

Official: Wallenberg Possibly Outlived Death Date

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Khristoforov holding up an archive case at FSB headquarters in Moscow. **Mikhail Metzel**

Raoul Wallenberg, who saved tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews before vanishing into Soviet captivity, may have been alive after the official 1947 date of his death — but only for a few days, says the chief archivist of Russia's counterintelligence service.

The disappearance of the 32-year-old Swedish diplomat is an abiding mystery of World War II. His defiance of the Nazis is commemorated worldwide in statues, in streets named after him and in postage stamps bearing his likeness, and to this day inspires scholarly articles, popular books and Hollywood movies.

It also has been a perpetual embarrassment for Moscow, which has failed to dislodge a stubborn belief, supported by credible if unsubstantiated evidence, that Wallenberg lived like a ghost in the Soviet gulag for up to four decades after his alleged death.

In a rare hourlong interview with The Associated Press, Lt. Gen. Vasily Khristoforov acknowledged that the Soviet version of Wallenberg's death of a heart attack could have been

fabricated and that his captors may have "helped him die." He sought to counter accusations that his agency was hiding the truth, but his account and comments from independent researchers only underscored the possibility that the Wallenberg riddle will never be fully laid to rest.

Although he stopped short of discarding the official Soviet version of Wallenberg's death, his remarks — coming from a custodian of the country's most closely guarded intelligence secrets — represent a crack in the wall of official Russian reticence about Wallenberg. And while he did not cite any new evidence, the general said his statements were based on his knowledge of materials related to the fate of numerous other victims of repression.

Khristoforov denied that the Russian Federal Security Service — the successor to the KGB — is withholding any information on Wallenberg, and said that all documentary evidence on the Swede likely was methodically destroyed in the 1950s to cover up his fate. Still, he said, his department was continuing to search the archives for clues.

He discounted numerous accounts by former prisoners who claimed to have seen Wallenberg, or someone who might have been him, in prison or in labor camps after his purported death. Independent researchers cite compelling reports of "sightings" of Wallenberg, identified by another name or only a number, as late as the 1980s.

"I consider all that to be a product of these people's imagination," the general said, insisting that he was "100 percent certain ... that Wallenberg never was in any other prison, either under his name or an alias."

Khristoforov spoke in response to allegations by two researchers last month that the Russian archives still conceal information on Wallenberg or people who came into contact with him. The accusations came after Moscow released new material about a German officer, Willy Roedel, who shared a prison cell with Wallenberg, although it was unrelated to the Swede himself.

"It's naive to accuse us of concealing the existence of the interrogation protocols. There is a mix-up of things here," he said. "There is no mention, not even a hint of Wallenberg in Roedel's materials."

He said the archives had kept some pages from Roedel's newly released file classified for other reasons, which he did not reveal.

Khristoforov confirmed a report published last year by Wallenberg researchers Susanne Berger and Vadim Birstein, who cited his agency as saying that the mysterious Prisoner No. 7, who was interrogated in Lubyanka, the KGB prison in Moscow, on July 23, 1947, could have been Wallenberg. The official version of Wallenberg's death, given 10 years later, was that he died of a heart attack on July 17, 1947.

Khristoforov said he was "more than convinced that if he outlived the official date of his death, it could only have been by a few days."

While not ruling out the Soviet official version of Wallenberg's death, he said that "the second version is that they could have helped him die."

The heart attack version has already been undermined by Alexander Yakovlev, one-time chairman of a presidential panel investigating the fate of repression victims, who in 2000 said he was told by a former KGB chief that Wallenberg was killed at Lubyanka. That year, Russia conceded that the Soviet authorities wrongfully persecuted Wallenberg and posthumously rehabilitated him as a victim of political repression.

Khristoforov said it was highly unlikely that he would have been held in another prison because "it would have been impossible to keep that secret for long, even under an alias or a number."

An organization of U.S. Holocaust survivors said they want "more definitive answers" from the Russians on Wallenberg's fate.

"Khristoforov's comments do not end the controversy, they in fact reinforce the moral basis for a more vigorous inquiry into this profoundly disturbing mystery," said Elan Steinberg of the American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors and their Descendants.

Berger, a German, and Birstein, a Russian, served on the Swedish-Russian Working Group that investigated the case from 1991 to 2001.

Berger said in an e-mail that she remained unconvinced that all available evidence has been disclosed, citing the Russians' history of "incremental revelations" of material that they previously had denied existed. She said that if the Russians had provided full access to the Roedel file, for example, enough "secondary information" might be discerned by trained researchers to shed new light on the case.

"With no unambiguous proof that Wallenberg died on July 17, 1947, and only circumstantial evidence that he may have died some time later, and numerous unresolved witness testimonies stating that Wallenberg was alive in later years, how can Mr. Khristoforov exclude the possibility that Wallenberg did not survive as a secret inmate?" Berger asked.

Susan Mesinai, an American researcher who scoured prison archives for three years in the 1990s with Russian cooperation, said Khristoforov's conclusions were based on analogies, coincidences and intuition against "decades of state-of-the-art scientific and historical research."

As Sweden's envoy to Budapest from July 1944, Wallenberg saved 20,000 Jews by giving them Swedish travel documents or moving them to safe houses and dissuaded German officers from massacring the 70,000 inhabitants of the city's ghetto.

He was arrested in January, 1945. While the Soviets never gave a reason, Khristoforov, who considers Wallenberg a hero, shares the widely held belief that they suspected he was a spy.

In fact, Wallenberg had been recruited by a U.S. intelligence agent, with Swedish government approval, on behalf the War Refugee Board created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. But he is not known to have been engaged in intelligence gathering.

Some historians say Soviet leader Josef Stalin may have hoped to exchange Wallenberg for Soviet defectors who fled to Sweden, or use him as a bargaining chip in relations with Sweden or other Western nations, but then changed his mind for unknown reasons.

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