

Why not a word about Raoul Wallenberg?

By Susanne Berger, October 22, 2008

A major problem with authorized biographical writing which relies on specialized access to collections closed to other scholars is that authors tend to shy away from controversies which could result in loss of their privilege. All historians have to make choices and historic truth is admittedly a most elusive substance. But authorized biographies carry an enhanced risk of avoidance and outright self-censorship. The biographies of the two central figures of the Wallenberg family in the past century, Jacob and Marcus Wallenberg, written by two leading Swedish historians - Håkan Lindgren (Atlantis, 2007) and Ulf Olsson (Ekerlids, 2000) - , make for an interesting example in this connection; in particular, with respect to one of the most controversial subjects in Wallenberg family history, the disappearance of Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg in the Soviet Union in 1945.

When Professor Lindgren's well received biography of Jacob Wallenberg appeared in bookstores earlier this year, I went to see if it would match the record established by his predecessor in this line of work, Ulf Olsson, Professor at Göteborgs Handelshögskolan. In an impressive work about the life of Marcus Wallenberg (Ekerlids, 2000), Olsson had managed to fit exactly one reference to Raoul Wallenberg - in the diagramed family tree.

Thus although Marcus and Raoul had maintained consistent contact over the years, they were clearly not close but they were definitely one thing: Family. It was in fact Raoul's father, Raoul Oscar Wallenberg, Jacob's and Marcus's cousin who had been selected to take over Stockholm Enskilda Banken. He died, however, shortly before the birth of his son, Raoul Gustaf, in 1912, dramatically changing the line of succession.

Olsson's book includes not a word about Raoul Wallenberg's letters to Marcus (Raoul addressing him teasingly as "Lill-Marcus"); his visits during the 1930's and 1940's to Enskilda Banken, recorded in the Bank's registers, or Raoul's invitation to Marcus and other family members -- Jacob Wallenberg, Axel Wallenberg, Ebba Bonde - , to social gatherings at his home. Raoul also regularly socialized with his many cousin, including Elisabeth Seth, to whom he even wrote from Budapest.

Not a word about Marcus' dramatic appearance at the Raoul Wallenberg meeting in Stockholm in 1981, where he stated that the two men had discussed in depth Hungarian affairs. Olsson also did not address with one line Marcus Wallenberg's reaction to Raoul Wallenberg's disappearance in January 1945, and the effect it and the question of his unresolved fate since has had on the family. After all, Raoul's disappearance became one of Sweden's most protracted Cold War traumas - not the least because of his last name.

With his new work about Jacob Wallenberg, Håkan Lindgren now joins Olsson in a seemingly growing line of authors who are writing Raoul Wallenberg out of his own family history: The book's 570 pages contain only a half sentence in the main text, and one footnote about Jacob's second cousin -- a young

man who became one of the heroic figures of the Holocaust and who spread good will about the Wallenberg name world wide. In 2003, an independent Swedish Commission in fact concluded that Raoul Wallenberg's mission at the time had helped allay strong U.S. objections to the widespread commercial accommodation of Nazi Germany on the part of the Wallenberg family, which thereby avoided serious sanctions.

Like Olsson, Lindgren had exclusive access to Wallenberg family archives. He also had available the research reports of the Swedish-Russian Working Group which studied Raoul Wallenberg's fate for ten years (1991-2001).

In a thorough reply to an e-mail query , - Ulf Olsson did not respond- Professor Lindgren stated that, based on a full review of Jacob's correspondence file, he reached the conclusion that Jacob and Raoul had not been close. If so, why not include this insight in the book?

Lindgren argues that after his father's early death, Raoul became isolated, probably purposely, from the rest of the Wallenberg family and stayed that way until his disappearance. As a result, he had no discernible impact on Jacob Wallenberg's life. But documentation from other sources shows that the story may not be as simple: For one, Raoul Wallenberg's baptismal certificate - unearthed recently in Lidingö Stadsarkiv by Kulturintendent Louise Schlyter - shows that Jacob was Raoul Wallenberg's godfather, together with other notables from the Wallenberg family. (Interestingly, the list also includes a "Löjtn. E. Ternberg", apparently the brother of Helmut Ternberg, head of C-Byrån during World War II.) Jacob and Raoul clearly had contact right until the latter left for Budapest in July 1944. In his private papers, Kalman Lauer, Raoul Wallenberg's business partner, wrote that Jacob Wallenberg was Raoul's "idol" and, that " ...Raoul was his Private Secretary during the time he was with 'Meropa'." (the Lauer/RW firm -- SB). The Wallenberg family has neither denied nor confirmed Lauer's claim.

It was through Jacob Wallenberg that Raoul obtained his position with 'Meropa', whose offices were located just a few doors down from Jacob's private residence at Strandvägen 27. Raoul regularly signed his letters to Jacob with "Your affectionate, Raoul". Jacob also provided the references for both Raoul's Kabinettspass (issued in late 1941) and later his diplomatic passport.

While these actions can perhaps be viewed, as Lindgren does, as simple favors to a needy cousin, there are other indications which suggest that the contact went beyond mere charity: Jacob's permission was apparently requested and obtained before Raoul headed off to Budapest and, according to a document released by the Wallenberg archive in 2000, it was again Jacob who placed a direct appeal to SS Abwehr Chief Walter Schellenberg for special protection of Raoul Wallenberg before he embarked on his dangerous mission to Budapest.

It is equally clear that Jacob had a strong personal interest in Raoul Wallenberg's fate. There are numerous indications that off and on over the years he worked behind the scenes to try to determine what had happened to him. Documents in the Swedish Police archive allege that in 1954, Jacob may have tried to establish direct contacts to Soviet authorities through business and intelligence connections in Prague (with Helmut Ternberg closely involved in these endeavors). What information, if any, did these discussions yield and what were the consequences for the Raoul Wallenberg

investigation? Why did Jacob secretly turn to Helmut Ternberg who had been in charge of Swedish intelligence operations in Hungary in 1944?

Other important questions abound: It is worth noting that the attempt at contact with Soviet authorities may have been made through Jacob Wallenberg alone. As a result of the Bosch affair - when Enskilda Banken had acted as a cloak for German assets during the war - relations between Marcus and Jacob Wallenberg were extremely tense. Were there perhaps also differing views on how to handle the inquiry into Raoul Wallenberg's fate? And why did the Wallenbergs fight so hard for the so-called Warsaw Swedes, captured in 1942 by the Gestapo in Poland, but apparently showed far less enthusiasm to do the same for one of their own?

What about SKF's eyebrow raising decision to hand over its entire European inventories of ball bearings, including those in Hungary, to the Nazis as late as September 1944 - while Raoul Wallenberg was fighting for the Jews of Budapest? Did concerns about revelations of such wartime deals (the full scope and purpose of which remain unknown) and the need to protect postwar business interests affect Wallenberg family behavior in the Raoul Wallenberg case?

Marcus Wallenberg is known to have been convinced as early as 1951 that Raoul Wallenberg was dead. I learned this when I interviewed former Kabinettsssekreterare, Arne Lundberg who that year took over the Raoul Wallenberg investigation in UD. One of his first actions was to seek a conversation with Marcus Wallenberg who, according to Lundberg, did not hesitate to state his views on the matter. On what information did Marcus base his apparent conviction?

When I in May 2002 approached the Wallenberg archive about Jacob Wallenberg's initiative in 1954, I received the reply that the family had no comment and that the archive contained no information about the matter. There are indications, however, that - contrary to the archive's assertion - important material remains in its collection which have not been opened to public review. This includes Jacob and Marcus Wallenberg's sparse yet interesting correspondence with UD about Raoul Wallenberg. One important example is a letter by Jacob Wallenberg from October 1954, about a message he had received concerning a potential witness for Raoul Wallenberg's presence in Russia. Jacob went so far to privately research the man's background and he asked UD (First Secretary E.O.G. Vinge) to keep him informed about further developments.

Jacob Wallenberg apparently also played a small role in the efforts by his niece, Elisabeth Seth, in 1965 to obtain information about Raoul Wallenberg through Russian contacts. She asked Jacob to arrange for a high Russian official to stay at Jacob's estate Malmvik. Towards the end of his life, Jacob appears to have felt the strain of the years of uncertainty about Raoul's fate: At the funeral for Raoul's parents, Maj and Fredrik von Dardel, in 1979, Jacob was - according to many witnesses - completely overcome with emotion.

If the younger Wallenberg generation does not have adequate knowledge of these issues or the details of the Raoul Wallenberg case in general, it will hopefully now make a concerted effort to fill the existing information gaps from all available sources. Historians, too, should not shy away from examining these issues in greater detail.

Sixty three years after Raoul Wallenberg's disappearance, it would be interesting to learn how one the main actors in Swedish society and politics [the Wallenberg family] viewed the case.

Professors Olsson and Lindgren are highly accomplished and well respected academics. Their two books are well written and provide a fascinating look into the lives of two of Sweden's most accomplished bankers. It is, therefore, all the more regrettable that both scholars somehow failed to seize a golden opportunity to finally address such an important chapter in the Wallenberg family saga.