Raoul Wallenberg to FokusIsrael.ch: “Eichmann called me a ‘Jewish dog’”

About the Person

Raoul Gustaf Wallenberg was born on August 4, 1912, in Lidingö, near Stockholm. He came from the well-known Swedish Wallenberg family of bankers and diplomats, studied architecture in the United States, and subsequently worked in international trade. On July 9, 1944, the 31-year-old arrived in Budapest as a legation secretary at the Swedish legation. Following the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944, some 440,000 Jews had already been deported; about 200,000 still lived in the capital, Budapest. Wallenberg was tasked with monitoring their situation and helping them. On July 15, 1944, just a few days after his arrival, he met the Swiss Vice Consul Carl Lutz. Lutz had already issued letters of protection to the Jews based on British Palestine certificates. Wallenberg adopted this approach, had his own official-looking protective passports printed, and designated about 30 rented houses as Swedish protection zones. With these passports, safe houses, and his personal efforts at train stations and during death marches, he saved some 30,000 Hungarian Jews from deportation and murder. On January 17, 1945, he was arrested by Soviet troops and disappeared. The Soviet Union later cited July 17, 1947, as the date of his death in the notorious Lubyanka Prison in Moscow. The Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem honored Raoul Wallenberg on November 26, 1963, as a “Righteous Among the Nations.”

By Sacha Wigdorovits[i]

Mr. Wallenberg, did you volunteer to be transferred to Budapest, or were you assigned there?

Raoul Wallenberg: I volunteered. The Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the American War Refugee Board were looking for someone to monitor the situation of the Jews in Budapest and propose humanitarian measures. I wasn’t a career diplomat, but I was familiar with Hungary through my work. I accepted the assignment because I felt I had to do something.

What were your first impressions when you arrived in Budapest?

Raoul Wallenberg: I arrived on July 9, 1944. The city was tense following air raids. The deportations from the provinces were largely complete; about 200,000 Jews were still living in Budapest. Even in the first few days, I heard about transit camps, yellow stars, curfews, and confiscated property. It was a tragedy of immense proportions—and at the same time, work day and night.

How quickly did you realize the deadly threat facing Budapest’s Jewish population?

Raoul Wallenberg: Very quickly. In my first reports to Stockholm, I spoke of horrific and brutal conditions. The danger was not over, even though Horthy (Regent Admiral Miklós Horthy, the Hungarian head of government—Ed.) had temporarily halted the large-scale deportations. In October, after the Arrow Cross coup (the Arrow Cross were the Hungarian Nazis), the danger became more apparent every day: roundups, executions, death marches.

Did you already know back then that the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp was an extermination camp?

Raoul Wallenberg: Yes, reports about it were available. Detailed information about the extermination camps was already circulating in Budapest. I myself wrote to Stockholm about transports “bound for Poland” from which people would not return. The Germans’ intention was clear: not resettlement, but extermination.

When you realized that the Nazis wanted to exterminate the Jews, what went through your mind?

Raoul Wallenberg: That we couldn’t just stand by and watch. I had accepted the mission and couldn’t return to Stockholm without having done everything in my power. We had to use documents, connections, and personal interventions—quickly, visibly, and without diplomatic hesitation.

Shortly after your arrival, you sought out the Swiss Vice Consul Carl Lutz. Why?

Raoul Wallenberg: Lutz had been there for some time and had issued letters of protection based on Palestine certificates. I sought him out to understand his procedure and to obtain the wording of his documents. We discussed protection documents, houses, and the need to present a unified and resolute front to the authorities.

How did your approach differ from that of Carl Lutz?

Raoul Wallenberg: Lutz had scaled up the model of protection letters and safe houses considerably. I adopted the principle, but had my own, very official-looking protection passes printed—featuring crowns, a photo, and the legation’s stamp—and declared rented buildings to be Swedish zones. I went to train stations and marches myself. We worked in parallel, often coordinating our efforts.

Did you also have contact with Adolf Eichmann?

Raoul Wallenberg: Yes. He and his unit openly threatened me. It was said that he called me “the Jew-dog” and threatened to have me shot. Once I sent word to him that the war was lost and that he should let the living live. He remained unmoved: he had his orders. Later, a truck rammed into my car; I wasn’t in it.

Your country, Sweden, had already rescued and taken in Jews fleeing persecution. Were you acting in Budapest at the behest of your government or on your own initiative?

Raoul Wallenberg: Both. Stockholm sent me with the mission to report and propose humanitarian measures, and gave me an unusually free hand. I developed the specific measures—mass issuance of protection passes, housing, and interventions on trains—on the ground, together with colleagues such as Per Anger and using resources that also came from American sources.

How did your government react to the fact that you issued protection letters to Jews and placed Jewish homes under Swedish protection?

Raoul Wallenberg: The legation and Stockholm stood by me. Officially, limited quotas were initially planned; we exceeded them. Reports were sent home regularly. As long as the documents were respected by Hungarian and German authorities, the backing remained—even though they were aware of the risks in Stockholm.

Today, there is a militant, anti-Semitic Islamist scene in your home country of Sweden. Would you have thought this possible?

Raoul Wallenberg: I couldn’t have foreseen that in 1944. I came from a country that combined neutrality with sanctuary, and in Budapest I saw where hatred and state power lead. Anyone who seeks to exterminate people because of their origins remains, in my view, the enemy—no matter under what flag or ideology they operate.

After the Red Army conquered Hungary, they took you prisoner. Why?

Raoul Wallenberg: On January 17, 1945, I drove with my driver to the Soviet authorities to discuss the protection of the remaining Jews and assistance after the liberation. I expected cooperation, not detention. To this day, I still don’t know why

they detained me—suspicion of espionage, mistrust of neutrals, or the chaos of the occupation?

Looking back, do you regret having acted the way you did in Budapest at that time?

Raoul Wallenberg: No. I had accepted the assignment. In recent weeks, I had written home saying that the situation was exciting and adventurous, and the work almost inhuman—bandits were roaming the city. But I couldn’t have gone home without having done everything in my power to save as many lives as possible.

Note: This interview is based on statements and recordings by and about Raoul Wallenberg, 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 bring them and their ideas closer 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 controversial thinker

Carl Lutz, the Swiss diplomat who saved tens of thousands of Jews

Paul Grüninger, the St. Gallen police commander who was dismissed and convicted for helping persecuted Jews

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