

Gustav Kraitz, Artist

I was born in Hungary, but to understand my links to Raoul Wallenberg and the creation of the Raoul Wallenberg monument in New York, I first have to tell my own story.

I began my studies at the Budapest Art Academy in the autumn of 1944. The war was in full swing and the Germans were still in Budapest. Bombs dropped by both American and Russian planes were falling around the clock. It was a chaotic autumn, and the future felt uncertain.

I had many Jewish friends at the Academy. We helped them out with food and other things that could not be found in the ghetto. There was also a girl at the Art Academy whose father had a bakery in the ghetto area. That was where we had our meetings with our Jewish friends. We discussed our future and tried to keep our hopes alive. But we felt a foreboding about the fate that awaited our Jewish friends. I never met Raoul, but I heard about him as a myth, and about the rescue operation that was taking place.

I have a cousin whose father was a Jew. He was captured by the Germans, who sent him to the front at the beginning of the war. The Jews had to disarm the mines that the Poles had laid in front of the German advance. They were all killed. I didn't find out about this until November.

At the end of November, all of the students had to report to the Academic Battalion and go off to the war. At the same time, the Russians had entered northern Hungary. I did not report for military service but instead tried to get back to my home town in the north, where the Art Academy had an establishment with a number of studios. On the way I met the fighting units, but since I was a civilian and unarmed, I was able to pass.

I moved into one of the studios with an artist friend. After a week there came a knock at the door. Four armed men stood there and asked my name. They took me to a strange office in an apartment building where they were going to register me. All the while there were people streaming in through the entrance and out through a back door. We were taken to the courtyard of an old police station surrounded by high walls. And it was there that we were told that we would be going off somewhere to do a job in about fourteen days.

On January 19th, two days after Raoul Wallenberg had been arrested, we marched in a group of around 2,000 people from my home town to a nearby railway station. We were locked into goods wagons, 60-70 people in each. Women and men aged between 18 and 50. The wagon contained an oil drum, with a pipe going through the roof. That was the stove. There was a hole in each corner of the wagon. These were the toilets.

Everything happened very quickly. The doors were nailed shut. We sat there in the darkness. Some of the people screamed hysterically and the train started moving.

We drilled small holes in the walls to orient ourselves as to where we were headed. After twelve days travelling at a snail's pace even more wagons were hooked up, with people from Transylvania. We travelled east and left Romania. Suddenly the train changed direction and travelled north. We were convinced that our final destination was Siberia. But on the second day we could see masses of soldiers and watch towers that poked up out of the snow drifts.

After sixteen days the doors were opened. We were hurried out of the wagons. We jumped down in to 60–70 cm deep snow drifts and were herded into a camp with long low buildings. The camp already contained a large number of people from Slovakia.

We were in Donbas, in the coal district, at the anthracite mines. The mines had been destroyed and flooded by the Germans. Our job was to be to return the mines to a usable condition and mine the coal.

It turned into five hard years for me. At the end of 1945, 90 % of the camp population died. Typhus was rife throughout the autumn. Then the camp was filled with new people.

I tried to escape three times, but was captured each time. I was assaulted and beaten almost to death.

After five years we were released and allowed to return to Hungary. We had completed Stalin's first five-year plan.

I was able to continue at the Art Academy. Marked by my five years in captivity, I was required to pay homage to communism at school, where every day we had to discuss the editorials in the daily papers.

I was ill, but I didn't know it. In 1956 I came to Sweden. The uprising gave me the opportunity to leave Hungary. It was a new beginning in my life.

I came to Sweden in 1956 as a trained sculptor and **curator**, with a social realist approach to art. This made it completely impossible for me to start to work as an artist, in a new world with Picasso and Matisse.

In order to sort myself out and earn a living, I started working with pottery. I had never done so previously.

In 1959 I met my wife, who was a trained painter. She changed my life.

After eight years I started to regain my health and we started working together, which we have now done for almost fifty years. Quite soon we decided to start to experiment with and research into the thousand-year-old technique of old Sung pottery, in order to then use it in our art. At that time there was no information available from China about the process. We followed old pictures from museums. It was a long time before we succeeded.

There then followed a series of exhibitions in both Europe and the USA. In 1994, we were asked by the then consul-general in New York, Dag Sebastian Ahlander, about a temporary artwork for a period of time in New York, that should have a connection with Raoul Wallenberg and Budapest. I had a feeling

Kommentar [W1]: Är osäker om detta ska vara "curator" eller "restorer"

that here I could do something; I am a person who only looks to the future. I have tried to push away my old experiences, but all of the channels to my memories were now opened up. I immediately saw the ruins in Budapest and the ghetto.

It was an incredible period, and the discussion about a temporary work of art quite quickly changed into talk about a permanent monument. What was wanted was something that reminded people about the diplomat Wallenberg. That was what became the attaché case – I got the idea for it on the flight home from New York.

When I told my wife about the attaché case, she decided that she would make it.

The attaché case is full of documents that would save the Jews. Now Raoul Wallenberg is gone, only the attaché case remains. The blue sphere symbolises the hope present in all hardships. The paving stones on the ground around the monument come from the ghetto in Budapest and are a gift from the city's mayor. The black granite pillars symbolise the burned-out chimneys. We built models, and it all went very quickly. Then Marcus Storch entered the picture. He agreed to finance the monument, which was inaugurated in November 1998.

I came closer and closer to Raoul Wallenberg; beginning to perceive the attaché case as a symbol for his drive and energy. I often think of his time in captivity and my own. The guards who worked with prisoners had often come back from the war with serious injuries. They viewed us as fascists who had caused all of the misery in Russia. Their primitive bullying and degradation were often worse than hunger and other things.

I believe that Raoul Wallenberg was also subjected to degradation. It breaks you down. Not everybody can cope with it.

I have produced a number of other art works linked to the persecution of the Jews and Wallenberg.

The refugee monument in Ramlösa Brunnspark, Helsingborg

“Behind the waves”

I came to Sweden as a refugee in 1956. When I sat on the ferry to Sweden and saw the big waves rolling towards the shore, I felt for the first time that I had left my oppression behind me. I was on my way to freedom.

All of those who were given asylum in Ramlösa Hälsobrunn have probably experienced the same feeling. On their way towards a future that carried them back to life. The movement of the waves is a symbol for moving forwards to something new. The sculpture was inaugurated in August 2010.

Bench outside the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2012

This is an important place. Here all the diplomats walk past the attaché case. I hope it reminds everyone that negotiations can mean lives.

I have perhaps talked too much about my own history, but it is part of a living history. For five years I have been trying to seek redress but neither the

Russians nor the Hungarians want to deal with my case. Even the European Court of Human Rights has rejected my petition for redress.

Five years of my life were taken. I was not politically tainted, nor had I participated in the war. To my knowledge I am now the only person from the camp who is still alive.

My youngest child, who is six years old, protests when I want to read a bedtime story. She wants me to tell her about the soldiers. I am reminded every time of how important it is to pass this history on. A history that can make the next generation aware about oppression and degradation.