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CHAPTER

16

**Looking In-Depth:
The Moral Courage of
Raoul Wallenberg**

Raoul Wallenberg sat at his desk in Stockholm, Sweden, and stared at the piece of paper. It described the round-up of Jews in Hungary by Adolf Eichmann's Nazis. Wallenberg now knew that each day more than 10,000 Hungarian Jews were being forced into trains heading north toward Poland. Their destination was a concentration camp called Auschwitz, where they faced a certain and terrible death. The paper remained before Wallenberg's tired eyes. "Dear God, help those people." His voice seemed to choke. "Help me to help them."

It was June, 1944. The western Allies had landed in German-occupied France, and the Russian army was approaching the heart of Hitler's empire from the east. It seemed only a matter of time before Hitler would be defeated. But time was something the young Swedish diplomat didn't have. As they began to sense their coming defeat, the Nazis widened the round-ups, packed the death trains to capacity, and sped up the killings. Eichmann was determined that by the time the Allies liberated Europe, not a single Jew would be left alive. The Nazis had guns, secret police, and soldiers. How could one person stop them?

An Unlikely Hero

Raoul Wallenberg was born in 1912 into a famous and wealthy Swedish family. The Wallenbergs had provided Sweden with professors, bankers, bishops, and diplomats for generations. The Wallenbergs could always be sure of a welcome at the Royal Palace, and the government often chose them for delicate, confidential assignments abroad.

Wallenberg's father, a young naval officer, died of cancer three months before the child was born. His grandfather, Ambassador Gustav Wallenberg, took charge of his education. As he grew older, the boy travelled the world and learned to become comfortable with many different customs and ways of life. He went to the United States and attended the University of Michigan, where he became an outstanding student of architecture.

Soon, though, he was being prepared for a career in banking. His business assignments took him first to South Africa, and then, in 1936, to a bank in Haifa in Palestine, the nation that would later become Israel.

In Palestine, Wallenberg began to meet Jews who had fled from the growing Nazi power in Germany. They hoped to start a new life in the land of their ancestors. The intense energy of these people appealed powerfully to him. He began to feel bored with the idea of spending the rest of his life in a bank.

Wallenberg decided to try a new career as a trader in the import-export business. He teamed up with an Hungarian Jew named Koloman Lauer, and went to Paris. But France had been taken over by the Germans almost two years before. Adolf Eichmann was already organizing crackdowns against the French

Jews. Many of the people Raoul did business with were Jews. As he sat with them at the dinner table they spoke anxiously of friends who had already "disappeared." What was happening to the Jews of Europe? Something in Raoul seemed to demand that he find out.

The Final Solution

Wallenberg did not know it yet, but the Nazis had already decided on "the final solution to the Jewish problem": mass murder. But how could so many millions of people be killed? And after they were killed, what would be done with their bodies?

Gestapo leader Adolf Eichmann had all the answers. A meticulous administrator, he had already prepared lists showing the number of Jews in each European country. He also was familiar with the results of certain experiments on Russian prisoners at the new camp at Auschwitz. After the prisoners were shut up in a room, a gas called Cyclon B was released. Desperately gasping for air, the prisoners died in just a few minutes.

All of the parts of the death machine would soon be in place: secret police to round the Jews up, trains to take them to Auschwitz and dozens of other camps, the gas to kill them, and ovens to burn their bodies.

"I can do nothing!"

Slowly and reluctantly the world began to learn about the Final Solution. But it seemed that no one was willing or ready to help. An Allied Conference at Bermuda concluded that nothing could be done

by the United States or Great Britain. The International Red Cross, an organization that had helped in countless natural disasters, said that they could not get involved in a country's "internal affairs." Most church leaders did not speak out.

By early 1944 Eichmann had turned his attention to Hungary, which had the last large group of Jews in Europe. While the Nazis dominated the Hungarian government they hadn't occupied that country the way they did France. Admiral Horthy, the Hungarian leader, started to feel pressure from the Allies, and kept resisting Eichmann's plans. Now, as victorious Russian armies drew nearer, the Nazis sent troops into the country and Horthy became a German puppet. Eichmann seemed to be free to finish the extermination. By the middle of June 147 trains had delivered 437,000 Hungarian Jews to the death camps.

Passport to Life

Finally an organization called the War Refugee Board started to make contacts in Hungary. Kolomon Lauer suggested that they ask Wallenberg to help. The Swede agreed, but he demanded that he be allowed to do whatever was necessary to save lives. There was no time for the usual slow pace of diplomacy.

As Wallenberg read the reports of deportations, an idea came to him. Sweden was a neutral country that both sides needed as an intermediary. Even the Nazis seemed to leave Swedish citizens alone. Quickly Wallenberg began to have hundreds of impressive-looking Swedish passports printed, complete with colored seals and official signatures. He began to distribute them to Jews in

the city of Budapest. Soon two Jews would watch another go by on the streets and remark: "there goes another Swede!"

But Wallenberg had to be careful: he could only give passports to Jews who had some sort of connection with Sweden—perhaps a relative there. He couldn't give the Nazis an excuse to reject the passports.

"Please forgive me. You must forgive me. I wish I could help you all. I have a mission to save the Jewish nation. I can only save a few hundred, and I must save the young."

Wallenberg began to walk the streets and roads and go everywhere that Jews hid or were being held for deportation. Each time he would say to them "Please forgive me. You must forgive me. I wish I could help you all. I have a mission to save the Jewish nation. I can only save a few hundred, and I must save the young." And even those who could not be given a life-saving passport perhaps felt a glimmer of hope for their people's future: "the Jewish nation... the children."

Even the passports couldn't always protect people from being beaten by roving gangs of fascist supporters. So Wallenberg began to organize "safe houses" where these Jews could live and receive food and medical help. Somehow he managed to talk fascist leader Laszlo Ferenczy into giving permission.

Wallenberg used every negotiating trick he had ever learned in international business. If a Nazi official looked greedy, he bribed him. If the Nazi looked like he was afraid of the

approaching Allied armies, Wallenberg took a stern tone. He said anyone who continued to harm Jews would be tried as a war criminal, while those who helped might be able to save themselves.

A Race Against Death

As the situation became more desperate and dangerous, Wallenberg only grew bolder. When armed fascists broke into one of the safe houses, Wallenberg ran to the scene. Facing the fascists' guns, he said, "This territory is protected by the Swedish government. If you want to take anyone you'll have to shoot me first." When Wallenberg's many agents, his network of "eyes and ears", reported that a deportation was taking place, he raced to the train station. Shouting and waving his Swedish papers, he led hundreds of Jews out of the station, right out from under the Nazis' guns! Another time, having come too late, he drove ahead of the train and raced aboard at a border station. His voice of authority was so persuasive that he was able to rescue many Jews who had no passports at all.

Even Eichmann seemed to feel a grudging respect for the resourceful Swede who seemed to foil so many of his plans. At a dinner in the Swiss embassy, Wallenberg and Eichmann had their only meeting. Although Eichmann still had his armed agents, Wallenberg fearlessly pointed out the contradictions in Nazi philosophy and predicted that Nazism would soon be dead. Eichmann, taken aback, said "I admit that you are right, Herr Wallenberg. I have never believed in Nazism as such, but it has given me power and wealth." Eichmann warned Wallenberg that he would hang on to

the bitter end, and kill anyone who got in his way.

But Wallenberg continued his work as Russian guns thundered outside Budapest. When the Nazis began to surround the Jewish districts for a final massacre, he warned the German commander that he would be hanged if he did not stop the slaughter. The threat worked.

Where is Wallenberg?

In February 1945 Wallenberg went to see the Russian commander, Marshal Malinovsky. He wanted to get help for the Jews, and he had ideas that he thought would help rebuild Hungary. But the Russians arrested Wallenberg, and no one could find out where he had been taken. In the decades that have passed since that day, many people have tried to find out what happened to Raoul Wallenberg. Why was he arrested? The most likely reason is that his wealthy background, business connections, and contacts with the American government made the Russians think that he was a spy. Stalin was notoriously suspicious of foreigners and foreign ideas.

At first, the Soviets admitted that Wallenberg was "in their hands." Soon, however, they claimed that he had been killed by the Hungarian fascists or agents of the Gestapo. In 1947 and 1953, Soviet officials denied that they knew anything at all about Wallenberg.

In 1957, the Russians changed their story, admitting that Wallenberg had been taken to Moscow's Lubyanka Prison. They claimed that he died there of a heart attack in 1947.

As survivors began to come out of the Russian "Gulag" prison system, reports of "sightings" of Wallenberg continued through the 1960s and 1970s. Now that Russia is a much more open society, it is possible that the final truth about Wallenberg will someday be known.

The Legacy of Raoul Wallenberg

The Yiddish language spoken by many European Jews has a word called "chutzpah" (HOOTS-Pah). A person with chutzpah has a lot of "nerve," acts with audacity and gets away with it, and seems to overcome the worst of odds. Raoul Wallenberg was chutzpah personified.

Because of the risks he took, the bluffs he

somehow got away with, and the way he kept the Nazi tormentors off balance, Raoul Wallenberg saved as many as 100,000 Jewish lives from the Holocaust. In those terrible years of darkness the moral courage of Raoul Wallenberg shone like a bright candle. He showed what a difference one person could make.

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