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Wallenberg Memorial Sites in Budapest

Wallenberg's recollections began five months after his disappearance in Budapest. There is nothing strange about it, because he had been hiding during his last few days in January 1945, and the fights were going on – after his arrest – for four weeks till the full occupation of Budapest. The people saved by him knew no more about him that he had disappeared from Budapest. It may have been their first thought that he simply went back to Sweden. So on 21st of June 1945, when the Jewish Community of Pest held a festive meeting, they drew up minutes which recorded the gratitude of the rescued, and then this document was sent to Wallenberg's address in Stockholm.

The Wallenberg Committee was formed on the 11th of November 1945 with the aim to immortalize Wallenberg's memory, and it addressed the following request to the Mayor of Budapest: "The first: The management of the capital should make it possible that a street must be named after Wallenberg in the area formerly protected by Sweden, bounded by the St. Stephen Boulevard, Pozsonyi Road, St. Stephen's Park and Pannonia Street. The second: Let the capital's leadership permit to erect a statue of Raoul Wallenberg – by public donation – in the same area, possibly in St Stephen's Park. Sculptor Pál Pátzay has already created the model of the statue."

The committee's submission also includes a description of the statue. "The figural part of it is composed like a silhouette, a naked male figure fighting with a snake, which is supposed to symbolize Wallenberg's heroic struggle. This group is on 3-meter-high granite pillars, the head of the pillar is enlarged like a plinth. In the wider side of the pillar – at a height of 180 cms –Wallenberg's portrait relief is placed engraved into the material of the pillar. The whole monument is 580 cms tall at its highest point."

The petition was signed by directors of banks and large corporations, several doctors, merchants and lawyers. The patrons of the Wallenberg Committee were Béla Zsédényi, the President of the Hungarian Parliament and Árpád Szakasits, the President of the National Committee of Budapest. The next week Zoltán Vas, Mayor of Budapest accepted both requests, namely the naming of the street as well as the erection of the statue. Another week later and after a visit on the site a new mayor's decision placed the location of the monument in the Saint Stephen's Park. Experts later suggested that the relatively small statue should be placed not centrally, but rather asymmetrically in the huge park. Taking this opinion into consideration, the final decision about the place of the sculpture was made half a year later, in May 1946.

The Municipal Public Works Council (in Hungarian Fővárosi Közmunkák Tanácsa), the organization which provided names for the public places (streets, squares etc.) in Budapest, decided at its 18th of December meeting to rename the former Phoenix Street after Wallenberg. You can see two maps on the slide. The first shows the street names of the 13th District in 1943 and the other one the same area in 1947. You can see on the second map that the previous Phoenix Street had already taken Wallenberg's name. As usual

in that time, an enamelled iron plate was placed on the wall of one of the houses about the person whose name was given to the street. The following text could be read on it:

„Raoul Wallenberg Street. Raoul Wallenberg, Swedish Embassy Secretary, who saved the lives of tens of thousands during the Arrow-Cross rule due to his courageous actions and enthusiastic devotion. He disappeared during the siege of Pest.”

This little iron plate remained in the same place throughout the following four and a half decades. It can hardly be explained by the fact that it is a rather short street. The survival of the street name itself resulted that Wallenberg's name could be read on every map of the city, in every phone book etc. Moreover, neither the Rákosi nor the Kádár era of socialism took halfway measures in abolishing unwanted memories. (And they did not care about the sensitivity of the society, in this case the sensitivity of the local Jewish society.) Due to the fact that the name of the street remained unchanged, we have to conclude that even among the top leaders of the party there were such people all the time, who thought that Wallenberg's memory was worthy of preservation – despite of all uncomfortable foreign affairs overtones.

But back to the statue and back to the 1940s.

A public fund-raising activity began in early 1946 to provide the costs of creating the sculpture. The same summer a Wallenberg memorial concert was held at the Budapest Music Conservatory in his honour. The amount received, however, was absorbed by one of the largest inflation events in world's history. The fund-raising continued later, but then the change of the political situation intervened. The bank and factory manager members of the Wallenberg Committee may have been rightfully optimistic as early as 1945. In the period between 1947 and 1948, however, the Communist takeover took place, the banks and the big companies were nationalized, and as a result of this, it became impossible to count on an additional support.

The sculptor, Pál Pátzay completed the sculptural work in August 1947, however, the moulding of the sculpture wasn't finished until the autumn of 1948. To this time, as a result of the political changes, the existence of all social organizations was at risk, including the existence of the Wallenberg Committee. Therefore, in November 1948, the Committee asked the Town Hall to set up the statue at their own expense at the location assigned in 1946. The Cultural Department of the Town Hall, however, was only able to finance the erection of the sculpture from the following year's budget.

The specialists of the Town Hall erected the sculpture in Saint Stephens Park in March 1949. One single photograph remained from the erected but not yet inaugurated monument. Using this photo we were able to reconstruct the original inscription: „Raoul Wallenberg, the representative of the Swedish nation, led the brave and noble philanthropic activity of the Royal Swedish Embassy in Budapest from the beginning of July 1944 until January 1945. He became our legendary hero in this dark era of destruction! Let this monument be the sign of our imperishable gratitude at the centre of the very same district, whose persecuted inhabitants were protected by his unshaken waking humanity in the night of an inhuman age.” The inauguration date of the memorial was set to 10th of April. The last contemporary short news about the sculpture appeared on the following day: “The inauguration of the Wallenberg

memorial scheduled for Saturday was cancelled, because technical work has not yet been completed.” Various legends came to life in the later Wallenberg literature about what really happened on the daybreak of the planned inauguration. Fortunately there was an eye-witness on the spot, the writer Lajos Hatvany. He saw from the balcony of his flat overlooking Saint Stephen Park that some men appeared with a lorry. Then a rope was wrapped around the monument and both the statue and the plinth were demolished by the force of the lorry. Then the wreckages were transported away from the scene. Lajos Hatvany immediately called Pátzay, awakening the master with these words: „My dear Paul, your statue has been destroyed right now!”

In a later formal document the following euphemistic sentences can be found about that daybreak: “The Town Hall got Paul Pátzay’s sculpture called Naked man with snake (Wallenberg memorial) taken apart. The statue was damaged when it was pulled down.” The shattered pedestal with the inscription and Wallenberg’s portrait relief disappeared for good. No one has seen it since then. The wreck of the sculpture got into the Municipal Gallery’s (Fővárosi Képtár) depository for about a year.

The submitted tenders for the correction of the sculpture in the spring of 1950 demonstrate that the statue suffered serious damages during the fall: “there are splits and breaks, deflected forms will have to be folded back”, or in another document: “one of the legs of the statue has to be moulded completely new”.

So finally the history of the monument became very similar to the story of Wallenberg himself. We will probably never learn what exactly happened to it, and why. Why should an erected monument be demolished just before its inauguration? Or why was it erected if it should never have existed? From what we know, however, we can deduce what happened in the background.

As we know, Raoul Wallenberg was captured by the Soviets in the middle of January 1945. At the time, however, nobody knew about it. As we have seen the street name plate, placed the next year contained only so much: “He disappeared during the siege of Pest.” Indeed, even Jenő Lévai accepted in his Wallenberg biography – published in 1948 – the Soviet-made-up story that Wallenberg disappeared on his way to Debrecen, and supposedly was murdered.

It was already mentioned too, that the last mayor’s decision about the possibility of setting up the sculpture was taken in May 1946. In late 1948 and early 1949 the Cultural Department of the Town Hall took action on its own in all matters, based on the last mayor’s decision. In the meantime, however, two and a half years elapsed, bringing radical changes. The country’s political and economic life became more and more centralized, but the Town Hall still operated decentralized. The Cultural Department had the right to fulfil a decision on its own competence, even if it went back three years earlier. Meanwhile something else happened too.

At the end of 1945 and in 1946, the Smallholders’ Party was in charge of the leadership of both the capital and the country. The Smallholders Party’s foreign policy orientation was directed not to the East, but rather to the West. Wallenberg’s heroic rescue struggle took

place just one and a half years before, and the news about his being captured by the Soviets may not have influenced the mayor's decision – if he got the news at all.

Three years later, in late 1948 and 1949, however, the Communist Party ruled both the Town Hall and the country. The Iron Curtain was built towards the West at that time, and the unquestioned accommodation to the needs of the Soviet policy became more and more exclusively the single aim of the Hungarian foreign affairs policy. The political change, the takeover by the Communist Party reversed the values: the appreciation and evaluation of Wallenberg's rescue mission was overshadowed by his unfortunate and inexplicable destiny. What happened then? The Cultural Department erected the statue on its own competence, based on a decision which was created three years earlier amongst very different political circumstances. The already standing monument obviously came into the view of the more informed, higher political circles. And in order to avoid a potential foreign affairs scandal, someone from this higher political circle took the risk of causing an internal political scandal by giving orders to demolish the monument. We do not know, and maybe we'll never know where this instruction was issued. I believe it must have been inspired – precisely because of their interest – by the Soviets. This would also explain the decades-long secrecy. For example the former head of the Cultural Department didn't mention a single word in his memoirs about the Wallenberg monument, and even decades after the incident just said: "it happened on the urgent wish of Soviets." Within the Soviet sphere of influence it was not allowed to immortalize the name of a Swedish diplomat, deported by the Russians, in a monument in Hungary.

Therefore it played an important role in the fate of the statue that the Communist Party already tried to gain total rule in the whole country, while the local governments' activities were still based on earlier established democratic principles. This meant that decision-making competences were in fact still ambiguous. The history of the erection and demolition of the Wallenberg memorial demonstrates the spectacular collision of these two tendencies. Early in 1950 the damages of the statue were repaired and the Town Hall gave it back to the creator, because the original owner, the Wallenberg Committee didn't exist any longer at that time. It is strange to say that the additional story of the sculpture was not linked to the memory of Wallenberg. The possibility that it could be erected in a public square as an "anti-fascist memorial" arose at the same time. The sculptor Pátzay thought similarly: he sent the sculpture to an exhibition under the name: „Victory over Fascism". The concept to turn the statue into an "anti-fascist memorial" failed probably after a criticism. A critic said at a professional conference: '„The way as Pátzay shows the struggle against fascism with this statue is the same as the bourgeoisie fought against fascism: vague and impalpable." This is still bourgeois symbolism. ... The symbol mustn't substitute factual representation, visualizing of the typical.' This kind of class struggle criticism had done its work. In the autumn of 1950 the sculpture appeared at the exhibition under the neutral title "Figure with snake". From April 1949 until the beginning of 1950 the statue lost the personal memory of Wallenberg (together with the pillar which contained the inscription and the portrait), and became a general anti-fascist symbol. During the next six months the former Wallenberg memorial turned into a decorative statue without any ideological contents. The most amazed,

but perhaps most obvious metamorphosis, however, happened later. Two years later the statue was erected on a simple concrete plinth next to the new building of a pharmaceutical company called Biogal in Debrecen under the title “Man with snake” which later transformed into “Snake killer”. The factory used the silhouette of the statue as their trademark for decades. In the following slides you can see it in the headline of the company’s newspaper and on a share. In 1974, a smaller „Snake killer” was established in front of the entrance of Radiology Clinic in Budapest. So both former „Wallenberg Memorials” were placed in front of medical institutions. But with this location, without the portrait and the inscription, however, they didn’t symbolize Wallenberg’s struggle against fascist terror, but rather mankind’s struggle against diseases. Only the shape of the plinth of the second statue preserved something from the former Wallenberg memorial, because it has exactly the same form as that of the original Wallenberg sculpture.

The statue’s disappearance and its transformation was followed by three and a half decades of silence in remembering Wallenberg in Hungary. Even the name, Wallenberg’s name turned into taboo, it became literally unspeakable and unprintable in public. Wallenberg’s name did not show up either in encyclopaedias, or in historical scholarship. The name was nowhere to be found, and it was like as if Wallenberg had never even existed.

This silence was broken by a historical journal called *História* in early 1984, which published my first study about the history of the Wallenberg memorial. This article contained approximately the same facts that I have been talking about till now. And in the following years, this article became a determining shaper of Wallenberg’s memory in Hungary.

Actually it happened, that in those years, between 1983 and 1986 the Hungarian-born Nicolas Salgo was the Ambassador of the United States in Hungary. He had read my study about the world’s first Wallenberg memorial’s rugged fate, and on one occasion he asked the famous Hungarian sculptor Imre Varga if he had had the courage to make a new Wallenberg memorial. Because Mr Salgo knew very well, that in those times such an activity needed first of all courage.

Imre Varga was Pátzay’s student at college in the 1950s, and he had known about the story of the first Wallenberg memorial. Therefore, he wanted to erect a relic not only for Wallenberg, but also for his former master’s work. He chiselled the contour of the former monument onto the surface of a huge Swedish granite sheet, then broke the sheet into two parts vertically. On the one hand by doing so he marked the destruction of the old monument symbolically, on the other hand he created the space for his new bronze Wallenberg statue. This sculpture, however, doesn’t show a young man, but an old one, wearing the typical clothes of Soviet labour camps, drugget cloak and clogs. Next to the silhouette

of Pátzay’s statue Ovid’s lines were engraved in Latin: *Donec eris felix multos numerabis amicos, / Tempora si fuerint nubila, solus eris*. In English translation: „As long as you are fortunate, you will have many friends; if the weather has become cloudy, you will be alone.”

The statue was erected in the garden of the U.S. Embassy in Budapest in 1985. So it wasn’t placed in a Hungarian public square, but on American territory. Its translocation to a Hungarian public square needed a real diplomatic conspiracy. Anyway, the following story

could well illustrate the atmosphere of the late Kádár-era, the ambiguity of the so called goulash communism.

The Swedish government invited János Kádár to an official visit to Sweden in 1986. In one of the preparatory discussions Kádár asked the Swedish ambassador in Budapest, what kind of questions would be expected during the press conferences? The ambassador, Anders Rognar Dromberg had known about the sculpture standing in the garden of the American embassy, and he had agreed with his American colleague beforehand, so he answered there would certainly be a question about whether there was a monument to Wallenberg in Hungary. A few weeks later the Ambassador of the United States, who was departing his place, paid his last visit at Kádár's and offered the Wallenberg memorial as a gift for the Hungarian people. According to Mr Salgo memories Kádár accepted the gift "reluctantly", and told the American delegate with a „sourish smile" that he would have to explain it, and apologize to the Soviet comrades again.

The further events were typified by this „reluctance" and ambiguity of Wallenberg's political judgement. The statue of Wallenberg wasn't set up in his former operational area, but far away from the city centre in an outer district. The newspapers hadn't been allowed to publish the day of the inauguration before it took place, and the monument was inaugurated on a very low level of the political protocol. The inauguration took place almost in secret – in the presence of a few dozen people – exactly one week before the Kádár's visit to Stockholm, in April 1987.

So Wallenberg's recollection may have appeared actually in public squares only after the change of the political system. The enamelled street sign plate, which was placed in 1946, was replaced by a bronze relief on private initiative in 1989. The inscription is essentially the same as the former one, but it implies neither the line "He disappeared during the siege of Pest" nor the mortality date of Wallenberg. At the same time both "Snake killer" statues got an inscription, which transformed them from decorative statues into Wallenberg's memorials subsequently. Their inscriptions are on the slides. The board in Budapest says: „This obelisk was erected in the memory of Raoul Wallenberg, who was second secretary of the Swedish embassy in Budapest between 9th of July 1944 until 17th of January 1945. He was one of the greatest heroes of the period of the Second World War, saviour of tens of thousands of Jews during the Nazi occupation of Hungary." The inscription of the monument in Debrecen: „Paul Pátzay's work – the symbol of mankind defeating the evil – cherishes the Swedish diplomat's, Raoul Wallenberg's memory, who saved thousands of persecuted people from the Nazi– Arrow-Cross killers."

Ten years later, in 1999, at the fiftieth anniversary of the erection and demolition of Pátzay's original Wallenberg's memorial the copy of the original work was erected in its original location, in St. Stephen's Park. At the very beginning of his commemoration Phoenix Street was named after Wallenberg. Later his memory was deleted from official national remembrance for decades. However, the gratitude of the rescued people preserved it, and half a century later many of them could witness as Wallenberg's memorial revived from the ashes as a true phoenix.

