

A PIECE OF FADED YELLOW PAPER

Ignacio, my grandson, looks baffled as I put a yellow piece of paper, faded by time, in his hands. I tell him that it is part of his birthday present and he smiles, thinking that I am kidding. Then I look into his eyes and I add that that aged piece of paper that seems worthless today, meant the difference between life and death when I was thirteen. It is my grandson's thirteenth birthday today. If it hadn't been for that slip of paper neither of us would have probably been here today, celebrating.

Now Ignacio looks at the faded document again and sees a seal that he hadn't noticed before.

"What 's that?" he asks.

"The Coat of Arms of the Swedish Royal House."

My grandson understands that there is a story behind this and I begin to reminisce.

The sound of water is the music that accompanied my childhood. The most intense and distant memories of Budapest, the city of my birth, are associated with water. Not only because the two historical centers, Buda and Pest are divided by the Danube River, but also because the whole capital of Hungary abounds with fountains and thermal baths.

During the summer, my family and I used to go to Gellért, the most popular bath. I can still feel the excitement of sinking into the pool with the artificial waves that would lift me up to the crest with undulating movements. I was only eight and my world was a safe place, sheltered by my parents' love. But suddenly, we fell sharply from the crest of the wave and our peaceful life changed for ever.

Janos, my father, and Bartha, my mother, understood that, apart from the calamities of war, there was for us a great additional menace: persecution because of our origin. One had only to see what had happened in Poland: as soon as the Nazis occupied it, the manhunt of Jews was unleashed.

"But if we Hungarians are friends of the Germans," I argued "Why would they hurt us?"

Perhaps in order to set my mind at rest, I thought that my parents were exaggerating. During the following years, in spite of the war, I continued going to school and leading a life which, even with fear and hardships of every kind, seemed normal.



Then came the fateful year of 1944.

Germany and her allied countries, among which was Hungary, were definitely headed for defeat. The Russians, who, allied with England, France and the U.S.A., fought against the Germans, were advancing, without stopping, over Rumania and Bulgaria, and their threatened arrival in my country was imminent. Commandant Horthy, head of the Hungarian government, asked the Russians for a truce. The Nazis considered this petition as treason. They feared that, through our territory, the enemies would finally penetrate Germany. To avoid this, they invaded Hungary.

I was thirteen. I learned the harsh way how correct my parents' fears had been. The invaders immediately put in practice the same policy of death against Hungarian Jews that they had enforced in all the occupied countries.

My parents and I, together with thousands of others, were torn from our homes and confined to the enclosure of the ghetto. That winter was a harsh one and we were crowded in dark, miserable rooms under the constant menace that any gesture would cost us our lives. Once a day, we would manage to eat a piece of bread. I remember that, despite everything, I continued to hear the sound of water, the music of Budapest, and that kept my hope alive.

Finally, on a day when the April sun was beginning to show itself, we were violently driven from the ghetto and were dragged to the East Railway Station.

In more happy times, we used to leave from there to visit my grandparents who lived in the country, the country which in springtime is filled with flowers. Now, instead, from there we were to leave in cattle trains towards death.

I walked with the others, striving to keep back my tears. I was so afraid! Beside me

walked a woman with a baby in her arms. We were on the station platform, when one of the huge dogs that an officer was holding threw itself against me. Terrified, I fell to the ground. The soldiers laughed at my panic. The dog's enormous mouth was baring its sharp teeth centimeters from my head when I suddenly heard an unfamiliar voice exclaiming: "Leave him! That boy is under the protection of the King of Sweden!"

The man who held the menacing beast, pulled its leash and withheld it. I looked at the person who had spoken. He was a young man of about thirty, slim and elegant. He wore a long blue overcoat and his blonde straight hair was combed back from his forehead. With a determined gesture he extended before the officer a yellow paper that bore the coat of arms of the Royal House of Sweden. I never really found out why the Germans, who stopped at nothing, showed such respect for seals and documents.

That day Raoul Wallenberg, I later learned that this was my savior's name, managed to save dozens of Jews from the trains of death. During the following months, I worked by his side at the Embassy of Sweden, a neutral country during the war. Employed as an office boy, I myself distributed among my brethren those yellow papers that meant the difference between living and dying.

More than fifty years have passed and I cannot forget the image of that brave and caring man, climbing on the roofs of the cattle trains, giving out with full hands the saving documents. And I cannot but think of the irony of destiny.

By 1945, when the Nazis surrendered and the Russians finally entered Budapest, Wallenberg had succeeded in rescuing from the hands of the victimizers more than a hundred thousand Jews. However, he was not able to save himself. On January 17th 1945 he was seen for the last time entering the headquarters of what was then the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The Russians, who made him a prisoner, maintain that the Swedish diplomat died in prison in 1947. But there is no proof of this.

"There wasn't a saving paper for Raoul Wallenberg just as there isn't a tomb to pay him homage," I concluded my story.

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