

Least-Expected Heroes of the Holocaust by Vera Gara
Book launch at Official Residence of Government of Austria
Hon. David Kilgour
December 1, 2011
Ottawa

Ambassador and Mrs. Brandstetter, Rabbi Bulka, Ladies and Gentlemen,

All of us are deeply grateful to our hosts for launching *Least-Expected Heroes of the Holocaust* in these premises in our national capital.

The author speaks in the book about her idyllic childhood in Vienna as a member of the Pick family, then famous for making the best salami across Austria and beyond, until the Nazis annexed Austria in 1938. She writes, for example, "I remember pleasant times in the garden where I had a child-sized house to which I sometimes invited the neighbour's daughter."

In a period when the world is losing so many Holocaust survivors because of the passage of time, Mrs. Gara allows readers to see some of its events through the eyes of a child.

The book is deeply-moving. The most vivid recollections begin in 1938 when her family, being Jewish, was forced to flee from Vienna to Hungary at the beginning of the Nazi nightmare. She guides readers through the ensuing ordeals, which involved being forced into ghettos and then cattle cars, months of forced labour before ending up at Theresien camp near Prague, and finally, years later, reaching the freedom of Vienna.

One of heroes highlighted in the book is the Swede Raoul Wallenberg, who saved the lives of tens of thousands of Jews by issuing them makeshift passports of neutral Sweden and creating 'safe houses' in the six-month period before January 17, 1945.

The chapter on Wallenberg is a highlight and I quote Sandor Ardai, one of Wallenberg's drivers in Budapest, describing how his audacity immobilized the Nazis when he intercepted a trainload of intended victims about to leave for Auschwitz:

"(Wallenberg) climbed up on the roof of the train and began handing in protective passes through the doors which were not yet sealed. He ignored orders from the Germans to get down, then the Arrow Cross men (Hungarian Nazis) began shooting and shouting at him to go away. He ignored them and calmly continued handing out passports to the hands that were reaching out for them. I believe the Arrow Cross men deliberately aimed over his head... because they were so impressed by his courage."

The author eventually relocated to Britain, where she trained as a nurse. She and her husband George later moved to Canada, where she devoted herself to promoting education about the Holocaust, hoping to prevent any other child from ever taking the same perilous journey she made. Raoul Wallenberg became Canada's first honorary citizen in part because of Vera's lobbying campaign among MPs of all parties in 1985. Like numerous others across Canada, I've long admired her determination in pursuing good causes.

This book's educational value, including a focus on some of the wider issues of World War Two, should be valuable to readers of all ages. It deserves the widest possible audience.

Thank you.