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Memorial to Swiss Diplomat Unveiled at U.S. Embassy Budapest

Vice Consul Carl Lutz is credited with saving 62,000 Jews from Holocaust

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Dignitaries at the U.S. Embassy in Budapest, Hungary, unveil a memorial to former Swiss diplomat Carl Lutz, December 13. (U.S. Embassy)

Washington -- A Swiss vice consul who on his own initiative launched one of the largest and most successful rescue operations of the 20th century was honored December 13 at a ceremony in front of the U.S. Embassy in Budapest.

Carl Lutz is credited with saving the lives of 62,000 Jews from the Holocaust by issuing "letters of protection," a life-saving diplomatic device of his own

invention. "We are honoring a man who took care of the U.S. Embassy in a way that went far beyond the call of duty," said U.S. Ambassador to Hungary April H. Foley at the unveiling of a memorial to Lutz.

"It was here at the American legation that he conducted a massive administrative operation, issuing life-saving documents to tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews," Foley said.

In addition, he helped 10,000 Jewish children emigrate to Palestine after he became head of Switzerland's foreign interests section in Budapest in 1942.

By 1944, Lutz represented 12 countries in addition to Switzerland, including the United States, and he worked much of the time out of what remains to this day the U.S. Embassy building in Budapest.

"Few individuals during the dark times of World War II helped so many innocent people escape death," said Foley at the ceremony, which also was attended by diplomats of other nations, Hungarian government officials -- including Gábor Demszky, the mayor of Budapest -- and representatives of the Jewish community. ([See related article.](#))

Although he is now regarded as a hero, Lutz risked his professional career and his life during the Holocaust. "His superiors continually questioned and criticized his actions," Foley said. Americans had no knowledge of Lutz's massive rescue operation, according to Foley, and he "received virtually no recognition at the time for his acts of bravery."

Born in Switzerland in 1895, Lutz emigrated at the age of 18 to the United States, where he was to remain for more than 20 years. After working in Illinois and then studying at Central Wesleyan College in Warrenton, Missouri, Lutz went to work in 1920 at the Swiss Legation in Washington. He continued his education at George Washington University, where he received a bachelor's degree in 1924. After serving as chancellor at the Swiss Consulates in Philadelphia and St. Louis from 1926 to 1934, Lutz's more than 20-year sojourn

in the United States ended with his assignment as vice-consul to the Swiss Consulate General in Jaffa, in what was then Palestine.

Appointed in 1942 as Swiss vice-consul in Budapest, Hungary, Lutz soon began cooperating with the Jewish Agency for Palestine, issuing Swiss safe-conduct documents enabling Jewish children to emigrate.

According to an account on the Swiss Embassy Web site, once the Nazis took over Budapest in 1944 and began deporting Jews to the death camps, Lutz negotiated a special deal with the Hungarian government and the Nazis: he had permission to issue protective letters to 8,000 Hungarian Jews for emigration to Palestine.

Lutz then deliberately misinterpreted his permission for 8,000 as applying to families rather than individuals, and proceeded to issue tens of thousands of additional protective letters, all of them bearing a number between one and 8,000. He also set up some 76 safe houses around Budapest, declaring them annexes of the Swiss legation.

"He repeatedly confronted the Nazi and Arrow Cross [pro-Nazi Hungarian] authorities," said Foley.

"Using the thinnest veil of diplomatic paperwork and lots of guile and determination, he managed to outfox some of the world's most heinous war criminals," she said.

Lutz cooperated closely with diplomats of other neutral countries, including Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg and the Apostolic Nuncio Angelo Rotta, as well as the delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Friedrich Born.

After the war, Lutz was initially reprimanded for having gone too far in his efforts, but was vindicated and honored by the Swiss government in 1957. He retired from the Swiss consular service in 1961.

For risking his life to help Jews during the Holocaust, Lutz in 1964 became the first Swiss national named "Righteous Among the Nations" by Yad Vashem, the Jewish people's memorial to the Holocaust.

Lutz died in Bern, Switzerland, in 1975.

At the entrance to the old Budapest ghetto, a wall-monument was erected to him in 1991. Although more than 400,000 Hungarian Jews died in the Holocaust, 125,000 survived, half of them thanks to the efforts of Lutz.

In concluding her remarks at the unveiling, Foley expressed the hope that visitors to the U.S. Embassy in Budapest will "pause here for a few minutes to remember the courage of a great man and to pray that, if any one of us is faced with a similar challenge, we will be capable of the strength of heart, the courage of spirit, and the bravery shown by Carl Lutz."

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