

## VALDEMAR LANGLET AND THE "GRATEFUL" BUDAPEST

The Swede journalist Valdemar Langlet (1872-1960) lived with his wife Nina (1896-1988) in Budapest from 1932.

Valdemar lectured in Swedish at the university. His wife, of Russian descent, gave piano lessons. They acquired a good grasp of Hungarian, had a wide circle of acquaintances, took part in society affairs and had outstanding connections within the "upper crust".

The Langlets were Esperantists. Nina, a member of the esperantist Russian Borovko family, became famous with her connection to Zamenhof, Valdemar, on the other hand, was the first president of the Swedish Esperanto Society. He first came to Budapest in 1902, making contact with the newly-formed Hungarian Esperanto Society, then indulging his favourite pastime of horse-riding in the Hortobágy. He came to Hungary for the second time in 1931 to criss-cross the country during the course of a horse-riding tour.

The book of his journey (*"On Horseback Through Hungary"*) which appeared in Swedish and English, devoted much space to the "praiseworthy past" of the country, as well as acquainting the readers with 40 historical people. A special chapter dealt with Trianon, the "injustice inflicted on Greater Hungary". He identified with the feelings and irrational approach suggested by the irredentist propaganda. "It cannot be that so many hearts shed so much blood in vain.....No, no, never!" was the final sentence in an article he wrote for a Hungarian newspaper. (*"1100 kilometres in the Saddle"*, in *Pesti Hírlap Vasárnapja* March 23, 1932) When he then realised that irredentism was leading to a policy of war, he confined his activities to fostering Swedish/Hungarian relations.



Langlet, who spoke excellent German, was already 72 years old when the Germans invaded Hungary and, from the first day, operated arm in arm with the Hungarian authorities. Beginning on March 19, 1944, those who had opposed the politics of war were rounded up in large numbers. From Valdemar's circle of acquaintances many were forced to flee, even that very day.

The Langlets' Lónyai-street residence was packed to the rafters with refugees. Being esperantists they accepted everyone, regardless of language, nationality, religion and citizenship. By April 1944 they had accepted so many escapees who were lying low in their residence that, in the strict meaning of the word, there was no room for Valdemar, who had to sleep over at a friend's house. In endeavouring to provide a greater degree of security for the constant flood of refugees, he managed to get himself appointed the Chief Operations Officer in Budapest for the Swedish Red Cross. Although in reality this did not authorise him to do anything, he could operate under the aegis of the Red Cross. A forceful presence, language skills and excellent connections allowed him to save tens of thousands of lives. Utilising the Swedish Red Cross and the Swedish Embassy, he invented the concept of "protected houses", which, although having no foundation in international law, were in general respected by the Hungarian authorities and, as a result, sheltered occupants were in relative safety. (*Nina Langlet: The Swedish Rescue Operation. Budapest 1988*).

From May of 1944, he hindered the deportations by issuing Swedish Red Cross letters of protection to many thousands being persecuted, and arranged for them to go into hiding. In truth the letters of protection nevertheless had no standing in international law. They worked because Langlet, through his excellent connections, had them accepted by the police and the German patrols, and later even the Arrow Cross authorities accepted them. With the authorities he agreed on four hundred letters of protection, but issued at least four thousand. There were those rescued from the deportation lines; and on one occasion he distributed letters of protection to a whole labour company. The plain-paper document was also forged in large quantities.

Langlet only worked with volunteers. His network quickly grew so big that, even in peacetime, it would have counted as the largest civil organisation. The volunteers were organised into 16 divisions, had 12 vehicles including two trucks; a workshop; and even a petrol station. He co-opted two monasteries and seven convents, where mostly children and mothers with infants were hidden. Although the fate of rural Jewry was already sealed, he tried to establish rural branches. His greatest success was in Pécs. Together with his wife, Nina, he managed unbelievable workloads with great inventiveness.

All this took place under the aegis of the Red Cross, in truth without direction from Stockholm; in fact they were not really aware of his operations and, at best, only became aware of this or that much later. The Swedish Ambassador also had very little to do with the organization; at best he just put up with it, sometimes being forced to recognise the outcomes. Per Anger, the consular secretary, supported them in so far as was possible for an employee who does not identify with his boss. Certain actions on the part of the Red Cross and ambassador made the Langlets' work especially difficult. To this day these matters have not seen the light of day. (*Bjorn Runberg: The Forgotten Hero Valdemar Langlet Budapest 2007 deals with this topic*).

The Budapest Jewish Council also trusted Langlet. They gave him the Auschwitz Report which documented the genocide. He immediately translated it into Swedish and tried to forward it to King Gustav V, a personal acquaintance. The Swedish ambassador in Budapest doubted the authenticity of the document, and vetoed its forwarding to the King. Langlet did not give up and, with the aid of the consular secretary, forwarded it to the Foreign Ministry; from there, although delayed, it got to the King. Gustav V immediately wrote a letter to the Regent, Miklós Horthy. Langlet and the consular secretary sought out Horthy to hand-deliver the King's letter and, through doggedness and persistence, they finally succeeded; so that, on June 22, the police were ordered to halt the deportations. Langlet with this one act saved the lives of more people than all other rescue operations combined. In truth Horthy was being pressured from other directions as well, and the Allied landing at Normandy was also a warning sign.

After the cessation of deportation, at Langlet's request the Swedish Foreign Ministry sent Raoul Wallenberg to Budapest as consular secretary, to organise humanitarian work. On arrival Wallenberg approached Langlet to be informed of the situation and, taking the advice offered, started issuing Swedish Embassy letters of asylum. Meanwhile Langlet managed to get the Hungarian and German authorities to extend the "validity" of the previously distributed letters of protection. To this end the indefatigable Langlet later held discussions with the Arrow Cross Foreign Minister and, at an official level, had the absurdity that the Swedish Red Cross was a separate diplomatic entity accepted. If not without hiccups, the "letters of protection factory" operated continuously, together with the various Red Cross offices, and places where the persecuted were quickly directed to acceptable places. The number of "protected" apartments and houses grew continuously, as it was enough to mark the edifice with a recognisable emblem and placard. Wallenberg issued embassy safe-conduct passes exclusively to Jews; Langlet and his volunteers rescued everyone being persecuted. Wallenberg, a member of Sweden's richest family, and a paid employee of the embassy was independently well supplied with funds. Langlet on the other hand received no pay or support from the embassy, nor from the Red Cross. Beside private donations, all his assets were used to save people. He continued his work even after Wallenberg departed from Budapest.

During the Arrow Cross regime Langlet moved with relative ease, at least at the beginning, through the city, as gradually diplomatic immunity receded in value. The Arrow Cross even dragged people out of the Swedish Embassy. When the Swedish Government officially ended the operations of the Red Cross, Langlet took over the network and all the infrastructure, and operated it under the auspices of the Swedish-Hungarian Association, which with foresight was established in the summer. Under its aegis, it was very difficult to operate and, in the last weeks, even he had to hide out. Even after the siege, the Langlets did not rest, but organised the distribution of food and medicine shipments in ruined, hungry Budapest. As an outcome of the stressful work, Valdemar's health deteriorated to such an extent that, on May 31, he was transported to Sweden. In that year he received the Hungarian Republic's Order of the Cross but, in retirement, was forgotten, and lived in total poverty.

Now the capital city plans to rename the Danube's lower quays after the people-rescuers from the Arrow Cross period. In general there is no point in weighing up who saved how many lives whilst risking his/her own. At this time the proponents owe an explanation, as it appears that Valdemar and Nina Langlet, who saved the most people, will not be included in this honour. WHY NOT?

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