

FRANK VAJDA THANKS RAOUL WALLENBERG FOR SAVING HIS LIFE.

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Professor of Clinical Neuropharmacology at Monash University in Melbourne, Frank Vajda, who thanks Raoul Wallenberg for saving his life:

“We were lined up in front of a machine gun near a wall and we were standing there for a long time ... then some people appeared, and I was told later that it was Raoul Wallenberg and his team.”

Interview:

Frank Vajda is a neurologist and Professor of Clinical Neuropharmacology at Monash University in Melbourne. He was born in Budapest in 1935 and today divides his time between doing research in neuropharmacology and seeking the truth about the fate of Raoul Wallenberg. Frank Vajda was nine years old in 1944 when he was, one of tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews, saved by the Swedish diplomat, Raoul Wallenberg.



Frank Vajda's translation of Jenö Lévai's book about Raoul Wallenberg (left), published in Hungary in 1948 and described by Swedish diplomat Per Anger as "the most authentic and well documented description of

Wallenberg's work in Budapest", was published in 1988 and re-printed in 2002.

In April 2003, Frank Vajda was honoured by the King of Sweden who conferred on him the Royal Order of the Polar Star, first class for his work in memory of Raoul Wallenberg.

Vajda has been head of the Free Wallenberg Committee and has been associated with other projects that have commemorated Wallenberg including naming the Australian centre for neuropharmacology after the Swedish hero.

Tell us what happened October 15, 1944.

Frank Vajda: I was born on October 14 so October 15 is indelibly etched in my memory. On the 14th we had a birthday and on the 15th the regent of Hungary Admiral Horthy announced that he was seeking peace with the Allies because the war was lost. At this time I was in a protected house with my mother. My father had been murdered. He was deported by the Hungarians, taken to Auschwitz, survived Auschwitz, but murdered later. We went deliriously happy and celebrated because we thought the war was over. The following day I was playing in the back garden of this protected house, marked by the multiple emblems of various neutral countries, and I came in to find on the ground floor of this place my 30-odd year old mother, a slight, blue-eyed lady, engaged in an altercation with about half a dozen terrorist thugs, 20 year old gangsters armed to the teeth with hand grenades, machine guns and wearing swastikas. They were the Hungarian equivalent of the extreme right-wing. They were demanding to know why the Jews had torn off the Jewish star. And my mother, who was fearless, very brave and intelligent, and here I want to quote an old saying that goes "God could not be everywhere so he created mothers", answered that Admiral Horthy had said the war was over. Everyone was trying to get my mother to keep quiet and when I came in I also tried to do that. The thugs then decided to take the women who did not have the stars sewn properly on them

with them. The women tried desperately to quickly put the stars back on but they were required to be sewn on tightly and so the thugs lined them up, I think there were 29 women. I said I was going as well but the thugs would not allow me and my mother also asked me to stay there. It was not because I was brave but I did not want to lose my mother. So I insisted on going and we were walked from this protected house to some military barracks. It was a hive of activity with lots of machine guns and other arms. This was on the day the new government took power. We were lined up in front of a machine gun near a wall and we were standing there for a long time. During that time one of the women fainted and the rumour went around that she had fainted because she had heard them discussing whether to shoot

Hungarian Jews hanged in a street corner

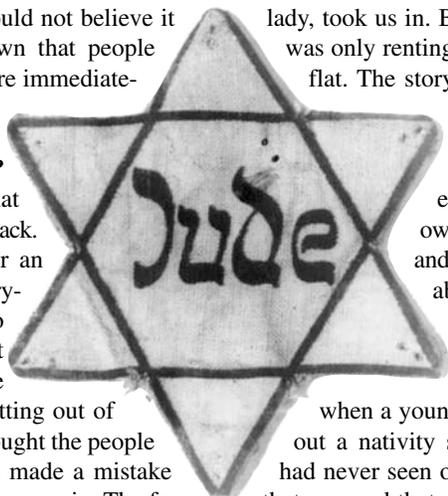


us on the spot or whether to take us to the Danube. It did not look very good. Then some people appeared, some civilians and I was told later that it was Raoul Wallenberg and his team. There was a calm discussion and following this we were taken back by a civilian to our protected house. When people saw us they could not believe it because we had known that people who were arrested were immediately shot or deported.

What happened then?

It was unbelievable that we were allowed to go back. About two hours later an ambulance arrived carrying some people who had tried to commit suicide and when we saw the policemen getting out of the ambulance, we thought the people realized that they had made a mistake and they had come for us again. The fear was so enormous, we took off the Jewish stars and with our false papers, jumped off one of the windows in the back of the place and walked off to catch a tram, all the time worried that we would be recognized as belonging to the group that was to be killed. We went to the non-Jewish part of Budapest and blended in with the people. The problem was there was nowhere for us to stay because our Jewish friends were either in protected houses or had been killed or deported and we were too afraid to go to our non-Jewish friends because we could not endanger their lives. So we went to different food places and walked around and went to the movies. We had a key to a flat that belonged to an uncle of mine who was a lawyer. It was a sealed flat so we had to wait until it was

(Above) *The Star of David that all Jews were required to wear.* (Below) *Jews lining up in Budapest to acquire protective Schutz-Passes.*



dark before we could go there. We did not dare to go to sleep or go to the toilet and flush in case somebody would realize that there were people in the sealed flat. We spent a horrible night and we left very early in the morning. We did this a few more times and then a former cleaning lady, a very fine lady, took us in. But she was so poor she was only renting a bed in a one-roomed flat. The story was that we had been bombed out of our house in the country. That was fine for a day but then early in the morning the owner of the flat came back and interrogated my mother about our story and she lied and did it quite well. Then there was another close shave when a young boy in the house took out a nativity scene with Jesus and I had never seen one and so I asked what that was and that gave us away. After that we left immediately. What we found out later was that the man who had interrogated us was a terrorist who was after Jews so that was a terrible close shave.

Where did you find safety?

We went back to the protected house and experienced two months of bombing, starving, atrocities, hiding, abuse. About a week before liberation the Arrow Cross broke in again and we were woken to screaming. We went to the basement with our hands up. This was about the 8th of January, a week or so before Wallenberg disappeared. They started checking our documents. There were several hundred people in the house and many had Swedish passes, some signed by Wallenberg or by other diplomats, others had passes from other neutral countries. We did not have individual passes, we just had a collective one. At some point my mother said we are not risking this again, we are going to hide in the bathroom behind the information desk on the ground floor so while everyone was going to get their documents we rushed into the bathroom and we stood in an wardrobe in it. We fitted in easily because my mother was slight and I was nine. And we stood there for three hours in bitter cold. When we got out everyone was crying because they had taken 35 people away. One of my aunts had been taken away and her son was completely distraught. He was told to go to Raoul Wallenberg because he was the only person in the world who could help him. They found out where Wallenberg was because the phones

were still operating. My cousin went, without his star, early in the morning to find Raoul Wallenberg at a specific address. He has told us, with great reverence and sadness, how he found Raoul Wallenberg in this flat. He looked terribly terribly tired, he had a slight Swedish accent but spoke perfect German. He wasn't terribly well dressed. My cousin reported to him what had happened. Wallenberg said: I can't do anything more for you, they are already hunting for me, I am hiding, I am in a different place every night and unfortunately the people who were taken away are no longer living, they take them to the party house and shoot them right away. Wallenberg cried with my cousin but said once again: I'm terribly terribly sorry I can't do anything for you. My cousin told me this many many times.

Do you think it is possible to get the true story of what happened to Raoul Wallenberg in the Soviet Union?

I believe the truth exists and is hid- >>>

Raoul Gustav Wallenberg was born August 4, 1912, into the prominent Swedish Wallenberg financial family. He was sent to Budapest, Hungary in July 1944 under diplomatic cover to rescue Jews from the Holocaust. He issued protective "Schutz-Pass" passports from the Swedish embassy that identified the bearers as Swedish nationals awaiting repatriation and engaged in rescue missions. It is impossible to determine how many Jews were rescued by his actions, but he is credited with saving as many as a hundred thousand people condemned to certain deaths by the Nazis during World War II. On January 17, 1945, he was arrested on the direct order of Soviet Deputy Commissar for Defense Nikolai Bulganin. It is probable that the order came from Stalin, for reasons never disclosed. In 1957, responding to diplomatic pressure, the Soviets announced that Wallenberg had died of a heart attack in 1947 in Lubyanka prison in Moscow, but this has been disputed. Raoul Wallenberg is an honorary citizen of Israel, USA and Canada.





“Putin should just understand the goodwill he would generate by revealing the fate of the most important historic person during World War II”

>>> den. I don't believe that the Russians have destroyed every archive and every document. It is not possible in a system like that. I believe that there are numerous archives and it may be that it is one of the provincial ones like maybe in one of the smaller towns, hidden under a different name or hidden in a former party archive or a KGB archive or a presidential archive, which I think is the most likely because it is such a powerful office. The president probably has access to knowledge regarding everything to do with the state. Putin should just understand the amount of goodwill he would generate in terms of human rights issues by revealing the fate of the single most important historic person during World War II, which the Russians call the Great Patriotic War and quite justly because it defended civilization from barbarity. He could achieve a major humanitarian coup. It should be very tempting for a man in his position. If Putin realized that with a single, maybe 10-minute effort, by giving an order, and remember his order is law because this is still a very powerful single presidential state, he is an absolute ruler, he could actually create goodwill that otherwise may take him months and years of political reforms to achieve. I do believe he has the power to find out. Gorbachev tried and he gave orders to the then head of KGB whom he had appointed to go to the archives and look for Wallenberg. The man tried and was informed by an official that there was nothing. So he sacked that official. Then he went to the new appointee and he also said that there was nothing and he was also sacked. Then the third man came and he found a

number of things, personal belongings, diplomatic passport of which I have a copy, a notebook, some coins, addresses, appointments and dates of Raoul Wallenberg and his contacts in Budapest in 1944. This was returned to the family, Raoul Wallenberg's half brother, Guy von Dardel and his half sister, Nina Lagergren. The Russians said that these things just happened to be found accidentally somewhere. That is absolute nonsense. How could that be found accidentally. It was found because they made a concerted attempt to find it. I believe that the truth exists, it should be revealed and I believe that the pressure should be put on if such a thing is possible. It is not pressure in a political or military sense, but to show Putin and his successors the gain by showing an adherence to the truth and justice for someone who was essentially an ally. Wallenberg was actually helping to fight the Nazi monolith, the Nazi juggernaut and did more than any single underground army was able to do in saving human lives. When I took on the Wallenberg cause in 1981 it was on the basis that I believed that he was alive. Passionately. Unfortunately because of the time that had lapsed between 1945 and 2007 he is been imprisoned for 62 years it is no longer realistic to believe that he is alive although it is not totally impossible. But now we want the truth, we want to know what happened to him. We don't know whether he is dead, we don't know when he died, we don't know how long he suffered. In many ways I don't wish him to have suffered up till today.

What can be done to get the Russians to act?

Maybe it is through interviews like this. Interviews in English are important. To get more people to know about this. A very important thing that has happened recently is that the current British prime minister,

Raoul Wallenberg in Budapest



Gordon Brown has written a book called *Courage* in English about ten heroes and it includes people like Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King and then Raoul Wallenberg. That chapter on Wallenberg is positively moving, it is brilliantly written. It is written in a spiritual sense. I am not a religious person but this was very moving. Brown talks about Raoul Wallenberg's motives, the personality, the kindness, the humanity, the wish to throw himself totally into something, regardless of risks to his own personal life and safety. And this is someone who did not have to do it. He came from a distinguished family, he was well-educated, spoke many languages, had a great sense of humour, loved life, women, friends, communication, mimicry, acting, play-acting. He was charismatic. He was a very great man. His ancestors were great men. His grandfather was a very distinguished Swedish diplomat. His half-brother was in the Nobel Committee, awarding the Nobel Prize. His sister, Nina Lagergren is a great art historian. Raoul Wallenberg was a very clever man but he did what he did putting his own life at stake, totally as a matter of humanity for people he did not know. Gordon Brown feels for that and his book conveys it probably better than most other books. I just want to add that Raoul Wallenberg was also fortunate to be given the chance to carry out this unsurpassed rescue operation with the backing that he had.

Who did Wallenberg actually work for?

There are a number of modern historians, for whom I have not very much respect, trying to paint Raoul Wallenberg as being an agent of this and that secret organization, or a professional spy, that he was doing dealings. This is absolute nonsense. I lived through that, I've seen what was going on. People were trying to survive. You did not know from one minute to the next if you were going to be murdered, you were going to be bombed, you were going to be deported. If they were going to hold you up, beat you, torture you, shoot you. Raoul Wallenberg was aware of that as he must have been to go and save me and many other people in terrible situations. How could he have been motivated by other things such as working for a secret spy organization, supplying information. That is a very demanding full-time exacting precise job. If he provided any information for any spy group, it was part of what was expected of any neutral or western person travelling in enemy territory. It was naturally expected if you happened to see a convoy of 50 trucks carrying soldiers to

the front that you report that to your embassy. That is not being a professional spy. All these people attributing base motives and commercial motives to someone who for 98 percent of his time risked his life to save human life, I think it is despicable and these people are trying to create a business, an occupation, financial reward, promotion, academic success by taking down, by denigrating someone like Wallenberg. It is contemptible. I think this is because there is a tremendous rivalry and competition and a lot of less than goodwill between historians and this is a question of creating a name and personal gain by altering the reality of what went on and trying to bring in nuances to justify and explain, to distort and alter. This is just the tall poppy syndrome, there is an attempt to cut somebody of importance to size. That's what historians are trying to do. If you are trying to survive and save lives, whatever mistakes you make are incidental and should not be highlighted. Whatever Per Anger has said I regard as indisputable. I also regard him as a very great man. He worked with Raoul and he was a great humanitarian. I knew him as a personal friend. And I give complete credit to his story about how Raoul Wallenberg in one act saved the lives of 60 to 70 000 people in the ghetto.

In your mind which is the last credible report of Raoul Wallenberg being alive?

I don't know the answer. I am not part of any official Swedish committee on this. I have not been told of any confidential information as it has been received by the Swedish foreign office from the various Swedish embassies or individual people reporting to governments or to the family. I only know what many other people know and that is that there were many many sightings over the

A Russian soldier reading an article about Raoul Wallenberg and the last known photograph of Raoul Wallenberg.

years. There have been people who have met Wallenberg in various transit camps and that was in the 70s and I am not sure how credible that is. There was a dentist, Kaplan, who was jailed for sending some information to Israel and in 1978 he called his daughter to say he was well and now out of prison and told her he met the Swede who had been in there for a long time for saving Jews. That information I do believe. There were previous to that absolutely credible sightings suggesting that people had either been in the same cell with Wallenberg and had actually physically seen him and spoken with him. These reports were from people who were later released but they are from before Wallenberg's actual alleged death in 1947. Credible since than is Simon Weisenthal finding a man who testified that he met Wallenberg after July 1947 and that I think could discount the July 1947 date and there were a number of other reports like that. There was another man who met Wallenberg in a Lubianka Prison lift. And there was a lady called Nanna Schwartz who was a Swedish cardiologist who met the head of the cardiac institute in the Soviet Union who said that he looked after Wallenberg in an institute and asked Ms Swartz if she wanted to see him. She answered: No, I want to take him home. The Russian doctor said that he could not arrange that so unfortunately she missed the opportunity of seeing Wallenberg. I believe that lady too. Subsequently the Russian doctor was suddenly found dead, allegedly from a heart attack. Before that he disclaimed any conversation with the Swedish lady and said that she had misunderstood him.

What more do we know?

There are many more second-hand reports but the ones I have named are more substantiated. Do we believe many, perhaps two dozen or three dozen people who go to



Dr. Frank Vajda at a Melbourne monument to Raoul Wallenberg, that he was personally engaged in erecting.

various Swedish groups around the world, to embassies, consulates or arrive in Stockholm and contact the family and say I've met Raoul Wallenberg in Soviet Union and he said go to any Swedish office or embassy and just say you've seen Raoul Wallenberg at such and such a Soviet prison. Do you believe any of these people who come and tell you that and risk their lives or do you believe the KGB which is now nominally dissolved which we could regard as a former organization of very dubious repute, actually a criminal organization putting out statements. I don't believe the KGB, I believe what witnesses have said if there are many of them from different countries around the world where there seems to be a consistent pattern. It is possible that there is a conspiracy and they deliberately asked these individual people to lie but I find it very difficult to imagine that these people would act on the instructions of the KGB and continue lying even after they are in the free world because it is just not conceivable. Many people state somewhat the same things at different times. People from different backgrounds are consistently interrogated by Swedish experts and found to not be lying. I tend to believe them.

