

**High School Essay
First Place**

No Other Choice

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The decision – a moment, an instant – can change everything and define who you are. The path chosen at this junction of life-altering events is shaped by a culmination of life's experiences, the demands of the moment, and an intense desire either to act, or to withhold oneself from action. Only those who overcome fear's paralysis to act on another's behalf succeed in marking themselves as rescuers.

During the Holocaust, one of the most challenging feats was to gain the courage to help the Jews, even though it meant putting one's life on the line. People who accomplished this, such as Raoul Wallenberg, not only saved Jews from certain death, but also saved themselves from the helplessness that fear induces and became heroes.

Raoul Wallenberg was born in 1912 in Sweden. One of his first jobs was in a Dutch bank in Palestine where he encountered Jews who had escaped Nazi persecution in Germany. Their accounts of the horrors of the Nazis had a deep emotional impact on him. He was particularly susceptible to their words because of his naturally empathetic nature and his heritage of a Jewish great-great-grandfather. When he returned to Sweden, he went into business with Koloman Lauer, a Hungarian Jew.

In 1944, the United States' War Refugee Board teamed up with Sweden to attempt to save Hungarian Jews. Lauer was the Hungarian representative, and upon his suggestion, the Board chose Wallenberg to lead a rescue operation. Selected for his language skills, intelligence, compassion, and familiarity with the Nazi government, Wallenberg agreed without hesitation. This decision set him on a path towards heroism from which he never wavered.

To prevent the deportation of Jews, Wallenberg issued protective passes marking the carriers as Swedish to be released into his custody. He used 30 buildings to house 20,000 refugees protected by the Swedish flag and hid others in the embassy itself. When Hungarian fascist troops tried to take Jews out of one of his buildings, he yelled, "This is Swedish territory... If you want to take them, you'll have to shoot me first."

Wallenberg's courage was unswerving as he ran alongside the deportation trains amid Nazi gunfire, handing out passes and demanding that those in possession of them be freed. When Adolf Eichmann ordered a massacre in a Budapest ghetto, Wallenberg threatened General Schmidhuber, head of the German troops in Hungary, with war crimes charges. The slaughter was halted. Raoul Wallenberg is credited with saving 30,000 to 100,000 Hungarian Jews.

My moment of decision was when, from my family's car, I witnessed a woman kick her young child brutally in the small of his back. The force sent him flying. I was in shock; my jaw and stomach hit the floor. I heard my mother's voice as she told me to call the police. By the time we got closer, the woman and child were in a car pulling

away. I gathered up my courage and read the license plate to the police dispatcher. We followed the woman's car and I related the directions to the police as they arrived. I knew I could not stand to see someone being victimized when I could help.

Afterwards, I felt disheartened but relieved; a sickening burden of guilt and helplessness lifted. Even though my actions put me in no danger, I felt the difference between being a witness and a rescuer. Witnesses are the mass of the crowd, engulfed by their fear and powerlessness. Rescuers are far rarer, the diamonds of humanity. Their exceptional courage, strength, and compassion allow them to break through the crushing emotions that disable so many others. While my small act by no means made me a rescuer, it made me aware of the great difficulties faced to become one – and the moment of decision that changes everything.

Is it acceptable to merely *witness* atrocities, rather than *committing* them? Does the blood spray beyond the trigger finger and into the crowd? Raoul Wallenberg did neither and instead rescued. He said, "To me there's no other choice. I've accepted this assignment and I could never return to Stockholm without the knowledge that I'd done everything in human power to save as many Jews as possible" (<http://www.raoulwallenberg.net/?en/wallenberg/611.htm>). Despite great mystery surrounding his disappearance in 1945, whether he died of a heart attack in a Soviet prison, or was executed by the Soviets, his legacy lives. Not only did he save thousands with great risk to himself, but he inspired other to do the same – including me.