



THE INTERNATIONAL
RAOUL WALLENBERG
FOUNDATION

[Home](#) > [News](#) > IRWF New York...

August 4, 2009

Remembering RAOUL WALLENBERG

Dr. Mordecai Paldiel

It was an unforgettable sight. On a cold November 1944 day, not far from the Hungarian-Austrian border, a young looking stranger, who someone whispered was a Swedish diplomat named Wallenberg, walked past the SS officer supervising the deportation train, climbed up on the roof of the train, and began handing safe-conduct passes through the doors, which had not yet been locked. In the words of one witness, Wallenberg "paid no attention when the Germans ordered him to get down, or when the Arrow Cross men began firing their guns and shouting at him to go away. Ignoring them, he calmly continued giving passes to the outstretched hand. After Wallenberg had distributed the last of the passes, he told everyone who had one to get off the train and walk over to a caravan of cars parked nearby. The Germans and the Arrow Cross were so dumbfounded that they let him get away with it.

Raoul Wallenberg was born into an aristocratic Swedish banking family in 1912, and his father died when Raoul was three months old. Raised by his mother and grandfather, he studied architecture, then joined his family's banking business, and gained experience in a branch of the Holland Bank in Haifa, Palestine, where he first came in contact with Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. Returning to Sweden, where he continued his banking and business career, in 1944, he learned that the Swedish government was looking for an appropriate candidate to work in its embassy in Budapest, Hungary, as a cover for the US-based War Refugee Board. The purpose was to save the remnants of Hungarian Jewry, which at the time was being systematically decimated by the Germans, who had occupied Hungary on March 19, 1944, and their Hungarian collaborators.

When Adolf Eichmann ordered what turned into a Death March for tens of thousands of Jews toward the Austrian border, Wallenberg followed the stragglers in his car, many of whom were felled by Hungarian gendarmes for not keeping up with the rest, and succeeded in releasing many persons, on the spurious claim that they had, or were on the process of obtaining, Swedish nationality. Those released, were sent back to Budapest, and to the International Ghetto, set up by Wallenberg and other diplomats, where more than 30,000 Jews were sheltered, as Budapest came under siege by the Soviet army.

As told by Miriam Herzog, one of the marchers:

"The conditions were frightful. We walked thirty to forty kilometers a day in freezing rain, driven on all the time by the Hungarian gendarmes. We were all women and girls and I was 17 at the time. The gendarmes were brutal, beating those who could not keep up, leaving others to die in the ditches. It was terrible for the older women... Suddenly I heard a great commotion among the women. 'It's Wallenberg,' they said. I didn't think he could really help me, and anyway I was too weak now to move, so I lay there on the floor as dozens of women clustered around him, crying 'Save us, save us.' I

remember being struck by how handsome he looked – and how clean – in his leather coat and fur hat, just like a being from another world, and I thought, 'why does he bother with such wretched creatures as we?' As the women clustered around him, he said to them, 'Please you must forgive me but I cannot help all of you. I can only provide certificates for a hundred of you.' Then he said something which really surprised me. He said, 'I feel I have a mission to save the Jewish nation, and so I must rescue the young ones first.' I had never heard of the idea of a Jewish nation before. Jewish people, of course, but not a Jewish nation. He looked around the room and began putting names down on a list and when he saw me lying on the floor he came over to me. He asked my name and added it to the list. After a day or two, the hundred of us whose names had been taken were moved out and put into a cattle truck on a train bound for Budapest. There were a lot more danger and hardships for us, but we were alive – and it was thanks entirely to Wallenberg."

With the Russians in control of Pest, on January 16, 1945, Wallenberg was apprehended on orders from Moscow, and held in confinement, probably on the suspicion that he was a spy for the Western Allies. Taken to Moscow, he was jailed in the infamous Lubyanka prison, and held incommunicado. Efforts by the Swedish government as to his whereabouts and release, proved unsuccessful.

At first, the Soviets denied having had a hand in arresting Raoul Wallenberg and incarcerating him. Then, suddenly, bowing to pressure by Sweden, on February 6, 1957, Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko announced that the Soviet authorities had discovered a document signed by the head of the infirmary at Lubyanka prison, A.L. Smoltsov, stating that Wallenberg had died on July 17, 1947.

The Swedish-Russian Working Group, in its exhaustive report, in 2000, noted that a warrant for Wallenberg's arrest was signed by Bulganin, the Deputy Defense Minister, on January 17, 1945, probably with Stalin's consent. At Lubyanka prison, where Wallenberg arrived on February 6, 1945, he underwent several interrogations. The Working Group suggested the following possible explanations of the supposedly mysterious death of Wallenberg in July 1947. He had either succumbed to hardship and inhuman treatment; or to mental and physical strain. He may have been shot, ordered so by Molotov, or Beria, with or without Stalin's knowledge, or died of a heart attack, which was induced by various forms of mental torture (including sound and light), and medical experiment, and perhaps poison. As for Beria's role in this sordid affair – it has been suggested by a former KGB officer that Beria's initial plan was to create the myth of a Jewish-Zionist anti-Soviet conspiracy, and for this purpose he needed Wallenberg in order to fabricate a case that he would later present to the paranoid Stalin. However, the interrogation reports shown to Stalin were false. But, it would have been embarrassing, even dangerous, to suddenly inform Sweden that Wallenberg had been in a Soviet prison in Moscow all along. What satisfactory explanation could one possibly give? His story would have created a scandal. It became essential, therefore, to remove the problem. Therefore, the likelihood of a decision to be rid of the man. However, to this day, the full Soviet documentation for the reasons of his arrest and incarceration are still missing, and his fate remains an unsolved mystery.

He was only 32 years of age, when last seen in Budapest; if alive, as we all hope, he would be 97 years old. Before disappearing from sight, Raoul Wallenberg told his colleague in the rescue operation, Swedish diplomat Per Anger, "I'd never be able to go back to Stockholm without knowing deep down that I'd done all anyone could do to save as many Jews as possible." As he was led away by Soviet guards, Wallenberg reportedly said: "I don't know if they're protecting me or watching me. I'm not sure if I'm their guest or their prisoner." This is the last his colleagues saw him.

To this date, the Wallenberg family and all persons of good still wait for a full explanation on the fate of this heroic and tragic figure who, by his benevolent acts in Budapest, exemplified the best and the most elevated form of humanitarian behavior.