

# The rescue work of a Swiss in World War II

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## THE RESCUE WORK OF A SWISS IN WORLD WAR II

The following is a reprint from "The S.M.S. Student", the magazine of the College of the Swiss Mercantile Society in London. We have permission of its Editor, Geoffrey Tier, Dr. Phil., to reproduce it and should like to express our appreciation.

*We are happy and proud to present the following article by one of the bravest and most resourceful Swiss officials in the battle area of the Second World War, Generalkonsul Charles Lutz, now living quietly in retirement in Berne. He saved the lives of between 50,000 and 60,000 Jews in Budapest, where he was in charge of British and American interests. There is now a Konsul Lutz Street in Haifa, and in 1946 his name was put forward for the Nobel Peace Prize. It is twenty-one years this month since Mr. Lutz guided many British and Americans safely through the valley of death, including the editor of this Magazine.*

On the orders of my superiors, I arrived at the Swiss Legation in Budapest on January 2nd, 1942, as the official in charge of the security division of that Legation. I organized this section in the building of the United States Legation, where I had a staff of experienced bi-lingual civil servants at my disposal.

Until the invasion of Hungary by the German army in March, 1944, the work and living conditions, despite the black-out, were almost normal. On March 18th, however, everything was changed. Together with the German army came the personal troops of the Gestapo chief, Heinrich Himmler, commanded by Eichmann. All Jewish citizens were ordered to move into a ghetto and to wear a yellow star. The Jews in Budapest, and indeed in all Hungary, were seized with panic. I noticed this when the following morning several thousand terrified people gathered in front of our office, seeking help. Switzerland was of course a neutral power, and it was therefore almost impossible for such a foreign power to protect them through normal diplomatic channels. But the laws of life are stronger than man-made laws; the crowd in front of our building became larger every day; and Eichmann had already started to deport the Jews in the provinces to the Nazi concentration camps.

I constantly reflected on how it might be possible to help these people without becoming *persona non grata*. I did not have any too much time to devote to this idea, since my job was to look after the citizens of enemy countries in Hungary. The Swiss authorities at home had already experienced such a situation when the persecuted Jews of France, Germany and Italy had tried to cross the Swiss frontier and pleaded for admittance. In Switzerland itself the Parliament, the police, the army, and many other authorities were able to cope with this sudden rush. What the Swiss frontier meant for the Jews of Germany, France and Italy was what the Swiss Legation in Budapest meant for the Jews of Hungary; with the important exception that in Hungary there was war, revolution and chaos, and that we, the Swiss authorities there, were facing this avalanche alone, without administrative help, without financial resources, and without any official "go-ahead".

The idea now occurred to me to try and protect all those Jews who had had the intention of emigrating to Palestine, which was then still under British mandate. I decided to ask for an appointment with the German

Minister in Budapest and the Hungarian Foreign Minister in order to submit to them my plan, under which Swiss aid would be afforded to those Jews who wished to emigrate to Palestine. Only those who themselves lived through those times can understand exactly what it meant to interfere in the "Jewish question". However, the plan which I submitted was forwarded to Berlin.

Six weeks later, an official of the German Legation gave me to understand that a certain number of people might be allowed to go free, but under certain conditions to be approved by the Hungarian Government. The negotiations then dragged on into the summer. In the meantime all Jews were ordered to live in so-called "Jewish houses" and to wear the yellow star. They were only allowed in the streets during certain fixed hours to buy food. The panic grew day by day and hour by hour. Every day our offices were surrounded by great crowds of frightened people.

At long last my request that I should be allowed to take at least a certain proportion of the Jews under Swiss protection — those who wanted to go to Palestine — was granted. Such Jews, however, had to have an "exit permit" which then entitled them to receive a Swiss *Schutzbrief* stating that they had in fact received their exit permit. At first, not every policeman and security officer recognized or honoured these letters of protection. I therefore requested that the Hungarian Radio should broadcast an order to all Government departments and officials to honour these documents. This was done; and the very next day such an immense crowd formed outside my office that mounted policemen had to clear a way for me myself to reach it. At first, 5,000 letters of protection were made out during the night. I then decided to assume that by the number "5,000" the Hungarian Government meant 5,000 *families*; and so I had a further 45,000 letters of protection prepared.

In October, 1944, the Hungarian army surrendered, and Admiral Horthy, the Regent of Hungary, abdicated. The Hungarian Nazis, led by Szálasi, took over the reins of government. From that day forth, the situation was radically different. The deportation of entire camps of Jews in the neighbourhood of Budapest was suddenly stepped up, and the round-up of all the Jews in Budapest might start any day.

The Swiss Minister was recalled to Berne, and the Federal Government in Berne refused to recognize the new Nazi Government. This of course seriously weakened my own position with regard to the Hungarian Government and the German occupation authorities. The first thing to do was to introduce myself to the new Government, which I did, and at the same time I asked that every Jew possessing a *Schutzbrief* should receive protection, which, I added, would make a very favourable impression upon the Swiss Government. At the same time I promised to do what I could to get my Government to recognize the new Hungarian Government.

It was quite clear to me that the *Schutzbrief* by itself would not afford sufficient protection; and I therefore asked the Hungarian Government to place a number of large apartment houses at my disposal, so that I could fill them with the Jews who were under Swiss protection. After a long delay my request was granted. Within one week, 20,000 non-Jewish residents were evacuated from these houses in order to make room for tens of thousands of Jews. This gigantic task had to be performed with the assistance of a large number of Hungarian police and during constant air raids. The apartment houses were

then given identification plaques, and the crush to get into them was indescribable.

Within a very short time the quota of 50,000 letters of protection was exhausted, and there were still long, desperate queues of people outside our office, pleading for these life-saving certificates. It was of course impossible for me to exceed the permitted quota without incurring the wrath of the authorities and probably endangering the entire project. And then false letters of protection began to appear, manufactured and circulated by Jewish sources as a last desperate attempt at salvation. These false letters caused me a considerable headache, as the Hungarian authorities very soon found out about them and threatened to arrest all Jews regardless. So I promised to help personally to sift the "good" certificates from the "bad"; and this was probably the most painful task of all. On one occasion my wife and I had to spend four hours in the snow and ice at the infamous Obuda camp and do the sad job of sifting these letters.

We witnessed the most terrible scenes. Five thousand of these unhappy people were standing in line, freezing, shaking, hungry, with tiny packs on their shoulders, stretching their letters out towards me. Never, never shall I forget those despairing, horror-stricken faces. Again and again the police had to intervene to prevent my clothes from being torn from my back. For these people it was the last glimmer of hope; for us, this screening was the worst form of spiritual torture. We saw the people being lashed with dogwhips and lying in the slime and mud with bloody faces. Whenever we tried to help them we, in our turn, were threatened with rifles. Whenever possible I would drive alongside these people on their way to the concentration camps to try and show them that there was still hope, until my way was blocked by the guards.

By now the battle-front had moved very near to the city. Again and again the Foreign Minister, Keményi (who was later shot), put pressure upon me to get his Government recognized by Switzerland. The Hungarian Government threatened to withdraw our diplomatic status if this recognition was not soon given. I played for time as best I could, saying that the Swiss Foreign Minister had been suddenly taken ill and so the final decision would be delayed a little longer. Then I said that the diplomatic courier was probably held up in Vienna with the letter of recognition. And so on and so forth.

The work of protecting the persecuted Jews was extremely hard on our administrative personnel; for every new Government edict brought fresh crowds of people to our offices. Day and night, the air raids on the city became more and more numerous; the sound of heavy artillery could be heard all day; and at night the sky was lit up with anti-aircraft fire. Many of our staff had difficulty in holding their nerves in check; but there was no time to ask for any fresh personnel from Switzerland. Many of my staff, especially the volunteers, worked day and night. The one thing we needed most, apart from more office staff, was money. We waited in vain for some international organization to come to our assistance. None came; and so we had to rely upon ourselves.

*(In the middle of December, 1944, just before the Russian armies surrounded the city, the Swiss Chargé d'Affaires and the Military Attaché departed. This caused great consternation, and Mr. Lutz was begged not to abandon those under his protection. He therefore decided, of his own free will, to remain at his dangerous post. He now takes up the tale again. — Ed. "The S.M.S. Student.)*

The battle-front came closer and closer. The Hungarian Government moved to Sopron, in the west of Hungary, and insisted that we follow. We refused, although we were threatened with the withdrawal of our diplomatic status. One morning I was informed that the German Legation was about to leave Budapest. I knew then that the city would soon become a battlefield, and I was worried about the safety of those people under Swiss protection. A German diplomat told me, however, that the Hungarian Nazis had been instructed not to attack the apartment houses bearing the Swiss emblem *as long as I myself stayed in the city.*

The residence of my wife and myself was the British Legation building, on the very summit of the citadel of Buda. For weeks we had to live in a damp, unheated cellar in the middle of winter, often without candles or water, and very little food. We had to endure fierce attacks from the air for hours at a time. We received nineteen direct hits from artillery and aircraft. On one occasion a couple of incendiary bombs set fire to our building, which blazed for two days and nights with us in the cellars underneath. And while it was burning, twenty armed Nazis burst in and robbed us of most of our private possessions.

When again we saw daylight, Budapest was under Russian occupation. It looked like a ghost town, or some city in a nightmare. One of the first things the Russians did was to arrest an employee of the Swiss Legation, right in front of me, and deport him to Russia; and I myself was able to escape being shot only by leaping through a window. For ten days the entire population, including ourselves, were at the mercy of drunken members of the forces of Marshal Malinovsky.

My office and my staff were on the other side of the Danube, in Pest, and the retreating German army had blown up all the bridges across the river. I therefore had to walk for miles until I came to a point where it was just possible to cross the swollen waters in a small rowing-boat. I am glad to say that I found everybody alive. Also, most of the Jews under my protection had been saved.

Unfortunately, we were not able to await the arrival of the British and American Political Missions, for after ten days we received orders from the Russian authorities to leave for Switzerland within twenty-four hours, via the Black Sea and Turkey. We left at the beginning of April, and the trip was by no means simple. We were accompanied by six Russians armed to the teeth, and our group, consisting of some seventy people, arrived in Istanbul after six days. One uncomfortable moment came when our guards said that if Turkey refused us entry our train would be sent to Russia!

From Istanbul we went up the Mediterranean to Lisbon; and thence through Madrid and Barcelona to — at long last — Switzerland and home.

*Charles R. Lutz.*

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