

The following text is a slightly revised version of my keynote lecture given at the conference. It is based on my book *A Hero's Many Faces. Raoul Wallenberg in Contemporary Monuments* (Palgrave Macmillan 2009), especially Part I, chapter 1-5 and Part III, 203ff, reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan. In the book, you can find all references to literature and archives and more images of the 31 Raoul Wallenberg memorials existing worldwide.

The Universal Hero Raoul Wallenberg

In Sweden, many people are quite tired of Raoul Wallenberg. They, as Swedes, may not shout out directly 'Do not bother us with this old story again' but from their reluctant reactions you recognize at once, you better be quiet. However, their reactions could also be understood in a more positive sense. In Sweden, heroes are not very popular – it is a nation driven by the wish to build a democratic society which should be open for each and every one; that also means that no one should stick out! If we leave out the moral guilt official Sweden feels for one of their greatest sons, whom they ingloriously abandoned after the end of World War II when Raoul Wallenberg became a prisoner of the Soviet Union, we understand that the Swedish reactions are not quite as inappropriate as they may seem at first.

In fact, a hero is an anachronism in democratic societies. The hero disagrees with the idea that all human beings are egalitarian. The hero sticks out. Democracies are meant to make the hero, at least the hero of history, the hero of determinative historical action, dispensable. Bertolt Brecht reminds us in his *Galileo Galilei*, 'unhappy the land that needs heroes.' As American philosopher Sidney Hook argued in 1945, the hero could even be a threat to democracies, because he is able to change the course of history and consequently is able to endanger the given democratic system.

Still, there is a longing for heroes even in most democratic societies. Today, Raoul Wallenberg serves as a role model for a universal policy based on human rights in many countries throughout the world. How does this come about? Who was this man? What in his biography, what aspects in historiography make him such a suitable hero-figure even today in the 21st century, after the hero-concept as been misused by Fascism and Stalinism?

Let's first take notice of the classical hero patterns that even this hero is bestowed with.

The Hero's Origin

Raoul Gustaf Wallenberg was born in Stockholm on 4 August 1912. He was not only born on a Sunday but with a caul about his head, which, according to popular belief, is considered to be a sign of luck, an omen that the child is distinguished by greatness of mind and even equipped with supernatural powers. However, the hero's origin is often foreshadowed by tragedy, and so is the case even here. Raoul's father died from cancer at the age of 23, three months before his son was born. Raoul's mother, only 20 when she married, had not even reached 21 at the time she was widowed.

But Raoul Wallenberg was not a nobody. Another important aspect of the hero's story is his famous family ties. Raoul was a descendant of one of Sweden's most distinguished, affluent and socially prominent families, the Swedish Rockefellers so to speak, who for generations played an important role in the country's economic, political, and social life. Raoul, who should have been the imperial's heir but was pushed aside, nevertheless turned out to be the best that the Wallenberg family was ever able to anticipate with its name. While other members of the family were, to some extent, discredited because they profited from the war by doing business with both Nazi Germany and the Allies, Raoul Wallenberg, the educated architect and businessman, became later known for having saved 100,000 Jews from Nazi persecution. As the Guinness book of records mentioned, no other human being has ever accomplished a similar rescue. Of course we know that Wallenberg did not accomplish this rescue singlehandedly but still this recognition is part of the myth that surrounds the historical figure.

The Call to Adventure

We have already touched upon another classical hero pattern; without a challenge, without peril, there is no hero. The classical hero ventures out into a world full of danger, leaving the safety of his home. Raoul Wallenberg was 31-years old when he left his secure homeland, the neutral Sweden, to save the Jews of Budapest. After their occupation of Hungary, the Germans had deported more than 400,000 Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Wallenberg, as a third secretary of the Swedish legation and

provided with money from the American War Refugee Board, arrived in Budapest on the 9 July in 1944 to save the remaining Jews of Budapest. Wallenberg did not resist the call of history. And besides the acceptance of the first challenge, namely to go to Hungary and help the persecuted, Wallenberg met his real challenge in October 1944, after the Arrow Cross coup. Although he originally planned to return home by the end of September 1944, he remained in Budapest when the political situation became worse. In fact, the following months after the coup turned out to be the most difficult for both the persecuted and the helpers and Wallenberg became the legendary figure posterity remembers him for.

Tragic Fate

Another important hero-pattern is the tragic fate which, unfortunately, Wallenberg so undeserved had to bear, and many monument makers have taken this up in their Wallenberg memorials. The fact that Wallenberg never returned and the fact that his fate was never entirely settled (the latter maybe even more important) contributed to his story being kept alive. After the Russian 'liberation' of Budapest in January 1945, Wallenberg hoped to establish contacts with the Russians in order to help the Jews of Budapest, even after the end of the war. But instead he was transported to Moscow and transferred to Lubyanka Prison in the beginning of February 1945. Until today it is not documented whether he was killed in 1947 or alive even later.

Like many of the classical hero-fighters, Wallenberg was vulnerable in the end. After successfully saving many lives, he was imprisoned, and unable to save himself.

Although Wallenberg's story had already started, during his days in Budapest, to develop into a myth, it is of course his unsolved fate (and how it was handled both by the Russians/Soviets and the Swedes) that contributed to the mythic dimensions of the Wallenberg story, opened speculations about his whereabouts and in this way kept his narrative alive.

So far some of the classical hero patterns – but which patterns made Wallenberg such a suitable modern day hero?

The Individual against a Cruel Regime

First of all, we have a strong individual who fought successfully against a dictatorship. Western societies are currently experiencing the age of the individual.

While many people today feel impotent against state power, and lost due to globalization, the action of single individuals reaffirms the belief that one person's actions are still possible and influential. Raoul Wallenberg is often described as a David against a Goliath (although he acted on behalf of official Sweden and the American WRB and was equipped with diplomatic immunity). However, Wallenberg fulfills a common longing for an individual who is able to fight and succeed against cruel state-power. These views may be exaggerated but still, they hit the core narrative. Wallenberg, as an individual, made a voluntary decision that put his life in danger; he was not a career diplomat, he could have stayed at home, but decided not to.

The Civil Hero

Wallenberg fits in many ways into our common understanding of a modern-day hero. He represents resistance against injustice, represents the civil hero, a hero type that is relatively new in history. This type is exemplified by figures like Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela. But more than that, while these outstanding human beings fought for their own people or were active within their own countries, Wallenberg represents a different hero type; the non-patriotic or universal hero. Actually, it is this categorization that makes Wallenberg such an appropriate hero figure for so many societies in the Western world.

The Universal Hero

It is important to know about Raoul Wallenberg's upbringing, his military service (which deserves much more attention, especially in this context, and I hope to provide this in a forthcoming text which, hopefully, will follow this online publication. In the meantime I refer to Lars Brink: *När hoten var starka*, 2009.) and the conditions for his missions were optimal preconditions for becoming a universal hero.

Wallenberg lived, what we would call today, a cosmopolitan life. His grandfather carefully prepared him to become a citizen of the world. His studies in the United States were meant to lead to a deeper understanding of the human nature and they taught him how to make useful contacts with people from all walks of life and culture which prepared him for a leading position in later business life. After his studies,

Raoul worked in South Africa and Palestine. Among the factors that contributed to Wallenberg being easily received as a 'national' hero in many countries, without actually being a citizen of those nations, was the cosmopolitan life he lived. In fact, he lived, worked or traveled on four continents, indeed in several of the countries where he later was honored in several ways, e.g. with the erection of 31 memorials in twelve countries on five continents.

Furthermore, Wallenberg had two employers, The Swedish Foreign Ministry and the American War Refugee board, and consequently, two nations behind him. Another factor contributing to him becoming a universal hero is that he saved not his own people, but Jews who were threatened with persecution and Wallenberg took the decision not to stand beside and remain a bystander. Many of the Jews he saved fled later, after the Hungarian uprising in 1956, to various parts of the world, and kept the memory of this universal hero alive in the many different nations where they established their new homes.

The fact that Wallenberg is not a national hero is of utmost importance. While other heroes were 'always articulated through the ideological frameworks of gender, imperialism, and national identity,' Wallenberg represents something different. He is a hero who, via his upbringing and education and by the circumstances of his mission in Budapest, crosses national borders, and is celebrated by nations to which he never belonged.

Wallenberg as the World's Conscience

An aspect that is linked to the importance of the Holocaust remembrance, which we take up in the following, is the fact that Wallenberg's rescue mission can be regarded as an attempt to save the Western world's conscience. By the time Wallenberg arrived in Budapest, German intentions to exterminate the European Jews were known to the leaders of the world. News of the atrocities committed against the Hungarian Jews had finally reached the Western world, which had previously been indifferent to the fate of European Jewry. In retrospect, it appears that the change in attitude towards the ongoing genocide seemed expressly reflected by the posting of

Wallenberg as an envoy and a humanitarian attaché. When Wallenberg decided to undertake the mission, he knew, at least to some extent, of the Nazi atrocities against the Jews, and it seemed that Wallenberg wanted to prevent the ongoing genocide in its totality. Wallenberg became the world's observing eye in Budapest, and the world's consciousness – most importantly, he *acted* on that behalf.

Retrospectively, it seems as if the world's attitude towards genocide, national sovereignty, and passive bystander mentality changed during the period when Wallenberg was sent to Budapest. The reasons why Wallenberg is such an appropriate universal hero are obvious; he questioned bystander mentality and acted instead. Even if it took decades before a new policy could be implemented (as in Kosovo, and this policy is by no means functioning well, as the case of, for example, Rwanda or Darfur prove), the basis for a new policy was established during that time, and was later expressed in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. The posting of Wallenberg and the manner in which he handled the mission had, indeed, set moral standards that later, when the Holocaust was widely remembered, became an obligation for the world.

The Holocaust Hero in the Age of Globalization

The Wallenberg monuments are embedded in a larger context, here already referred to as 'Holocaust remembrance'. In the Western world, the Holocaust is today widely considered as a 'civilizational break' (Dan Diner) of the 20th century. Since the end of World War II there have been many tendencies to internationalize the meaning of the Holocaust or to remember the atrocities as the negative example of modernity. However, only since the late 1990s can one speak of a globalization or internationalization of the Holocaust remembrance.

Over the years, especially during the 1990s after the end of the Cold War and against the background of the Balkan crisis, the awareness of the Holocaust generated discussions of its origin to point out state organized crimes and to make sure that genocide is regarded as war against humanity, a threat to all societies. The Holocaust is considered as a memory-emblem of the 20th century, which has evolved into a moral benchmark for good and evil. In an age of ideological uncertainty, after a century of world wars and genocides, the memory of the Holocaust served as a

guideline for the establishment of a global politics on human rights. In this way, the Holocaust became the key for a new, forward-looking humanitarian memory, which has the potential for a universal identification (see e.g. Daniel Levy/Nathan Sznajder). Through a collective commemoration of the European catastrophe the hope is that new forms of solidarity can develop across national borders. The bond of the Holocaust is the prevention of genocide.

The establishment of a Holocaust memory goes hand in hand with an interest in the long neglected 'Heroes of the Holocaust', those who actively reacted against the Nazi crimes, The Righteous Gentiles. The appearance of the 31 Wallenberg monuments in 12 countries on five continents confirms the establishment of such an 'internationalization' of Holocaust memory and visualizes Wallenberg's suitability to function as an ideal in a global world. Wallenberg is just one more prominent example of this development.

When the Holocaust became generally understood as a benchmark in history, a widespread need for moral guidance called upon the heroes of the Holocaust. Wallenberg was considered to be an example for moral guidance and human rights politics. The monuments erected in his honor show us that the historical figure of Wallenberg has been used as a symbol across national borders to represent the value of civil courage and the necessity to intervene when genocides occur. The cover of the 2002 brochure of Michigan's Holocaust Memorial Center shows Adolf Hitler as the 'epitome of evil and destruction' and Raoul Wallenberg as 'role model of altruism and compassion'. This example clearly demonstrates the status Wallenberg had received during the last six decades in popular imagination: his example serves today as the antagonist of evil itself. Of course, Wallenberg's role, as the representative of good, is based on the perception that the Holocaust was a benchmark in history. The Holocaust is considered the ultimate crime committed by human beings against other individuals, as agreed upon by most Western societies in the 1990s.

So, for example, Gustav Kraitz' Wallenberg monument *Hope* from 1998 is situated close to the headquarters of the United Nations in what is known as the 'capital of the world', New York. The setting supports the reading of Wallenberg as a universal

hero and is in accordance with Kraitz' ambition of expressing a general message with his *Hope* monument.



Gustav and Ulla Kraitz, *Hope*, New York, 1998 © Tanja Schult

The monument consists of five pillars of black diabas, which contain inscriptions. A blue ceramic globe on top symbolizes the hope Wallenberg represented for the persecuted in Budapest as well as posterity and the diplomatic case at the side represents the mission Wallenberg undertook while, at the same time, reminding us of Wallenberg's fate; the man has gone, but leaving his legacy behind him.

The United Nations drafted the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in the wake of World War II and it was ratified in 1948. Coincidentally, Kraitz' monument *Hope* was inaugurated on November 9, 1998, on the 60th anniversary of the Kristallnacht (The Night of Broken Glass) but also the 50th anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was celebrated. Against that background and the circumstances of Wallenberg's mission in 1944, it is easy to regard Wallenberg as a worthy representative of the UN. And having followed the Wallenberg case for quite a while, one is hardly astonished to learn that Kofi Annan, UN-Secretary-General

from 1997-2006, is married to Wallenberg's niece. Raoul Wallenberg learned of her birth in Budapest but never had the chance to meet her.

When we comprehend heroes as forerunners of changes or transformation processes, we can understand Raoul Wallenberg as a prototype of a UN representative before the organization was actually founded. With the protective passes, and the protective houses with their ex-territoriality, Wallenberg anticipated the concept of the United Nations. Using his country's neutrality, Wallenberg acted against national sovereignty and tried to establish a multinational system to provide help. In addition, Wallenberg knew about the necessity of long-term solutions. He planned to establish a supranational Raoul Wallenberg's Institute for Support and Reconstruction after the end of the war. Furthermore, he engaged Tom Veres as the Legation's photographer after the Arrow Cross coup, not only to protect him from persecution but also because he wanted him to take pictures of both the atrocities and the aid actions which took place so that they would be documented for posterity.

Clearly, Wallenberg can indeed be regarded as a very suitable representative of universal human rights policies as well as a global memory. This is reinforced by the information that indicates that Wallenberg, in connection with the imminent blow-up of the ghetto, threatened high-ranking Nazis and Arrow Cross people with punishment after the war. This action can be seen as a fore-runner of what came to fruition in the Nuremberg Trials (1945-49), and institutionalized in the International Criminal Court (ICC), established in 2002 as a permanent tribunal to prosecute individuals for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.

Kofi Annan, who in fact has become one of the many prominent promoters of Wallenberg and has many times highlighted publicly Wallenberg and his deeds, reminds us that the United Nations was "born out of the very lessons of the Holocaust that marked Europe's darkest hour". The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (1948) marks the beginning of modern human rights policies as well as the cosmopolitan memory (as analyzed by Nathan Sznajder and Daniel Levy in their book *Holocaust and Memory in a global age*). For various reasons, including as the Cold War, it took decades until a global human rights policy was able to develop and

it is by no means functioning well. Nevertheless, the establishment of the International Criminal Court proves that a fundamental change has taken place.

The reading of Kraitz' monument in New York is indeed supported by the setting. Standing in front of Kraitz' Wallenberg monument close to the UN headquarters it seems that this work expresses the *Hope* that the UN resolutions will not remain as lip service only, but contribute to a world community that will remember the Holocaust and in so doing assume a moral obligation for future political actions based on human rights. In the context of the setting, the example of Raoul Wallenberg can inspire posterity to learn the lesson of World War II. The array of blue-shining windows from the UN, close by, corresponds to the globe as well as the sky. One is free to compare the mission of Raoul Wallenberg with the tasks the UN has to face today all over the globe, still being confronted with wars and genocides. While, on the property of the UN, the fight against evil is represented by a St. George fighting the dragon, Kraitz' monument in front symbolizes the *Hope* that the fight against evil can be successful. The United Nations Building becomes somehow part of the monument. Together with the attaché case the setting acts as a reminder, with the artist's own words, that peace is also bureaucracy.

In a short sequence in Woody Allen's 1997 movie *Deconstruction Harry*, Allen's cynical alter ego, Harry, talks about how he still holds on to Raoul Wallenberg because he incorporates morality and selflessness. All others do no good, but this hero does not let us down. It is due to Wallenberg's popularity in the States that his example functions in this way even in the fast medium of a movie; within seconds, the audience associates him with moral good. Furthermore, because celebrities will be the subjects of some lectures during the conference it is worth pointing out that, in contrast to celebrities who are, to some extent, made up and made famous, heroes are indeed self-made. In the best case, they become famous because of the deed they committed which has relevance even in the society which lifts them up and keeps them. Today, even Sweden uses its prominent son to promote the country in several ways (together with historian Ulf Zander I will explore this aspect more in our forthcoming book on Raoul Wallenberg as historical-cultural symbol).

I want to conclude by summarizing the most important aspects of this lecture, exemplifying them with illustrative examples. Many of the monuments represent Wallenberg as a classical hero figure, as the fighter. For example, Pal Patzay's 1949 memorial in Budapest, his very first Wallenberg monument, which was, however, turned down the night before its planned inauguration and it was not until 50 years later that a copy could be installed. Here Wallenberg is represented as a beautiful hero of classical proportions – referring to the Greek idea that a beautiful mind is represented by a beautiful body. Interestingly, the idea of inner beauty representing moral good is taken up again nearly 60 years later by Charlotte Gyllenhammar. Her Wallenberg monument was inaugurated in Gothenburg in 2007.

Important for the classical hero is the deed he committed, the action. Some of the monuments do indeed focus on this hero pattern, as with Willy Gordon's work, situated on the island of Lidingö, where Raoul Wallenberg was born in 1912. Here, help is given to those who are in desperate need of it. Some monuments represent Wallenberg as the diplomat that posterity most often remembers him as and as an intellectual whose aid mission could be successful because he made use of diplomatic means. In Philip Jackson's memorial in London the protective passes are high lightened. As Folke Benadotte is connected to the White Busses Rescue mission, Raoul Wallenberg's name is associated with the Schutzpass-mission, although he seldom actually signed any of the protective passes.



Uga Drava, *Pieta*, Nepean, 1987 © Tanja Schult



Willy Gordon, *The Deed of Raoul Wallenberg*, Lidingö, Sweden, 1999 © Tanja Schult

Also the classical pattern of Wallenberg being a victim is, of course, represented in several works, as with Ernest Raab's memorial in Toronto, or Wallenberg is portrayed even as a martyr as in Imre Varga's work in Budapest. Many monuments, however, refer to the universal aspects of Wallenberg's legacy and the universal values Wallenberg represents as Freedom; these include Karoly Veress' sculpture in Illinois, and the Gustav Kraitz *Hope* sculpture in New York. And many monuments appeal to us to follow Wallenberg's example, try to make this world a better place, as Staffan Nihlén's *Pienza* in Malmö suggests, even if this striving is doomed to remain a utopia in this world. Nihlén's sculpture is named after the ideal city, Pienza, built in Italy during the Renaissance, but nevertheless incorporates ideals which the artist found also in Wallenberg and considers worth striving for.



Ernest Raab, *The Raoul Wallenberg Memorial*, Toronto, 1996 © Tanja Schult



Imre Varga, *The New Raoul Wallenberg Memorial*, Budapest, 1987 © Tanja Schult

Important too is that few Wallenberg monuments make use of the fighter hero and almost none treat Wallenberg as a warrior who dominated history, stressing other characteristics instead. The choice of the protagonist or of Wallenberg the cosmopolitan with his message of freedom, humanity and human rights, is directed to all human beings independently from gender, ethnic belonging or nationality.

Wallenberg succeeds in imbuing the personal monument genre with new meaning

and awards it new content and relevance. And this universal hero as a democratic one actually comes about in the monuments' appearance: Few monuments have a pedestal, or if they do a very low one, so the viewer can reach this hero and come close to him. That the hero Wallenberg was extraordinary in many ways is still obvious; remember the nimbus of beauty and intellect of Jackson's Wallenberg. But this hero is accessible; you can do what he did if you are willing to follow his example. But that does not mean, first and foremost, that you should become a victim. A modern-day hero's role is to remind us that we are all encouraged to prevent future victims and, perhaps, even to prevent situations where a hero is needed at all. Yet still, we shall ask ourselves, what can I do? What are the current problems we are confronted with? What of the poverty and war refugees which need our solidarity?

And the monuments remind us that the hero of democracy incorporates other values than the heroes of dictatorships. Kirsten Ortved's Wallenberg monument in Stockholm consists of twelve low sculptures in bronze and his signature reminds us; do not stay devotedly in front of the uplifted hero! Use your imagination and use your creativity as Wallenberg did in Budapest. If necessary be uncomfortable (as this highly discussed monument is) and as Wallenberg was in Budapest. The modern-day hero seldom needs physical power, but has to stand for his convictions. The monuments act as reminders; Imagine – have a dream, believe that the world can change to the better and that you can contribute to this development! Now you may be reminded of John Lennon and may say I am a dreamer. However, I am not the only one, and these words might remind you of Barack Obama. Obama's success rests certainly on our longing to believe in selfless role models again, those who seriously strive to realize their vision of a more fair society. That Wallenberg and Obama were both born on the 4th of August is, of course, only a coincidence but, you know, heroes as celebrities or modern day politicians depend on myth-making and need publicity to secure their place in history.

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