



Wallenberg, Raoul

(1912-?), Swedish diplomat, Righteous Among the Nations who saved the lives of Jews in Budapest, Hungary.

In March 1944, the Germans occupied Hungary, and began deporting Jews to Auschwitz in May. Between mid-May and July some 435,000 Hungarian Jews were deported; by the time the deportations ended, only about 200,000 Jews remained in Budapest. Soon after the invasion, the Swedish diplomatic representatives in Budapest launched a rescue operation. The Swedish foreign minister, Ivar Danielsson, suggested that they issue temporary Swedish passports to Hungarian Jews who had some connection to Swedish citizens. In July, based on the recommendation of the Swedish branch of the World Jewish Congress in conjunction with the support of President Roosevelt's War Refugee Board, the Swedish Foreign Ministry sent Wallenberg to Budapest to take over the passport operation.

The deportations halted in the summer of 1944, but by October they recommenced in full force. The Arrow Cross Party took over the government, placing the Jewish community in further danger. At this stage, Wallenberg also stepped up his operations. Over the next 3 months, he issued thousands of impressive looking "protective passports." When Adolf Eichmann ordered the death march of Budapest's Jews to the Austrian border, Wallenberg chased the convoys in his car, removed those Jews who held his passports, and took them back to Budapest. He was even able to remove passport holders from trains that were about to depart for Auschwitz, thus rescuing Jews from being sent to forced labor camps.

Wallenberg also rescued Jews from the danger of the Arrow Cross by setting up special hostels - protected houses - as safe havens for them. Other diplomatic delegations created their own protected houses in a part of the city which came to be known as the "international ghetto." Approximately 600 Jewish employees helped manage Wallenberg's operation, which included providing food, health services, and sanitation for the protected Jews.

The Soviet army entered Budapest on January 16, 1945. The first part of the city that they liberated was Pest, where both the main ghetto and the



"international ghetto" were located. Wallenberg attempted to negotiate with the Soviets and ensure that they would take good care of the liberated Jews. However, the Soviets suspected Wallenberg and the other Swedish diplomats in Budapest of spying for the Germans. Wallenberg traveled to their army headquarters in Debrecen, believing that his diplomatic immunity would protect him. He returned to Budapest the next day, accompanied by two Soviet soldiers. Wallenberg was overheard saying, "I do not know whether I am a guest of the Soviets or their prisoner." Wallenberg subsequently disappeared without a trace.

For several years after Wallenberg's disappearance, the Soviets claimed that they knew nothing of his whereabouts. However, German prisoners of war returning from the Soviet Union swore that they had met Wallenberg in prison. On the basis of these testimonies, the Swedish Government demanded that the Soviets release any information they had on Wallenberg. After the death of Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Government announced that Wallenberg had indeed been arrested, but had died in a Soviet prison in 1947. Nonetheless, Wallenberg's family did not believe this story, as they had received other reports from Soviet prisoners who claimed to have seen Wallenberg alive at various later dates. There is no definitive proof of his death.

As years passed, many people criticized the Swedes for mishandling the situation. Wallenberg had become a legendary name; films were made about him, streets were named after him, and the United States awarded him honorary citizenship. He was also designated as Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.