

RADNOTI, Istvanne (Magda)

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From microfilm

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Abstract

Magda Radnoti's husband Istvanne was taken with 200 other physicians to the Jozsefvaros train station for deportation to Auschwitz or Dachau in autumn 1944, after the Arrow Cross coup.

Raoul Wallenberg arrived with a list. Istvanne Radnoti held his flashlight for Wallenberg to see the list. Mrs. Radnoti still has that flashlight. Neither Dr. Radnoti, nor his friend Dr. Hidas (Hides), nor Prof. Gottseger (Goldeeger?) was on the list. But Dr. Hidas (Hides) told Wallenberg that he had been promised Swedish protection, although this was not true. Dr. Radnoti said the same thing, and Wallenberg saved the three men, and ten to 30 others. Wallenberg ensured that each of them had a safe place to stay. All the other 200 doctors perished, she says.

Dr. Radnoti went to a protected Swedish house, where he worked as its doctor, and never went outside throughout the rest of the war. The street was later renamed Wallenberg Street.

Magda Radnoti, a physiotherapist, survived by using false identity papers as Veronika Takaos, nurse; by living in protected Swedish houses; and by refusing to go on a death march to Vienna. Although she had received a *Schutzpass* from Dr. Radnoti's 85-year-old relative living in Romania, apparently she did not use it.

Mrs. Radnoti hid with a friend of theirs, Gyozo Salgo, after receiving false papers from her brother-in-law, who was a doctor. At one point, the Germans were sending her and other Jews on a death march to Vienna. She refused to go, and because her husband had given generous tips previously to men involved in the incident, she was set free. She ran into a friend of her husband's, who took her to a protected Swedish house.

Russians liberated the hospital where she was working on January 16, 1945. Her husband came two days later to get her. When they returned to their apartment, they found iron workers living there. She saw much damage from bombing.

After the war, she was the first witness at a court hearing for a doctor friend who had saved many Jews by putting plaster casts on their legs, and saying that people with broken legs could not be transported. Charges against him were dismissed.

Interview from microfilm

Peter Bajtay: (Please) tell me about your husband's escape...

Mrs. I. (Magna) Radnoti: It happened in a way that my husband went to the railway station. Actually he was taken out. With 200 other physicians. Only doctors were taken away on that train. It was getting dark...

Bajtay: When did this actually take place?

Radnoti: This happened in 1944, I do not know exactly when.

Bajtay: This probably happened after the Arrow Cross coup, didn't it?

Radnoti: Yes, after the Arrow Cross coup. At that time it was already the "humorous" Arrow Cross environment.

Bajtay: Do you remember what type of weather it was? Was it cold, did you have snow?

Radnoti: It was cold, but no snow. It was very cool. He went with his rucksack and he carried a beautiful red English blanket, and he was put on the train. He already had his place, and then came Wallenberg and he brought a list.

I was very much shocked by this relief, where the list is shown. And he makes a beautiful movement with his hand like Christ, a very soft motion. It is very nice, it is wonderful. Well, he came to the railway station and people got off the train, because he called one or two people by name.

Bajtay: Was this the railway station of Jozsefvaros?

Radnoti: Yes. He brought the free pass there. My husband did not have a free pass... It was getting dark, and he did not bring any free passes for Doctor Hidas (Hides?) ...neither for Hides, nor for Dr. Gottseger (Goldeeger?) who was a professor, and not even for my husband. So it was getting dark, and he did not see the list anymore. So he asked whether somebody had a small torchlight (flashlight). And then my husband provided light for him with this poor little torchlight. (Mrs. Radnoti shows me old torchlight). So he illuminated the document. And Dr. Hidas, this physician friend of my husband's, he died very recently, he was a physician of internal medicine, he said: "I was promised to get Swedish protection, it must be on the way." So Wallenberg said in German: "*Dann Kommen si emit*" (So come with me). And then my

husband says, "*Ich bin such so*" (The same applies to me). "*Dann kommen Sie such mit*" (You should also come with me, Wallenberg replied). So he brought in about 25 to 30 people. I do not know who they were, except for these three, Professor Goldeger (Gottseger), my husband, and Hidas."

Bajtay: So to say then your husband bluffed him, as your husband did not have a paper.

Radnoti: He did not have a paper, but he held the light for him to see the list. It did not occur to him that he could escape, once he was not on the list. But Hidas was a clever man. He said that the document was on its way for him.

Bajtay: So Hidas did not have a document either?

Radnoti: No. He did not have any. But he saved everyone. This was wonderful.

Bajtay: And the Arrow Cross men, they did not check the list?

Radnoti: No.

Bajtay: So he received a document or a certificate on the spot?

Radnoti: No. "*Dann kommen Si emit und bleiben Sie hier.*" (So you came with me and you stay here). Hidas went to fetch his package from the train, and he brought it. My husband did not get on the train, he left everything there. He said he would not get into a debate with a Hungarian policeman, saying, "Look here, I was saved by Wallenberg. Get off and see it for yourself." He was afraid the policeman would say, "Please sit down here and stay, you cannot get off." So my husband left everything there. His blanket, his clothes, and he was right, of course. And then, Wallenberg brought them by foot. So this is how my husband was saved. And he received another 20 years. This was in 1944 and my husband died in 1965.

Bajtay: How many doctors did he save then, were they three or four?

Radnoti: Much more. Ten or 20. I do not know exactly. So it was not only them, the three or them. Because he really brought a lot of free passes. He brought those people in legally. But he brought in my husband the others illegally, because he wanted to save everyone.

Bajtay: So he made your husband and the other physicians stand aside?

Radnoti: Yes. He made them stand next to himself and said, "*Bleiben Sie hier*" (You stay here). So my husband did not get back on the train, and he was absolutely right. Hidas got on the train again and saved his things, but there was not much of a point in this, because he could have lost his life. You cannot imagine what type of a world it was.

Bajtay: And did your husband tell you how many people approximately were made to stand aside?

Radnoti: About 15 to 20.

Bajtay: I mean altogether at the railway station of Jozsefvaros. There were so many, who...

Radnoti: There were 200 people. I know that exactly. This was a 200-strong crowd, exclusively consisting of physicians, who the Arrow Cross guys wanted to take to Auschwitz. They were only doctors. And none of them came back. They were all killed. I cannot tell you names.

Bajtay: How did your husband know that he was Wallenberg? Has he heard before of his activities, did your husband know about his missions?

Radnoti: He announced to the "passengers" of the train that whoever had a Swedish passport should get off because Wallenberg was there. This is how they knew it. It was spectacular, somebody appearing there with a list, and the names are shouted out.

Bajtay: Was Wallenberg alone?

Radnoti: I do not know. Maybe he was escorted. But it was a wonderful story anyway.

Bajtay: And did your husband tell you about what Wallenberg looked like? What impression did he make on your husband?

Radnoti: No. He was a young man of 35 years of age. Handsome and rich. And he was a wonderful creature.

Bajtay: I mean your husband. Didn't he tell you about this?

Radnoti: No, he did not talk about it. It was a terrible world. I was also hiding. My story is interesting, too. I was hidden by a

friend of ours, an MG (Medical General), the best friend of Bajcsy-Zallinszky's. He was an MG called Gyozo Salgo. I received false papers from my brother-in-law, a doctor posted to Pacel. He sent me a false paper, and I was hiding with that document on me, and this is how I escaped. So my husband came home then, and we were located in a Swedish home.

Bajtay: Where was your husband taken from the railway station?

Radnoti: He came home.

Bajtay: Did he receive some kind of a document, a protecting pass?

Radnoti: No.

Bajtay: Not even later on?

Radnoti: I do not know. He was posted as a doctor to the Swedish house. This was in Radnoti Miklos utca or another street parallel to it. He was there all the time during the war, he did not leave the house.

Bajtay: So he stayed in that house during the siege of Budapest?

Radnoti: Yes. In the Swedish protected house. I also escaped due to being in a Swedish protected house.

Bajtay: You were sent to a Swedish protected house because of your husband, or how did it happen?

Radnoti: No. I was transferred to a Swedish protected house because this house where we are now was surrounded by the Germans, and they locked the gate. They took the Jews downstairs, and they were all taken to the brick factory of Obuda. I said I would not go because I knew that I would die. I knew it was a journey by foot to Vienna, the death trip. I put on my fur coat. I had a very nice fur coat with yellow star on it. So I went to the caretaker and told him: "Let me out." And since my poor husband gave handsome tips to the caretakers, he let me out. There was the German lorry (truck), and I went out. They did not see that I had a yellow star. They did not call after me. So I wandered out, and I had nowhere to go. I did not know where I would be going. I did not have any place to go. But it was interesting that there was an Arrow Cross center in 3 Szent Istvan Korut. So I could not go in that direction. I went below the bridge and came up to Pozsonyi ut. At that time tram 15 was running there, and I supposed I wanted to go to the Jewish hospital at that time, now called OTKI, where we had a friend Professor Wasony.

But this is not sure. Anyway, as I was walking, I met a friend of my husband's. He asked me where I was going. I told him that I would like to answer the same question.

Bajtay: Did you have no pack at all?

Radnoti: Nothing. A handbag. Not even a nightgown. My husband had a friend and his name was Mendelovics. So he said, "Magda, we are in a Swedish protected house. Come there." So I went there, to 40 Balzac utca, where Gyorgy Aczel lived. I was hiding there. It was a Swedish protected house. You just cannot imagine...

Bajtay: This was the house where Mendelovics lived? And they lived in their own apartment?

Radnoti: Yes. It was a Swedish protected house, so they were protected. And I was taken there by this friend of my husband's. On that night, many people escaped to the house because it was protected. And they were sitting in the staircase on the steps. It was very late at night. I still remember making a large pot of tea because people were hiding in the staircase with small children. There was no place they could go. They were not let into the apartments of the house. So I took a cup, and kept pouring the tea. And then, suddenly, somebody said, "Mrs. Radnoti." So I say, "Yes." She had a child in her arm. So she says, "Your husband is a doctor. What are you doing here?" I say, "I am hiding here." So they were put up somehow in the house, and so they escaped. By means of getting to this house, they escaped from being deported. Because everybody was quite nicely taken away, there was no hope.

Bajtay: Didn't you try to get a free pass (*Schutzpass*)? Didn't you have contacts to Sweden?

Radnoti: Yes, I received one. I had a sister-in-law living in Magyvarad (?) (now Romania). An 85-year-old lady. She was my husband's sister. She could move about freely as a Romanian citizen, and she acquired a Swedish passport. In fact, she brought my mother-in-law there. She brought me a Swedish free pass (*Schutzpass*), but it was forged. And she told me that. Many of these passes were forged. She told me to show it only when absolutely necessary. One nice day, they came to check the house, and they called me downstairs. But it was only up to an age of 50.

Bajtay: Was the passport made out in your name?

Radnoti: Yes. And my mother-in-law had one, too, and she wanted to go downstairs, by all means. I told her not to go down because she was already 70, and she did not have to. But she insisted to go downstairs and show her passport. I was afraid that she would betray us, because she did not know that the passport was forged. Anyway, I had to certify myself with that passport, and then I could not stay there any longer. I had to go on. And then this General friend of ours got me hiding in his hospital.

Bajtay: How long did you stay in that house?

Radnoti: In the Swedish protected house? I was there for more than four weeks. We were sleeping on the floor on mattresses, because many people were hiding there.

Bajtay: How did you get food?

Radnoti: Food was brought by my sister-in-law and my younger sister, she has died recently. She was not endangered as her husband was a Christian and as the wife of a Christian, she could move about freely.

Bajtay: Did you get no food centrally? I mean from the Swedish Embassy?

Radnoti: I do not remember. I only remember the house. And I know that a woman in black leather dress and leather jacket used to visit us. She was the Arrow Cross leader, the “authority” for the house. We were frightened of her because she would soon send you to jail or have you deported. She only had to lift her finger. It was a “very funny” life, you should be glad that you did not live at that time.

Bajtay: And when you were transferred to the hospital, was it more quiet there?

Radnoti: Well, it was not quiet at all, because that hospital was already evacuated. This doctor friend of ours was an orthopedic surgeon, an excellent man. He had another hospital on the island. He plastered Jews' legs there, and said that they could not be transported with a broken leg. Of course, no leg was broken. He saved a lot of people. I was the first witness at the court hearing after the war. He was released from charges immediately, in spite of the fact that he was Bajcsy-Zsilinszky's friend, he was still brought to trial as an MG. He told me that there was a housewife in 3 Matyas ter, where there was a Red Cross flag outside. So it was a protected house with a locked gate. There was

nobody except for this housewife in the house. She said that I would help in the kitchen. But when she saw my hands, she said, "You cannot do that with those hands. The maids will see immediately that you are not a maid yourself." "But what shall I do then?" I asked. "Just stay in the room." The room had a bathroom. So I could have a wash frequently, I was reading, I listened to the radio, and I did not go out for weeks. And then, one fine day, this MG sent me a message with his driver at 3 PM to leave the hospital immediately. This was because he was taken to 3 Szent Istvain Korut, and was charged with the hiding of Jews. Since there was a chance that they would be looking for me, I should leave the hospital. You could only go out until 5 PM. After that, you could not go out. Where shall I go now? So this housewife said, "Go over to my daughter." She lived nearby. So I went over to her and I spent a night in the basement. But I had to move on from there, because the person in charge of the house already asked how I got there. And then in the hospital there was a young man, about your age, who was a wood sculptor, and he made artificial hands. He came with me because he did not want to stay there. The hospital was not a safe place any more. And then I went from hospital to hospital as a health worker. I worked in ORFI up to 1940. I worked there as a nurse because I had a false document under the name Veronika Takaos, nurse. So I went from hospital to hospital to find a job as a nurse. But nobody needed a nurse. Finally I found an auxiliary hospital in Vas utca, where I was employed. So, I worked there, and waited for the end of the war with false documents.

Bajtay: During all this time you had no information about your husband?

Radnoti: No news, whatsoever. When the Russians came in, my husband came to the hospital. He knew that I was there. I did not have any problem at the hospital. There was a captain called Vatin, who hated the Russians, and the only people that he hated more than the Russians were the Germans. He was a doctor of contagious diseases in the Belgian Congo, and came home exactly at the "right" time. He dropped right into it. It was the "best" timing. He said that a terrible world would come if the Russians came in because he knew that Communism would be introduced, and everybody would be poor. He knew it would be horrible. So on 16 January at night, the wall was crushed, and an elegant Soviet officer stood there in a snow-white uniform, just like in an operetta. He was a great big man. And we were liberated.

Bajtay: He was really in white uniform?

Radnoti: Yes, certainly. (...) At that time, they proceeded in a way that they crushed through the walls of basements, and so they moved inwards. And they got to Vas utca also by breaking through the wall. I stayed there for a while, afterwards.

Bajtay: Your husband was already there?

Radnoti: No, once a Russian soldier rushed across, and pulled me by my hair to the other side. I said to myself, "Jesus, he will do me in now!" I could not talk to him, because he did not speak English or German, and I do not speak any Russian. As I found out, he took me over to help somebody who was shot. We immediately put him on a stretcher, took him to the hospital, and took care of his wounds. Two days after this event, my husband showed up and introduced himself.

Bajtay: So this happened on 18 January?

Radnoti: Yes, we were liberated on the 16th, yes, this was on the 18th of January. So my husband came and contacted the man in charge, this captain called Vatin, and it is interesting to note that later on, he was working with him at the traumatology, as he was a laboratory doctor, and my younger sister who was working there met him. Unfortunately, I did not meet him later. Maybe he is still alive. So he came in and told this man, "I am coming to fetch my wife, sister Veronika." This was the name I had in my false papers. One time, this Vatin became suspicious because I always helped him, and a patient came who was scabby. You could see it on his hand. So I told the doctor in Latin that he probably had scabies. So this doctor looked at me and became suspicious. He asked how I knew.

Bajtay: Were you a doctor?

Radnoti: No, I was a physiotherapist by profession. I am not a physician. But during my hospital days, I have seen and heard a lot of things. So this captain Vatin told me to stay there because he could use me very well. My husband told him that he does not let me stay, because the hospitals will be locked up, and then you cannot come out for a year. So he took me from there, and the next day the hospital was locked up. So I came home and everything was damaged by bombing. Iron workers from Caepel (?) lived in our apartment.

Bajtay: And when was your husband taken away, when did they want to take him away?

Radnoti: This deporting attempt was probably in the autumn of 1944. It is interesting that I do not remember the exact date. All I know is that those taken away never came back.

Bajtay: They were taken to Auschwitz?

Radnoti: I do not know whether they were taken to Auschwitz or Dachau, they were taken somewhere anyway.

Bajtay: So at that time only these 200 doctors were awaiting the transport?

Radnoti: Yes. Nobody else. And Wallenberg brought away 15 to 20 people. They came by foot.

Bajtay: Wallenberg escorted them.

Radnoti: Wallenberg brought in those people, and made sure that they found a safe place. My husband was immediately sent to a Swedish protected house. These houses were without medical service. The sick people did not dare to come out. And when I came away from the hospital, I also went there and stayed there for a while. At the Swedish protected house. This was in the thirteenth district, I do not know which street it was. One of the side streets.

Bajtay: Wasn't it in Katona Jozsef utca? There were many Swedish houses there.

Radnoti: Maybe, maybe.

Bajtay: It is running in parallel with Balzac utca.

Radnoti: Yes, maybe.

Bajtay: The street called Wallenberg now. What was the name of it then? Was it Funix Street?

Radnoti: Maybe.

Bajtay: Because we have this Balzac, then Katona, and Wallenberg Street.

Radnoti: Yes. Maybe we stayed in Wallenberg Street, but of course, at that time, it was called differently.

Bajtay: Maybe it was called Fonix at that time.

Radnoti: No.

Bajtay: Then perhaps Tatra utca?

Radnoti: Yes, maybe Tatra utca, yes. So we were there. And when everybody was let out, everything was robbed, the windows were broken, and so we received glass from the health trade union to repair the windows of the apartment. It is a nice story.

Bajtay: Thank you very much