About the Person

Carl Lutz (born Karl Robert Lutz), a Swiss national, was born on March 30, 1895, in Walzenhausen in the Appenzell Vorderland region. He grew up as one of ten children in a devout Methodist family. After completing a business apprenticeship, Lutz emigrated to the United States in 1913, where he worked and studied; in 1920, he joined the Swiss legation in Washington. In 1935, he married Gertrud Fankhauser; the childless marriage ended in divorce in 1946. From 1935 to 1941, Carl Lutz served at the consulate in Jaffa in the British Mandate of Palestine, where he witnessed Arab-Jewish unrest as well as the plight of German nationals in the British Mandate. In early 1942, Lutz became vice consul in Budapest and head of the Department of Foreign Interests. Among other countries, he represented Great Britain and the United States. Following the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944 and the mass deportations of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz, Carl Lutz organized one of the largest civilian rescue operations of the Holocaust. Using a quota of British Palestine certificates, he issued letters of protection and collective passports, extended them to entire families, and brought tens of thousands under Swiss protection. About 76 buildings, including the famous “Glashaus” on Vadász utca, were turned into safe houses.

According to estimates, Carl Lutz saved about 62,000 people—roughly half of the surviving Jews in Budapest. He negotiated with the pro-German Hungarian Horthy government, Edmund Veesenmayer, and Adolf Eichmann; he rescued Jews from death marches; and on one occasion, he jumped into the Danube to save a woman who had been shot. Switzerland later reprimanded him for exceeding his authority. In 1949, Lutz married the Hungarian Maria Magdalena (“Magda”) Grausz, whom he had protected along with her daughter Agnes; he adopted the girl. In 1964, the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem honored him and his first wife, Gertrud, as Righteous Among the Nations. He was also nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize. Carl Lutz died on February 12, 1975, in Bern. His stepdaughter, Agnes Hirschi, keeps his memory alive. With the help of AI, FokusIsrael.ch spoke with Carl Lutz about his history, his beliefs, his actions, and his relationship with the Jewish people.

By Sacha Wigdorovits

Mr. Lutz, when did you first realize what the fate of the Hungarian Jews was, the ones who were loaded onto the trains?

Carl Lutz: When the Germans occupied Hungary in March 1944 and the trains soon began rolling, we saw people being whipped with dog whips, lying in the mud with bloodied faces. That’s when I knew: This isn’t an evacuation—it’s extermination.

Were you already aware beforehand of what the Nazis meant by the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question”?

Carl Lutz: I knew about persecution, the yellow star, and forced labor. But the fact that “evacuation to the East” meant gas chambers only hit us with full force in 1944—when the province was emptied and the trains headed for Auschwitz. In June, the Auschwitz protocols reached us. By then, the term “Final Solution” was no longer an official term—it was murder.

When did you make the decision to help the Jews?

Carl Lutz: The decision took shape as the crowds gathered in front of the legation, and I kept asking myself how I could help them without becoming a persona non grata myself. As a Christian—one who didn’t want to be just in name—helping those in need was a moral obligation.

Did your superiors—especially the Swiss government and the Federal Council—know what you were doing?

Carl Lutz: I acted according to my best judgment, without consulting Bern or receiving support from there. We felt abandoned by the outside world. A Federal Councilor later told me, “You didn’t have any authority to carry out that rescue operation. The designation ‘Swiss collective passports’ was considered inadmissible.”

What did you say to him?

Carl Lutz: I told him, in essence: “The laws of life are stronger than the laws of men. If someone is drowning, I don’t wait for permission before I save them. If so many countries violate laws in order to kill, one country may violate them in order to save.” I acted according to my conscience, not according to the paperwork. The collective passports were the only means left to protect the persecuted Jews.

After the war, you were even reprimanded by the Swiss authorities for exceeding your authority. How did that affect you?

Carl Lutz: It felt like a blow. There was no thanks when I returned to Switzerland. Just the question upon entry: “Do you have anything to declare?” Ever since then, two people have lived within me: the humane Swiss man, who is often ashamed of his Swiss identity—and the diplomat condemned to silence.

What was the most difficult and dangerous moment during that time?

Carl Lutz: I knew I was walking on a volcano every hour. Adolf Eichmann (the man primarily responsible for the extermination of the Hungarian Jews, Ed.) told me that no Jew would leave Budapest alive, that my efforts were in vain. For four hours we stood in the snow and ice at the Óbuda brickworks, sorting out letters of protection. Heart-wrenching scenes. Even today, I still ask myself whom we sent to their doom.

How did you finally convince Eichmann to let you go?

Carl Lutz: He told me I was speaking like Moses before Pharaoh, but that he was merely his master’s faithful servant. I replied, “Herr Obersturmbannführer, as far as I’m concerned, there are no Jews, Germans, or Swiss—only people who want to save their lives. If you were Jewish, you’d come to me yourself.” He replied, “Damn it, you’ve got some damn courage.”

What was your relationship like with the Swedish envoy Raoul Wallenberg, who was also working to save Jews?

Carl Lutz: Shortly after his arrival in the summer of 1944, Wallenberg visited me at the American legation. He said he wanted to lead a rescue operation and asked for the text of our letters of protection. I instructed him as best I could. Other diplomats learned from this method; we pulled people out of the marching columns.

You saved the lives of over 62,000 Jews at that time—more than any other rescuer during the Holocaust: Looking back, how does that make you feel?

Carl Lutz: It makes me happy that, thanks to our actions, hope remained where otherwise there was only the whip and the mud. But I regret not having saved more people. It was extremely dangerous to negotiate with Adolf Eichmann. For those who were saved, it was their last glimmer of hope—for us, the worst emotional ordeal.

When you look back on that time: Is there anything you regret? Anything you would do differently?

Carl Lutz: Yes. Even today, I still find myself wondering how many people we may have sent to their doom, in addition to those we were able to save. I regret that I was not able to save more of my fellow human beings. Sorting through genuine and forged documents was mental torture.

You had previously worked at the Swiss Consulate in Jaffa, in the British Mandate of Palestine. Did this have any influence on your decision to help the Hungarian Jews?

Carl Lutz: In Jaffa, I witnessed the unrest and represented German interests. The Germans later recalled this. Palestine certificates became the legal tool. As a Christian, the plight of the Jews was a call of conscience for me—regardless of my position—but my experience in Jaffa sharpened my perspective for what was to come.

Another Swiss man who selflessly dedicated himself to rescuing Jews persecuted by the Nazis out of a sense of conscience was Paul Grüninger, the police commander from St. Gallen. Have you ever met him and spoken with him about his rescue efforts?

Carl Lutz: I never met Paul Grüninger, nor did I speak with him. Our paths never crossed. Each of us acted according to our conscience in our own place. I only learned of his story later, from a distance. In Budapest, we stood alone against Eichmann, the Arrow Cross (the Hungarian Nazis—Ed.), and the trains.

In Israel, at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, you were honored in 1964 as a “Righteous Among the Nations” for your courageous actions. What did that mean to you?

Carl Lutz: The honor bestowed by Yad Vashem was also intended for Gertrud (Carl Lutz’s first wife—Ed.). It signified recognition where the authorities remained silent. In my younger years, I had asked Providence for a special mission. When the Jews in Budapest came to me, I felt: Here it was. My conscience weighed heavier than the files.

Note: This interview is based on the writings and recorded statements of Hannah Arendt, which were identified and reproduced with the help of AI. In our series “Conversations with Legends,” we speak with deceased figures from the worlds of politics, religion, science, and culture who were significant to Judaism and Israel. Our aim is to introduce them and their ideas to today’s audience. Interviews

published so far include:

Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism

Chaim Weizmann, Israel’s first president

David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister

Golda Meir, Israel’s only female prime minister to date

Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian president who traveled to Jerusalem in 1977 to make peace with Israel

Moses, who led the Jewish people out of slavery in Egypt and into freedom

Maimonides, the great Jewish scholar who lived in the 12th and 13th centuries

Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis

Albert Einstein, the founder of the theory of relativity

Robert Oppenheimer, the “father of the atomic bomb”

Hedy Lamarr, the Hollywood icon and inventor

Estée Lauder, the entrepreneur and founder of a global corporation

Milton Friedman, Nobel laureate in economics

Levi Strauss, the inventor of jeans

Elie Wiesel, writer and Nobel Peace Prize laureate

Primo Levi, the Italian chemist and writer

Theodor Adorno, the German philosopher and sociologist

Martin Buber, philosopher, scholar of religion, and writer.

Hannah Arendt, journalist and outspoken thinker

Sacha Wigdorovits is president of the Fokus Israel und Nahost association, which operates the website fokusisrael.ch. He studied history, German language and literature, and social psychology at the University of Zurich and has worked, among other things, as a U.S. correspondent for the SonntagsZeitung, served as editor-in-chief of BLICK, and co-founded the commuter newspaper 20minuten.