

TESTIFYING ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

An Actor's Path to Congress

Nate Schenckan in Profile

By Masha Udensiva-Brenner

Nate Schenckan (MARS-REERS, 2011) compares the feeling of testifying before Congress to the feeling you get when you board a roller coaster—you get in, the restraints click shut, “and things just start going.” Schenckan, who directs special research at Freedom House, an independent watchdog organization focusing on democratization and human rights, has given four congressional testimonies, all at the U.S. Helsinki Commission. He likes doing it. “You’re a little scared, a little anxious, but, like on a roller coaster, you’re enjoying the movements,” he says.

Schenckan’s most recent testimony, on how Turkey uses international tools to repress political exiles, took place last September. He appeared before the commission

alongside Harriman director Alexander Cooley a year after participating in a Harriman Institute–organized workshop on political exiles, transnational repression, and global authoritarianism. A Helsinki Commission staffer had attended the workshop, and Cooley says the event may have played a role in Congress’s decision to introduce the Transnational Repression Accountability and Prevention Act—the reason behind the Helsinki hearing. “It’s an example of how Harriman’s cross-professional convening power and selection of topics help propel these issues,” says Cooley.

Schenckan, who studied at Yale, majored in political science with a focus on the Middle East. But, when he graduated in 2002, he did not envision that his career would involve testifying before Congress—for years

after finishing his undergraduate degree he worked as a stage actor. He appeared in Rachel Dickstein’s *Betrothed*, a production of *Death in Vacant Lot!*, and a staging of Allen Ginsburg’s “Howl,” among other plays. “I was living in New York, I was acting, and, honestly, I was kind of floundering around in life,” he says.

To support himself, Schenckan worked as a property manager in the West Village. The job—building maintenance, trash disposal, accounting, tenant relations—may sound mundane, but the experience gradually transformed Schenckan’s life. The landlord who hired him was Andrew Blane, a prominent human rights activist and professor of Russian religious history. Blane, a longtime Amnesty International member and the first North

Nate Schenkkan
testifying at the
U.S. Helsinki
Commission
hearing, "Prisoners
of the Purge: The
Victims of Turkey's
Failing Rule of Law,"
on November 15,
2017. Photo courtesy
of the U.S. Helsinki
Commission.



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American to serve on its executive board, had participated in the Helsinki Accords process and was one of nine delegates sent to Oslo to receive Amnesty’s Nobel Peace Prize in 1977. Because of this, he had established strong ties within the Soviet dissident movement, and the tenants he rented to included prominent Russian literary figures and activists (he had even housed the Nobel Prize-winning poet and essayist Joseph Brodsky).

Schenkkan quickly became immersed in Blane’s world. “Andrew was the kind of person who would take someone under their wing,” he says. He met figures like Jan Egeland, a prominent UN diplomat handling refugee affairs, and Russian human rights icon Lyudmila Alekseeva. When Blane worked on an antitorture campaign during the second Bush administration,

Schenkkan helped him. In the four years he worked with Blane, Schenkkan learned a lot. He was able to see up close the people who had shaped the field of human rights since its inception.

In 2007, Schenkkan traveled to Moscow on a theater fellowship with a Russian theater troop. He had a feeling that it would be his last stint in theater—the career would never sustain him financially in New York—but the trip reinforced an already developing interest in Russia. When he returned, Schenkkan

took Russian classes and thought about applying to graduate school. “I didn’t really know what I was going to do, but I did feel that human rights was going to be a part of it,” he says.

In 2009, Schenkkan enrolled in the Harriman Institute’s MARS-REERS program. He knew little Soviet history and used the interdisciplinary curriculum to fill the gaps in his knowledge. “I was skipping around trying to put together an understanding of the region,” he says. He took several classes on Central Asia and studied Uzbek; he learned about Soviet interventions in Eastern Europe and focused his thesis on the détente and the creation of the Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe. He also received a Critical Language Scholarship from the U.S. Department of State to study Turkish in Ankara and interned for the Open Society

Left to right: CeCe Heil, Jacqueline Furnari, and Nate Schenkkan at the U.S. Helsinki Commission hearing, “Prisoners of the Purge: The Victims of Turkey’s Failing Rule of Law,” on November 15, 2017. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Helsinki Commission.



Foundations' Central Asia program. "I really just followed my interests," he says.

After graduation, Schenkkan moved to Kyrgyzstan and worked as a freelance reporter for Eurasianet and other media outlets. It was a difficult experience, but it helped him understand the region better. "Journalism is a really good way to teach you how little you actually know," he says.

His work paid off. In 2012, he got a job as a program officer for Freedom House's Eurasia program, where he managed grants and made sure programs ran smoothly, efficiently, and with accountability. When a project director position opened at Nations in Transit, the organization's annual survey of democratic governance, Schenkkan welcomed the opportunity of a research-oriented position. He would be in charge of editing,

fact-checking, and scoring detailed reports about the 29 post-Communist countries. It was 2015, two years after a wave of pro-democracy protests had broken out in Turkey's Gezi Park. By that point, Schenkkan, with his knowledge of the Turkish language and his undergraduate background in Middle Eastern studies, was also working on programs covering Turkey.

It was Schenkkan's Turkish expertise that led him to testify before Congress for the first time in 2014. Schenkkan had no idea what to expect, but Freedom House coached him on all aspects of the process. He felt prepared, but it was stressful nonetheless—"It's a public performance, and it's on the record."

Schenkkan's 2017 testimony, at a hearing about the imprisonment of U.S. pastor

Andrew Brunson in Turkey, was the most challenging. His role was to discuss Turkey's human rights conditions, and the stakes were high. "You have an individual in prison whose case could go in different ways. Relations with Turkey are deteriorating badly. You wouldn't want to make things worse," he says.

All things considered, Schenkkan says he finds acting more difficult than being a congressional witness. "You have to know your lines; speak them correctly, with the right feelings; hit your cues. When you testify, you're sitting in a chair with your lines in front of you, reading." ■

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