Raoul Wallenberg was a Swedish diplomat who rescued thousands of Jews in Budapest, Hungary, during the Holocaust.

Born in 1912, in Stockholm, to a family of bankers and diplomats, Raoul made a career in banking and international trade. In July 1944, after roughly 437,000 Jews from across Hungary had already been sent to Auschwitz, Wallenberg was dispatched to Budapest by the Swedish Foreign Office in order to help save the upwards of 200,000 Jews who remained there. The Swedish legation in Budapest had already begun rescue actions for the sake of the Jews immediately following the occupation of Hungary by the German forces in March 1944, with the start of the deportations. The legate, Carl Ivan Danielsson, initiated the issuing of hundreds of temporary Swedish protective passports (“Schutz-Pass”) to Hungarian Jews who had any family or business ties with Swedish subjects. With the arrival of Wallenberg in Budapest on July 9, 1944, the Hungarian government decided to stop the deportations due to international pressure, including the intervention of the King of Sweden. However, the Swedish legation’s efforts to protect the Jews continued. Wallenberg was put in charge of the department dedicated to this mission and was granted special authority.

On October 15, 1944, the Hungarian government was overturned, and the fascist and anti-Semitic Arrow Cross Party, headed by **Ferenc Szálasi**, took control of the country. The Jews of Budapest were left defenseless to face the murderous violence perpetrated on the streets by Arrow Cross thugs. Simultaneously, deportations to Auschwitz, under the direction of Adolph Eichmann, resumed. Wallenberg came to the aid of the Jews on both these fronts. To protect them from the Arrow Cross pogroms, he, alongside diplomats from other embassies, established the International Ghetto in Pest—approximately thirty special residences where fifteen thousand Jews were housed under Swedish protection. This Ghetto was managed separately from the main Budapest Ghetto. Its operation required a great deal of organization, food and sanitation arrangements, and funding.

At the same time, over the course of three months, Wallenberg issued thousands of Swedish protective passports, which were honored by the Hungarian and German authorities and saved thousands of Jews from deportation. Yet Wallenberg did not stop there: when Eichmann organized the “death marches” of thousands of Jews to the Austrian border, Wallenberg personally chased the convoys down in his car, managing to extract protective passport holders from the marches and bring them back to the city. His confidence and energy were such that he succeeded in getting Jews out of train cars about to leave for Auschwitz and even out of labor brigades.

In January 1945, Soviet forces liberated Pest and, with it, both the Budapest and the International Ghettos. The Soviets treated the Swedish legation with great suspicion, accusing its staff of spying for the Germans. Wallenberg was summoned for an inquiry at the Red Army headquarters. He went thinking that, despite the Soviets’ hostility, his diplomatic immunity would be enough to protect him. On January 17, 1945, the Soviets arrested Wallenberg, along with the rest of the Swedish legation’s staff. All of them, apart from Wallenberg, were released several months later and returned to Sweden; yet, Wallenberg’s traces vanish from this point on and his fate remains a mystery to this day. After his disappearance, the Soviets claimed to have no knowledge of him. German prisoners of war returning from Soviet captivity testified to having encountered him in jails and prison camps in the Soviet Union. Following great pressure applied by the Swedish government, the Soviet Union finally issued a statement in 1956 claiming that Wallenberg had died in prison in 1947.

In 1987, forty years after his presumed death, the Soviet government handed over to Sweden Wallenberg’s personal belongings, including his meetings planner, detailing his activity in Budapest during the war. It turned out that, prior to the liberation of Budapest, Wallenberg, with the help of Hungarian sympathizers and the Jewish council, prevented the SS and the Arrow Cross from blowing up the Ghettos in anticipation of the Soviets’ arrival. This intervention saved the lives of roughly one hundred thousand Jews residing in the two Ghettos. In 1966, Yad Vashem recognized Wallenberg as one of the Righteous Among Nations and planted a tree in his name. Many other countries have recognized his important efforts on behalf of European Jewry and honored his memory.