

## A MEMORIAL TRIBUTE TO THOMAS VERES

Thomas Veres was twenty years old when he met Raoul Wallenberg in the Swedish legation in Budapest. Tom's father, Paul Veres, was the top society photographer in Hungary, and young Tom was a photographer, too. Wallenberg, with his ability to use everyone's best talents, immediately assigned Tom to be his "personal photographer."

At first, this mostly meant that Tom took the photos for Schutzpässe. But as the war progressed, he often became Raoul's companion as the two of them visited soup kitchens, hospitals and safe houses that Wallenberg and the legation had established. Everywhere they went, Tom took pictures.

For a long while, Tom would go to his parents' home in the Gerbeaud Palace to develop the films at night. But eventually he was stopped, nearly arrested, and his knapsack full of pictures nearly seized by the Arrow Cross. After that Wallenberg insisted most of Tom's undeveloped film be sent to Stockholm in the diplomatic pouch—although Tom kept a running darkroom in the Section C offices on Ulloi Street throughout the siege.

Tom was a study in contrasts—a basically shy man with a sly wit and a wicked sense of humor. He managed to see humor and irony in everything, throughout his stints in work camps, and working with Section C. He often spoke of how Wallenberg changed him—changed everyone he worked with—in profound ways. It became accepted to put your life on the line for others. On at least two occasions, Tom accompanied Wallenberg and his driver, Vilmos Langfelder, to train deportments. As always, Tom secretly took pictures. By the second deportment, Tom risked his own life by sneaking to the back of the cattle cars, opening the doors and releasing men from the back. By doing this, he personally saved at least dozens of lives. On the second cattle car, he was caught. It was only through jumping and being pulled to safety into Wallenberg's car that he was saved.

Not stopping there, he took photos of the released men going back to the safe houses. He also took the portrait of Wallenberg that was used on the U.S. postage stamp.

As the war wound down, Tom went with Wallenberg (to the end of his life, Tom could never refer to him as "Raoul") and Langfelder to the top of Castle Hill where the three of them watched the approaching Russian troops. Again, Tom took photos and 8 millimeter movies of them against that dramatic backdrop. Those are the photos he most wished he still had.

Tom was there the night the Arrow Cross emptied the Ulloi Street offices and took all of Wallenberg's people on a death march—only to be rescued by Wallenberg himself at the last minute. Wallenberg waited outside the Gerbeaud Palace two weeks before the end of the siege while Tom went up and unsuccessfully argued with his parents to leave their apartment and be driven to safety. He went with Wallenberg to confront German General Schmidhuber and issue the ultimatum that stopped the pogrom that was to wipe out the entire Central Ghetto—and by doing so saved over 70,000 lives. Wallenberg got Schmidhuber to sign an order prohibiting the

pogrom or any further action against the Ghetto. Wallenberg gave Tom the task of reproducing this order in mass quantity overnight without the benefit of electricity. He did it.

Tom knew Raoul's hiding place at the Hazai bank, and he knew the password to open the giant vault door as the end approached. Tom went there pleading for help to find his parents who had finally been arrested by the Arrow Cross. It was the one time Wallenberg could not help him. It was too late.

But Raoul did ask Tom to join him and Vilmos to go and meet with Russian Marshal Malinovsky so that things could be wrapped up quickly and the Wallenberg Reconstruction Institute could start offering food and medical services and reuniting Hungarian families shattered by war. It was the one time Tom chose not to go. He had to find his parents. As we all know, Wallenberg and Langfelder never returned from that final trip.

Tom escaped from Hungary in 1956 and made his way to New York where he had a successful career as a photographer, eventually joining J. Walter Thompson. He had a wife, one son and two grandchildren. He loved fried calamari and made a great citrus marinade for grilled chicken. For many decades, he did not talk about Wallenberg. It meant too much to him. He never wanted to be seen as profiting from the story. Most people he worked with had no idea of his background.

Tom was therefore not an easy "mark" for journalists. He did not suffer fools lightly and he had a fairly stringent definition of what made you not a fool. In 1990, it took me nearly six months of asking, scheduling, canceling, rescheduling to finally get in to see him. But I had done several articles on Wallenberg when the miniseries had come out, I had seen Tom's photos, and I knew I had to talk to him for the young adult book I was writing. He cancelled yet another appointment because his beloved dog died. I understood that and sent him a sympathy card. I think it was our mutual love for dogs that finally got me in the door. Which was when Tom's "trial by fire" started.

When writers or filmmaker came to see him, he started with the question, "Who was the Scarlet Pimpernel?" (Wallenberg reminded him of that fictional character.) If you didn't know, out you went. (That happened to several journalists both before and after my time!) Fortunately, I knew the answer and asked him if he knew who the Pimpernel Smith was. He didn't know and was delighted to know there was an actual Pimpernel connection with Wallenberg! But the test wasn't over. I had to prove I knew the pre-Soviet layout of Budapest, the location of both offices of Section C, and all the names of the all main players that he threw at me. You didn't come to Tom to do initial research. It was only when he ran out of questions that he decided we could talk.

And once he started talking, the floodgates opened. It all came back to him, in the minutest detail. What people were wearing, the jokes they told, what they had for supper. It wasn't only his Leica that recorded history. His mind did, as well. Much of what he told me ended up in the biography of Wallenberg we did—I wrote and he contributed the photos.. But there was so much more in Tom's incredible life that we began sketching out his own autobiography. Unfortunately, there was an unexpected glut of World War Two books coming out at just that time and we

weren't able to find a publisher. That's too bad because his stories were shocking, truthful, and full of unexpected twists and ribald humor.

When Tom died last summer, the world lost a one-of-a-kind individual. I'm not surprised that Wallenberg recognized him as a comrade almost immediately. Tom would never have let me say this while he was alive, but under the self-deprecating exterior beat a true hero's heart.

--Sharon Linnea  
Author of "Raoul Wallenberg: The Man Who Stopped Death"

For additional information about Thomas Veres, you may wish to read his autobiographical article that appeared in "Guideposts Magazine." The article is available on Beliefnet at the following web address:

[http://www.beliefnet.com/frameset.asp?boardID=14824&pageloc=/story/75/story\\_7559\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/frameset.asp?boardID=14824&pageloc=/story/75/story_7559_1.html)