

During the waning months of World War II, a young man climbed atop the roof of a train ready to start for Auschwitz. Ignoring shouts—and later bullets—from Nazis and soldiers of the Hungarian Arrow Cross, he began handing fake Swedish passports to the astonished Jews inside and ordering them to walk to a caravan of cars marked in Swedish colors. By the time the cars were loaded, the soldiers were so dumbfounded by the young man's actions that they simply stood by and let the cars pass, carrying to safety dozens of Jews who had been headed for the death camps.

Virtually alone in Hungary, one of the most perilous places in Europe in 1944, Raoul Wallenberg worked such miracles on a daily basis, using as his weapons courage, self-confidence, and his deep, unwavering belief in the rightness of his mission. His deeds inspired hope, courage, and action in many people who otherwise felt powerless. No one knows how many people he directly or indirectly saved from certain death, though it is estimated at more than 100,000.

Wallenberg was 32 years old in 1944, a wealthy, politically connected, upper-class Swede from a prominent, well-respected family. When asked by the U.S. War Refugee Board to enter Hungary and help stop Hitler's slaughter of innocent civilians, Wallenberg had everything to lose and nothing to gain. Yet he left his life of safety and comfort to enter Hungary under cover as a diplomat, with the mission of saving as many of Hungary's Jews as possible. Wallenberg boldly demanded—and was granted—a great deal of latitude in the methods he would use. He personally conceived the plan to use false Swedish passports and designed them himself as masterpieces of the formal, official-looking pomp that so impressed the Nazis. Later, as Wallenberg plunged into the midst of the struggle to free Jews from the trains and death marches, he convinced his enemies to accept such things as library cards and laundry tickets as Swedish passports. The Nazi and Hungarian Arrow Cross soldiers, accustomed to yielding unquestioningly to authority, yielded to Wallenberg on the strength of his character, personal authority, and courage.

Wallenberg never returned from Hungary, but apparently was captured as a suspected anti-Soviet spy, and died in a Soviet prison. He gave up his life fighting for a cause he believed in, and his actions made a real difference in the world.