

## Peter Weiss: Tackling the powerful lawbreakers

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Soon a personal friend, the lawyer Peter Weiss, will celebrate his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in New York. Born in Vienna in 1925, he fled to the US in 1941 and worked in the US Army as an interpreter at the end of World War II. At Fort Hunt near Washington, Weiss worked at a detention camp for high-level Nazis, including missile researcher Wernher von Braun and Reinhard von Gehlen, who would later go on to serve as head of West Germany's intelligence service. After the war Weiss took up work with the Office of Military Government in US-occupied Berlin. This Office was tasked with dismantling the extensive German business cartels that had helped the National Socialists win and maintain power. One of those questioned by Weiss was Herrmann-Josef Abs, former Nazi banker and later a chief financier in West Germany. Weiss was also involved in the preparations for the Subsequent Nuremberg Trials of German business leaders.

As a lawyer in the post-war USA, Weiss was mainly occupied with questions of commercial law, but from the 1950s on he became active as a civil and human rights lawyer. In 1966 he was one of the co-founders of the civil rights litigation organization Center for Constitutional Rights ([CCR](#)) in New York. Together with investigative journalist Seymour Hersh he advised victims of the massacre by US forces in My Lai, Vietnam. In a series of cases Weiss sought to use little-known legal sources and international law to help the victims of human rights violations. One of his most historic achievements is the case of Filártiga versus Peña-Irala. Relatives of torture victim Joelito Filártiga from Paraguay had identified policeman Americo Peña-Irala as their son's murderer. Using the Alien Tort Claims Act, an old law from 1789, Weiss and the CCR sued the torturer before US courts. The claimants won their case before a New York appeals court and were awarded over ten million dollars in compensation. Weiss then led similar compensation cases against oil companies UNOCAL and Shell for human rights violations in Burma and in Nigeria. He also found success as part of the International Association of Lawyers against Nuclear Arms ([IALANA](#)). Their work led to the opinion handed down by the International Court of Justice in The Hague in 1996 stating that the use of nuclear weapons would violate international law.

I worked with Weiss and CCR to try to bring former US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other officials responsible for systematic torture by the US before the courts in Germany, France and elsewhere. Skeptics were wary of taking legal action against powerful criminals like Rumsfeld; again and again Weiss would respond by pointing to the historic breakthroughs that had been made in the past thanks to the innovative use of the law.

Today the seeds planted by Weiss have taken root. All over the world, lawyers are following his lead, they are joining forces with local social movements against criminal corporations and using the principle of universal jurisdiction to take legal action against torturers and their superiors. The seasoned fighter remains an optimist: Weiss plans to continue fighting until his last days for a world free of atomic weapons.