Before rescuing thousands of Jews during World War II, Raoul Wallenberg learned and grew at Michigan. No other individual has been credited with saving so many from extinction.
Before made all the difference.

Before outfoxing the Nazis, risking his life, and saving 100,000 Jews from the hell of World War II death camps. Before living on the run and being the target of assassins.

Before disappearing into a Russian gulag and being forever silenced.

Before the statues, the streets bearing his name, and the global tributes exalting his bravery and sacrifice. Before becoming the only person other than Winston Churchill to be made an honorary U.S. citizen.

Before all this, Raoul Wallenberg was a University of Michigan student.

Days removed from an ocean liner that carried him from his native Sweden, he walked onto the Ann Arbor campus in 1931 much like any freshman: eager to fit in and succeed.

As a student, he would come to express his creativity as an artist and his emotions as a man. He would learn to solve problems, both on paper and in the real world. He was flexible and fearless, eager to encounter new people and places.

If one indeed believes leaders are not born, they are made, then Michigan helped make Wallenberg. And his days in Ann Arbor would shape a brand of heroism that distinguished Raoul Wallenberg, Class of 1935, as one of the 20th century’s most extraordinary humanitarians.
Enrolling at Michigan was largely the decision of Wallenberg’s grandfather and mentor, Gustaf Wallenberg. Raoul was his only grandson and a child whose father—Gustaf’s only son—died before he was born. That Gustaf adored Raoul was an understatement.

“You are the dearest thing I have on this earth,” he told his grandson on his 20th birthday.

He wanted an American education for Raoul not for the coursework, which he felt could be equaled in Swedish universities, but rather for the lessons of living and learning in a new environment. Raoul, he believed, should absorb the confidence he associated with the United States.

“Maybe you are now beginning to realize what I am after, not your schooling as such, but real life, contact with American young people, learning to become a well-organized fighter, always aware that you have to get ahead in the world.”

Raoul Wallenberg was a child of wealth and privilege, born into a family that had built a banking and industrial empire unrivaled in Sweden. Wallenberg was cosmopolitan, able to read and speak French, Russian, German, English and, of course, his native Swedish. Elitism was the family norm, as were global influence and connections.

His friends at Michigan knew none of this. He was, simply, Rudy Wallenberg. “There just was no snobbery about him,” a classmate recalled decades later.

He lived in plain boarding houses (“I’m going to get another room for the summer because the one I have now is in an attic and I’m sure it will be insufferable”). He had no interest in fraternities, and little use for college pranks.

“Yesterday was so-called ‘black Friday,’ which is a day when all new freshmen and the upperclassmen go out into the streets yelling and fighting,” he wrote, two months into his first semester. “The freshmen are the butts of all kinds of ridiculous jokes. It doesn’t seem too fashionable at the moment, though: I was left alone, in any case.”

He would walk three blocks from his room on East Madison to have breakfast at the Michigan Union, enjoying grapefruit in the dining room before classes at 8 or 9 o’clock.

His best friend was John Wehausen, a “red-haired engineering student … he is very clever.” Wallenberg repeatedly bragged that his friend was the top student in engineering, an accomplishment that allowed him to “bask in his reflected glory.”

(It was a perceptive assessment: Wehausen would go on to a brilliant academic career and induction into the National Academy of Engineering.)

He sweated exams (“I feel totally exhausted”) and felt the loneliness that envelops international students at the holidays. “Everybody leaves town within a few hours of the last classes before Christmas, and from then to the seventh of January the place is like a tomb. …Christmas Eve I felt rather lonely and gloomy.”

Friends and faculty knew him as both mature beyond his years and a happy-go-lucky kid. He learned to play golf, and enjoyed dances. A highlight of being an architecture student was an annual dance, with elaborate scenery and costumes slated out months in advance by students. Attending his final ball, Wallenberg joined in the “Arabian Nights” theme he helped orchestrate.

He did not get overly excited about grades, awards or social status. What mattered most, he said, was the experience of living. “My school work has, on the whole, paid off not only when it comes to grades, because that isn’t too important, but because I really feel that I’ve learned something.”
Wallenberg did not sit still in Ann Arbor, a town that he initially found to be “somewhat monotonous.” Given his worldly upbringing, he was accustomed to travel and big cities.

Not that he ignored his college home. He spent his summers on campus, taking courses that would allow him to graduate early. He went canoeing on nearby lakes. He bicycled; once, he pedaled 60 miles to Owosso to speak to a ladies’ civic club about Sweden. The women celebrated his visit with “dainty refreshments,” each topped with a tiny blue-and-yellow Swedish flag.

But he relished new sights and people different than himself. He traveled alone, with friends, and with his professors. He adapted to changing scenarios with ease; no environment, it seemed, posed a worry or threat. And he wanted to soak up what he saw as strictly American phenomena: hot dog stands, drugstores, newsreel theaters, air conditioning and more.

Visiting New York City, he was in awe of the newest skyscrapers: the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building (“very beautiful … light and graceful”). In Chicago, he worked as a summer volunteer at the Swedish pavilion of the 1933 World’s Fair.

He loved to hitchhike, a popular mode of transportation during the Depression. Not only did it save money—he boasted about thumbing his way from Ann Arbor to Los Angeles and not spending a dime—but hitchhiking was an adventure. He traveled with truckers, veterans, bigots and “a pistol-toting traveling salesman in a magnificent Oldsmobile.”

“You’re in close contact with new people each and every day. Hitchhiking gives you training in diplomacy and tact.”

He rode on the roofs of trucks, alternately baking in the sun and freezing at night. Viewing the Grand Canyon produced a torrent of adjectives: dizzying, jutting, yawning jaws of hell. The heat of Death Valley drove him and his traveling companion to strip naked in the car.

In New Orleans, he and a U-M friend drew sketches and sold them (“I know that if worse came to worst, I could earn my keep doing this”). Riding through Mexico, he found himself caked in the dust of the rural roads; he grew a beard for the fun of it.

Only once in his travels did he encounter trouble, when four men robbed and beat him on a road outside of Chicago. A gun was flashed and Wallenberg was thrown into a ditch.

It left him unfazed. “I really didn’t feel scared; I found the whole thing sort of interesting,” he told his mother. “This will not make me give up hitchhiking. I’ll just carry less money on me and try to become more devious.”

CHAPTER 3

The Traveler
Like so many before and after him, Wallenberg found a soulmate while a U-M student. Rather than pursuing a fellow classmate, however, he dated a young faculty member at Michigan State Normal College, now Eastern Michigan University, in neighboring Ypsilanti.

Bernice Ringman was a physiotherapist in the school’s special education department. Dating between students from the two colleges was not unusual; the Normal College trained teachers, fertile territory for college men seeking romance. The men of the Michigan Union Opera once sang of the “Ypsi treat”—“a maiden most dainty and sweet.”

Ringman was four years older than Wallenberg who, within months of arriving in Ann Arbor, said he was struck by the poise of American women. “As a rule they are nice and and quite knowledgeable. They also have more backbone than most of the men.”

Wallenberg and Ringman undoubtedly bonded over his native Sweden. Her parents were Swedish immigrants, and as a teenager she traveled to their homeland. She also trained at a Swedish physical education institute following college.

In Ann Arbor, the couple attended performances of Handel’s “Messiah” every December in Hill Auditorium, as well as the annual architects’ ball.

It was only after Wallenberg graduated and returned to Europe that he learned Ringman had fallen in love with him; each letter to Stockholm carried more affection. It was a revelation that left Wallenberg both depressed and distressed. When Ringman sent a telegram on his 23rd birthday, asking if he loved her, he immediately wired back: No.

“I liked her so much and hated to know that I was the cause of her unhappiness.”

Wallenberg shared this angst with his grandfather. The old man had repeatedly warned against romance and women during Wallenberg’s time at U-M. Women, he told his grandson, are hyenas who “use all means at their disposal to get their claws into whatever young man that suits their designs.”

He was therefore apoplectic when his grandson poured out his heart about Ringman. Did you seduce her? Is she pregnant? “I fully realize how easily the sexual urges of a young man can lead to a liaison with a young girl, but he must not let them put his future at risk.” The reaction was so severe that Raoul Wallenberg dashed off an immediate telegram to put his grandfather at ease. “Please dont worry/no complications/affection her part only.”

Neither Wallenberg nor Ringman would ever marry.

CHAPTER 4
The Lover
More than anything, Wallenberg wanted to be an architect. By choosing Michigan, he was attending one of the premier American programs of its day.

Wallenberg arrived at an exhilarating moment for the Michigan architecture program. Its leader, Professor Emil Lorch, had been at U-M for a quarter-century and was determined to see architecture—then part of the College of Engineering—become an independent school in its own building. Michigan Architecture was one of the largest programs in the country, and it needed to make its mark.

The building came first, in 1928, a four-story brick structure designed by Lorch himself and located at what was then a far corner of campus. Three years later, with the blessing of the Board of Regents, the College of Architecture was born, led by Lorch as its first dean.

This was the environment that awaited Wallenberg. No doubt he appreciated the European flair of the faculty, with architects from Finland, Denmark, Austria and France among the teaching corps. Sketching in the courtyard of Lorch Hall, which was filled with architectural elements, he would have watched as just two city blocks to the west the area was transformed into the magnificent structures of the Law Quadrangle.

He designed restaurants and houses. Challenged to find ways to house thousands inexpensively, he spent 10 weeks devising an entire community, on paper. He was fond of his professors, including his senior thesis adviser, a French architect named Jean Hebrard.

“Working under him has been wonderful, although he’s very European. That is to say, he maintains a certain aloofness, and it would never occur to anyone to address him with anything but the greatest of reverence and respect.

“American professors, on the other hand, without in any way sacrificing their authority, feel embarrassed if you scrape and bow. In American slang it is known as ‘polishing the apple.’ How the expression originated I don’t know.”

Wallenberg was honest in saying he put his time and creativity into architecture at the expense of subjects he disliked, such as chemistry and math (“there is a real disaster brewing”).

“I have been quite lazy when it comes to some of my courses.”

When he graduated in 1935, Wallenberg received the American Institute of Architects silver medal as Michigan’s most outstanding student.

Even so, he was more artist than architect. He covered his room with murals he designed, filling them with animals, birds, ships and buildings drawn in chalky pastels. Friends particularly enjoyed the work because Wallenberg was colorblind.

“Raoul Wallenberg was so apt a student in drawing and painting—I must have had him in three or four classes during his studies with us—that he got nothing but As from me. But As from me, he definitely did from me,” Jean Paul Slusser, a professor of drawing and painting, told an interviewer years later. “I asked him finally if he were not intending to be an artist. He looked at me slowly and, as I think of it now, perhaps a little sadly.

“He then explained to me briefly and with enormous modesty, too, who his family were and how the sons of the house of Wallenberg were educated.”

That meant the world of banking and, as Wallenberg saw it, a career being “a commercial ditto.” After graduating and landing business internships—with the help of his grandfather—in South Africa and Palestine, he remained unsettled about his future. He wrote to Lorch, his former dean, inquiring about the American market for draftsmen; Lorch advised him to work in Europe. And he told his grandfather that he wasn’t suited for the Wallenberg family business.

“To tell you the truth, I don’t find myself very bankerish: the director of a bank should be judgelike and calm and cold and cynical besides. …My temperament is better suited to some positive line of work than to sitting around saying no.”

RESOURCES
Learn more about Professor Emil Lorch:
http://um2017.org/faculty-history/faculty/emile-lorch

Learn more about Professor Jean Hebrard:
http://um2017.org/faculty-history/faculty/jean-hebrard

Learn more about Professor Jean Paul Slusser:
http://um2017.org/faculty-history/faculty/jean-paul-slusser
Raoul Wallenberg was blessed with what his grandfather called “the wonderful gift of a cool head.” He obviously enjoyed the rush of adrenaline, whether facing down armed thugs when hitchhiking or waiting until the last minute to complete his coursework.

“I don’t know whether this is the character of an adventurer shining through, but I take a particular pride-pleasure in relaxing for a week or two, to get time to do what I like, and then suddenly pulling myself together and working through the night, which gives me a little more of a thrill than plodding along with everyday tasks.”

His defiance in the face of Nazi brutality during World War II is a modern-day morality play. As a Swedish diplomat assigned in 1944 to Hungary—one of Europe’s few remaining pockets of Jewish people—he made it a personal mission to disrupt Hitler’s “Final Solution.”

Using his gift for drawing, he created fake Swedish passports for Jews in Budapest. Distributed en masse, the cleverly designed but entirely bogus Schutzpass provided immediate diplomatic immunity.

He leaned on his urban planning lessons to develop safehouses, renting and reconfiguring apartment buildings to hold far more people than they were designed for and, in the process, providing a safe haven for Jews.

Where in the 1930s he partied in the costumes of the U-M Architect’s Ball, in the war he disguised fair-haired Hungarian Jews in SS uniforms, seizing upon their Aryan looks to infiltrate the German troops. The impostors would free Jews, explaining they were captured by mistake.

He handed Jews a second chance at life, pulling them from rolling trains bound for concentration camps. When trains were no longer available and the Germans forced prisoners to march to the death camps, Wallenberg followed, shoving food, medicine and passports at the wasted victims.

Dining with Adolf Eichmann, mastermind of the Nazi death camps, Wallenberg calmly told him: “Why don’t you call off your people?” Eichmann had earlier branded Wallenberg “Jewdog” and directed German sharpshooters to kill him.

In the course of six months, Wallenberg rescued an estimated 100,000 people from the smoldering shell of Budapest. No other individual has been credited with saving so many from extinction. Raoul Wallenberg disappeared in 1945, taken by Russian troops into so-called protective custody and held in a Moscow prison. He was 32 and never heard from again.

Like Wallenberg’s disappearance, the source of his moral courage is a mystery. What is known is that this humanitarian grew to maturity in Ann Arbor. “The years Raoul spent in America, studying at the University of Michigan and traveling around, were critical to the development of his character,” his cousins Gustaf Söderlund and Gitte Wallenberg wrote nearly 50 years after he vanished.

When Wallenberg was approaching his senior year and the world was at peace, he voiced the melancholy that so many students experience as college draws to a close.

“I feel so at home in my little Ann Arbor that I am beginning to sink roots here and have a hard time imagining my leaving it. But I am not doing anything very useful here.”

There were lives to save.

– Kim Clarke

This article was drawn chiefly from Letters and Dispatches, 1924-1944, Raoul Wallenberg, translated by Kjersti Board; “Raoul Wallenberg Remembered,” by Lillian E. Stafford, Michigan Alumnus, May 1985; Wallenberg: Missing Hero, by Kati Marton; More Than a Handsome Box: Education in Architecture at the University of Michigan, 1876-1986, by Nancy Ruth Bartlett; the papers of Emil Lorch and the College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the Bentley Historical Library; as well as census and immigration records.

© 2013 by the Regents of the University of Michigan