

Raoul Wallenberg: An Angel of Mercy for Jews

It was the spring of 1944. Nearly every major Jewish community in Europe had been decimated. Then Adolf Eichmann set his sights on Hungary's 825,000 Jews, applying against them the same extermination plan the Nazis had been utilizing in other countries.

At the same time, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt realized European Jewry was about to be completely annihilated. After procrastinating far too long, the president decided the Americans needed to get involved. He established the War Refugee Board (WRB) as part of a clandestine effort through the Office of Strategic Services (OSS)—a precursor to the CIA—for operatives to try and save as many Jews as possible from the Nazi death camps.

Roosevelt sent an official representative, Iver Olsen, to Stockholm, as the Swedish government was also making serious attempts to save Jews in Hungary. Together with the Swedes, Olsen searched for a person to head up a rescue mission for the Jews of Budapest.

Hungary's 825,000 Jews had remained safe for most of the war until Hitler discovered that Hungarian officials were holding secret talks with the Americans and the British. As a result, in March 1944, Nazi troops marched on Budapest, and the extermination of Jews began immediately.

Because Sweden was considered a neutral country, Swedish diplomats were still able to travel freely across Europe. Therefore, Olsen looked for a Swedish man willing to walk into the jaws of the Nazi death machine—someone who spoke both Hungarian and German, someone with an independent spirit who would not need much oversight or direction.

He came upon Raoul Wallenberg, a man from a well-known Christian Swedish banking family. Wallenberg had been educated at the University of Michigan and had studied a number of languages and cultures. Interestingly, in 1936, his grandfather had arranged a job for him in Haifa, a city in what then was called Palestine. There, he came into contact for the first time with Jews who had fled the growing Nazi influence in Europe and were now being tyrannized by Arabs resenting their presence in Palestine.

The year 1936 was a particularly tumultuous time for Jews who had come back to live in their ancient homeland. That year marked the beginning of the "great Arab uprising," triggered by Arab alarm at the large number of Jewish immigrants arriving in the 1930s.

In 1935, over 66,000 Jews had arrived in Israel, mostly from Germany, where conditions had become intolerable with the rise of Nazism. It was also the last large burst of Jewish immigration, as the British severely reduced the number of Jews allowed into the Holy Land because of Arab opposition just as Hitler was coming to power.

Wallenberg witnessed the overwhelming majority of the Arab population, with their superior weaponry, intimidating armies and vast economic potential juxtaposed against the 440,000 men, women and children who made up the Jewish population in the Holy Land in 1936.

Then, back in Sweden during World War II, Wallenberg watched the Jewish people being annihilated by the Nazis. Now he was being offered an assignment to lead a rescue operation of Hungarian Jews who were at the moment being systematically slaughtered. Of great importance were his language skills in both Hungarian and German. Furthermore, he had been to Hungary many times on business.

Nevertheless, some felt Raoul at 32 was too young and

inexperienced for this job. However, his business partner, Koloman Lauer, who served on the War Board, felt Wallenberg was the right man—he was quick-thinking, energetic, courageous and empathetic. Lauer believed Wallenberg could be sent under diplomatic cover to lead the rescue operation.

Wallenberg Accepts

Wallenberg accepted the offer but with unusual conditions. He requested full authority to deal with anyone he wanted, without first clearing the matter with the Swedish ambassador in Budapest, and he said he must have diplomatic couriers outside normal channels.

Wallenberg's memo concerning these things was so unusual that the matter was referred all the way up to the Swedish prime minister, who consulted with King Gustav V before informing Wallenberg that his conditions had been accepted.

By now it was July 1944. In the previous three months, the infamous Eichmann, who managed the logistics of mass deportation of Jews to ghettos and extermination camps in East Europe, had already deported 400,000 Hungarian Jews by freight train to Auschwitz. Only 230,000 Jews were left in the country, including 200,000 in Budapest, and Eichmann had a plan in motion to end all plans: to deport all of the remaining Hungarian Jews in 24 hours!

For reasons only to be speculated, Nazi leader Heinrich Himmler ordered Eichmann to temporarily halt the deportations.

Enter Wallenberg. There was nothing conventional about his methods. He immediately opened an office in Budapest and "hired" 400 Jewish volunteers to run it. He told them to take off the yellow Star of David that marked them as Jews, as they now had Swedish diplomatic protection.

Printing Swedish Passports

After quickly distributing a few hundred genuine Swedish passports, Wallenberg and his staff's next task was to design a homemade Swedish "protective passport." Wallenberg had previously learned that the German and Hungarian bureaucracies had a weakness for external symbolism. So he had the passports attractively printed in blue and yellow (Sweden's national colors) with the Three Crowns coat of arms in the middle, and he furnished them with the appropriate stamps and signatures. Wallenberg's protective passports (called Schutzpasses) had no value whatsoever under international law, but they commanded the respect of those he wished to influence.

With permission from no one, he announced that the Schutzpasses granted the holder immunity from deportation to the death camps. He persuaded the Hungarian authorities to give him permission to issue 4,500, and through promises and empty threats to the Hungarian foreign ministry, Wallenberg managed to issue many thousands of these Schutzpasses indiscriminately.

Safe Houses

With U.S. Defense Department finances, Wallenberg began renting properties. He rented 32 buildings around Budapest and declared them to be extraterritorial, protected by Swedish diplomatic immunity. Wallenberg knew that, again, the Nazis were overly impressed by official government emblems. So he put up intricately designed, official-looking signs on the buildings, such as "The Swedish Library" and "The Swedish Research Institute." He hung oversized Swedish flags on the fronts of the buildings and put up shiny embossed government shields on the doors.

Apparently, 32 Swedish "libraries" were not suspect as long as they had well-crafted "official" signs on the entrances. The Nazis never discovered the plot. As Nazi troopers stormed house-to-house looking for Jews, word traveled fast on the

well-oiled Jewish grapevine that all those new Swedish “libraries” in town were actually safe houses. Wallenberg’s buildings provided shelter for over 10,000 people. Some witnesses say three times that many were actually hidden in those safe houses.

Other neutral diplomatic missions in Budapest began to follow Wallenberg’s example by issuing Schutzpasses, and a number of diplomats from other countries were inspired to open their own safe houses for refugees.

Death Marches

Meanwhile, Eichmann began his brutal death marches. He carried out his promised deportation program by forcing large contingents of Jews to leave Hungary by foot. The first march began on November 20, 1944, and conditions along the 200-km (120-mile) route between Budapest and the Austrian border were so appalling that even some Nazis protested.

Thousands of Jews marched in endless columns, hungry, freezing and in great suffering. And thousands fell along the way.

It was during these marches that Wallenberg’s actions became legendary. Wallenberg stayed with them, continuously distributing Schutzpasses, food and medicine. He alternately threatened and bribed the Nazis until he managed to secure the release of those who had been given his Schutzpasses. Wallenberg was able to rescue some 17,000 Jews who were in the death marches.

The Trains to Auschwitz

When Eichmann again began shipping out the Hungarian Jews in whole trainloads, Wallenberg intensified his rescue actions. As the freight cars full of Jews stood in the station, he would even climb on top of them, run along the roofs of the cars and hand bundles of protective passports to their occupants. On one occasion, German soldiers were ordered to

shoot him but were so impressed by Wallenberg's courage that they deliberately aimed too high. He was then able to jump down, unharmed, and demand that those Jews who had received his Schutzpasses be allowed to leave the train and return to the city with him.

Threatening General Schmidhuber

Wallenberg searched desperately for suitable people who could be bribed, and he found a very powerful ally in Pál Szalay, a high-ranking officer in the Arrow Cross (the Nazi Hungarian police).

Two days before the victorious Russians arrived to take over Budapest, Wallenberg learned that Eichmann had set in motion a total massacre of the Jews living in Budapest's larger ghetto. He knew the only person who could prevent it was General August Schmidhuber, commander of the German troops in Hungary.

Wallenberg's ally Szalay, with a nice bribe, was sent to find Schmidhuber and hand him a note which declared that Wallenberg would make sure the general would be held personally responsible for the massacre and that Schmidhuber would be hanged as a war criminal after the war. The massacre was cancelled at the last minute as a result of Wallenberg's intervention, saving an estimated 70,000 Jews.

How Did He Do It?

Jan Larrson, who was a staff member of Wallenberg's and wrote his biography, was often asked in lecture tours how it was possible for one man and his staff to save such a large number of people from Nazi executions. Wallenberg was not the heroic type in the ordinary sense, according to Larsson, but he was a fearless, skilled negotiator and organizer. He was, moreover, a good actor—a talent that served him well during his clashes with the Nazis.

Wallenberg would also show two different personalities. The first was the calm, humorous, intellectual, warm person that his co-workers could see. The second was in confrontation with the Nazis, where he transformed into an aggressive person who would shout at them or threaten them on one occasion and flatter or bribe them on another, as the circumstances required.

The Nazis were impressed by him and usually gave in to his demands. One reason, of course, was his Swedish diplomatic status, which the Germans were loath to violate. On the other hand, status without enormous bravery would have accomplished nothing.

Larrson relates: "Inevitably Raoul was forced to play for increasingly high stakes in a situation where Budapest was becoming more and more a battlefield. The bombs were raining down, and Soviet troops were closing in on the suburbs. The last time I saw Raoul Wallenberg on January 10 1945, I urged him to seek shelter, especially as the Arrow Cross the Hungarian Nazis were searching for him in particular."

Wallenberg's reply was typical: "To me there's no other choice. I've accepted this assignment and I could never return to Stockholm without the knowledge that I'd done everything in human power to save as many Jews as possible."

Wallenberg started sleeping in a different house each night to guard against being captured or killed by Arrow Cross party members or by Eichmann's men.

While the Russians, Americans and English were bombarding the city, chaos and looting reigned. The Jews were confined to two ghettos. Many government functionaries and diplomats fled. Wallenberg continued fighting alongside the Red Cross, looking for allies or bribing the police.

Toward the very end of the war, when conditions were totally desperate, Wallenberg issued a simplified version of his

Schutzpass, a mimeographed black and white page that bore only his signature. In the prevailing chaos, even this worked.

Immediately after its installation, a new Hungarian Nazi government announced that all Schutzpasses were invalid. But Wallenberg managed to make the acquaintance of Baroness Elizabeth "Liesel" Kemény. She was the wife of the foreign minister, and with her assistance Wallenberg managed to have his protective passports reinstated.

His Loss to the Russians

On January 13, 1945, the advancing Soviet troops saw a man standing and waiting for them alone outside a building with a large Swedish flag above its door. Wallenberg told an amazed Soviet sergeant in fluent Russian that he was the Swedish *chargé d'affaires* for the portion of Hungary liberated by the Soviets. He received permission to visit Soviet military headquarters in Debrecen, east of Budapest, to explain his humanitarian strategies. On his way out of the capital on January 17, Wallenberg, with a Soviet escort, stopped at the "Swedish houses," where he said goodbye to his friends.

Altogether, 120,000 Jews had survived the "Final Solution." Wallenberg was the only diplomat who had remained in Budapest. Now his purpose was to propose a reconstruction plan to the Soviets. With that end in mind, he took his driver, Vilmos Langfelder, and some Soviet guards to Debrecen, where a provisional government had been established. He wanted to reach the Russian Commander Rodion Malinovsky.

Somewhere on that route, their supposed "guards" handed them over to the KGB (then NKVD) and put them under "military protection." They were never seen again.

The Russians clearly did not have the same attitude toward Jews and were probably incapable of understanding or believing a person who had devoted all his energies to saving them. They probably thought Wallenberg was a CIA agent and jailed him in

the Lubyanka prison, the KGB headquarters in Moscow.

For years, many nations demanded to know what happened to Wallenberg. The Soviets have always insisted he died of a heart attack on July 17, 1947 (at the age of 35!), in Lubyanka. Nevertheless, as foreign prisoners were released after the war from KGB prisons, many eyewitnesses told Swedish authorities they had personally met him and that he was definitely alive.

According to Sweden's ambassador, Per Anger, stationed in Budapest during World War II and Wallenberg's friend and colleague, Wallenberg must be given credit for having saved about 100,000 Jews.

What One Man Can Do

Challenging the entire machinery of Germany and its Hungarian allies by employing his imagination as an offensive weapon, Wallenberg resolved to do the impossible. With the help of people, some of them diplomats of good will, Wallenberg demonstrated that human courage has no limits. Through a process of persuasion, threats and an unmatched dose of diplomatic creativity, this young 32-year-old Swede managed to save the lives of multiplied tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews. For all those whom he saved, his heroism was crowned by tragedy.

In 1981, U.S. Congressman Tom Lantos, himself one of those saved by Wallenberg, sponsored a bill making Wallenberg an honorary citizen of the United States. In 1985, Wallenberg was made the first honorary citizen in Canada, with January 17, the date he disappeared, declared "Raoul Wallenberg Day" as a national holiday.

In 1986, Wallenberg was made an honorary citizen of Israel. On Raoul Wallenberg Street in Tel Aviv, there is a statute identical to the one erected in Hungary, where his image continues to inspire generations of Jews and Gentiles that

“one man can make a difference.”

On Wallenberg's 100th birthday anniversary, July 26, 2012, he was awarded a Congressional Gold Medal by the United States Congress “in recognition of his achievements and heroic actions during the Holocaust.”

He is a man who represents what Yeshua the Messiah described as the greatest love of all that a man would give his life for his friends.