

Ingrid Carlberg Raoul Wallenberg: *The Man Who Saved Thousands of Hungarian Jews from the Holocaust* (with an introduction by Kofi Annan) (original in Swedish)

Norstedts 2012; Editions Limited, translated hardcover edition (2016); MacLehose Press, translated paperback edition (2017) 640 pages

*Jan Mutton**

In times of growing nationalism, arrogance and bullying in international relations, it is refreshing to read the biography of a man, the Swede Raoul Wallenberg, who, almost by coincidence and without any predestination, was faced with the horrors of genocide and human rights abuses and who seized the moment to save thousands of Jews from the Nazi Holocaust in Budapest, the capital of Hungary. To do so, he used imagination and determination, only to be trapped in the end and to disappear, at the age of 33 years, into the prison system of the Soviet Union after the liberation of Budapest by the Red Army in 1945.

In 2012 Ingrid Carlberg wrote an extensive, well-researched and well-documented biography of Wallenberg including a bibliography and lists of sources and interviews. It was translated in 2015 into English by Ebba Segerberg and published in paperback by MacLehose Press in London. The introduction to the English edition is by former United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, who died in 2018 and who was married to Wallenberg's niece.

The biography may be subdivided in three parts. In part 1, Carlberg gives one a full but concise picture of Wallenberg's family background, his education and training and his professional life in as much as it is necessary to understand the character of the man who jumped into action to save lives. Part 2 is, from a human rights point of view, the most interesting as it explains in detail Wallenberg's *modus operandi*, the procedures he developed and the imagination he displayed to work as effectively as possible. Part 3 covers the endless search for Wallenberg after his disappearance from Budapest into the Soviet prison system, mainly by his family as Swedish and international official channels were, within the context of the Cold War, hesitant to confront Moscow.

* Research Associate in Foreign Policy and Human Rights, Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria, South Africa.

Throughout the biography Carlberg reminds us of a number of interesting background issues which give us a better understanding of that dark period of World War II. First, there is the late reaction of the Allies, who were at war with Germany, such as the United States of America (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), to become involved with the Jewish question. Second, there is the issue of the role that Sweden played as 'neutral country' with respect to Nazi Germany seeing post-war Germany as a viable democratic alternative for the rising power of the Soviet Union. This explains, for example, why German companies were placed under temporary Swedish cover during the war, to protect them from reprisals by the Allies, or why German troop transports were allowed to cross through Sweden on their way to occupy Norway. Third, there is a good description of the special place Hungary occupied during the war as an ally of Germany. Fourth, this biography describes well how Sweden tried to remain neutral after the war and develop a constructive relationship with the Soviet Union at the expense of diplomatic initiatives to free Wallenberg from Soviet prisons.

Raoul Wallenberg was born in Stockholm on 4 August 1912. Although his parents were not very wealthy, he grew up in a well-educated and cultured upper-class family, the grandson of Sweden's envoy to Japan and a junior relative in the Swedish Wallenberg banking dynasty. It must be emphasised that these privileged relations did not play an important role in his professional life, nor in his diplomatic mission in Hungary or in the search for him in Soviet prisons. On the contrary, the ambiguous role which the Wallenberg dynasty and 'neutral' Sweden had played *vis-à-vis* Nazi Germany may have played against him when the Soviets decided to capture and imprison him. Wallenberg was very much his own man, which explains the determination and courage with which he operated in Budapest.

Carlberg describes well how nothing in Wallenberg's formative years, apart from a strong interest in international politics and a natural empathy for injustice, hinted at the heroism he was to display during his mission in Hungary. On the contrary, he was a rather average young man who had trained, not as a diplomat or as a lawyer, but as an architect. Following his studies, in the mid-1930s, he gained commercial experience in South Africa and Palestine. Both experiences broadened his thinking and made him sensitive to social injustice and inequality in the world, the racial segregation in South Africa and the tension between Jewish immigrants and the local populations in Palestine. Upon his return to Sweden, at a tense time of rising Nazi political power and German military build-up in Europe, Wallenberg entered into several business ventures, finally becoming a partner in the Mid-European Trading Company, which specialised in food imports from Hungary.

The author explains well how and why the Jewish question only became an urgent topic in the latter part of the war. This clarifies why Wallenberg only arrived in Budapest towards the end of the war, a few months before Soviet troops liberated Hungary. In this regard she points at the lack of general awareness because the horrors took place behind the curtain of Nazi secrecy. The first report on the extent of the Holocaust only appeared among the Allies in 1942. She also explains how the main focus of the Allies was on winning the war and having peace rather than be sidetracked by humanitarian rescue operations.

The rising awareness of the Jewish question in the second half of the war brought neutral Sweden more into the orbit of the Allied forces such as the US and the UK, and led, for example, to efforts to save the Norwegian Jews from the Holocaust. Later on, it would allow the Swedes to send Wallenberg as a diplomat to become involved in Jewish rescue operations in Hungary. In the US, internal pressure led President Roosevelt to establish the War Refugee Board (WRB), an independent authority, funded by US-based Jewish organisations, to lead Jewish rescue operations in Europe. However, the WRB went beyond rescue in Europe and was also interested in developing a post-war reconstruction programme for the continent. It is important that the author drew our attention to this dimension as it may have pushed the Soviets, who were weary of Western intervention in post-war Eastern Europe and their future sphere of influence, to capture Wallenberg after the liberation of Budapest.

Carlberg equally explains well the special role played by Hungary as an ally of Nazi Germany, fighting with the Germans against the Soviet Union but by and large maintaining an independent domestic policy which left the Hungarian Jews, unlike those in the rest of Nazi-occupied Europe, mostly untouched. This changed, however, when Germany, frustrated with the liberal Hungarian government and under pressure from mounting war losses, in March 1944 militarily occupied Hungary and installed a pro-German Hungarian government. The Holocaust was now suddenly also facing the Hungarian Jews. In a short period of time, more than 400 000 Jews were deported to the Nazi gas chambers.

Sweden, as were Switzerland, Portugal and Turkey, was neutral in the war. It had an embassy in Budapest and, consequently, was the indicated partner to be approached by the WRB for a rescue operation in Hungary. At that time Wallenberg was a young businessman involved in trade with Hungary. It did not take long for diplomatic, political and economic circles in Stockholm to identify him as the ideal man to take on the WRB work, given his enterprising character, his past international exposure and his command of the English and German languages. Sweden would offer the diplomatic cover and add him as a diplomat, as special humanitarian attaché, to their embassy in Budapest. Sweden paid for the administrative costs while the WRB gave him the mandate and paid for the operational costs. He arrived in Hungary in July 1944. He would disappear in January 1945.

When Wallenberg took up his post as humanitarian attaché in the Swedish embassy in Budapest, recent deportations of Jews had been enormous. Of the estimated 700 000 Jews, only about 250 000 were left in the country, 200 000 of which were supposed to live in Budapest. At the time of his arrival, deportations had temporarily ceased but internment camps had multiplied and Jews were still sent to labour camps. Their general situation was dire and the sword of extinction continuously hung over them. At that time, only a few hundred were under Swedish protection, and approximately 7 000 were awaiting transfer to Palestine on the basis of Swiss emigration certificates.

Carlberg describes how Wallenberg, in the face of the urgency and the magnitude of the situation, approached his mission not as a conventional diplomat but rather as a businessman, clear-sighted, intelligent, courageous, undeterred, determined, independent and driven, even with bluff, to obtain results. He always remained careful, though, never to

compromise the credibility of the Swedish diplomatic service. His office soon grew to a few hundred staffers, funded by Sweden. Fortunately, the political climate allowed him to move around, to make contacts and to set up his rescue operation. He built a network of contacts that covered all political tendencies in Budapest, ranging from the Jewish community and Jewish organisations to the government in place, the security institutions, the Nazi occupier as well as anti-Nazi political organisations and his colleagues in humanitarian work, especially the Red Cross and the Swiss embassy.

Wallenberg very soon realised that it would be impossible to find a solution for all Jews in Hungary, and decided to concentrate his efforts on the approximately 200 000 Jews in Budapest. He realised that the instrument of protection, so far used by the Swedes, namely, a protection certificate, delivered on the basis of connections with Sweden and stating that a person was on a collective passport, aroused the suspicion of the German occupier and was too cumbersome as a tool in the situation facing him.

Taking the Jews out of the country indeed seemed impossible. Therefore, they needed to be protected locally. Keeping them in Hungary was also less costly than transporting them to Sweden.

As a consequence Wallenberg developed a new document, namely, a 'protective passport' which would not be the official passport or a vague protection certificate, but which would appear very professional and would be printed on embassy paper, with photographs, Swedish emblems, signatures and embassy stamps, satisfying both the Hungarian and Swedish authorities and not provoking the wrath of the Nazi occupier. It was a letter of promise, stating that a person intended to depart for Sweden and would, until that time – highly unlikely given the disrupted transport systems – remain under Swedish protection. These letters were only valid for travel in combination with a collective passport. Such letters could be mass-produced. Wallenberg, however, ensured that the credibility of the document would not be jeopardised, that Swedish diplomacy remained respected, that no corruption took place and that each individual application was examined thoroughly. By being in possession of such a document, Jews could leave internment camps and be housed in Swedish protection buildings.

The second part of the plan, as Carlberg describes it, was to find accommodation for as many Jews as possible, even for those without a 'protective passport', in houses abandoned by their owners or in properties made available by the Hungarian authorities, and to place these people under Swedish diplomatic protection. By August 1944, approximately 40 houses in the international ghetto had been made available to house some 10 000 Jews under either Swedish diplomatic protection or Swedish Red Cross protection. Together with housing came the challenge of the distribution of food, clothes and medicine, not only for the Jews in Swedish protection houses but also for Jews in the international ghetto and for those in internment camps in Budapest or in labour camps elsewhere in the country.

By October 1944 Wallenberg had established a well-oiled protection mechanism. However, his life became more complicated when the Nazi occupier became frustrated by Hungary's signing of a ceasefire with the

Soviets, resumed the deportation of Jews and installed a brutal local government of their choice. Wallenberg's determination and enthusiasm drove him beyond the mere protection of Jews through a Swedish protection process and pushed him to intervene on their behalf in many respects, in the face of deportations, extra-judicial killings and internment in labour camps.

By the time the war ended, according to Carlberg's biography, roughly 70 000 Jews had survived in the main ghetto of Budapest, and approximately 35 000 in the Swedish protection houses. It could be said that even though hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews had perished, the efforts of one single man, supported by the Swedes and the WRB, in a few months had saved approximately 15 000 Jews.

While advancing to liberate Europe, the Soviet Union kept a very close watch on events taking place, as it wanted to bring large parts of Eastern Europe into the Soviet sphere of influence. The Soviets, and Stalin in particular, had always been concerned about Wallenberg and the operations of the American WRB, the Swedish connections with Germany early on in the war, Wallenberg's contacts and negotiations with Nazi authorities in Budapest over the Jewish question and his commitment to the Jewish plight in general. It should be recalled that the Soviet Union had known its own persecution of Jews.

When the Russians arrived in Budapest in mid-January 1945, Wallenberg wished to discuss with them the return of Jewish property to their rightful owners. He also wanted to discuss his proposal for a general reconstruction programme for the country. Wallenberg never returned from his meeting with the Russian military. He was taken prisoner and, as was discovered later, brought to Moscow upon direct instructions from Stalin.

In the third part of the book Ingrid Carlberg describes the relentless efforts, mainly by Wallenberg's parents, to establish his whereabouts. They never did, and never found closure. In January 1945 Wallenberg simply disappeared from Budapest and was never seen or heard of again outside the Soviet Union.

Initially, for some years the Soviets denied any knowledge about Wallenberg. They claimed that he had remained in Hungary, indirectly suggesting that he had been killed by the Nazis or by the pro-Nazi government installed towards the end of the war and in place at the time of the liberation by the Soviets. For a while it was not difficult for the Soviets to maintain this position as several people, for unknown reasons, claimed to have seen him around Budapest or in Hungary. Such statements gradually subsided, however, since they could not be corroborated by facts.

However, as the years passed it became more and more clear that Wallenberg was held prisoner in the Soviet Union. Several prisoners of war, who had been liberated from the Soviet Union in the years following the war, testified having seen or heard or having been in contact with Wallenberg in several Soviet prisons. When conflicting statements also surfaced by persons connected with the Soviet system, authorities could no longer remain in denial. They finally construed some evidence and

admitted that he had died in prison some years after the war. The family never accepted this explanation. They continued to fight, but in vain.

They were rather alone in this struggle. Their own Swedish government remained aloof throughout the ensuing decades. Generally speaking, Sweden wanted to build relations as strong as possible with the Soviet Union and wanted to be a bridge between the Soviet Union and the West during the Cold War. Wallenberg fell victim to global politics. In the second place, as a matter of ethical policy, Stockholm continued to refuse an exchange between Wallenberg and Soviet prisoners in Sweden, claiming that human beings could not be the object of barter.

For a long time, also internationally, the Wallenberg case did not arouse much emotion. It took the more ethical and human rights-based administration of President Jimmy Carter of the US at the end of the 1970s to increase international attention. It cannot be said that any clarification of Wallenberg's whereabouts ensued but, at least, he started receiving the international recognition he deserved. He slowly became recognised as one of history's heroes in the protection against genocide and crimes against humanity. Around the world streets and squares were named after him but, most importantly, he was made an 'honorary citizen' of countries such as Australia, Canada, Israel and the US, where he became only the second person to be so distinguished since Winston Churchill.

This biography should be read, especially by human rights students and practitioners, as it invigorates and shows that, even when circumstances work against you, there is always a way to fight for the defence of human rights and to save people from atrocities.