

Book review

# 'Under Swiss protection'

## How Swiss diplomat Carl Lutz saved 50,000 lives

by Thomas Scherr

*The example of Swiss diplomat Carl Lutz shows that one person can make a huge difference. Amid the atrocities and callousness of wartime Europe, this man risked his life to save thousands of Jews from certain death.*



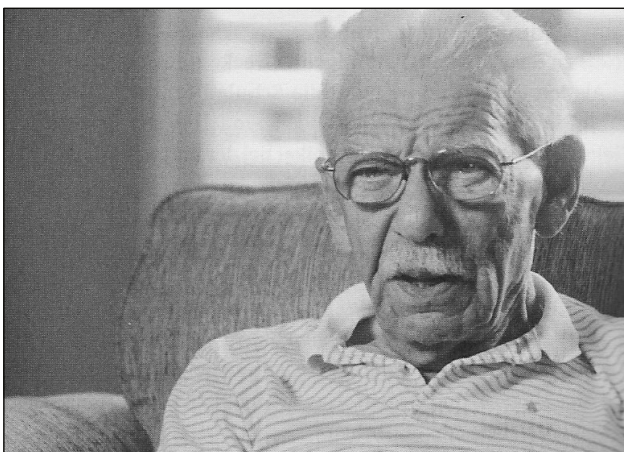
Carl Lutz, 1942  
(photo from the Hirschi estate)

The meticulously compiled book: "Under Swiss Protection. Jewish Eyewitness Accounts from Wartime Budapest",\* edited by *Agnes Hirschi* and *Charlotte Schallié*, transports readers back to Budapest in the terrible months after it was occupied by the German army in 1944. After a historical introduction, many very moving testimonies

give us deeper insight into the rescue efforts coordinated by *Carl Lutz*.

### Negotiating with Adolf Eichmann

In 1944, the Swiss diplomat had to haggle over "letters of safe-passage" with Nazi top brass such as *Adolf Eichmann*, who organized the deportation and extermination of the Jews. Thanks



Alexander Schlesinger, born 1928, was saved from shooting by Carl Lutz. In the 2012 interview (photo from the mentioned volume)

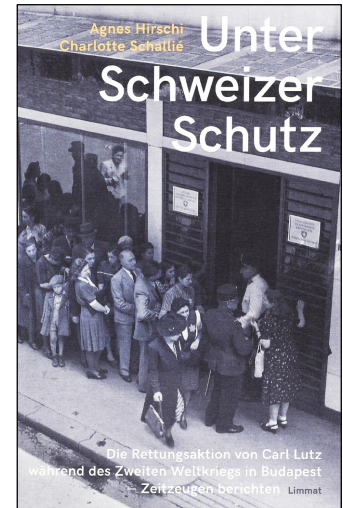
\* "Under Swiss Protection. Jewish Eyewitness Accounts from Wartime Budapest", edited by Agnes Hirschi and Charlotte Schallié. Ibidem Press, November 2017

to these papers, Jews seeking refuge in Budapest could be placed under the life-saving protection of the Swiss legation – with the official prospect of being able to emigrate to Palestine. As the situation took a dramatic turn for the worse, Lutz extended the set quota of letters to include many thousands of people, at his own risk. He also had to negotiate with Hungarian Foreign Minister *Gábor Kemény*, among others, to place houses under Swiss custody in order to accommodate the growing number of people seeking help. The rescue efforts began in May 1944 and ended at Christmas 1944, with the liberation of Budapest by the Soviet army.

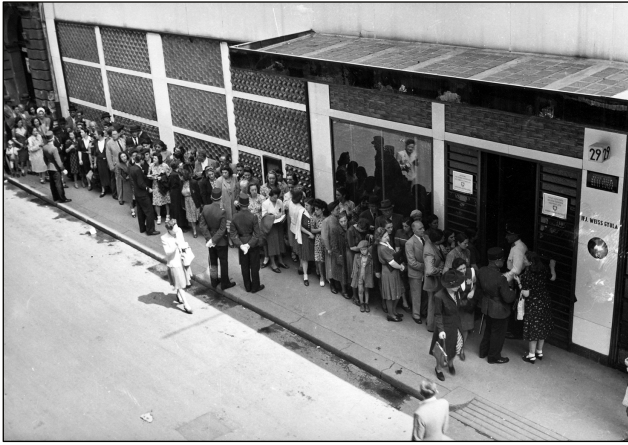
### Taking risks to save others

"Diplomats are not expected to be heroes taking risks. It was his conscience that drove Carl Lutz to use his position beyond the authorized limits and at great risk to his career. He even risked his own personal safety to save complete strangers who were being persecuted." (p. 475, German edition) This is how *Miklós Weisz*, then eight years old, put it many decades later in a speech in 2005.

So who was this courageous Swiss diplomat? Lutz was born in Walzenhausen, in the canton of Appenzell-Ausserrhoden, the second youngest of ten children. His father, who ran a sandstone quarry, died when Lutz was still young. His mother was a Sunday-school teacher at a Methodist church and cared for the poor, even though the family were badly off themselves. She was a warm-hearted woman and a role model for Carl Lutz, who loved and revered her. As he could not afford to study in Switzerland, he emigrated to



"Under Swiss protection", people queuing in front of the Swiss legation



People queuing in front of the Swiss legation ("Glass House"), 1944 (photo from the Hirschi estate)

the United States after completing a commercial apprenticeship. Thanks to years of factory work, he was able to pay for his university degree in history and law there. At the same time, he began his diplomatic career with temporary positions at the Swiss legation. In 1935, he married *Gertrud Fankhauser*. After various assignments, he was posted to the Swiss consulate general in Jaffa, covering what was then Palestine and Transjordan. As vice-consul, he also represented the interests of German nationals in Palestine. (p. 13f.)

### Courage thanks to his moral compass

When asked why it was that Carl Lutz became so deeply involved in Budapest, the author and producer *Daniel von Aarburg* ("Carl Lutz – the forgotten hero") tried to find an answer in an interview with Swiss television SRF in 2014. "That's the big, inexplicable and fascinating question about Carl Lutz. How could a man, who was so shy that he had to break off his training as a church minister, negotiate such a deal on Jewish lives with the top Nazi hierarchy and risk his neck by trying to deceive *Eichmann* and his cronies? I can only explain this by his piety, which gave him with his moral compass and which, at this decisive point in his life, gave him the courage to follow his conscience and, in a singular act of moral bravery, not just carry out his diplomatic functions. Carl Lutz was also a humanist and a philanthropist, he loved the diversity of human existence ..." (SRF DOK of August 28, 2014)

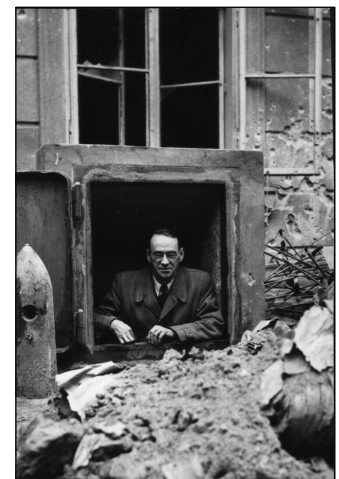
### 430,000 Jews deported in just seven weeks

In organizing the rescue operation, which also involved the representatives of other countries, Lutz and his assistants faced enormous logist-

ical and bureaucratic hurdles: secretly producing identity papers for thousands of people, taking photos, organizing protection from violent attacks, finding shelters, obtaining food, etc. A vast network of the most diverse groups and individuals emerged, working together to save as many people as possible. After the occupation of Hungary by the German Wehrmacht, 430,000 Jews had been deported from the province in just a few weeks – from May 15, 1944 – in a bureaucratically sophisticated operation organized by *Eichmann's* extermination machinery. Due to international pressure, the then Hungarian regent, Admiral *Miklós Horthy*, ended the deportations on July 6. But by October 15, Horthy had been forced to resign in favour of the Nazi Arrow Cross party. The pressure on the secret helpers and rescuers intensified even further. Everyone hoped for a rapid advance by the Soviet army.

### 'he needed hundreds of other people to help him ...'

The then 24-year-old Hungarian officer *Paul Fabry*, who fought in the underground movement, later described the work involved in rescuing Hungarian Jews: "He [Carl Lutz] was an example of what is possible. But those who helped him also knew that one man alone could not save a single person. There wasn't a single Jew who was saved without the involvement of dozens of other people. There was the one who let them into the house, the one who took them to the taxi, the one who gave them a little money or something to eat, the one who ran from one place to the next with fake certificates, the one who made phone calls to tell them when to flee. It was a chain of events, and every second counted. Where could someone help in that second? Was someone there who could help? Who was there to give them the papers? Nobody could save thousands of persecuted people on their own, and this was also true of Lutz. He was a hero, but he needed hundreds of



Carl Lutz in the bombed-out British legation, 1944 (photo from the Hirschi estate)

other people to help him.” (p. 64f.) However, Lutz was the one who made it work, who coordinated the actions, and who was later joined by others. In the end, over 50,000 people were saved from certain death. And what preoccupied Lutz in the years thereafter? How he could have done more to save even more people ... (p. 15)

### **Last living eyewitnesses**

In the post-war years, these rescue efforts were almost forgotten. It was only after Lutz’s death that his work became known to the general public. After the impressive film “Carl Lutz – the forgotten hero” by Daniel von Aarburg, released in 2014, it is now the turn of this publication, which contains the testimonies of the last surviving eyewitnesses, to preserve his memory. Lutz’s step-daughter, *Agnes Hirschi*, compiled this valuable book together with *Charlotte Schallié* and an international team.



*Agnes Hirschi, editor, Carl Lutz's stepdaughter*  
(Photo pma)



*Charlotte Schallié, editor, professor at the University of Victoria, Canada*

### **'Devoting his life to saving human lives'**

In 2012, *Alexander Schlesinger*, now living in the United States, said: “Yes, we are a dying generation; soon there will be no one left with personal memories, and Carl Lutz will be part of history for everyone. [In the last few years] Carl Lutz has grown even greater in my eyes – perhaps because as I get older I become more aware of the risks he took. This wasn’t as clear to me in 1944 as it is today. Carl Lutz also put his life on the line. Nobody was safe. [...] It’s really hard to say what exactly was going on in his head, in his heart, when he decided to devote his life to saving human lives. What makes one person do this, when around him people are destroying other people? But when someone says, ‘No, it is not okay - it is not okay to kill children, women, old men, defenseless people,’ then that is a reason to hold them up above others. Carl Lutz was such a person.” (p. 331)

There were many people who reacted and felt like Lutz, and their actions were deeply human. Lutz’s rotating superiors at the Budapest legation also knew about his expanding rescue operations. Nor should we forget the legations of other neutral States that supported him and took action themselves, such as the Swedish, Spanish and Portuguese legations and the Vatican nunciature, as well as the ICRC. The deeds of the Swede Raoul Wallenberg, who also worked closely with Lutz, have become famous worldwide.

Yes - there were neutral States and institutions. From a humanitarian point of view, the value of neutrality should not be underestimated.