

*His role in US rescue efforts may
have doomed the missing diplomat*

WALLENBERG: A LINGERING TRAGEDY OF WORLD WAR II



January 1981 marked the 36th anniversary of the disappearance of Raoul Gustaf Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat credited with saving thousands of Hungarian Jews during World War II. Arrested by the Soviets in 1945, Wallenberg's fate remains a tantalizing mystery fed by continuing reports that he survives somewhere in the Soviet gulag. Pressure from successive Swedish governments as well as recent queries from the United States and Israel have failed to extract a satisfactory explanation from Moscow. Neither Stalin, Khrushchev, or the current Soviet leadership have provided answers to why Wallenberg was arrested and detained, or what fate befell him. Although the definitive story may never be told, a look into the declassified documents of the US War Refugee Board, which actually sponsored Wallenberg's project, provides some interesting insights into the clandestine character of that organization—a factor that could have aroused Soviet suspicions and led to his disappearance.

In 1979, the US State Department accepted partial responsibility for Wallenberg's fate by admitting in a so-called "non paper" presented to the Soviet chargé in Washington that the US had provided funds for the program to save Hungarian Jews. The Department failed to reveal, however, that Wallenberg's contact man at the US legation in Stockholm, Iver C. Olsen, was a member of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the parent organization of the Central Intelligence Agency. The Hungarian project was one of about a half-dozen similar operations sponsored by the War Refugee Board—not the OSS—in an effort to save European Jewry from the Nazi holocaust. At great personal risk, Wallenberg extended neutralist Sweden's diplomatic protection to Hungarian Jews, often using false documents and bribery, and sometimes resorting to bold deceptions. He is credited with having saved at least 20,000 lives. Mentioned for the Nobel peace prize for the first time in 1948, his name has been put forward almost every year since.

Wallenberg was born to the recently widowed Baroness Maj von Dardel of Stockholm on August 4, 1912. His father was Jewish and was related to the wealthy Swedish banking family headed by Jacob and Marcus Wallenberg. Earlier generations of the Wallenberg family had enjoyed distinguished careers in the diplomatic service. One of Raoul's grand uncles had served as Swedish Minister to the Legation in the United States and another was Foreign Minister during World War I. His aunt was married to Colonel William Calvin of Connecticut, a former US military attache in Stockholm.

Wallenberg was an architect by profession and had studied at the University of Michigan in 1934 and 1935. US diplomatic correspondence following his disappearance indicates that he was well connected in Washington and may have been

personally acquainted with President Roosevelt. He had been working with a firm in Stockholm in June 1944 when the Swedish Foreign Office approached him to take an assignment at the Swedish Legation in Budapest. Accepting the assignment, Wallenberg told the American Minister in Stockholm, Herschel Johnson, that he wanted to save lives and was not interested merely in filing reports to the Foreign Office. Both Johnson and Iver Olsen, who was also the War Refugee Board representative in Stockholm, were impressed with Wallenberg and described him as "our choice" for the job.

Johnson informed the Department in a cable on June 29, 1944 that the Swedish Foreign Office felt that by assigning Wallenberg to Budapest it was cooperating fully with the furtherance of an "American program." According to Johnson, Wallenberg felt that he was carrying out a mission for the US War Refugee Board—implying that he viewed his posting as an attache to the Swedish Legation as his cover. Consequently, the newly appointed attache requested that Washington cable full instructions outlining his duties, limits of authority and extent of financial support. Johnson recommended that Wallenberg not be restricted by a "concrete program," but be given rather general instructions that would allow him to deal with situations as they developed. He further informed Washington that arrangements had been made to communicate with Wallenberg in Budapest through the Foreign Office in Stockholm.

Wallenberg's instructions were passed in a War Refugee Board cable relayed in July by the State Department to Stockholm. They included an account of how much funding was available, a description of the various refugee escape channels that might be used to smuggle out Hungarian Jews and a list of possible friendly contacts in the Budapest area. Olsen was told to pass on to Wallenberg as much of this information as he deemed advisable. The Board's message also said that:

"while he (Wallenberg) cannot of course, act as the Board's representative, nor purport to act in its name, he can, whenever advisable, indicate that as a Swede he is free to communicate with Stockholm where a representative of the Board is stationed. He may thus express his willingness to lay before the Board's representative specific proposals if in any particular case he should deem so doing to be advisable, or if by reason of the nature of the proposals Olsen's or the Board's approval is necessary."

In order to appreciate Wallenberg's accomplishments it is necessary to understand the plight of European Jewry in the spring of 1944. The German army had suffered devastating losses in the East and the long anticipated Allied invasion of Europe seemed imminent. Despite accounts of the horrors of Nazi extermination camps, most Jews, particularly those in Hungary who had survived in one of Europe's most anti-semitic countries, were reluctant to believe the thoroughness of Hitler's "final solution." Many Jews fled from Germany, Slovakia, and Poland to Hungary despite its history of anti-semitism and its reputation as a loyal ally of Nazi Germany. Anti-semitism long had been an element of life in Hungary. In 1924, long before Hitler came to power, Hungary promulgated the first discriminatory laws against Jews.

Nevertheless, as the war drew to a close, the Jewish population in Hungary increased as a result of the influx of refugees. For their part, many Hungarian Jews thought Germany soon would pull back its forces and negotiate a surrender. The Horthy government certainly would have followed Berlin's lead. Instead, Horthy was deposed and on March 19, 1944 elements of the German army entered Budapest and the one-time ally for all practical purposes, became an occupied country under the

Szalasi regime. A few days later, Adolf Eichmann, architect of the final solution, arrived in Budapest along with some of the most infamous officers of the Sonder Einsatzkommandos—the special section of the Gestapo charged with the extinction of Jews. Germany was going to lose the war but efforts to complete the extermination of the Jews was accorded top priority.

In spite of these developments, most Jews refused to take any defensive action. Efforts to form a resistance, spearheaded by young Hungarian Zionists, were only partially successful because the majority of Jews would not take up arms. The docility of the Hungarian Jews, choosing to believe that the Germans eventually would abandon their extermination plans, was turned to Nazi advantage by Eichmann. When Jews by the thousands were turned out of their homes and herded into ghettos and staging areas for transport to the death camps, Jewish leaders often went among their co-religionists urging them not to panic and to cooperate with Nazi and Hungarian authorities. As a result, during the spring and summer of 1944, some 800,000 Jews were transported from Hungary and executed.

Earlier that year, stories of the holocaust had begun to reach Washington, Stockholm and other world capitals. While few grasped the extent of the horror, President Roosevelt put into action plans to assist the remaining Jews to escape and to discourage further atrocities, particularly in countries allied to Germany. Roosevelt issued a statement warning the Hungarians and other German allies that the US was determined to see that those who shared the guilt of Nazi policies be punished. Similar resolutions were passed by both the House and Senate. Copies of both were given to Wallenberg with the instruction that whenever possible he should call them to the attention of the Hungarian authorities.

The War Refugee Board was established in January 1944 as part of the Executive Office of the President. The Board was composed of the Secretaries of State, Treasury and War. The Board's mission was to combat the Nazi efforts to exterminate captive people because of their race, religion, or political beliefs. The first Executive Director of the Board was John Pehle, assistant to the Secretary of the Treasury. He was succeeded a year later by Brigadier General William O'Dwyer who directed the Board until its dissolution in September 1945.

The records of the Board suggest that the experience gained by the Administration in setting up the Office of Strategic Services a few years earlier was used to establish the new organization. Special representatives served the Board in strategic areas in or near the European mainland—Turkey, Switzerland, Sweden, Portugal, the UK, Italy, and North Africa. Their communications were classified and the Board's representatives and contacts in enemy territory—sometimes referred to as "agents"—often had cover. Although those of the Board's records dealing with Wallenberg fail to reveal any connection with any intelligence organization, a still classified list of OSS employees identifies Iver C. Olsen, the Board's representative in Stockholm and the link between Wallenberg and Washington, as a member of the Special Intelligence Branch, OSS. Olsen was a diplomat and Board representative; apparently, he was part of the 35-man OSS station in Stockholm in the fall of 1944, as well. If Olsen's identity was known to Soviet intelligence—perhaps through liaison arrangements—it is possible that Wallenberg's contacts with American intelligence may have aroused Soviet suspicion.

Wallenberg arrived in Budapest in July and immediately rented a 16-room office which he placed under the extraterritoriality of the Swedish Legation. This office had a

great deal more space than he needed for clerical functions, of course, and soon provided sanctuary for several prominent religious leaders. His advent had coincided with a temporary suspension in the transport of Jews to the camps. In two months prior to his arrival, however, Hungarian police had turned over 400,000 to the SS. With the temporary suspension order, local Hungarian authorities agreed to proposals by the War Refugee Board, the Swedish Red Cross and the Jewish Agency of Palestine that some Jews be allowed to emigrate and others be extended the protection of neutral legations in Budapest. Wallenberg seized on this and begun acquiring properties throughout the city which he placed under the Swedish banner as sanctuaries for thousands of Jews.

A dispatch from Iver Olsen in Stockholm in August reflected the zeal with which Wallenberg approached his task. Olsen wrote John Pehle, Executive Director of the Board:

"I get the impression that the Swedish Foreign Office is somewhat uneasy about Wallenberg's activities in Budapest, and perhaps feel that he has jumped in with too big a splash. They would prefer, of course, to approach the Jewish problem in the finest traditions of European diplomacy, which wouldn't help too much."

In the same dispatch he relates how Wallenberg "left in a hell of a hurry with no instructions and no funds." The Board had ample funds but getting the monies to Wallenberg may have caused some problems as he frantically acquired properties and bribed local officials. Dealing with Hungarian authorities Wallenberg at first experienced considerable success; for example, the Hungarian Legation in Stockholm informed the Swedish Foreign Office in August that the Hungarian government agreed to authorize the emigration to Sweden of Jews recently granted citizenship by the Swedish king. Other Jews could emigrate, as well, provided they had relatives or long standing business connections in Sweden. Wallenberg screened thousands of Jews who might fit the criteria for emigration under the Hungarian edict and found some 5,000 of 9,000 eligible. He issued the necessary documentation for those who qualified and tried to protect the rest from being conscripted into labor battalions or transported to Germany by placing them in houses under the Swedish flag.

By the end of September, an additional 5,000 persons had been extended Swedish protection. According to a cable from Minister Johnson in Stockholm, deportations from Hungary to the death camps had officially stopped and Jews in Budapest appeared to be "reasonably safe for the time being." Wallenberg was less optimistic, as the German occupiers began extending their authority and Hungarian officials caved in. In some of the more remote concentration camps in Hungary, for example, German forces continued to commandeer Jewish prisoners for deportation.

When the deportations "officially" resumed, Wallenberg doubled his efforts to establish more "Swedish houses" and even sequestered some in private homes throughout Budapest. These Jews would otherwise have been deported or swept into labor battalions by the Nazis or their local adherents, the Hungarian Arrow Cross. According to some accounts, Wallenberg cooperated with the Swiss Legation and Hazalah, a small Jewish resistance group, in duplicating protection certificates and establishing sanctuaries. Several times, he reportedly faced down Nazi and Hungarian authorities trying to deport Jews under his governments's protection. According to a Stockholm press account forwarded to Washington by Minister Johnson, Wallenberg confronted armed Hungarian troops who had entered one of his houses in search of

labor conscripts and warned "none leaves this place as long as I live." Thus balked the troops withdrew; later their commander returned to talk with Wallenberg. After an hour, according to the story, Wallenberg received a written pledge from the commander saying that Jews under Swedish protection were exempt from labor service.

One of the most famous episodes involves Wallenberg racing a deportation train that was headed for the death camps in Germany. Apparently the Gestapo had herded several people with Swedish protection on a train already crowded with other Jews. Informed of this, Wallenberg raced to the Budapest railway station only to discover that the train had departed. He pursued it by car to a small town near the Hungarian border, confronted the train commander and demanded the release of the documented captives. The commander relented and Wallenberg returned to Budapest with "his" people—the rest of the passengers were not so fortunate.

The effectiveness of the Hungarian government waned in the months before the Soviet occupation in January 1945. No one was safe. Jews and other unfortunate minorities fell easy prey to the Gestapo, the Arrow Cross and other thugs. Wallenberg was harassed and it was rumored that the Arrow Cross had put a price on his head. His car was stolen and once his office staff was arrested. The confusion, however, probably contributed to the success of some of his efforts. Bogus documentation replete with forged stamps and seals was effective in persuading military authorities and police to release prisoners. Many Hungarian Jews owe their lives to the documents skillfully crafted by Wallenberg and others.

By December, the relief effort guided by Wallenberg had reached considerable proportions, with 335 employees in addition to about 40 physicians, house governors, and miscellaneous helpers. He had rented at least ten houses—one account claims 30—to shelter Jews and had two hospitals with a total of 150 beds, along with several soup kitchens and a ration card system for distributing food. Wallenberg had convinced the Hungarian authorities that Jews with foreign documentation already serving in labor battalions in Hungary should be returned to Budapest. Some 15,000 were. Through the intervention of Wallenberg and his staff over 2,000 others were snatched from deportation points at the last minute. According to a report from the Swedish Foreign Office, Jews bearing Swedish protective passports fared better than the other wards of foreign missions in Hungary.

Nevertheless, the situation in Budapest became even more dangerous as the Nazis and their Arrow Cross sympathizers made a last ditch attempt to annihilate those Jews still alive. Wallenberg devoted all his energies to caring for those under his protection and reportedly cooperated with nascent Jewish resistance groups. According to the account of a Polish officer who spent 15 years in Soviet prisons and who knew Wallenberg, the Swede spent the early weeks in January 1945 rounding up weapons for the small band of Jewish resistance fighters in Budapest. Some of these Hazalahs donned Gestapo garb and actually guarded properties used for quartering Jews.

By mid-January the first contingents of the Soviet army reached the environs of Budapest. One historian of this period claims that when a Soviet patrol visited the Swedish Legation on January 13 Wallenberg asked to be put in touch with the local Soviet commander. Four days later, according to a press account, Wallenberg, escorted by Soviet military personnel, appeared at the Jewish "relief office" in Budapest. He said he was on his way to see Marshal Rodion Malinovsky. "I'm going," he said but "I don't know if its as their guest or their prisoner."

Another version of Wallenberg's disappearance is attributed to a Latvian named Krisko who worked as a Russian interpreter at the Swedish Legation in Budapest at the time. The Legation had employed Krisko to handle Russian traffic after Sweden accepted responsibility for Soviet interests when Hungary declared war on the USSR. Krisko and Wallenberg were arrested about the same time and held at a Soviet military facility outside Budapest. On January 20 they were flown to Moscow. This was the first time they had seen each other since before their arrest and, according to Krisko, Wallenberg, who was sitting under guard several feet away, nodded in recognition. Wallenberg, "looked bouyant, probably thinking his arrest was a misunderstanding." A few days later the Swedish Legation in Moscow was informed by the Soviets that Wallenberg was under their "protection."

As the plight of Jewish refugees improved following the Nazi collapse in Hungary, communications between Stockholm and the War Refugee Board diminished; it was April before Minister Johnson reported to Washington that Sweden had asked for US assistance in determining Wallenberg's fate. He said there had been unconfirmed radio reports that Wallenberg had been murdered, presumably by the Arrow Cross, and asked that our Embassy in Moscow be instructed to request assistance from the Soviet government. In reaction to Johnson's cable, Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau reminded Secretary of State Edward Stettinius of his own personal interest in Wallenberg in a handwritten note on April 4. Correspondence concerning Wallenberg tapered off over the summer and the War Refugee Board was dissolved in September.

Swedes loyal to Wallenberg, however, were loath to let the issue rest. A Wallenberg Committee was formed to pressure the Stockholm government to continue to query the Soviets. In the early post-war years, less than enthusiastic socialist governments in Stockholm tried to avoid provoking the Soviets. Nevertheless, after several attempts to elicit a response from Moscow, a functionary at the Soviet Legation in Stockholm said in 1946 that Wallenberg was "being taken care of for some foolish things he had done." Another story claimed that Wallenberg had been convicted by a Soviet court as an American spy and sentenced to 25 years.

There are a number of things that may have caused the Soviets to doubt Wallenberg's credentials. His modus operandi certainly exceeded standard diplomatic practice. The falsification of documents for Jewish refugees, the use of bribes, and his successful use of bluff and bravado on numerous occasions were probably known to them. His familiarity with the Soviet interests section of the Swedish Legation, implied by the interpreter Krisko who also was accused by the Soviets of being an American spy, may have increased those suspicions. The generally muddled condition of Wallenberg's bona fides is reflected in a portion of a digest cable from Allied headquarters in Caserta, Italy in May 1945. According to a source in Budapest (possibly Brigadier General Bonner Key, OSS):

"General Key has asked the Soviet military authorities for information regarding the whereabouts of Wallenberg, Meier, and Feller. The instruction in the Department's 12 for Budapest will be complied with as far as possible, but the fact that the Soviet authorities may well have conclusive proof of pro-Nazi collaboration on the part of Feller and possibly of Meier and Wallenberg should be of interest to the Department."

The reference to collaboration with the Nazi's probably referred to Wallenberg's use of bribes to gain the release of Jews and other refugees.

Some of the communications passed by the War Refugee Board representative in Stockholm through the Swedish Foreign Office to Wallenberg also may have aroused suspicion. For example, shortly after Wallenberg arrived in Hungary, the Department of State asked Olsen in Stockholm to request him to forward to a Hungarian businessman a message from his partner in Los Angeles. The communication was cryptic with numerous references to the reputed partner's personal effects—ruby cuff links, his wife's gold bracelet, a brooch with green stone, etc. The businessman was to be told that he could expect to go to Switzerland soon and should "apply for a visa immediately." The Department's explanation for the message was that the two men were business associates and that the partner in Budapest soon was to go to Switzerland on banking business. The cable cautioned Olsen, however, that if he thought it was inappropriate for any reason to pass the message he was to advise the Board, which would reconsider the action. Although there is no indication that the message was passed to Wallenberg or by him to anyone else, such instructions, if compromised, could have raised questions about his assignment.

Efforts to get the Soviets to provide an explanation of what happened to Wallenberg span the 36 years since his disappearance. Stalin reportedly took a personal interest in investigating Wallenberg's case but failed to reveal his fate. When Khrushchev visited Stockholm in 1956 he was presented a petition by Wallenberg's mother and the Soviet leader promised to "clear up the matter." Subsequently, Moscow officially announced that a "man named Raoul Wallenberg died of a heart attack in July 1947" in Lubyanka prison. The Swedes requested the remains of the body—only to be told it had been cremated—despite the usual Soviet practice of burying deceased prisoners with their number plate affixed to a leg. In the Brezhnev era, Soviet officials seem torn between the Lubyanka story and another that asserts that Wallenberg was killed by Nazis or Hungarian fascists before the fall of Budapest in revenge for saving Jews.

A number of reports from prisoners released by the Soviets over the years since the 1950s trace Wallenberg's odyssey through the Soviet prison system. Former inmates of Lubyanka, Vladimir, Aleksandrov Central, Verkhneural'sk, and other prisons have reported meeting Wallenberg or of knowing some other prisoner who knew him. One of the most recent and credible accounts is that of Jan Kaplan, a former inmate of Butryka prison, who wrote his daughter in Israel that while in the prison infirmary in 1977 he had met a Swede who had been in several different prisons over the past 30 years. According to Kaplan, the Swede "was in pretty good condition." This report was subsequently relayed to Stockholm and the Swedish government sent yet another note to the Soviets in January 1979. The response: "No Further Information."

Nevertheless, the Israeli government felt that Kaplan's tale merited further investigation and Prime Minister Begin urged President Carter to ask Brezhnev about Wallenberg when the two leaders met at the Summit in Vienna in 1979. Members of the US delegation queried their Soviet counterparts to no avail. An earlier attempt to bring highlevel US pressure to bear on the Soviets may have occurred in 1973. According to Nina Lagergren, Wallenberg's half-sister who visited Washington in the summer of 1979, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger vetoed instructions from his staff to the US Ambassador in Moscow to demand information regarding Wallenberg. If so, Kissinger probably sensed that such a demand would have been detrimental to the spirit of detente. Lagergren's visit, however, coincided with the "non-paper" mentioned earlier which admitted partial US funding for Wallenberg's project.

In January 1980—the 35th anniversary of Wallenberg's disappearance—a group representing Wallenberg demonstrated outside the Soviet Embassy in Stockholm. The Swedish Foreign Ministry issued a statement reviewing Wallenberg's role as a humanitarian and informed the Soviets that Sweden's demand for a complete disclosure concerning his fate remained unsatisfied. The government also released previously classified information detailing immediate postwar attempts to gain Wallenberg's freedom. The documents confirmed the unwillingness of Sweden's post war governments to antagonize Moscow over Wallenberg. According to press reports, one document indicated that Stockholm had turned down an offer by former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson to intercede with the Soviets to gain Wallenberg's release.

On the 36th anniversary of Wallenberg's disappearance in January 1981, some 350 persons attended a "hearing" in Stockholm sponsored by the Swedish Wallenberg Association. Marcus Wallenberg, the patriarch of the Swedish banking dynasty, the British and Israeli ambassadors, and the wife of US Senator Daniel Moynihan, attended. Several former Soviet prisoners testified to direct or indirect contact with a Swedish prisoner long after 1947, when the Soviets claim Wallenberg died. Gideon Hausner, chairman of the Israeli Wallenberg Committee and the prosecutor of Adolph Eichmann, told the audience that he had seen no convincing evidence that Wallenberg had died. On the contrary, Hausner felt that there was "considerable material" to contradict the Soviet version of Wallenberg's fate. Hausner also reminded demonstrators that Wallenberg had been appointed to his task by President Roosevelt and declared "we don't want to relieve America of the responsibility to pursue the case." Hausner's comments were echoed by Simon Wiesenthal, founder of the Jewish Documentation Center in Vienna.

In all probability, such activities merely will annoy the Soviets, producing few results. It would seem unlikely that the present regime in Moscow would call attention to the fact that Wallenberg's life, or 36 years of it, had been forfeited to their whim. What could they say? That his arrest was simply a misunderstanding carried out by overzealous security personnel operating under a blanket order to arrest all suspicious foreigners in Budapest? Then what about his early years of detention? Thousands of German prisoners of war were detained in the Soviet Union for years after the war. Had Wallenberg been returned before 1950, for example, his detention might have been attributed to administrative error.

A possible opportunity to get a definitive answer to the Wallenberg affair may occur when a change in leadership takes place in the Soviet Union . . . a time when criticism of the previous regime is sometimes permitted. Until then, the true fate of Raoul Wallenberg may never be clear, but his humanitarian accomplishments are irrefutable.