Raoul Wallenberg's Rescue of Vera Koppel (1944)

Abstract

Raoul Wallenberg (born 1912, exact date of death unknown) was a Swedish businessman and humanitarian. As Germany's defeat became increasingly likely by 1944, the Swedish government and the Swedish Red Cross, two self-declared neutral authorities, sent Wallenberg with the support of the World Refugee Board to Hungary to aid Hungarian Jews. After 1942, the Hungarian authorities, not out of humanitarian concern but instead frustrated by their unequal partnership with the Nazi regime, had resisted introducing further antisemitic legislation. This reluctance included by 1944 a stalled program of mass deportation of Jews to the East, which further strained the German-Hungarian relationship and created an opportunity for neutral influences to try and protect Hungary's Jews. After arriving in Budapest in May 1944, Wallenberg helped to distribute thousands of *Schutzpässe* [protective passports] to Jews throughout the city. These passports effectively identified their holders as subjects of the Kingdom of Sweden and protected under its declared neutrality. The documents were seen as only quasi-legal but were nonetheless respected by Hungarian and Nazi authorities. Further, Wallenberg and his associates rented 32 buildings throughout the city and placed large Swedish flags in their front entrances, designating them as neutral. These spaces were used as safe havens for Hungary's Jews.

This interview, a postwar oral testimony given to the International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation by a Hungarian-born Jew and holder of a *Schutzpass*, Vera Koppel, is revealing of life in Budapest during the later stage of the war. As historians, we can gain only a small appreciation for the lengths Koppel's mother went to get a *Schutzpass* and to shield her daughter from the daily attacks on Jews by both Hungarian and Nazi authorities in the city.

Wallenberg's efforts saved thousands of Jews and their families from deportation in 1944 and motivated other organizations, like the International Committee of the Red Cross, to also issue protective papers to the most vulnerable as the war came to a close. Raoul Wallenberg disappeared after the Red Army liberated Budapest and installed their own communist regime. His fate is largely unknown, though most historians suspect he was arrested by Soviet authorities and sent to a labor camp, where he likely died under harsh conditions.

Source

Q: What is your birth name, and when and where were you born?

A: I was born Veronica Hausen in Budapest, Hungary on August 19, 1935.

Q: Your married name is Koppel?

A: Yes. I was born Veronica, but everybody always calls me Vera.

Q: Tell us about your family. Do you have any siblings?

A: I am an only child. In those days, around 1935, people were already starting to worry about the war, so I don't think people could, or wanted, to have many children.

Q: Did you grow up in a Jewish community?

A: We lived in District 7 of Budapest, which had a lot of Jewish people. I think all of my friends were

Jewish, but the subject didn't come up, or if it did, I don't remember it.

We were religious people. I went to a religious all-girls' school but only for three grades before the Jewish school was closed and the persecution started.

Q: What was your life like as a little girl before the war?

A: I went to school. Because I lived in the big city of Budapest, I walked to the school. I walked to school, as far as I can remember, from at least the second grade on. It was far away, and I had to cross major streets. I still remember my mother would give me two slices of salami and five cents – or something like that – and every day on my way to school, I would go to a bakery, where they cut my roll, and I would take my lunch with me.

Before I was old enough to attend school, my mother took me to the park, which was the central park, City Park, every single day. Later, every afternoon, we went ice-skating. It was a nice middle-class life.

My parents tried to leave the country in 1938. They sold everything they had, and they bought tickets on a ship to Palestine. I'm not sure about the exact date, but that ship was the first ship to be stopped and the individuals told they could no longer leave. So, we went back with a little furniture and whatever we had left, and we lived our lives in hunger.

Because I was young, I was not aware of what was going on at that time. In Budapest, there were not really many restrictions until late 1943 or 1944. After that, we were not allowed to have too many things because of the war.

Q: When did you first notice antisemitism?

A: I first noticed antisemitism with the advent of the labor camps. Still, though, it did not hit me because all of my friends' fathers went. I didn't know these camps were strictly for the Jews because all of my friends were Jewish.

When antisemitism really hit me for the first time was when the notice came that the Jews had to move to certain houses designated with yellow stars and our house was not one of them.

I don't know how they communicated with each other, but my mother found out from a friend of hers who had a son and whom she knew from the park, that they had a house, or building, that was designated with a yellow star. We moved in there, not knowing it was still a luxury that we got a room of our own and were able to take one or two pieces of our furniture with us. Life was different because, at that time, the whole building only had women, children and elderly individuals.

I do remember that one day an ordinance came stating that all the women had to pack food and clothing, and they all had to go to a large soccer field, I think it was. Everybody was worried they were never going to come back, and they wondered what was going to happen. (My mother told me much later that the superintendent in our house, in our building, who was not Jewish, said to her as she was leaving the building, "Don't worry! We will all be in charge of your children," meaning [she believed] they would never come back.)

The women left, and then the building only had children and the elderly as occupants. Luckily, late one night, the people who had been taken came back. The transport hadn't gone. Where they were supposed to go, what was supposed to happen, I don't think anybody knew.

Q: When was this?

A: It was 1944. The men were in Hungarian labor camps where they did coal work.

In Hungary, we knew very little about what was going on, but every day on the radio, we heard which city, which little town was clean of Jews. This meant the Jews in these towns had had to pack their clothing again and be taken to the working camps.

Q: They started removing Jews from the small towns around Budapest before concentrating on those in the city.

A: Right. The towns outside of Budapest were the first to be "Jew-free."

One particular day, my mother heard that the towns her sister and mother lived in had been taken, so she said to her friends, "Okay, I am going. I want to be with them," and her friends said, "Don't be silly! Don't go! You never know who you are going to meet." But, again, nobody knew where they were going. That's what I remember.

Q: Can you tell us how your mother received a *Schutzpass*?

A: I don't know how people knew what they did because you could only go out during designated hours. I don't know where people met. This was before cars, before telephones. People would tell you things and you never knew, I suppose, if the news you heard was true or not. But this was Europe.

All I know is that one day, my mother went out and didn't tell me where she was going. The next day, she went out again, and only after the war did I really find out that she had heard that in one embassy they were giving certificates, and with these certificates, you could move into some protected houses. Her friends kept telling her not to go because it was dangerous. (As people stood in line waiting for those certificates, the Nazis would come. They obviously knew that everybody standing there was Jewish, and if you were not lucky then they would take you away, who knows to where.)

But, one day, my mother came home with this winning face. She had gotten this certificate. At the time, we didn't know it was a *Schutzpass*. I had no idea what it meant. To tell you the honest truth, I didn't know, and I'm not sure my mother knew, that it was Mr. Raoul Wallenberg who had issued it. All we knew was that there was this man who gave her this certificate.

Q: After receiving the *Schutzpass*, you moved into the safe house with your mother?

A: Yes. A few days after we received the *Schutzpass*, we packed and moved to this beautiful neighborhood close to the Danube River. This time, nobody had their own room. There were lots of people already there at this time, and we had a corner of a room. I still remember where that corner was. I don't remember how we ate, I don't remember what we ate, I don't remember how we got the food. The only thing I remember was that the European houses had high staircases all made out of marble.

At least once a day, every single day, the Nazis would come to check the people's identification papers. Even today, I can still hear them as they came upstairs, step by step, in their boots. One day, as they came closer and closer, everybody in the room got more scared and more scared, except for this one family with several children. Everybody was scared when the Nazis came, no matter what, but this family was less scared than the rest of us because they had legal documents. When the Nazis came, though, they took this family away because their papers looked different than the rest of ours. I never heard from them again.

Q: While you and your mother were in the safe house, you didn't know it was Raoul Wallenberg who had established it, right?

A: No. That is a very good question. We had no idea, and I'm not even sure if my mother found out before we left Hungary. I'm not sure. But, when we came to the United States, we started to hear stories, and we

knew that we had been in a Swedish protected house. That's when I found out.

Q: How long did you stay in the safe house?

A: I'm not sure how long I was there before my mother heard of an orphanage that was also protected by somebody and took me there. Again, I don't know how she received this news and found out about it.

I'm not sure how many children lived in the orphanage during peacetime, but by the time I got there – again, I can't forget it – there were mattresses from wall to wall, and we slept on these mattresses next to each other.

The other thing my mother was always able to do, though I don't know how, was get us kosher food when kosher food was hard to come by. I'm not sure how this came about, but my mother gave me a small piece of salami when she took me to this orphanage, and she said, "You eat this only when you are starving." I took this salami and put it under my mattress, and every night, when the children went to sleep, I took out my salami to smell it.

I remember this long, long hall in the orphanage, and at the end of the hall, behind this window, there were women. I am not sure if they were nurses or what their positions were. One night, I heard them say they were going to take the children to the ghetto. There was no ghetto in Budapest before so I had no idea what the ghetto was, but by the way they were talking about it, it didn't sound good. I woke up the girl who was sleeping right next to me, and I said, "They are going to take us to the ghetto." (As an adult, I realize the girl I woke up didn't know what the ghetto was either.) She was even more scared than I was, and she started to scream, "Vera said they are taking us to the ghetto!" That was the one and only time in my life that I was beaten by somebody. I said I had lied and the subject was closed. However, I wrote this little, open postcard to my mother, telling her they were going to take us to the ghetto, and I sent the postcard, but she didn't receive it.

Weeks later (I don't know how long afterward), we were lined up so they could take us to the ghetto. I was the smallest child there (I was only nine years old), and the policeman (the police took us, not the Nazis) was holding my hand. (The Hungarian police were probably worse to Jews than the Nazis because the Nazis did what they did because it was their job. The Hungarians took pleasure in it.) I still remember what I looked like in the wintertime. We were standing in a line, and I was in the front, and then I saw my mother. I said, "Mommy, mommy," and my mother said, "Don't call me mommy." I didn't understand why she said that. Much, much, much later, she explained that she hadn't been wearing a yellow star. She told the policeman that she had promised my mother, the Jew who was dying, that she would come and look for me. Here, our stories are different. I said to the policeman, "Somebody was looking for you over there." My mother told me he knew what was going on, so he left. My mother grabbed my hand, and we left the place.

That was the first day there was no public transportation because the bombing was so severe. We probably walked three hours. It might not have been a long walk, but I was still a child. I didn't know it at the time, but my mother had left Raoul Wallenberg's house because it was not safe anymore. There were too many *razias*, and they came to make the Jews' lives miserable.

Q: What are *razias*?

A: *Raziar* means "raiding." The Nazis just came, as I said, to make sure everybody had a paper. They checked more than once a day. By that time, there were lots of people who came from Romania, from Czechoslovakia, from Poland and had no identification papers of any kind. Even in the Wallenberg house, it was not enough to be a Hungarian Jew. You had to have the *Schutzpass* [or you would be taken away by the Nazis].

Q: What did you do after you and your mother reunited?

A: That was during wartime when the bombing was really severe in Budapest, and nobody had basements or shelters. Everybody who was able left the vicinity and went as far away from Budapest as possible. My mother talked to this lady who told her she knew where all the empty houses in the suburbs were. One particular family had left, and their house was empty. My mother and I moved in there.

Q: How did you survive before the end of the war?

A: People ask me, “What did you eat in those days?” Europe is different and certainly was different. There were no refrigerators, so everybody bought supplies for the whole year. [In the house] there were potatoes, there were onions, there was flour and there certainly were beans. We ate that food first. I do remember that during the last couple of days we had nothing left but beans, beans, beans and beans.

One night, we went out of our apartment to get some fresh air, and the next day there was bombing between us and the neighboring house. Between our houses was a tall, big fence, and that fence was bombed, so then we couldn’t even get out. We looked between the curtains, and we didn’t know whether or not the war was over because we saw soldiers moving all the time.

One day, my mother said, “You know, I didn’t see anybody moving yesterday.” The following day, we specifically made a point to look outside, and there was no movement, so the day after, my mother got dressed as a peasant woman, putting on a handkerchief. She went out and, when she came back, she said the war was over. That was how we found out the war was over. (It was not really over officially because Hungary did not declare peace until April 4, 1945.)

When my mother returned, she also came back with meat. (As I told you, we kept kosher, but that was not part of the picture during the war because there was hardly any food anyway) My mother cooked this meat, and she made some kind of stew, and I couldn’t eat it. I’m pretty sure it had nothing to do with whether or not it was kosher. My mother begged me. She begged me to eat it, but I just couldn’t eat it. I couldn’t eat it.

Later, after the war, I tasted meat like that I had tasted in the stew, and I found out it was horsemeat. My mother told me that while she had been out that day, she had happened upon a street where horses were dying from the bombings, and that’s where she got the meat. Anyway, I paid for it because, a couple of months later, I came down with a vitamin deficiency. My whole body was covered with sores.

Q: And then the Russians entered in January 1945.

A: It was about that time, and we knew so little that my mother said, “We have to go back to grandmother’s house, and I have to make sure we clean it up before she comes back.” (It was not far away from the suburb, so we walked there.)

When we arrived, somebody was living in my grandmother’s house; there was a family with children living there. We went back through our rooms and kitchen. I don’t really remember much of what we saw – just that there was no furniture, no nothing. I don’t understand all of the politics but, by that time, the communist regime was in place. Of course, the family living there said communism did not allow for two women to have an apartment with several rooms like that to themselves, so we left and went from house to house, to the good friends of my grandmother. Everybody was very sorry, and they said, “Don’t worry. They will be back soon.”

We left one house, and I said to my mother, “You know, that lady has grandmother’s bedroom set.” We went back, and my mother looked, and it was my grandmother’s bedroom set. But, by that time, the communist party was in charge [so there was nothing we could do about it].

Q: Was the lady a friend of your grandmother's?

A: No, she was just a neighbor.

Q: Where was your grandmother?

A: My grandmother was taken to Auschwitz, but we didn't know that at the time. They never came back. Nobody from my mother's family came back.

Toward the end, my grandmother, who lived in a non-Jewish neighborhood, had neighbors who were helping Jews. I was a child, and even I knew that.

Q: What happened to your father?

A: We did not know it for a while, but my father had escaped from the working camp and gone into hiding. During the very last days of the war, the peasant, or the person who was hiding him – I don't know who it was – got scared and reported him to the authority, and he was caught. By that time, the area was already Jew-free, and it was too late to take him to the prison.

Interestingly, my father died on the day of liberation. He was buried in Sopron. He has a grave with two other people who died on the same day. There was a priest in that town of Sopron who kept records of Jews. He had a tiny little book that had the name of every individual who had gone to Sopron and when I looked up my father's name, there was a note: "Hausen from Budapest. Died at age 34."

[…]

Source: Vera Koppel interviewed by Yeo Young Yoon and Svetlana Platisa. Transcription by Yeo Young Yoon, edited by Katie Kellerman. Available online: https://www.raoulwallenberg.net/wallenberg/testimonie/interviews/vera-koppel/

Recommended Citation: Raoul Wallenberg's Rescue of Vera Koppel (1944), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/nazi-germany-1933-1945/ghdi:document-5179> [September 05, 2026].