Raoul Gustaf Wallenberg was born in Stockholm on August 4, 1912. He was a member of a prominent Swedish family, the Wallenbergs, who for generations had played an important role in the country’s economic, political, and social life. His father, Raoul Oscar (1888–1912), was a naval officer, who died from cancer three months before his son was born, leaving the son to be raised by his widowed mother, Maj Wising Wallenberg (1891–1979). In 1918, his mother married Fredrik von Dardel (1885–1979), and from this marriage, two children were born, Guy in 1919 and Nina in 1921.

Raoul’s paternal grandfather was Gustaf Wallenberg (1863–1937). He was a career diplomat, who served as the Swedish Minister to Japan, China, and Turkey. After his retirement he remained in Istanbul. Despite the distance, Gustaf played an important role in his grandson’s life, acting rather like a surrogate father to Raoul. Under the patronage of his grandfather and the tutelage of his mother, Raoul Wallenberg developed, from an early age, a cosmopolitan view of the world affairs. This view was reinforced by his extensive travels and enhanced by his talent for languages. As a schoolchild, Raoul was sent abroad to learn French, German, and English. He also learned Russian in school, and started to study Spanish while living in the US.

Raoul Wallenberg moved to the US during the middle of the Great Depression at the request of his grandfather, who felt it was important that his grandson experience the American culture and way of life. He studied architecture at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor from 1931 to 1935, graduating at the top of his class, with honors, and received the American Institute of Architects’ Silver Medal. Among his classmates were Gerald Ford, who later became the 38th President of
the USA (1974–7) and Sol King, the President of Albert Kahn Associates, Inc. (1958–75).

Albeit Wallenberg was allowed to make his own choice of academic study, it was apparent that his grandfather intended that he pursue a career in banking. His grandfather wanted him to get some work experience after graduation and arranged for Raoul to work in South Africa, where he was apprenticed at a Swedish construction company, and then in Palestine, where he was apprenticed at a Dutch bank in Haifa. In 1936, while working in Haifa, Wallenberg came into contact with immigrants from Germany who told about the Nazis atrocities against the European Jews.

Despite Raoul Wallenberg’s privileged background, he was not guaranteed a career in the family business. His grandfather, Gustaf Wallenberg, had left the family empire to his brothers, after a disagreement, and became a diplomat. His grandfather died in 1937, before the international bank he had planned for his grandson had been established. Wallenberg’s American degree in architecture was not valid in Sweden, and he did not wish to go back to university. A position in one of the Wallenberg companies or Stockholm’s Enskilda Banken was not in the picture, even if some help and assistance from the Wallenberg family might be hoped for. In fact, it was via his uncle and godfather, Jacob Wallenberg, that Raoul Wallenberg acquired a position at the food-trading enterprise MEROPA. The company was run by the Hungarian Jew Kálmán Lauer, who had immigrated to Sweden before World War II broke out. Wallenberg became his employee and later his partner. During the war, Wallenberg traveled to Germany and Hungary, among other places, on business trips for the company. For Lauer, being a Jew, such traveling might have proved a death sentence.

It was while working at MEROPA that Wallenberg was chosen for the mission for which posterity remembers him. In June 1944, the Rabbi of Stockholm’s Great Synagogue, Marcus Ehrenpreis, asked Wallenberg’s boss if he knew anyone who would be willing to travel to Hungary to investigate the condition of the Jews in Budapest. Lauer recommended his employee, Raoul Wallenberg.1 Members of Lauer’s own family were in Budapest, and earlier Wallenberg had attempted to procure a visa for himself to go to Hungary to try to help the Lauer family, but his visa request had been denied.2 Later, after his arrival in Budapest, Wallenberg learned that Lauer’s relatives had already been deported.

At about the time of Ehrenpreis’s request and Lauer’s recommendation of Wallenberg, American plans developed to send a Swede to Hungary on behalf of the remaining Jews there. One department of