

A HERO FOR OUR CHILDREN

Raoul Wallenberg had no children when, at the age of thirty-two, he was arrested by Soviet soldiers and disappeared into the Gulag. But over the past decade, we have met many of his children. These include the man who approached a young volunteer, busily putting up posters on the street, to tell her—with tears on his face—how Raoul Wallenberg personally saved him from death. They include teenagers like Palko Forgacz whose father worked with Wallenberg; young men who ran ‘resistance missions’ for him in Budapest; the sons and daughters, grandchildren and, someday, great-grandchildren of the 100,000 he saved.

Raoul Wallenberg's **CHILDREN**

Today, there is yet another generation of *Raoul's children* being born — those who are transformed by hearing the story of this great humanitarian. Their response to his nobility of spirit is Raoul Wallenberg's ultimate victory. His story answers a deep need in today's youth. His example of brilliance, courage and compassion provides a model for our students. It awakens a sense of responsibility. Raoul Wallenberg brings home the message, "I too can make a difference." *Raoul's children* carry his spirit forward in time, extending the heroic tradition for generations to come.

The heroes that a society chooses for itself are reflective of the values of that society. The historic example of a non-violent hero like Wallenberg is very much needed in today's world of instant celebrities, fictitious super-heroes and random violence as personified by Rambo.

This magazine is an introduction to Raoul Wallenberg's early life, historic deeds, and to the *RAOUL WALLENBERG: A STUDY OF HEROES* Curriculum. It tells many reasons why this very important story must be remembered and told. The magazine also gives a first glimpse at some of the overwhelming responses that have come from American educators and from the children themselves.

It is our hope that those who read *Raoul Wallenberg's Children* will contribute in any way they can to making the Heroes Curriculum a reality for schools in their community and across America.

*The Board of Directors of
The Raoul Wallenberg Committee
of the United States*

Raoul Wallenberg's **CHILDREN**



Ivan Becker with his parents, 1936.

Ivan Becker with his wife Nancy, and sons David (left) and Kenneth.



Ivan Becker's Schutzpass, signed by Raoul Wallenberg.

There is a new generation emerging, one "family", made up of people who were directly or indirectly saved from almost certain death by Raoul Wallenberg during his six month odyssey in Budapest. Like members of any one biological family, personalities and life experiences may differ. But a strong, invisible bond link them together. Interviews with some members of this family revealed that they also share certain characteristics in their priorities and personal histories, and in what they pass on to others.

David Becker, 26, and Kenneth Becker, 23, are the sons of Ivan Becker, one of those who survived the War because of Wallenberg's intervention. "Knowing that I am here strictly because of Wallenberg," said Kenneth, "gives me a sense of obligation, both to my family history and to history in the larger sense." David and Kenneth both said that their history has created in them the conviction that each person must contribute to the world in his or her own way, and that each person is responsible for upholding the rights of those around them.

Ernest Bokor worked with Wallenberg as a guard, dressed in Nazi uniform, for Swedish safe houses and as a driver who "hijacked" truckloads of people destined for the railroad stations and the camps by driving off in a different direction, taking them to safe houses. Ernest has two daughters and four grandchildren. One of his daughters, Raya Warner, said she wants her children to know about their grandfather's activities and his relationship with Wallenberg.

"I just want them to understand what their grandfather did and to know about Wallenberg, so they can see the very best side of human nature."

Tom Veres was, at eighteen, Raoul Wallenberg's personal photographer in Budapest. His son, Tom Veres, Jr. is about to have his first child. "I look forward to the time when I can tell my children: 'Your grandfather was Wallenberg's photographer.' It will help to shape their identities in important ways. Maybe it will help them stand up for what they believe."

Joseph Halpern, a retired chemist now living in New Jersey, was one of the people pulled out of line by Wallenberg at a railroad station as he was about to board one of the transport trains. Two of his four grandchildren, Joshua and Talia, recently celebrated their B'nei Mitzvah. In his speech, Joshua said: "If my grandfather hadn't been saved, I wouldn't be here... I wish I could see him [Wallenberg] so I could thank him." Joshua is personally seeing to it that the story of Wallenberg is carried further. "At Hebrew school, I tell kids about the stories I've been told by my grandfather. I think Wallenberg would be a good person for kids to read about."

There is no question that Wallenberg has become an integral part of many family histories and that his story is being passed down through the generations. But one question keeps coming up with those interviewed: Why did it take so long for people to begin speaking about Wallenberg?

On a personal level, psychological barriers caused a long period of silence for many people. For Ivan Becket, the reasons for his silence have become clearer with the help of individual and family therapy. He recalls the moment when he was separated from his mother, never to see her again. "The first time I cried was when I came off the train. I realized that my Mother is gone and I am alone. I was about fifteen. After that, I didn't cry until I was fifty."

In 1980, the silence began to break. An article, co-authored by Eleanor Lester, appeared in the *New York Times*. In 1981 The Raoul Wallenberg Committee of the United States was formed. John Bierman's book, *The Righteous Gentile*, was published along with others on Wallenberg, and the television film, *Wallenberg: A Hero's Story*, aired for the first time. The barriers were coming down; people began to speak out.

Joseph Halpern's daughter, Nina Nochumson, recalls that her father never spoke about his past when she was growing up. But during the early Eighties, when Nina had children of her own, she was surprised to find out that her father had begun to speak about Wallenberg at synagogues. Her brother, Les Halpern, did not learn about his father's experiences with Wallenberg until his teenage daughters asked their grandfather some direct questions.

When I began to understand just what he had been through and what he had done," said Les, "I had a renewed pride in my father." Joseph Halpern now says that when it comes to Wallenberg, as difficult as it sometimes is to speak about the past: "I don't mind speaking... I owe him that much."

"I have come to save a nation; I must save the children first."



Dr. Vera Goodkin (left) with her husband and mother, Margaret Herman.

Dr. Vera Goodkin, a professor at Mercer County College in New Jersey, has been speaking for some years. One of her most vivid recollections of the War is of when she was twelve years old, being led out of a prison yard by three men who claimed they worked for the Swedish Red Cross. She remembers being physically pushed forward by her mother, now 87, who made an instinctive decision to trust these men to help her daughter find safety. Later, one of the men told her they were working for a Mr. Wallenberg—a man who was saving as many people as he could, "but his fondest wish is to save as many children as possible." Thanks to a number of amazing turns of fate and Wallenberg's personal intervention, Vera was later reunited with both of her parents. Today, she often speaks to school and community groups about her experiences during World War II. "I hope to convince everybody that democracy is not a spectator sport; that it demands active participation by informed citizens and committed leaders who recognize the influence of our past on our future. It doesn't get any easier to tell the story. I walk away from the lectern with cold, clammy hands and shivers."

But the pay-off comes when one of the children inevitably asks, "What can we do?"

Ivan Becker is currently chairman of a successful company in New Jersey. He does not make a point of public speaking, though after years, he has begun to share his past with his family. But his personal beliefs were considerably shaken by his experiences. For many years, he did not attend synagogue. Today, he claims to have a very "realistic view" of humanity.

"When somebody asks me about my experiences during the War, I ask them if they have ever heard of a Mr. Wallenberg. When their answer is 'yes,' I identify myself by saying, 'I am one of his children.' ■



— Yvette Cohen

Yvette Cohen works in public relations and is also a freelance writer.