view, too progressive uh, ideas. on the other hand, he thought I was a fresh wind and, good for the ICJ. and I was often in between him and Neil McDermott, because Neil McDermott, Secretary General, of course, often clashed by definition with the chairman of the committee. And I often ended up in between the two. So it wasn't always an easy position. Anyway, I remember once we had a situation where, you remember Iran when the, the revolution, the Shah was ousted and then, Khomeini came to power, uh, and they had the hostages of the American embassy. Now, at that moment, somebody felt that we should, maybe the ICJ should try and do something about this situation, like some intermediary role, because we had had good contacts with the Iranian diaspora under the Shah. I met several times with Iranian leaders who later became minister or prime minister, like Godzbadé, who was later killed when they returned. But anyway, they were, and I would collect information from people who had just arrived from Iran about what the Savaq was doing and torture, et cetera, and then brought that information back to Geneva. So I had kind of personal relationship with a lot of these people who had now gone back. So we thought maybe we, the ICJ that has a rep, a good kind of reputation with the Iranian, the Aspidas that returned, maybe we can play a role there. So that was discussed in the executive committee. Already Niel was in favor, but Bill Butler had grave doubts because the American position is we don't negotiate with terrorists. 해요. And so the ICJ should not get involved. And after a long discussion, it was decided that we could perhaps do something very carefully by using Sean McBride. Somebody suggested maybe Sean McBride should do it, because Sean McBride had in the meantime got the Nobel Peace Prize through Amnesty and had received the Lenin Peace Prize, both. So maybe this is, he was to be the right person to go and talk to them. And so, uh, Sean said yes, after he was contacted, uh, that he was willing to do that. And then Bill Butler thought he should send him an enormous, in those days we had still telex, not, uh, telex, sent him a five-

page telex, uh, with warning that he is very careful, cannot commit to anything, and they are terrorists, they should never go... Anyway, the whole position was, you know, and then he got an answer from, uh, Sean McBride that was exactly five or six words. Sean was already over 80 by then. He sent back a telex saying, "Was not born yesterday, Sean."

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 41:24

Oh, that's great!

BERT LOCKWOOD 41:26

Wonderful. you'll be Bill never told that story.

HANS THOOLEN 41:31

No, no, I'm sure.

I made a copy of the telex, and I still have it in my papers. uh, yeah, so the ICJ did a lot of interesting things. We created the Al Haq, you know what I mean, the Palestinian You know,

BERT LOCKWOOD 41:46

lawyers . Oh, yeah.

HANS THOOLEN 41:47

Yeah. Lawyers. What happened is that these were Christian, mostly Christian Palestinians, lawyers who had come to Geneva, three young And, of course, they were sent out with me because I was also a young guy. So we went out to drink something in Geneva, and we discussed what they can do. And the problem was that the Israeli used to allow them to create non-governmental organizations, certainly non-human rights organizations. So then we extended on how it came above us. Somebody had the idea, maybe we should make a corporation, because the military did not stop the creation of corporations, So we drew up a text for a corporation, and the only article in the corporation was to work together with the ICJ in Geneva. And on that basis, they passed. They got legal recognition from the from the Israelis. You have Israelis. And that was the start of al-Haq. They later changed the status. but that was an example of how, you know, you're just kind of brainstorming among ourselves.

BERT LOCKWOOD 42:55

Well, they' still doing good work.

someone with money call me who wanted give to a Palestinian group, but didn't know the landscape and whom would I recommend. so I recommended al-Haq, which...

HANS THOOLEN 43:14

Yeah. No, I think they're highly respected. Unfortunately, of course, they're now forbidden by the Israelis and the Americans, they're still very good.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 43:24

I was going to ask you about that.

HANS THOOLEN 43:27

The example was also the torture convention was being drafted in the UN, and the ICJ played an important role there. And when it was finally agreed, the text, then it needs to be ratified. the human rights movement in Geneva wasn't so big in those days, and it had very few kind of full-time professionals. So, but we, there were a few of us. And so we decided instead of competing with each other, in those days, was it easier, we decided to cooperate. And so we had a lunch every month with four people from Amnesty, Nigel Rodley came over World Council of Churches and from City. And we came and then progress on the campaign to to get ratifications. And of course, that's very useful because one organization is strong in Denmark, the other knows somebody in London, etc. So we exchanged very openly kind of information on it. And I'm sure we made a difference in getting this relatively quickly ratified, because we knew where to push at the local level in different countries. So that was an example of kind of old boys or young boys network. That, that was very efficient, in my view.

BERT LOCKWOOD 44:50

actually quite fascinating to me, because I can remember early on with the human rights in the US, basically, All going the same, entities looking for money to fund them. And it worked against their doing anything together, because they needed to sort of do things in their own name be able to claim an accomplishment.

HANS THOOLEN 45:19

Yeah.

BERT LOCKWOOD 45:19

And, and so it's, it's interesting to hear.

HANS THOOLEN 45:22

And even, even Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, they both get money, not from government, but from the public. They compete in the public domain. They can't be helped. Yeah. So, so there was in those days in 19, say in 1977, 80, early 80s, there was a lot of possibilities for people that were willing to work together. And I think we, it was nice work, it was constructive. then we had already those, in those days, fights with the disappearances in Latin America.

BERT LOCKWOOD 45:54

and, and, and I remember that Twan Van Dagen was the working group on disappearances.

HANS THOOLEN 46:00

Yeah.

BERT LOCKWOOD 46:01

That that the, uh, UN set he did something in the quarterly and one of the missions that they did, back in, in, in one of the Latin American So

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 46:10

I, I'm realizing just from this conversation and, and, and, you know, dad, your friendships through the years, there are so many incredible Dutch human rights and diplomatic, leaders at that time from you, Hans and case and Teo and Twan, um, absolutely remarkable. the community you all had in the work you've done. if I could take us to around 1986, Hans, when you joined the United Nations and spent many years working with the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. And for our listeners, we're going to be talking about Hans's expertise from documentation, technology, storytelling for human rights defenders around the world. And this is a really interesting place to start from because in late 1980s, you involved in efforts to strengthen how information about refugees was collected, organized, and shared, which included helping establish a computerized refugee documentation center. And at that time, as we know, digital systems were still quite new and you needed to have reliable information to protect such vulnerable populations. And this will take us into talking about your work with true hero films, but I'd love to take us back in time of what it was like around that 1986 period, joining the United Nations.

HANS THOOLEN 47:40

Well, okay. Then I go to you back a bit more back in time is that after I left the ICJ, I went to the Netherlands to set up the Institute for Human Rights called SIM, S-I-M, it stands for Study and Information Center on Human Rights.

in the beginning, it was mostly books and articles, of course, like a library, but then to create a computerized file. And then we started looking how we can get violations and also written into a computer file. And I'm a lawyer, I'm not at all a technician, but I got interested, we were able, we had decent funding in the beginning. So we were able to buy a big computer for those days, big computer. We all worked with it. We're processing, of course, these are all new things, but it worked. would, so that is how I got into information and documentation area. But you could even go a bit further back to when I was still at the ICJ in 1979. Carter had a human rights policy and he had promised he would every year publish a report on human rights in the world. So you know this, this, now what happened is that in the beginning, the first reports were only about countries that received money from the U. S., military or other development aid. Not the enemies. So, the problem was, the report tended to be mostly about countries that the US had a friendly relationship with, which was diplomatically not helpful. Anyway, so it was a bit of a problem. Then the Ford Foundation, I think, probably informally asked by the Carter administration, decided to organize a meeting in a castle just outside Paris in 1979, where they invited a number of human rights organizations, Amnesty and others, Laurie Weisberg, internet, uh, ICJ, to come together and see whether we, NGOs, could, let's call it take over, could see our ways to publish an international yearbook on human rights per country, where we put all our resources, like you have on disarmament So, after two, three days, we all, all the, all the NGOs, that's where I met Martin Ennals who was leaving Amnesty for the first time. and in fact, all the NGOs said, "No, we will never be able to agree on that.

You but we said, "We are willing to look into the possibilities of cooperation between NGOs in the area of information and documentation, where we can save money, we can do standardization, that's it. Okay, then the Ford Foundation, said fine, well, they had some money left, so we got a bit of money and we created a series of consultations with, uh, four or five people. We went around, we invited a Norwegian computer expert and we went around and talked to all kinds of people in different countries and that's how they developed the idea of HURIDOCs. was only created in 1982, just after I left the

ICJ, I had a few months, nothing before I took up SIM. And so that is when we put the last bricks into HURIDOCs, when we had a conference in Quito and later in Strasbourg, where we created officially the network. And that's how the secretariat of HURIDOCs ended up with me in Utrecht, So when I then Utrecht, the SIM, I went to the UN, UNHR. And one reason was they were very interested in what I had been doing with a computerized documentation system because UNHR didn't have it. So I was allowed to set up a new entity called the Refugee Documentation Center, which from the beginning was heavily computerized with professional staff. It was fascinating work and it grew very, very quickly. And again, I stayed of course in touch with HURIDOCs, we even created a parallel network called IRENE, which was refugee information, together with human rights documentation, because it's basically the same thing. But I remember in UNHCR itself, I had quite a bit of trouble to convince some of the higher up colleagues that human rights information is something you should use. They always felt that no, that is politics, you know, these are a lot of them were former diplomats that maybe had negative ideas about human rights organizations. So they didn't want the UNHCR to openly use, and quote Amnesty International. And I had to convince them to look, you know, we have to decide or help others to decide whether they are refugees or not, then you have to have country of origin information. So you must build a good system for access to country of origin information to help that process along. And country of origin information is also human rights information. And I even managed to, out of principle, to get an agreement, an official agreement between UNHCR and Amnesty for exchange of documentation. So there was no funding involved, but we gave each other documentation free of charge, which was free of charge anyway. But it was more the principle.

BERT LOCKWOOD 53:14

Hans, you Laurie Weisberg.

She really was one of the, I think, sort unsung heroes of NGO human rights movement.

HANS THOOLEN 53:26

Especially when it came to documentation yeah.

BERT LOCKWOOD 53:28

Yes.

HANS THOOLEN 53:29

Human rights internet was in fact, the first, I gave her a eulogy for after she died, they had, and I couldn't go, but I sent a document. And it was a bit of, because I disagreed also with her on one or two things rather. And I think her problem was, in fact, she had a dual thing. On the one hand, she was, , a documentation centre that collects physical documents like a library and gives access to it. And at the same time, she was a networker. And it's not easy to both at the same time because, your resources have to go somewhere, and b, cooperation is essential in networking but not necessarily in, in library work where you count how many people come to your door or how many read your, your particular. So, she was sometimes a bit obstructive within the HURIDOCS movement where she was a member, of course. But she was certainly one of the first to make clear how crucial documentation is to human rights. the same for HURIDOCS. She always said, you know, when it comes to human rights, uhm, uh, information is the only, only weapon of NGOs. We have no armies. We have no power, nothing. We only have information. So, when it comes to information documentation, we should be playing a home match. You know, we should be extremely good at it. Not just a little but extremely precise and good, et cetera. That was the credo behind HURIDOCS. Ye.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 55:03

And for our listeners... ...time with HURIDOCS was on the board from 1984 to a period of 26 years, which you helped shape the organization's standards and the direction for human rights documentation globally. Hans, you must have seen such a progress of tools and technology. ...recording and way to tell stories. did that time also help you become inspired to start, in 2006, Hero Films, which you started in the Netherlands and then moved it over to Geneva in 2013?

HANS THOOLEN 55:39

Hans, that's correct. But I should then first mention Martin Ennals. Martin Ennals was the first real Secretary General of Amnesty International. And it grew from nothing to 200 people in a few years under Very, very inspiring man who was able to get people together and he created other organizations, Article 19, International Alert, so on that he was involved in all of that with him. So when he died in 1992, we decided to create an award in his name, the Martin Ennals Award, which later became the Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders. And at the first ceremony in 1994, of the Martin Ennals Award which went to Harry Woo, the Chinese guy who had filmed the laugo, guy comes in China, and 60 Minutes had made a film about him. Well, he had made films and CBS had turned, edited those images into a film about this guy and his work. We didn't know that. So when we found out, we asked CBS that we were allowed to use it. And they said, fine, we could edit it and use excerpts in the ceremony. So in the first ceremony we had film images, very impressive, professional film images, from the American broadcaster. And it was such a success that we then decided every time every year when we have a Laureate for the Martin Ennals Award, we'll try and make a film. In the beginning it was done with amateurish with friends in Amnesty International, but we managed to do it every year. And so after a few years this, I realized more and more, yeah, making films is really a separate thing. You need specialization. So we decided to create an organization called True Heroes Films, which we set up in the Netherlands and then later we realized we needed to move it to Geneva, where we have more human rights defenders. so the MEA led to

films for laureates. That led to the insight to create True Heroes Films. And the second reason why I started doing, setting up True Heroes Films was that when I was in UNHCR, I served in Stockholm, then in Uganda, and then from Uganda, I'm in Ammogata. And High Commissioner called me back to set up and lead the 50th anniversary unit in Geneva. Uh, and that's when we decided to make it a big thing. And, uh, so not an internal, it wasn't just a dinner and a photograph. We decided to make a worldwide campaign under the theme of Respect Human Rights, Respect Refugees, RESPCT. We even got the song of Aretha Franklin's song. We were allowed to use it for one year, free of charge. we had, uh, a company making a marvelous one minute, uh, clip with singing and dancing refugees to the song of Aretha Franklin. You had famous refugees, including Madame Albright, dancing. Some of them didn't want to dance. And then the company that filmed them made them walk up and down and later added it as if they were dancing.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 59:13

Oh, that's great.

HANS THOOLEN 59:15

that, when the anniversary, uh, was officially started in the UN in the press room in the Palais des Nations, we decided to show them this one minute, uh, film with the, with the hot, loud music. And it's the only time in the UN press conference. And it's the only time in the history of the UN press conference that the journalists stood up and applauded.

It was brought up around the world as a freebie, where a lot of countries use, when you have 30 seconds left television time, they put uncommercial advertisement free of charge. And later, a study in the UN had discovered that this particular clip, for 30 seconds or one minute, that clip had been broadcast to the value of \$15 million.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:00:09

Wow.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:00:09

Wow.

HANS THOOLEN 1:00:10

If we had to pay for the airing, it

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:00:14

Deerball money.

HANS THOOLEN 1:00:15

And then we did also a show in Geneva with well-known singing, dancing Burundi drummers and the whole thing. that was done in Geneva and that was broadcast live by Eurovision. So I got involved in the creation of a television show. And we also launched a CD with refugee voices, singing refugees. And these are things that are all new for me. Luckily, I have some

good staff who knew about it. So I got very interested in the media aspect in my last job in UNHCR. So here you see Martin Ennals Award, films, media work in UNHCR. All that together got me more and more interested. And I said, no, we really have to do something about getting the message across. So that is how we did True Heroes. And now, of course, we have more than the concept. True Heroes started off basically to make films the Martin Ennals laureates. But then we started adding other laureates. Sometimes we simply interesting human rights defenders simply because they're there. Because we realized that when you do an interview, you have it forever. And so when there was there was a World Conference of Human Rights Defenders, the second one in Paris. we were hired to make a film on the conference. And instead, we did that, but then we added... We sent two more people with cameras. And we went there and we picked up interesting participants who came from all over the globe, brought them down to a makeshift studio and interviewed them. And so in that way, we had all kinds of people. For example, Pakistani guy Kashmir, Parvez. He was there. We interviewed him. And two years later, He became the laureate of the MEA. Nobody had film images because he's in prison, except we had it because we had filmed him in the basement in Paris. So we built archives and we have something like we extinct. We think about 200 hours of film footage on human rights defenders that can be pulled out when we need it.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:02:33

Well, and when I was doing research on True Heroes Films and the videos of interviewing the Martin Ennals award recipients, it was so hard to choose just one or two award recipients to spotlight on our podcast because I spent hours watching the videos. And as you said, I really appreciate that even the ones who don't win awards, you still interview human rights defenders because that's exactly what they are. They are human rights. in their own country, of their own culture, fighting, you know, huma rights abuses and violations. There's two women I'd love to spotlight. the first one is the 2025 Martin Ennals award laureate. Her name is Anna Paula Gomez de Olivia. She is a human rights defender, educator, and researcher in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Um, she lives in one of the largest favelas, and in May 2014, her 19-year-old son named Jonatha was shot in the back by a military police officer when he was just walking home. And through the devastating loss of her son, she co-founded an incredible collective of black mothers demanding truth, just, and accountability for state violence at the hands of Brazilian military police officers. And I just want to provide a little more insight to our audience of the statistics is currently happening in Brazil. so every year, more than 6,000 people, predominantly black boys from Brazil's poorest favelas are killed in police raids, often without any proof of threat or wrongdoing. Black people represent 82.7% of all police killings in Brazil. Some state governments even propose bonuses up to 150% for officers who neutralize suspects. And last but not least, Brazil has the highest rate of deaths of human rights defenders in the world. And I pulled a quote from Anna in her video, which I will link in our show notes for our listeners to watch, that she says, quote, This fight is a way to continue being their mother, a way to continue exercising our motherhood. And Hans, I want to ask you you being one of the jurists. And helping choose who got the award for the 2025 laureate and you got to choose Anna. Could you tell us about that process and how her story stood out to you?

HANS THOOLEN 1:05:16

No, I cannot. the, the proceedings of the jury are secret.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:05:21

Oh, I see.

HANS THOOLEN 1:05:23

For good reasons. The jury of the, of the MEA is, consists of 10 NGOs, not individuals, but organizations. It's very special. And that gives it, of course, also the power. Of course, an organization has to send somebody to represent, but that's the person. But the vote is of the organization. And so in order to safeguard the position of these NGOs, we don't go public. Secondly, the, the, the representative must be free, must feel free to talk and not to be recorded because he or she may say something that even their own organization doesn't agree with. But if they feel that they must be free to say that. And so we decided long from the start that the proceedings of the jury are confidential. I'm the chair. I was the chair. I resigned a few weeks ago. February, I resigned completely. as a jury chair, I don't even vote. I don't have a vote. The only thing I can tell you is who it generally goes. It is a very good process, but there are not many human rights awards that follow such a rigorous thing. All the candidates that are nominated are sent to all the NGOs. They then, each NGO with their own knowledge and background, selects 10 that they want to look at in the future. Up to 10. Those are, those votes are then collected and we create a master list of the top 10. Then the top 10 goes back to all the, each NGO, with one of them being a rapporteur on one of the 10. There they do further research. Check things, et cetera. And rapporteurs give their reports back with the candidates, usually in a personal meeting, now more and more since Covid, more online, not before in person. And then you have a kind of discussion where we first look at a general round, then people pronounce their preferences. And then in the third round we start thinning out until we get to the last two or three, and then maybe, in the end, we do a vote. But in most cases, we don't even vote, we talk until we agree. Because it is so much better if you can say that the vote, that it was a unanimous decision. Yeah. So it's a lengthy process with a lot of involvement. But of course, we have NGOs that have research capacity, that have national sections that they can check, et cetera. And then, on top of it, there is a panel of regional NGOs that are not on the jury, but that can also give feedback on candidates. so well done. That's why, of course, you can see that the ones that are selected, normally speaking, are really, you know, we haven't had many, many dots. But, and I sometimes, when I was still chairman of the foundation, I would get a letter from, say, an organization, maybe, a city in Germany that has a human rights award, but it has no candidates, or no capacity to do research. And they wanted us to know whether they can have hours, the ones that didn't get the award, the number two, three, whether they can use them, because they, they wouldn't be able to get the candidates otherwise.

And in the of the Brazilian lady, and for example, you have to understand the film, I thought you liked the film. So, yes, what happens is that our filmmaker, we often use the same we work in a certain philosophy, as you may see also from the films, there is a common approach. And it is a kind of, let's call it, respect for the showing that there are people, not just automates. We

don't go for short sound bites. We think about protection for them, et cetera. So, he goes for six days to make a film of 15 minutes. But that means that he spends the first four days simply going around, following the person, m other people, et cetera. And then finally, he starts filming, and the one hour, two hour film is later added to 15 minutes for the, for the ceremony. And, and for example, in her case, it was really, he said it was one of his more difficult assignments. assignments, because is a movement of understandable anger and demands, but it's not a very well-organized, that there's no political awareness of how to go about, et cetera. And he solved that by interviewing a lawyer who is in that film, a Brazilian lawyer who supports the women's groups. And he was, so to say, the one who brought a bit of structure in their, in their, in their future work. and that goes other films that were made before. You mentioned another one earlier.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:10:31

Yeah, her name is Huda, and she really stood out to me, because sometimes I think the atrocities that happen in Yemen don't get the international attention they write Deserve. And her story really stuck with which took place in 2020, the documentation of her which again, for our listeners, I will include this video as well in the show notes. Her name is Huda Al Sahari, and she is a lawyer and human rights defender who became the first activist to publicly expose a network of secret detention facilities in Aden during the conflict in Yemen. Now, through her legal investigation. She collected evidence of more than 250 cases of abuse and secretly taking place inside these prisons. Her work has helped achieve international attention to expose these detention facilities, m of them hidden at military bases, airports, private buildings and other locations where detainees are held without legal justification. They have no counsel and they're subjected to torture and mistreatment. and human rights watch as well as the associated press found that there are, um, were at least 18 secret prisons run by the UAE forces. Now, again, this is in 2020 and what happened to Huda is because of this work, she faced severe threats and online harassment and then tragically her son, Mosin was shot and killed. To this day, she still has not received clarity about what's his killing. Was it backlash of her work? Um, authorities have not investigated his death or provided any support or accountability. So similar to Anna in Brazil, Huda joined forces with other mothers of detained and disappeared men. and they have formed the group called abductees, mother's association, and they're using their advocacy, they're using social media to demand truth, reparations and punishment for perpetrators. and her story, I think, just shows the bravery and resilience. One needs to go after accountability. And her story continues. And I do that she does have the Yemen officials are now investigating her son's murderer and he may face jail time. And that's, um, but that's honestly, Hans, because of the work you do, your team does that brave filmmaker, who I assume went to Yemen. because a term that some of our listeners might not be familiar with is called publicity protection. And I was curious if you could explain what that means.

HANS THOOLEN 1:13:22

Well, look, I, we, I started the Martin Ennals Award originally, mostly to honor my friend Martin, but of course, that only lasts for a while. And then you realize you need to have a positive forward looking approach of it became the award for human rights defenders. Then

after a while running this with something great difficulty, this award for lack of funding or lack of support, I started looking at other awards. And I discovered there were a lot of them, some of them well known, others not. And in fact, there was a, uh, a York University in 2013 or something, had a conference and one topic was human rights awards. And they asked me to say something about human rights awards. Then I decided not to talk only about the MEA but about all human rights awards that I could find. So I started for fun, also a big research, found more than a hundred human rights awards, international human rights awards, not local, a hundred international human rights awards. and started mapping them and bit by bit, with the help of some others and some donors, we turned that into a digest of human rights awards so that people can look up on the website of True Heroes. So, um, the human rights awards, the human rights awards, then a few years later, we got some support and were able to add the laureates. So now, we have 200 human rights awards, we have 3000 human rights defenders at one that are the laureates, all in one big database that is publicly available. And so, looking at all these human rights awards, there are a lot of differences, but basically they all are given for three reasons. Not always all three. One is recognition, which I would say is very important. You can say, yeah, but if you don't only get recognition, is still, human rights defenders are often in a psychologically difficult situation, not appreciated by their own family or neighborhood. They're not necessarily heroes at home. And so, they're seen as difficult people, why don't you become a normal divorce lawyer, and why do you have to do human rights So, these people deserve recognition, on a psychological level, and I think you can see that, you feel that they... You feel finally somebody who listens, who appreciates what I'm doing. The second thing is a lot of awards, not all of them by the way, Half of them will come without any money, the money that comes with it is important because a lot of human rights offenders are in third world countries where little money goes a long way. So even, uh, \$5, 000 as prize money can be very, very important in those circumstances. ther not always clarity. Not all awards tell you honestly whether they give money and how much. Some of them even don't give any money but make money out of awards. Like Human Rights Watch and others, they have human rights dinners where everybody has to pay for a table and then the human rights awardees are received, appla, but the money goes to the organization. Nothing wrong with that, of course, that's well spent, but I'm saying that there's not always concrete support. But sometimes concrete support doesn't have to be money. It can be, training, showing people around, introducing them to, uh, others, et cetera. And then the third element that the board can give, and that's what you refer to, is we call protective publicity. Publicity that helps to protect them. Um, now that is a bit more difficult to be honest. Not, most awards don't manage to get real protective publicity because, hey, newspapers are not always interested in this kind of stuff, to be honest, understandable, but there are other things. And the war in Iran or something, it gets priority. Um, and the second reason is that, the NGOs are not always able to create the publicity around it because for that, you need very good approach, media approach, images, photos, et cetera, but it is doable. And now the second question of course is publicity is one thing, either in the mass media, in the main media or internet-based, uh, social media. The only question is, is all publicity protective? That is a good question. Uh, and, and that question I have been asked so many times by journalists and others. Does this award really help people, protect them? And I am a bit of an opt-out on this. I always say, look, why ask me? Ask the human rights defender in question? They are the best judge, in my view, uh, of what risk they

are willing to take. And the answer is 100% always. Look, we already stood up. We already stuck our necks out. nothing worse will happen. If anything, it will help. If it doesn't help, pity, but it cannot get worse. So we still use, uh, also True Heroes us in our filmmaking, we say, do no harm. Ah, so if, if somebody is saying things that we think would get them into trouble, we tell them, "Don't say that," or we don't use it, we edit it out. and that is very concrete. I remember we had a case of a lawyer in Syria and his brother, who was extremely, in his language about the idiots who had, arrested his brother. and we said, look, you know, maybe you should say it a bit softer. He said, no, I don't care. I'm not afraid of them. I can go to jail. And we decided not to use it. And then later we interviewed a woman who said similar things. And we said the same thing. He said, no, don't worry. I'm the granddaughter of the founder of Syria. I'm an, untouchable. And then we asked other people, they all said, yes, she, she's untouchable. So we used, her instead of the brother. and then we had given, uh, family members a pen, a special pen with a camera. In those days, they had just come out and they put the camera here and a few family were allowed to the secret trial. So they were able to film it. So we had images of him standing in front of the judges in the secret trial. But then of course we said, can we use it? Because from the direction of the pen, they were able to see approximately who it was. And then we realized the family members would probably be picked up. So we decided not to use it. We said, but that's a pity, you know, it's such good material as a good journalist. And then somebody said, what we can do, can make the film, the image look like this. He said, well, then it looks like the button of one of the guards. That it was one of the guards who did the filming, not the family members. The camp said, yeah, still, you know, then one of the guards falsely accused. And so we decided in the end not to use it. And then a few months later, another Human Syrian opposition group based in London made broadcast something. And they included the images that they had got from somebody else from another lawyer that we had given it to, and they used it. So then we decided, dammit, we can use it too.

But you see how, in practice, it's not just a theoretical question, do no harm. No, you have to really sometimes, you know, uh, give up on a scoop or on some very nice thing in order to protect the human rights defender. So publicity is normally good in my view, and the biggest problem is proving it. And they have a lot of human rights organizations that have awards, like the Martin Ennals Award, Right Livelihood Award, uh, Frontline. they have well-known awards. They all ask themselves, always the same question. And I've been involved in three, four studies on the impact of human rights awards, um, by, by the award givers. it is always basically the same. You always come to the, the problem that we all believe so, including the human rights offenders, the human rights organizations, but we cannot prove it. And of course you cannot prove it because what, in that case, you need a statement from the Iranian Mullah saying, "We decided not to torture your laureate." Yeah. Well, it's very rare that you have real hard evidence about what protected the human rights defender. The only thing we can say that, is if somebody goes to jail and has to serve two years in jail, but it's treated decently, it's not tortured, that could be the impact of the award. I would not knock that, but I cannot prove it, of course, but a lot of human rights offender things, uh, in 2008, uh, Tadjibaiwa from, uh, Uzbekistan, she was tortured in jail, uh, put in jail, etc. So, she was released from jail three days after she got the Martin Ennals Award. Okay, there were others that had asked for her

freedom, including the EU Parliament, uh, human rights organisations, etc. So, maybe we were only the, uh, the straw that broke the camel's back. uh, maybe we were only the, uh, the straw that broke the camel's back. Yeah. But, time-wise, there is such a close thing that if she was released a few days after the announcement of the award, that seems to indicate. And then we wrote a letter, etc., and then she was suddenly, she was allowed out of the country for medical treatment in Germany.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:23:30

Oh, really?

HANS THOOLEN 1:23:31

And yeah, you, you cannot say it is because of the award, but she thinks so. She is on record saying, "You saved my life."

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:23:42

Did that guess?

HANS THOOLEN 1:23:44

so I am a strong believer that the awards count. Of course, there are so many awards that it is difficult to get publicity for all of them. But even then I say human rights defenders, there are more human rights defenders than there are awards, for sure. There are only 200 awards and there are at least 10,000 human rights defenders in the world. So let them all get awards, uh, let them all get some recognition that better than nothing. That

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:24:12

Well, my final topic and question, that I'm going to pose to both of you and all of you is we are recording on April 29th and 2026 and Hans on your blog, um, which is fantastic, by the way. Um, it's incredibly helpful to be in touch on critical global topics. Um, one being last week, Amnesty International released their 406 page report titled the international state of the world's human rights and Secretary General Agnes Calamard opens that report with language that may not be surprising to us, but it is truly striking in Describing our current moment as one that is threatening to destroy, all that has built over the past 80 years, and Hans, you and my dad have spent 50 years dedicating your career and your legacies to international human rights. And the Council of Europe, the commissioner, has similarly warned that we are no longer merely in an era of change, but in a profound change of error that threatens the very foundations of human rights law and practice. And I'm just going to quote Agnes, and she said in the report world leaders have been far too submissive in the face of attacks on international law and the multilateral system. Their silence and inaction are inexcusable. And this report documents developments across 144 countries throughout 2025, and it's important to note that these patterns we are seeing continue into 2026. And for both of you, I just wanted to discuss this report, and the current state of the world, how do you read the moment? And Hans, obviously, my dad and I, being American, and I feel always very ashamed and embarrassed about what America has done here Trump, electing him again, and the impact it's had not only in our country, but the world.

HANS THOOLEN 1:26:29

Yeah. Well, let me say, I am very, very grateful to God, whoever, that I was active in human rights, mostly when it was still expanding and developing positive concepts. Uh, so the growth of the human rights movement that really started, say, in, mid seventies, and lasted until at least, I would say, another 30, 40 years. And then it starts to slowly decline. That means also, I believe that there is a bounce back. I am very sad at the moment, because I think it is terrible, like the amnesty report indicates, and we all see every day around us. But at the same time, I also have a feeling that things cannot, do not always go down. I think, you know, I think it will be a revival, and there will be a revival one way or another, with different approaches, but similar idealism. I think, um, I think the idea of justice has not died. look at what happened in Hungary, where Viktor Orban was, contrary to all expectations, completely kicked out of power, with a 50% majority. Um, in spite of support from Trump, um, in spite of support from Trump, or maybe because of support from Trump and, and Putin, uh, the Hungarians decided they didn't want it.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:27:51

J. D. Vance going.

HANS THOOLEN 1:27:55

he went there. Th we should give Vance Trump support to all the politicians we want to get rid of.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:28:01

Yes, line them up.

HANS THOOLEN 1:28:04

It worked in Canada, and so I think that, uh, there will be changes again, and I hope to see them. And, and justice sometimes takes a long, long time. You remember maybe the case, or you will, uh, ma, Bert, remember the case of the Ikon journalist in El Salvador, the four journalists from Dutch television, who were killed there, took around the same time that the nuns were killed. now I, I got involved in that when I was in Holland. that's another story I've written up in a blog post if you want to read about it, the Ikon journalist, I-K-O-N, Ikon journalist. But after 40 years, finally, the guys who did it were arrested and, and given a sentence. Took 40 years.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:28:52

40 years.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:28:56

Hans, I stayed overnight your apartment. And, and there some that was visiting, and I her fiance or something was one of the people that was killed.

HANS THOOLEN 1:29:08

Japanese woman.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:29:09

Japanese. Yeah, she was.

HANS THOOLEN 1:29:11

Yata Matsuzaki. Her name was.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:29:14

wasn't her fiance one of the people that was killed.

HANS THOOLEN 1:29:17

Yeah, yeah, it was her. common law husband, he was sound man,

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:29:23

I remember that, wow.

HANS THOOLEN 1:29:25

Yeah, and I've been following, of course, so because I got involved and went there almost created a Dutch cabinet crisis upon return, but unwillingly, eh, it's a nice story. But in the end, first the UN came with the UN investigation, the UN El Salvador, they concluded that they were killed on purpose, and then a few years later, they discovered that one of them was living, a colonel was living in the States, and they identified, and he was sent back, and they were tried. So, you know, 40 years seems nothing, but you hear it is a long time in the end, and therefore setback that had started maybe three, four years ago, eh, this movement, it may turn around again. I'm not totally pessimistic.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:30:17

And I'm not pessimistic either, because I the technological changes, amongst other things, have made much easier to get the information out about what is occurring.

HANS THOOLEN 1:30:29

Durand: Yeah.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:30:30

uh, frankly, that's really significant, in terms of, down the disadvantage, where you have governments that have all sorts of money to message But here so easy now for NGOs to be able to get information out about human rights abuses that are occurring in their countries. underlying values and I our innate sense wanting help people that in need. We've talked in previous things about what I think is the best definition of a human rights lawyer was Arthur Garfield responded when someone asked why he was involved in so much human rights stuff. As he said, don't like to see the little guy get kicked around.

HANS THOOLEN 1:31:26

Yeah. Based instinctive justice. Yeah. I agree. And I that's the reason I keep doing a blog because it forces me to keep an interest, to read, to keep the digest of human rights laureates up to date. So it gives me not only something to do, but something I hope is useful. And that's why I admire what you are doing because it's the same thing. It system going. tells the stories that need to be told. I think it's the same thing.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:31:57

I think it's the same thing. means the world. And I know my dad is honored to have you here and celebrate your long-time friendship.

truly Hans, truly, Hans, as a millennial, And I can speak to Gen Z and Gen Alpha because of the evolution of social media and videos. Storytelling is more critical than ever. And that's how a lot of young persons get their news and digest critical information. One thing we have to make sure we continue to be, particularly my generation and younger, are critical thinkers. And the work you're doing at True Hero Films and on your blog is just that you allow us to read important stories, read articles, keep us up to date, as well as watch these videos that allow ones to be critical thinkers. And that's what I hope our podcast does as well.

HANS THOOLEN 1:32:50

Good. Wel, we stay up to date. And come to Crete. We'll be glad to host you here.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:32:55

Oh, be careful what you offer because you say that and I will go on Google flight.

HANS THOOLEN 1:33:00

We have a guest heart. Don't worry.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:33:03

Okay. Thank you so much.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:33:05

It's been wonderful.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:33:11

Well, it's hard to know where to begin after a conversation that rich and dynamic. I want to first say dankjewel to Hans, which thank you in Dutch. And I want to express our sincere gratitude for his generosity and his longtime friendship with my dad. Hans has dedicated his life to ensuring that human rights defenders are seen, honored, and protected. And his work stands as a powerful testament to what conviction and commitment can achieve. And to you, our loyal listeners, we encourage you to the stories of global human rights defenders on the True Hero Films website, linked in our show notes, along with the Martin Ennals Award. We also encourage you to read and subscribe to Hans' blog, Human Rights Defenders. As always, the best way to support our show is to share it and leave us a review or a rating on Apple

Podcasts or Spotify. Thank you for listening. And we will see you next time. As they say in do we do we?