

# RESCUING 60,000 JEWS FROM THE NAZIS

The Moral Courage  
of Carl Lutz

by Richard Greene

Carl Lutz heard the gunshots and knew he had to act—immediately.

On the banks of the Danube River in Nazi-occupied Hungary, pro-fascist thugs were emptying their guns into a group of Jews they had rounded up and stripped. After shooting them, they began throwing the bodies into the river.

Lutz, a Swiss diplomat, had been protecting Jews from the Nazis since arriving at his post two years earlier. He had even snatched individuals away from similar firing squads by showing that they were under Swiss diplomatic protection. He was not about to stop now. He told his driver to hurry toward the gunshots.

Arriving on the scene—and still wearing his suit—Lutz rushed into the waist-deep water to rescue a bleeding Jewish woman who, miraculously, was still alive. He pulled her ashore, placed her in the back seat of his black Packard and sped to a diplomatic safe house, where the woman underwent immediate surgery.



Carl Lutz with a personal driver on the Danube, in front of the parliament building in Budapest.

Lutz's public bravery that day saved the woman's life. But today, Lutz is hailed much more for what he accomplished in secret. Leading what historians call the largest civil rescue operation during the Second World War, Lutz helped save some 62,000 Jews from being deported to Auschwitz and certain death.

The moral courage displayed by Lutz during the 1940s was rooted in his Christian faith, which was shaped

during his childhood decades earlier.

Carl Lutz was born in Walzenhausen, Switzerland, on March 30, 1895, the second youngest of 10 children by Johannes and Ursula Lutz. Most of the community surrounding Johannes Lutz's sandstone quarry consisted of impoverished farmers.

Ursula Lutz, a devout Methodist, taught Sunday school, and she taught her own children to pray, read the Bible, and how to live a life that pleases God. Lutz biographer Theo Tschuy wrote that "entries in early diaries show that in his youthful enthusiasm he wanted Jesus to guide his life."

Just as the Lord Jesus retreated to a quiet place to pray,

Lutz one day bounded up into the wooded hills above his house to talk privately with God. Tschuy wrote that the young boy "demanded loudly that Jesus make him do something unusual when he grew up, become a missionary or a great scientist."

At 18, Carl immigrated to the United States, working odd jobs to finance his schooling. In 1918, he enrolled at Central Wesleyan University in Warrenton, Mo., where

he studied Latin and theology with the intent to become a pastor. He stayed there two years.

A summer job in Washington, D.C., with the Swiss Legation prompted Lutz to consider a diplomatic career instead. So he left Missouri and enrolled at George Mason University in the nation's capital, where he pursued history and law, graduating in 1924. Lutz continued serving with the Swiss Legation, assuming responsibilities at consulates in Philadelphia and then St. Louis.

In 1934 he was appointed vice-consul to the Swiss Consulate General in Jaffa, in what was then Palestine—leaving the U.S. with his wife Gertrud on the night of their honeymoon. While in Palestine, at the time under British rule, Lutz defended the rights of German citizens living throughout the region, keeping them from being deported by the British. That very service would later prove critical when Lutz stood up to the Nazis in Hungary.

Lutz was transferred to Budapest in 1944. Drawing from his previous experience, he quickly began working with the Jewish Agency for Palestine, issuing safe-conduct documents so nearly 10,000 Hungarian Jewish children could emigrate.

In March of that year, fearing Hungary might sign a peace treaty with the Allies, Germany invaded the country and set up a puppet regime. Pro-Nazi paramilitary began to ruthlessly enact Hitler's "final solution" and ordered Jews to death camps.

Terrified Jews besieged Lutz's office, crying out for assistance. Moved by their plight, Lutz remembered how his mother had shown Christian compassion to the downtrodden back home. According to historian Xavier Cornut, that's the moment when Lutz recalled his childhood prayer. "He felt that God answered him when Budapest's Jews

came to him for help," Cornut said.

Lutz approached S.S. Lt. Col. Adolph Eichmann, who had come to Budapest, and requested 8,000 diplomatic letters of protection. Eichmann said Lutz must appeal to Hitler, which he did. And he received a surprising reply from Berlin: "This is the man who represented our interests in Palestine to such satisfaction that I'm willing to acquiesce to his request."

At every step, Lutz shrewdly extended the protection to cover far more than the intended number of people. Instead of applying the protection letters to individuals, Lutz interpreted them to cover entire families. Each letter bore a distinct number, and Lutz never reached 8,000. When he reached 7,999 he forged tens of thousands of additional letters by starting again at number 1.



Lutz looks out the window of the ruined British Legation in Budapest.

At the same time, Lutz established 76 safe houses across Budapest, where Jews were housed, fed and diplomatically protected. The most legendary was known as the "Glass House"—a former glass factory where 3,000 Jews found refuge.


The ruse was so effective, it was duplicated by other diplomats of neutral countries, including Sweden's Raoul Wallenberg. In 1944, Wallenberg had been given an assignment to bring 300-400 Jewish businessmen and their families to safety in Sweden. He was stunned to hear that Lutz had already provided safe haven for at least 20,000 Jews. Wallenberg realized he needed to set his sights higher. Soon, Sweden established 32 of its own safe houses near the ones Lutz had established.

Furious that Lutz had undermined the genocide of Jews, Hungarian government leaders requested permission to assassinate him, but Berlin never replied.

Following the war, Lutz returned to Switzerland, only to have his rescue mission come under fire. He

was reprimanded by his government for exceeding his authority. Still, he was acclaimed by others. In 1965, he became the first Swiss national to be named by the State of Israel to the list of "Righteous Among the Nations," and he was nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Lutz died on Feb. 13, 1975. Twenty years later, under pressure, Switzerland officially recognized his feats.

In speech after speech, Agnes Hirschi, Lutz's stepdaughter, affirmed her father's heroics. "He launched his mission to save the Jews in Budapest out of his religious and moral convictions. As an engaged Christian, he could not tolerate Jews being pursued and killed. He risked his life and career. He knew that God gave him this task, and he was confident that God would give strength to fulfill it."  ©2018 BGEA

RICHARD GREENE IS A SENIOR EDITOR FOR SAMARITAN'S PURSE.