

Levine, Paul: *Raoul Wallenberg in Budapest. Myth, History and Holocaust*. Portland: Valentine Mitchell 2009. ISBN: 9780853037286; 410 S.

Rezensioniert von: Tanja Schult, Department for History, Stockholm University

Historian Paul A. Levine, senior lecturer at Uppsala University, is primarily known for the much recognized book „Tell ye your children“, together with Stéphane Bruchfeld in 1997. A year earlier, his valuable dissertation about Swedish diplomacy between 1938 and 1944, „From Indifference to Activism“, was published. This new book picks up where his dissertation left off. The focus is on Raoul Wallenberg, architect and businessman, who in July 1944 joined the Swedish legation in Budapest in its humanitarian rescue mission on behalf of the remaining Jews of Hungary. During the six months to come, Wallenberg distinguished himself from the other accredited diplomats by his unconventional methods, and he has in popular memory become a symbol for the success of the rescue action. Unlike his colleagues, Wallenberg was arrested and spent the rest of his life in Soviet captivity. No doubt his tragic fate has had an impact on how posterity has remembered him, and already at an early stage myth-making became part of the Wallenberg epic.

As in his dissertation, Levine bases his research on documents from the Swedish Foreign Ministry. He stresses the importance of traditional diplomatic negotiations for the rescue of the persecuted Jews, the decisive role of the general political developments in Budapest, and, above all, the imminent end of the war. He explains how the Swedish diplomats in Budapest 1944–45 depended on decisions made by their superiors in Stockholm and highlights the role of Gösta Engzell, head of the Foreign Ministry's Legal Division during the war. Levine furthermore wishes to draw attention to other, less known rescuers. Despite all this, he also underscores that personal qualities and actions not approved by, or typical of, diplomatic protocol played a significant role in the Swedish Legation's successful efforts to protect around 120 000 Budapest Jews.

Unfortunately, Levine has decided not to focus his study on the documents of the Foreign Ministry. These documents are indeed important for gaining a more detailed picture of the context in which the Swedish rescue actions took place, and detailed analysis of them could have made an important contribution to what in many ways is our incomplete knowledge of Wallenberg and the combined rescue actions of other neutral legations. But Levine's stated aim is to simultaneously „demystify the achievements of one individual“ (p. 374), Raoul Wallenberg. This attempt, however, to kill two birds with one stone, does not work out very well, and the promise on the publisher's homepage to present „for the first time the true history“ of Wallenberg, is not fulfilled.

Already in the introduction it becomes clear that Levine finds the prominent role that Wallenberg occupies in popular memory problematic. Displaying a lack of understanding of the terms and conditions of a mythic narrative, Levine's understandable frustration over the many exaggerations and simplifications of the historic person hampers his aim to contextualize Wallenberg's achievements. Without question, Levine is right that even such a symbolic historic figure as Wallenberg „must be subjected to critical analysis“ (p. 11), and after twenty years of research on this particular subject, Levine could indeed be the right person to do this. Given the lack of a sober historical academic study on this field, such a book has long been awaited.

There is, however, a problem in the way Levine deals with the many myths which he has encountered over the years. Without using any kind of discernible methodology concerning the importance or frequency of these myths, Levine attempts to debilitate one myth after the other, always using the same pattern: He evokes expectations that he will reveal new insights, but in the end he undermines his own arguments. For instance, he argues that Wallenberg was not interested in the fate of the Jews before he went to Budapest, and that he intended to do business while there, only to conclude that this question is perhaps not so relevant. As Levine states, it was not „particularly unusual“ (p. 65) that Wallenberg did not mention the sit-

uation of the Jews in earlier correspondence, and he also admits that even if Wallenberg was engaged in business (while in the first place tirelessly trying to save lives, thereby risking his own), the „available evidence“ on the business issues „does not allow larger conclusions“ (p. 276). So the reader, curious to learn more about Wallenberg and the context in which he operated, wonders: Why bring this up in the first place? Why not focus on what the documents can reveal about the context in which Wallenberg was working?

Levine's resentment of the many myths about Wallenberg leads him sometimes to resemble a Don Quixote, flailing at windmills. I would argue that the popular images of Wallenberg are far less one-sided, stereotypical or homogeneous than presented in the book; that they fulfill different functions and that they work to keep the Wallenberg story alive. But above all I wonder: why does a historian bother so much about them? Is it because Levine subscribes to the idea that historians, so far, have failed to mediate Wallenberg adequately to the public? Levine, however, wants more than to describe and contextualize Wallenberg's role in Budapest during World War II according to existing documents (a challenging enough aim). He holds on to Wallenberg as an ideal and believes that the „trained historian“ is the one who can „best mediate the acknowledged moral value of Wallenberg to society at large, in order that society can obtain the greatest effect from it“ (p. 20). Maybe this is the crux. This moral understanding of the historian's role may be in itself a subject for discussion, but it would explain why Levine cannot break away from the myths. This historian has a mission: x-raying the hero and contextualizing his deeds will make him „more human“ (p. 15), meaning that he will function better as societal ideal. But if the goal is that Wallenberg is to function as an ideal, why then are more favorable layers of the myth left out, why are Wallenberg's attempts to help Jews even before he was an accredited diplomat not taken into consideration? Such examples could give an even more favorable image of Wallenberg and underline his suitability as a role model. And if they belong to myth-making, why does Levine not discuss them?

In the end Levine's research rather confirms the image of an extraordinary man who turned out to be a very suitable choice for the mission, and who is not by far such a „misunderstood hero“ (p. 16) as presented in the book. However, Levine's eagerness to „dispell“ (p. 97) the prominent myths risks infecting the more favorable image of Wallenberg and contrary to Levine's stated intention not to minimize Wallenberg's deeds, this is precisely what happens. Even though the analyzed documents in the end are not sufficient to revise the established image of Wallenberg, the contradictory line of argument may cause the reader nevertheless to get stuck on the stated assumptions: So Wallenberg personally never cared for the Jews? And he went to Budapest only to conduct business?

Levine's 'modus operandi' is in many aspects highly selective; relevant studies on Wallenberg's mission, fate and afterlife as carried out by Rudolph Philipp, Christoph Gann, Susanne Berger, and Ulf Zander are missing in this book. Furthermore, it is problematic when interesting observations made by other scholars are presented as if they were Levine's own. Maybe one problem is that it is not clear which readership Levine intended to reach with the book. The mainstream reader may not take this academic publication as a starting point to revise the common image of Wallenberg. And other scholars will soon see that despite Levine's repetitive stressing of his role as professional historian and his obligation to get the facts right, neither accuracy nor academic scrutiny is characteristic of this study. For instance, Wallenberg did not use a regular passport during his early business travels in Nazi-occupied Europe, but a type of diplomatic passport (Kabinettspass). Mistakes like this would be excusable if they were less frequent or less relevant. But Wallenberg's background and earlier activities may well have played a decisive role when he was chosen for the humanitarian mission to Budapest, and perhaps also in the reasons for why the Soviets arrested him. Without discussing relevant facts of his earlier professional and personal life it is impossible to provide a reliable contextualization of Wallenberg's role in Hungary.

2012 will be the centenary of Wallenberg's

birthday, and commemorations and festivities will once again highlight him in many countries worldwide. A number of scholars are currently working on biographies and on a deeper evaluation of the rescue mission of 1944–45. So there is good hope that additional and perhaps more insightful and nuanced analyses of this subject will be available shortly.

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