

The three crowns on Raoul Wallenberg's protective passport (A hypothesis presented by Ben Olander)

The rearranged three crowns

Some of us have wondered why Raoul Wallenberg designed his protective passports (*schutz-pass*) in such a way that the three crowns in the little Swedish national coat of arms were rearranged. If you compare the two, you see immediately that in the passport there is one crown on top and two beneath, while in the official Swedish coat of arms there are two at the top and one beneath. Many think that this was simply a mistake – but I don't believe that. I'm convinced that Wallenberg knew exactly what he was doing, and wanted with this handsome gesture to show that the passport (unsanctioned by international law) was a Jewish passport, and not a Swedish one.



Protective passport that Raoul Wallenberg designed and issued in Budapest in 1944 to save Jews from the Holocaust. Note the "un-Swedish" three crowns in the middle of the passport!

A very brief Jewish history

As we read in the Old Testament, the Jews were driven from Egypt around 1280 BC. Forty years later Moses led them through the desert to the Promised Land of Canaan, on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. After the Israelites under Joshua's leadership conquered Canaan, they settled there and lived with other ethnic groups in the region (among them the Canaanites, Jebusites, and Hittites). Saul became the first king of Israel in 1050 BC. Under King David some decades later, Jerusalem became the capital city.

Throughout the centuries' political entanglements, Israel was very exposed in its location on the borderline of cultures and powers in East and West. The Jews had to fight a continuous battle to keep their country unified, and they were often occupied by more powerful neighbors. The occupation with which we in the West are most familiar was the Roman one at the time of the life of Christ. After an unsuccessful revolt against the Romans around 100 BC, the Jewish people began to disperse out around the earth. Small groups of Jews stayed in Palestine and lived there side by side with Christians and other ethnic groups. In 638 AD Jerusalem was conquered by the Mohammedans, and even more Jews had to leave their country. Those Jews who moved to Europe were subjected right from the beginning to hard, constant oppression.

For obvious reasons the Jews, since they were forced to spread out around the world, have had a desire to keep themselves together as a people. In their (and our Christian) Old Testament, called the **Torah** in Hebrew, it is written that the Jews are God's chosen people. From their religious perspective this also naturally makes it a clear duty of all Jewish people to stay unified.

It wasn't until 1948 that the Jews got an internationally condoned opportunity to come back to Palestine, when the United Nations decided to sanctioning the state of Israel by a division of Palestine between the Jews and the Arabs. For obvious reasons all the world's Jews couldn't just move to Israel. Therefore many of them still live in the Jewish Diaspora, or the dispersion of Jews among the Gentile nations. The greatest numbers of the world's Jewish people live today in Russia, Israel, the USA, Argentina, the UK, France, and Canada, in that order. Other countries, like Poland, have no large Jewish populations for reasons that are well known; the Nazi Holocaust during WW II reduced the numbers of Jews in these countries drastically. This genocide is called **Shoah** in Hebrew, and it led to the bestial murders of 6 million Jews between 1941 and 1945.

Rabbi Isaac Alfasi and his law codex

Rabbi Isaac Alfasi wrote a great work for the Jewish people around 1000 AD; it was a law codex that unified the Diaspora – the dispersed Jews.

Alfasi lived from 1013 until 1103. He wrote the **Rav Alfasi**, which is a compilation of three of the six then-oral laws. His law codex was called the **Sefer Halachot** in Hebrew. These laws specified rules of conduct and were issued around 1060 AD. Alfasi's law codex was, of course, based on all of the six oral Jewish laws called the **Talmud**. It was mainly, though, based on those **three laws** from the Talmud that he believed actually unified the Jewish people. These three laws are written in **red text** in the list below of the Talmud's six laws.

Zera'im is an agricultural law from old Palestine. It regulated the harvest management as well as the procedures for sacrifices from the harvest in the temple in Jerusalem.

Moed regulated the Jewish holidays.

Nezikin regulated civil and criminal cases.

Nashim is a collective name for the Jewish marriage laws.

Kodashim regulated offering rituals and sacrifices in the temple.

Taharot are laws that regulated spiritual purity.

Of the Talmud's six laws it is apparent that the **Nezikin** (civil and criminal laws), **Nashim** (marriage laws) and **Moed** (the Jewish calendar) are those required to unify people socially. The three remaining laws are devoted

more to the spirit and to religious observation. Of course spiritual life and worldly life are interwoven in a culture. But Alfasi believed that the three laws were the ones that were needed for the Jews scattered abroad to stay united in foreign cultures. Elements in the pragmatic Jewish culture also criticized him for this opinion.

Rabbi Alfasi's law codex thus was disseminated around the Jewish world for the purpose of unifying and protecting the Jewish people. It later became especially important for the Jews living in Italy, as the Talmud was forbidden there after the Inquisition. In 1552 one version of Alfasi's codex was printed in Venice; its title page looked like this:



Title page of Isaac Alfasi's laws, published in Venice in 1552

The three crown might symbolize the three laws of *Moed*, *Nezikin*, and *Nashim*, which were specifically to keep the Jews together no matter where they lived in the world – and to protect them.

They may also symbolize the three foundations on which Jewish law is believed to be based – Isaac Alfasi (1013-1103), Maimonides (1135-1204), and Asher ben Yechiel (1250-1328).

No matter what the three crowns stand for, they constitute heraldic signs of Jewish law.

The three crowns on Raoul Wallenberg's protective passport.

I am convinced that Raoul Wallenberg was somehow acquainted with Isaac Alfasi's laws and the three Jewish crowns when he designed the protective passports. Perhaps a rabbi in his wide circle of associates could have made the observation and told him about the connection between one of the few heraldic symbols in Jewish culture and the Swedish national coat of arms. I cannot imagine that Raoul Wallenberg, the aesthetic and architect, who moreover in his role as a Swedish diplomat was in daily contact with the Swedish national coat of arms, could be unaware that he rearranged the three crowns. Raoul Wallenberg's revision of the protective passport was a very careful process. He redesigned the passports so that they would look more authentic to the critical Nazi's eyes. It is also well known that Wallenberg used his artistic talents and his aesthetic knowledge to make the protective passports more useful and impressive than they had been earlier. For these reasons I remain

very skeptical about claims that Wallenberg placed the crowns wrong simply because of the stress that he must certainly have been experiencing during that tumultuous year of 1944.

We can of course ask ourselves why the background of the "rearranged" crowns had to be so secretive on Wallenberg's part. The connection with Jewish law was apparently veiled in obscurity even to Per Anger, Raoul Wallenberg's closest co-worker and confidant. Anger states in Elizabeth R. Skoglund's book "A Quiet Courage" (Baker Books, 1997) that he himself believed that the rearrangement of the crowns was merely a mistake made in haste.

Why didn't Raoul allow even his closest colleague and friend to share the knowledge of his handsome gesture to the Jews that they fought together to protect? Perhaps Raoul simply forgot to tell Per Anger what he was considering regarding that detail in his design of the protective passport. There was so much else to think about and do during those days. And of course it wouldn't have been to anyone's advantage to have had a Nazi or Arrow Cross Party member find out anything about the fact that the three crowns on the passport were more symbolic of Jewish law than of Swedish law.

Furthermore it was of course true that much of the "magic" in this act was based on having only a small inner circle know about its meaning – that Swedes and Jews were united via their legal institutions in striving toward a common goal. The protective passports were not just sanctioned by Swedish law, but by Jewish law as well. Without doubt a strong flame burned in the hearts of the Jews who knew of the connection during the Holocaust.

In conclusion, I would like to say that this is just a hypothesis, one that I base on information we have gathered about some of the character traits of Raoul Wallenberg. He was inventive, spiritual, and well educated. For these reasons we cannot simply discard the three rearranged crowns as a mistake. I believe that it would be wonderful if some history student were to make a thorough study and try to test this hypothesis. If the hypothesis were to be proven true, our positive picture of Raoul Wallenberg would be even stronger.



The Swedish national coat of arms

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