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Individual Hero or mere power structures? Raoul Wallenberg in Budapest.

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In the summer of 1944, Raoul Wallenberg was sent to Budapest as a representative of the Swedish Foreign Office. His assignment was to lend the War Refugee Boards help to the Jews in Budapest. His activity in Budapest has been handed down to posterity as one of the greatest humanitarian operations ever, and Raoul Wallenberg’s personality has been much glorified. Finally, he was appointed an American honorary citizen in 1981, and he is claimed to have saved no fewer than 100,000 Jews.

Now, was this possible?

To answer this question properly we have to find answers to a long set of other analytical questions. I did this in my doctoral dissertation about Raoul Wallenberg in 2004. Now I will concentrate only on some of these questions:

1. How central was Wallenberg’s role in the rescuing actions in Budapest?
2. To what degree did the power structures and interests existing in Budapest – and elsewhere – work for or against him? To what degree did he act in concert with or against the wishes of the social, political and military power structures in Budapest after his arrival there on July 9, 1944? To what extent and in which ways did he act under adverse conditions when these structures turned against him?

As already said, Raoul Wallenberg’s task in Budapest was to lend the American War Refugee Boards support to the work of saving Hungarian Jews.

This saving work was already under way in Budapest when Raoul Wallenberg arrived, both under the auspices of the Swedish Legation and other neutral countries as well as through the agency of the papal nuncio. His arrival heralded an expansion of the Swedish activity but also a tightening of the rules surrounding it at the Swedish Legation. The expansion was, in all probability, an emulation of the example set by the much larger action of the Swiss legation in charged with the distribution of Palestine Certificates. The Swiss regarded these certificates as “family documents” and convinced the Hungarian government to accept this view. It is likely that this emulation was an initiative of Jewish individuals who already worked with issuing Swedish protective passports at the Swedish Legation. The Hungarian authorities had limited these to a maximum of 4,500, presumably after they had approved the Swedes’ definition of 649

Swedish entry visas brought by Wallenberg from Stockholm as “family visas”, with a corresponding increase in the number of protective documents.

It soon became well known that Wallenberg’s mission had the backing of substantial financial resources. First and foremost this was revealed by the way he succeeded in financing his actions via local Jewish funds. He had credit and could acquire considerable sums of money or quantities of goods against the promise that the money would be repaid into the relevant Swiss bank accounts. To a very great degree Wallenberg’s influence hinged on this implicit knowledge of his background (It is maybe important to mention that the Hungarian army counter intelligence was well aware that both Wallenberg and Valdemar Langlet worked for the allies).

Wallenberg had been sent to Budapest at the behest of the WRB, but with the active involvement of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. He was given Swedish diplomatic status with the rank of Legation Secretary, answering initially to the First Secretary of the Legation, Per Anger, but receiving his instructions directly from the WRB agent in Sweden, Iver Olsen. These included a long list of people whom he should contact, and instructions for organizing a network to protect Jews and to prepare escape routes for them from Budapest. Wallenberg contacted some of the names of the list – along with others who did not figure there – and presumably was even allowed access on one occasion to Miklós Horthy junior, the son of the Hungarian regent. Apart from this, however, there is no documentary evidence that he became involved in the development and coordination of the general rescue efforts in Budapest, nor that he collaborated with or assisted the resistance.

Raoul Wallenberg was – in comparison with the papal nuncio, other diplomats from neutral powers and other individuals, like Valdemar Langlet, who were already involved in saving Jews – inexperienced when he arrived. His callowness was even more striking compared to leading Jews in the Jewish Council and those working at the Swedish Legation. He lacked their extensive network of contacts and influence, especially in high political circles, so it would have been unthinkable for him to have been in charge with all the rescue actions in Budapest. As for the Swedish case all the documents witness that it was the Swedish Envoy, Ivan Danielsson, and the First Secretary to the Swedish Legation, Per Anger, who handled all the contacts between the Swedish Legation and the Hungarian government.

Wallenberg received much support from the group of influential Jews headed by Hugo Wohl who had congregated at the Swedish Legation. They had already embarked upon negotiations with the Hungarian authorities and reached some important conclusions

with regard to the formalities surrounding their recognition of the temporary passports that were now being issued. The most probable of all alternatives is that these negotiations between the Hungarian authorities and the Jews at the Swedish Legation led, in Sweden's case, to the creation of the later so famous blue and yellow "protective passports". There were these Jews who took care of the printing of these passports and the strange design of the Swedish Protective Passports strongly indicates that there were no Swedes who designed them either. There are several oral testimonies showing that the day to day activities of the Humanitarian section of the Swedish legation – in charged with the issuing of the protective passports – were conducted by these Jews.

As far as Sweden's interests were concerned and the opportunities for initiating, or rather, supporting Raoul Wallenberg's rescue actions in Budapest, the Swedish and international situation during the second half of 1944 was especially favourable.

The German need for Swedish iron ore and the strategic position of Sweden during the final months of 1944 forced Germany to show very great consideration for Sweden, leading to a degree of German compliance that had a highly positive effect on the circumstances surrounding the Swedish Legation and Raoul Wallenberg and the opportunities they had to conduct their protecting action toward their protégées. We should add that several German leading circles, headed by Himmler, worked for a separate peace with the allies at this time which made them highly sensitive for more moderation regarding the Jewish question.

The high degree of German compliance is directly visible in the way in which the incident around Eichmann's alleged threat "to shoot the Jewish hound Wallenberg" was resolved. After Swedish complains forwarded by the Swedish representatives in Berlin the German embassy in Budapest was instructed to apologize and Eichmann received a reprimand.

Raoul Wallenberg's work in Budapest was greatly facilitated by the fact that opinion was divided among Hungarian politicians and society at large with regard to the Jews.

There was also a deep schism between the leadership in Hungary and Germany. The Hungarian aristocrats, or the "aristocratic" bourgeoisie, and a portion of the middle class never approved of the German Nazis' vulgar political populism and their brutal "Judenpolitik", and many of them refused to be a part of it. In this matter the German Nazis were instead always obliged to rely upon their likeminded Hungarian henchmen. The Germans realized, however, that these kindred spirits of theirs were not capable of governing the country and that Germany would not be able to rule Hungary without an occupation force of a size which they could ill afford. So they allowed the elderly regent

Miklós Horthy to remain at his post, collaborating with him while retaining some semblance of Hungarian autonomy.

Hungarian politics continued to be characterized by schizophrenia even after the German occupation. While the Hungarian government appointed by the Germans actively participated in the deportations, the fact that Horthy retained a modicum of power enabled anti-German elements in Hungary to support and to a certain degree even work together with the Jews. And when Horthy resolved to act to prevent the deportations on the 7 of July, even some of the Hungarian politicians who previously had been indifferent to or positively hostile towards the Jews, began to adopt a more helpful attitude to the rescue actions that the International Red Cross (IRC) and the neutral legations had initiated. There are several documents –Wallenberg’s own reports and letters among them – oral testimonies and works written by contemporaries (Lévai being the most important one) showing that once Horthy had put a stop to the deportations, the Hungarian authorities did not only give their consent, but on occasions actively encouraged the Swedish Legation to extend its protection to larger numbers of Jews.

The Hungarian authorities had begun to recognize temporary passports even before Wallenberg arrived on the scene, and they were prepared to issue certificates to holders of such passports attesting to this. They also gave indications about which type of document they would accept as foreign identity documents and travel papers. There are documents showing that the issue of the “foreign” Jews was used as a negotiation tool by the Hungarian government to resist the German pressure to restart the deportations. The foreign Jews had to be separated and leave Hungary before the deportation could be restarted, they said.

Following the change of government in August 1944 Hungarian policy towards the Jews mellowed. The new Lakatos government regarded a relaxation in the plight of the Jews as one step in the process of moving closer towards the presumed victors – the allies – and it showed a keen interest in alleviating the situation for them. As a result, the Hungarian authorities were easily persuaded to accept, consider and treat as foreigners thousands of Jews with Hungarian citizenship.

The favourable Hungarian attitude was compounded by a more compliant disposition on the part of the Germans from August 1944 onwards and also by the enhanced bargaining strength of Sweden’s position vis-à-vis Germany. By this time Germany had become increasingly dependent on Sweden’s continued neutrality.

The structures in Budapest were, therefore, singularly propitious for the Swedish attempt to exempt certain categories of Jews from the fate that so many of their fellow

believers had suffered. No particularly great efforts were required in order to help Jews with Swedish connections in Budapest at this time. It was more a matter of “red tape” and issuing protective passports, a task which, to a great extent, was managed by the Jewish volunteers “employed” in the humanitarian section of the Swedish Legation. The good results that were achieved during this period proved to be of decisive significance even after the Arrow Cross fascists took power on October 15, 1944. The Szálasi government’s accession to power marked the end of these favourable circumstances, even if the change became less abrupt than it first appeared. The new government’s ambitions to acquire broad international recognition gave the neutral legations and the International Red Cross an opportunity to continue their protecting activities in Budapest. The Szálasi government was prepared to recognize the same numbers of foreign protective passports under the same conditions as the previous government in exchange for political recognition from the governments of the neutral states issuing such documentation. The early discussions that were held directly between Szálasi and Angelo Rotta, the papal nuncio and on lower levels by Wallenberg and representatives of the other neutral legations ensured that all foreign papers were soon recognized by the Arrow Cross government. At the very highest level it was still the papal nuncio and the IRC representative Fredrik Born who exercised the greatest influence. It was their personal interventions that had the greatest effect on Szálasi and that saw that the favourable conditions were restored. The forthcoming rescue efforts were facilitated by the order that Szálasi issued on November 17 that all Jews with foreign documents should be handed over to the relevant legation.

Raoul Wallenberg’s role in the process began to assume greater importance after October 15, but everything suggests that he continued to use his influence and his access to large sums of money primarily in order to protect those in possession of Swedish papers. This is the case in both instances where the documentary sources and the bulk of the oral testimonies attest to his direct intervention to save Jews: during the so called death marches toward the German border and on the Józsefváros railway station. However, Wallenberg did not risk coming into conflict with the Hungarian authorities, nor did he contravene the rules that had been laid down. In both documented cases where he directly led a rescue action, he first applied for permission to do so and received approval both from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the other authorities involved. He even received official assistance from the Hungarian authorities to carry out these rescue actions.

One clear conclusion is that the entire existence of the neutral – including the Swedish –action rested upon the say-so of the Hungarian government – and, after October 15, 1944 the approval of the “Leader of the Nation”, Szálasi. It would have been extremely imprudent to risk forfeiting this approval by conducting illicit actions. Even Per Anger concedes this towards the end of his book:

“We had an agreement with the Szálasi government for the approval of 5,000 such passports [X] If we had succumbed to the temptation to issue passports to everyone from the ranks of the Jewish population, the papers would most certainly have lost their value. Moreover, it would not have taken long for the Nazis to understand that we were sabotaging the agreement we had reached with them about limiting numbers, and they would have seen to it that we could no longer be of help to anyone ... Wallenberg was as aware as we were that no one must jeopardize the legation’s existence”

The situation deteriorated at the beginning of December when the Hungarian government understood that the conditions of the agreement were being flouted by the Swedish government and gave up hope of a Swedish recognition. This heralded a radical change in the situation of the Swedish legation and the Jews under its protection. The Swedish Red Cross was forbidden to continue his activity, and Wallenberg announced the Jewish protégés that the legation was not more able to give them protection. The situation became even worst when the government had left Budapest. The respect for the Swedish diplomats’ immunity evaporated, and the Swedish Legation was occupied by Arrow Cross forces.

There are no documented successful rescue actions after the opportunities for legal intervention to help the Jews were exhausted, and Wallenberg himself gave up hope of being able to be of any assistance once the relations with the Hungarian authorities worsened. The rescue actions were not revived until one of Wallenberg’s assistants, Károly Szabó, succeeded in getting the support of the moderate Arrow Cross leader, Pál Szalai. But that was not enough. Despite Szalai’s assistance the attacks against the “Swedish” houses and the terrorization of Jews nominally under the protection of the Swedes continued.

The final conclusion from both the analysis of written sources and the oral testimonies is that we cannot maintain that Raoul Wallenberg acted against the structures that were in place and saved a 100 000 lives. Instead, he skilfully exploited the favourable power structures that did exist for his rescue actions and, when these ceased, so too did his rescue actions. He himself had to hide under the chaotic conditions of those days, threatened to death by those whom he successfully confronted before.

Hundreds of Jews were executed in late December 1944 and early January 1945 by Arrow Cross mobs that by then were running out of control. The terror these mobs spread was not stilled until the Russians entered the city – and then only to be replaced by the terror conducted by the Red Army.

What the analysis of the documents has not succeeded in showing is why Raoul Wallenberg was perceived as a hero even during his time in Budapest and then continued to be so perceived ever since.

If we wish to pursue our analysis further in order to form an opinion of why Wallenberg was perceived as a hero, we must also look at the given testimonies in the light of our human inclination to restructure certain incomprehensible situations in which we sometimes find ourselves in order to lend coherence to them.

Wallenberg's presence in Budapest was, without doubt, almost inconceivable for most people at the time: an Aryan of high birth, who arrived from a country which, for the majority of Jews, was a place of almost mythical proportions and set about saving them. Employing the "hero template" to explain such a phenomenon seems almost inevitable and maybe essential as well. The hopes of the victims and their willingness to act willed the hero into existence. They needed, at least in their own minds, to have something against which to balance the lethal structure that seemed to point inexorably to their annihilation. They wanted to believe that it was possible to act and to change the circumstances, and that there were people who were in a position to do so. The victims yearned for a hero in whose limitless inner resources they were almost compelled to believe in order to keep that hope alive. And, in their minds, this hero must act unconditionally, prompted only by an unyielding inner conviction and moral strength. Only a figure like that could keep hope alive. In Budapest it was Wallenberg who was assigned this role, and the further away from what Bergman & Luckman call the "face-to-face meeting", the more stereotyped he became and the greater dimensions his personality acquired. Herbert Mead summarized the phenomenon by explaining that, in certain frequently recurring situations, social behaviour patterns are stabilized in the force of mutual expectations, creating a social role that reflects an intentional orientation to the expectation rather than the actual act. The figure of Wallenberg the Hero existed, therefore, and acted his part in Budapest, but this figure was, to some degree, independent of Raoul Wallenberg - and it is this figure that the hagiographic literature has captured. The circumstances surrounding his disappearance have, however, prevented posterity from undertaking a more penetrating analysis of his work and deeds in Budapest. That what he did was actually the job he had been given and that he was actually paid to fulfill these very expectations was either unknown or forgotten.

One good example of the way in which the myth of Wallenberg was created occurs in the following excerpt from a story told by a Jewish academic who came to Sweden after the Second World War and who rose to a very elevated position in Swedish academic circles. He spoke among other things, of how Raoul Wallenberg intervened in events in the days immediately before the coup staged by the Arrow Cross forces on October 15, 1944, when the synagogue in which the Swedish group was housed, was surrounded by Arrow Cross members:

“... The door opened and in stepped Wallenberg, cool, calm and collected – but pale. Most of us knew him by sight. Every one of us stared at his face, as if he held our fate in his hands. Then suddenly the guards disappeared. At that moment everyone believed that the mere sight of Raoul had so terrified the infamous Arrow Cross legions that they had fled. That was the moment when this Swedish civilian became a magician in our eyes, a maestro. Later, we found out that his arrival and the disappearance of the guards was mere coincidence. The Arrow Cross were still not masters of the city. At that critical moment in time they had been forced to concentrate all of their small number of regular forces to key points in the city’s defences. There was a barracks next to the synagogue and it was here that our guards had been ordered to appear.”

This brief anecdote reveals a great deal about the creation of the mythical figure Raoul Wallenberg. It reveals the general mechanisms that set in motion the creation of myth: an inexplicable event is ascribed to the power of something or someone in whom individuals or a group want to believe without searching for any further explanations. If the retelling of the tale then meets certain “expectations” or satisfies (often unspoken) needs, the event is “refined” and adapted in accordance with archetypal templates that imbue it with ever greater dimensions the further away from the event that the subsequent retelling takes place.

The existing myth meant that the figure of Wallenberg also assumed exaggerated proportions in the eyes of the perpetrators of the crimes against the Jews and exerted a certain inhibiting effect on their activity. Presumably the regard in which Raoul Wallenberg was held also had an effect on the way he himself acted. His existence became radically different after his arrival in Budapest. He was transformed from a simple businessman into the only visible manifestation of hope for hundreds of people. He was given both money and influence – and by his own admission money was something that he had long yearned for. But at the same time, the demands made upon him were enormous. Even if, to begin with, he regarded himself as nothing more than an intermediary for the help being provided by the WRB, his standing grew immeasurably and his self-image and actions could not deny what he saw “in the eyes of others”. We all identify ourselves with the reflected image we see in the eyes of those observing us and try to live up to this reflection. And when Wallenberg did the least of what he could be expected to do, his action immediately confirmed the myth of the almost independently existing, hope-inspiring hero.

The application of the “hero” label was also facilitated by the fact that this Wallenberg figure was multifaceted. It fit both of the basic “hero” templates, enabling whoever was telling the tale to choose to lay weight on either one aspect or the other. He fit the picture of the knight errant or the legendary prince, the leader figure who descended among the lowly oppressed victims and lifted them to their feet. He fought with the

villains “from above” and sought support solely in the authority that his own status bestowed upon him. At the same time, with his rucksack and the worn-out windcheater that he is sometimes described as wearing, he also fits the role of the popular hero who emerges from the broad masses, allying himself with the victims and using his cunning, shrewdness and skills to hoodwink the powerful villains. He himself has no real power to back up what he says, but is forced constantly to refer to the powers that he represents in order to carry out his assignment. He exploits the villains’ fear of this power in order to strengthen his own authority. All these aspects combine to create the picture of Wallenberg that literature has later chosen to reproduce.

Lévai’s summary of the importance of the presence of Raoul Wallenberg in Budapest points, however, to yet another aspect. He wrote:

“The greatest significance lies the fact that the Nazis and the Arrow Cross legions were not able to run riot as they pleased – they were forced to see that every step that they took was observed and followed by this young Swedish diplomat. For Wallenberg there were no secrets. The Arrow Cross fascists could not fool him. They could not act with impunity, but would be held accountable for the lives of the people whom they persecuted and sentenced to death. Wallenberg was ‘the watchful eye of the world’ that constantly brought the criminals to book. That is the greatest import of Wallenberg’s struggle in Budapest”.

Thus the third secretary at the Swedish Legation became the “watchful eye of the world”, as if the papal nuncio, the numerous other neutral diplomats, thousands of Jews and the hundreds of thousands of other inhabitants in Budapest were incapable of fulfilling this role themselves. What was needed was a hero, someone who would not under any circumstances conceal the truth, someone who made sure that the perpetrators of the atrocities could harbour no hope that anything would be brushed under the carpet.

The hero was, in other words, conceived in the minds of the victims at the very moment when they came to regard themselves as mere victims, without hope beyond that afforded by an autocratic Saviour. It is not surprising that in many of the interviews with Jewish survivors – particularly women – the description of Wallenberg acquires messianic traits. Nor did the picture of this Saviour leave the perpetrators of the crimes unmoved. Raoul Wallenberg was “stigmatized” as a hero and the concrete characteristics disappeared – or were transformed – by this a priori “stigma”.

I am convinced that myth has an extremely important part to play in the creation of history. Mythologization stems from a fundamental human need to explain and exercise control over one’s surroundings. Although the myth may be imagination, it

nevertheless possesses a creative power that can transform human reality. It forms the basis for the laws and rules that govern people's daily existence and influence their thoughts and ways of looking at the world. In everyday life these laws and rules become far more important and far more real than any ontological truth about the nature of the world. What is so very important in this respect is that the truth that the myth creates possesses a significance both for the world and for the individual. At the same time it gives the individual an identity that resists the mutability of everyday life and reinvests the individual with the qualities of a "being" with an immense, unifying power around which the happenstances of life are centred. Myth lends meaning to what has happened (history) and what is yet to come, and the meaninglessness of everyday life is dissolved in the sense that the mythical story makes of one's own life. This is often to provide hope in hopeless situations. In this story there are always certain deep-rooted feelings and reactions to outward signs; these are "the active essence of identity" – almost unconscious, fundamental traits which form the source for all our spontaneous comments about ourselves. These are "The Myths We Live by".

But the literature had – and still has – a particular purpose. Initially the aim was a noble one: to galvanize public opinion, governments and authorities in order to liberate Raoul Wallenberg from his incarceration in the Soviet Union. Later this goal was modified, and the struggle for Raoul Wallenberg became one aspect of the fight against the newly appointed Evil that the Soviet Union represented in the dramaturgy on the Cold War.

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In one sense my thesis deals with extremes. At the one extreme, the Hero, a historical figure who, in his purest incarnation is a symbol of Eternal Goodness. He is the human being – and a lonely human being at that – who acts in accordance with what Kant called the categorical imperative, namely in a way that ensures his actions could become a universal law. The Hero must therefore be able to recognize Universal Goodness – with the help of his powers of reasoning, if we are to follow in Kant's footsteps – and to act in accordance with it, regardless of the conditions and regardless of the consequences that this action can have for his own person. He must not act in his own interest, but only in the interest of others. These "others" are one of the three essential prerequisites for the existence of the Hero, as the Hero representing the force of goodness must have someone upon whom to exercise his goodness. And for this to happen, the person or people who form this focus for his goodness must find themselves in a specific situation: they must be in the grip of Evil, either the evil of nature or the evil of human violence. They must be in danger. Thus is established the necessary ménage à trois, where – paradoxically – the quintessential ingredients are Evil and its Victims. It is evil that creates victims and without victims there is no evil. And the more frequently the victims are subjected to the violence of evil, the easier it

becomes for the hero to stand forth as a hero. True victims suffer in extremis, which precludes them from doing anything themselves to combat evil. They lose all hope. The prime signal that the emergence of a hero sends out to them is the rekindling of lost hope in their hearts. This does not take much: all that is required is to open their eyes to other alternative ways of acting or to demonstrate that something can be done by actually doing it, by letting the unexpected happen. The hero is the figure who acts in a situation in which others find themselves paralysed. When the balance of power is upset, the hero brings his power to bear on behalf of the weaker party and endeavours to restore what we all long for: harmony between hope and reality. If no hero exists, he has to be invented. It is possible to make a strong case for claiming that this is what happened in Budapest. Wallenberg helped the Jews of Budapest to help themselves, not least by serving as the basis for a universal hero figure. But the reciprocity between Hero and Victim is so strong that the ephemeral hero figure must often be transformed into a victim in order to be resurrected as a symbol, an eternal hero. That is what happened in the case of Raoul Wallenberg, and that is why he is perceived as one of the Second World War's greatest heroes.