

As we have all seen, in particular in recent weeks, the sad reality of hatred in our world will at times always rear its ugly head. A few weeks ago, Hamas terrorists attacked innocent women and children; and we've also seen anti-semitism rear its ugly head with people tearing down photos of missing Jewish children, and targeting Jewish people out of their hatred for Israel.

This of course is just one example of hate, for it comes in so many forms. There is racism that will rear its ugly head. There is hatred over politics. And there is also apathy; of seeing something unjust and not doing anything about it. But what if we were to take seriously what Jesus tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves? To see all people through the eyes of God's love? What difference might we make?

Tom Veres was a professional photographer, known for documenting the Hungarian Holocaust, and his office in New York was only a few blocks from the United Nations, where signs designate the "Raoul Wallenberg Walk." In the story Veres tells of Wallenberg, he says those who know of him think of him as someone who saved nearly 100,000 lives in Budapest, Hungary, in the last, fierce days of World War II. To Veres though, Wallenberg not only saved lives, he also left a mark on those he saved. Veres knows because he left a deep mark engraved on his heart and mind, one that shaped his thoughts and actions ever since he got to know him.

Veres first met Wallenberg on October 17, 1944 when he was a young man. By then the Nazis had "cleansed" the Hungarian countryside of Jewish people; more than 430,000 men, women and children had vanished, at the rate of 12,000 a day, never to be seen again. Now, in the closing days of the war, the Nazis prepared to exterminate the last large population of Jews alive in Europe, those in Budapest.

Raoul Wallenberg was a young Swedish architect, and he had been sent to Budapest in July for the sole purpose of saving lives. He worked through the Swedish Legation, although he'd never been trained as a diplomat. He'd been in the import-export business and knew his way around Europe. His weapons were his wits, determination and a belief in the worth of each human life to the point of risking his own in exchange.

Veres grew up learning photography from his father. Through his father he knew one of the Swedish diplomats, Per Anger. Knowing his life was in immediate danger, he headed for the Swedish Legation. Against all odds, Veres made it through the crowds of people seeking help and was admitted.

He told Per the bind he was in. And he said to Tom, "Let me introduce you to someone." He leaned out the door and said "Raoul?"

In walked Raoul Wallenberg, a young man in his early 30s, slim with brown hair. His air was down to earth, a center of calm in a world gone mad. Per said "This is Tom Veres, a photographer, a friend of mine. He could be useful."

Wallenberg said "Good, You'll be my photographer. You will document the work we are doing. You'll report directly to me." And they made out official papers on the spot.

Much of Tom's time was spent taking pictures for passports that Wallenberg then issued by the thousands. They stated that the bearer was approved to move to Sweden after the war, and was already under the protection of the Swedish government.

But the day he found out what it really meant to be Wallenberg's photographer was a month later, on November 28, when his secretary handed him a piece of paper with his instructions: "Meet me at Jozefvarosi Station. Bring your camera."

The Jozsefvarosi train station was a freight depot on the outskirts of town. Veres took his Leica and got on the tram, not knowing what to expect. Everybody felt it was best to lay low and keep quiet and out of sight and not get involved; but here he was on a raw November morning, heading for Jozefvarosi Station.

Veres found the station surrounded by Hungarian Nazis and gendarmes (officers) from the countryside. Anyone in his right mind was trying to get out. Wallenberg expected him to find a way in. He shoved his camera into his pocket and went to one of the gendarmes. Using the world's phoniest Swedish accent, he spoke in a mixture of broken Hungarian and German. "I'm a Swedish diplomat! I must go in to meet Raoul Wallenberg!"

The gendarme stared at him incredulously but let him in. The scene inside the station was harrowing. Thousands of men were being loaded onto cattle cars. Wallenberg was there, as were his Studebaker and his driver, Vilmos Langfelder. When Raoul saw Veres, he walked over and whispered slowly, "Take as many pictures as you can."

"Pictures Here?" Veres thought. If he were caught, he knew he'd be on that train himself, legation or no legation. He climbed into the backseat of the car and took out his pocketknife. He cut a small slit in his scarf and positioned the camera inside it. He got out and walked through the train yard as calmly as possible, snapping pictures.

Wallenberg had his black ledger out. "All my people get in line here!" he called. "All you need to do is show me your passport!"

He approached the line of "passengers." "You, yes, I have your name here, Where is your paper?" The startled man emptied his pockets, looking for a paper he never had. He pulled out a letter. "Fine. Next!"

Men caught on at once. Letters, eyeglass prescriptions, eve deportation notices became passports to freedom. In his ledger, Raoul and his assistants carefully checked off, or added, each name in the book. Veres tried to become invisible, snapping away, trying to catch the atrocity of what was going on.

"Tommy! Tommy" he heard all of a sudden. He heard his name and turned around wondering if he'd been recognized.

Hearing his name in line, almost on the train, was his best friend George. George and Tom had known each other for years. They'd been assigned a seat together in first grade and had sat together by choice every year since. His friend was the valedictorian, and brilliant; now in line to die. Veres only had a moment to think.

He walked over to him, grabbed him by the collar and said "You dirty Jew, get over there!" and he pointed towards Wallenberg's line. "I said go! Are you deaf?" He kicked his backside, and his friend understood and got in line.

Wallenberg had pulled hundreds of men out of line when he sensed the Nazis losing patience. "Now back to Budapest, all of you" he said.

The new "Swedes" walked out of the station to freedom. Wallenberg turned back to the captors. He began to lecture them in measured tones about health conditions, crowding on trains, anything to take their attention off the departing men.

As soon as they had a good head start, Raoul and Tom got back into the car where Vilmos waited. The danger they had been in didn't hit Tom until then. This man, a Swede, who could have waited out the war in safety, was marching into train yards - and asking others to do the same.

When they got back to town, he found George, took him to one of Wallenberg's protected houses and took his picture for a schutzpass passport. "Now stay here until I get your papers," he told him.

The next day word came: more deportations were happening from Jazefvarosi Station. Again, he was asked to come. It was a ghastly repeat. Gendarmes with machine guns, thousands of men being herded onto trains. Wallenberg with his table and his black "book of life."

This time Tom's camera was already hidden in the folds of his scarf. As Wallenberg started calling off common names that many men might answer to, he started snapping photos.

That day, his cousin Joseph was among those marked for death, as was one of Hungary's great actors. He pulled them out of line to join Wallenberg's hundreds.

It was then he saw his chance. Tom walked around the train, inches from the armed guards. On the other side, the side away from the station, he climbed onto the already filled car. The train hadn't yet been padlocked from the side. He jumped, pushing all his weight onto the bolt that held the door shut. The spring clicked. The long door slid back in its tracks.

The men inside, who a moment ago had stood prisoner in the darkness, now blinked in the November sky. "Move quickly" Tom said. Men started jumping off the back of the train, running to the line where Wallenberg continued to give out passes.

Inside the station, Wallenberg clearly saw that his time was up. "All of you released by the Hungarian government back to town! March!" At the same time a Hungarian police officer saw what Tom was doing. He pointed his revolver at Tom and ordered him to stop.

Raoul and his driver got into the Studebaker, and they drove around to Tom's side of the train. Raoul opened the door and leaned out and told Tom to jump.

He didn't have a moment to think; he made the longest jump of his life.

Raoul pulled Tom inside and Vilmos hit the gas. Raoul smiled and looked back at the station saying "I don't think we'll come back here for a while."

A couple of days later at Wallenberg's Ulloi Street offices, George's mother came to see Tom. She was crying. George had tried to slip out to see his fiancée in a house two corners away. Two Arrow Cross thugs arrested him within those two blocks; Tom never saw his best friend again.

By January the Soviet Army was pressing close to the city, but the Nazis and Arrow Cross still ran Budapest. Wallenberg was in a pitched battle to keep the 30,000 people in protected houses from being added to the 70,000 already locked in the Central Ghetto. He was doing everything he could to stop the pogrom to finish the ghetto off.

By now there was constant bombing day and night, so hundreds lived in the Ulloi Street offices. On the night of January 8, a pounding came at the legation door. Within moments, the Arrow Cross burst in, shining blinding flashlights from face to face.

The Arrow Cross didn't know that Edith Wohl was at the telephone switchboard upstairs and that she made a quick call. "Everybody line up!" the officer yelled. "At once! Or we'll shoot you on the spot!"

Tom thought to himself "it was finally happening." as he was standing under guard in line, about to march to his death.

"All right everyone. It's time for a walk to the river!" one soldier spat. He turned to a couple of his buddies sitting nearby. "It's your turn to take them" he said.

"We just got back from taking the last group!" one of them complained. "There's still snow on our boots!"

Just then the door burst open. There stood Wallenberg. "What are you doing? These are Swedes! You've made a very serious mistake. Let them go!"

The Arrow Cross turned, stunned, to find a truckload of Budapest police filling the room, guns drawn.

Raoul Wallenberg stared down the Nazi captain. "You heard me. Let them go. now!"

The captain stared at the machine guns surrounding him. He stared at the Swede. The captain let everyone go.

The war was within days of being over when the bad news came. Everyone, Jews and Christians alike, who lived in Tom's family's apartment house had been marched away by the Arrow Cross because they'd found the huge hidden food stocks kept by the well-known Zserbo Confectionery stored in the building's basement. Tom's parents were taken as well, right to the Danube River and shot, their bodies thrown in the river. It was too late for Raoul to save them.

But it wasn't too late for thousands of people whom Raoul had pulled out of trains or off marches. It wasn't too late for the people in the ghetto whom Wallenberg and his accomplices had saved from the final pogrom, even as the firing squads were assembling.

The last time Tom saw Raoul Wallenberg, he and his driver, Vilmos Langfelder, were getting ready to leave for Debrecen to meet with the newly established provisional government about setting up reconstruction programs. He asked Tom if he wanted to come, but he had yet to find out the whereabouts of his parents. The two men left on January 17 with a Soviet escort. Before reaching Debrecen, they were taken into custody by the NKVD, the precursor of the KGB. They were not ever seen again.

Veres closes by saying he often thinks about the timing of his parents' tragic deaths kept him from disappearing along with Wallenberg. Sometimes he thinks his life was spared to tell his story.

Though it was never known what happened to Wallenberg, what is known is what he did for thousands of men and women and children. The people whose lives he saved, they were simply his fellow human beings, and as such, he felt responsible for them. He wasn't some superhuman, although his actions were heroic. He was an ordinary person who dared other ordinary people to do what he did.

Jesus gives us the same dare or challenge if you will. So how can we live it out?

As a starting point, it starts with looking at hatred in our hearts. It's something that we learn as humans; sometimes from family or friends or culture. What is it that caused ordinary people to attack Jews in Europe in the 30s and 40s, and in so many parts of the world this day? Sometimes in our hearts, bigotry or hate can come out and it can be learned as well. Now this is not to say, as I note in my column, you can't ask legitimate questions of other faiths or even be critical of some of their beliefs. But sometimes a

person can jump to a conclusion based on lies and gossip and propaganda, or assume that because one person acted in a certain way (eg a terrorist) then everyone of that religion must have terroristic tendencies. When we recognize this in our hearts, we can work to root it out and make sure it doesn't spread to other people. Sometimes we have hate for an individual at work or school, or a coach or a teacher. Maybe there is a legitimate reason to dislike someone, but maybe there's more to the story and more than meets the eye when we have an enemy or someone we dislike and we can pray for them or work for reconciliation.

We then ask the question "who is my neighbor?" Of course there are the people under our own roofs and in our families who need us to reach out to them. But what struck me with the story of Wallenberg was here was a man who wasn't Jewish, who wasn't targeted by the Nazis, who went out of his way to help someone in need. This is why it's so important to remember God loves all people; as we hear in the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus chooses the most evidently non-neighbor, the Samaritan, to expose our human tendency to exclude some people from sharing in the same common humanity. Jesus teaches us if we love God, then neighbor should flow from it. God Himself is love; Father, Son and Spirit; and we are meant to emulate that. Jesus of course does, dying for all humanity. So how can our eyes be opened to people in need? When we see racism or bigotry, do we do something about it? When we see someone who is hurting, do we offer them a helping hand or be present to listen to them? When people get into gossiping or tearing someone down, do we try to put a stop to it? Do we have a concern for the poor?

Some of the things that have happened in Gaza to the Jewish people are horrific; and again we ask the question "how is this possible," but again, persecution has happened at so many times through the ages of people of different faiths, religions, genders, and we are all aware of it. But if we are really going to love our neighbor, it can't just be a bumper sticker slogan. It has to be a way of life. Sometimes it will be costly, as people turn on us when we don't join in with the crowd or call someone out for their hate; and of course the Cross is the symbol of love, and at each Mass we receive our Lord who loves us so much, each and every one of us without exception. May we truly become what we receive, giving one another the love we are given.