

Holocaust Hero Receives Recognition

JEWISH PUBLIC AFFAIRS GROUP UNITING CONGRESS IN HONORING RAOUL WALLENBERG



Raoul Wallenberg in his Budapest office

“I’m alive myself because of Wallenberg. I grew up hearing my grandmother tell me that my grandfather, the Lisker Rav, was saved because he was sheltered in one of Wallenberg’s protective homes. I’m just one person, but I have kids, cousins, and we’re all alive, together with hundreds of thousands of others, because of him.” So says Ezra Friedlander, spokesman for the Raoul Wallenberg Centennial Celebration Commission (RWCCC).

Mr. Raoul Wallenberg, the Holocaust hero who was responsible for rescuing 100,000 Hungarian Jews, will receive

major recognition this coming year on the centennial anniversary of his birthday—Aug. 4, 2012. The Friedlander Group public affairs company is spearheading the RWCCC, which seeks to honor Mr. Wallenberg with a Congressional Gold Medal, initiate the ceremonial naming of streets after him, and implement country-wide educational programs. The RWCCC also plans to press Russia to finally own up to what they did with Wallenberg.

Wallenberg’s sympathetic attitude to Jews was already evident in the 1930s, when he asked to be posted to his family’s holdings in Palestine. When President Roosevelt created the War Refugee Board and asked the Swedish foreign ministry to

suggest a candidate to run an office there, the 31-year-old Wallenberg volunteered for the job.

Mr. Wallenberg arrived in Budapest on July 9, 1944, after the Nazis had already deported more than half of Hungary’s 750,000 Jews to Auschwitz. Wallenberg immediately applied himself to a plethora of rescue activities, which included creating safe houses and giving passports under the Swedish flag to thousands. His efforts to save Jews bordered on brazen and dangerous. With sheer bravado he pulled Jews off trains headed for death camps. He threatened a German general with prosecution if he sent Jews to their deaths. His efforts saved the majority of Budapest Jewry, who numbered close to 100,000.

On Jan. 17, 1945, Soviet officers in Budapest arrested him on orders from Moscow. Since then, his fate has been the subject of the rumor mill. On March 8, the Soviets stated on Hungarian radio that the Gestapo had murdered Mr. Wallenberg in Budapest. Reports that he was sequestered in an Estonian prison and a Slovakian castle followed.

On Aug. 18, 1947, Andrei Vyshinsky, the Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister, sent a letter to the Swedish ambassador in Moscow saying, “Wallenberg is not in the Soviet Union and he is not known to us.” Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal—who had earlier reported that Mr. Wallenberg was in

an Irkutsk psychiatric hospital—admitted he was mistaken.

An apparent breakthrough appeared on Feb. 6, 1957, when the Swedish ambassador in Moscow received a memo from Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko stating that Soviet officials had recently found, in the archive of Moscow's Lubyanka prison, a letter dated July 17, 1947. Prison health director Alexander Smoltsov had written the letter to Soviet Security Minister Viktor Abakumov: "I report that the prisoner, Walenberg [sic], who is well known to you, died suddenly in his cell this night, probably as the result of a heart attack." A notation added that the body had been cremated without autopsy.

On Oct. 16, 1989, a Soviet official set a wooden box before Wallenberg's brother and sister containing his remaining effects, reiterating that Wallenberg had died in 1947 and nearly all his case files had been destroyed.

But just this month, a book recording the interrogation of Willy Rödel, Wallenberg's roommate in a Soviet prison, was discovered, despite two decades of Russian denial of the book's existence. Historians believe a file exists on Wallenberg that the Russians have refused to own up to.

Mr. Ezra Friedlander, the CEO of the Washington-based Friedlander Group and spokesman for RWCCC, says that its program will be launched with a Congressional Luncheon on Capitol Hill on September 21, attended by a powerful array of Congressional leaders.

AMI interviewed Mr. Friedlander about RWCCC's plans:

AMI: Why do you want Raoul Wallenberg to be awarded a Congressional Gold Medal? He's been honored in many other ways in the past.

Friedlander: The milestone of the centennial of his birth is in many ways a reminder and awakening. There are hundreds of thousands of people who are

today the descendants of the original individuals saved by Raoul Wallenberg. We need to teach the young generation, who are not familiar with his heroism. We want to demonstrate to the world that he is not forgotten, and his humanitarian contributions to mankind still reverberate today. There is also the point that we still haven't achieved closure on this extraordinary chapter to WWII history. We need to pressure the Russian government and ask them what happened to Raoul, and when it happened.

AMI: What interest did the Russians have in arresting Wallenberg?

Friedlander: The Russians suspected everyone, especially anyone who had money at the end of the War. What could be the Russian motive for arresting him? Good question! It could even have been a local general who wanted to steal Wallenberg's money. The Russians were capable of throwing a person into jail and torturing him for any reason. At the time of his arrest, Wallenberg didn't enjoy the status of an icon.

AMI: What was the reaction of politicians to your launching of the RWCCC?

Friedlander: We are supported by a bipartisan coalition of the most senior and powerful members in both the House and Senate. We're also working together with the Swedish government because they're very much interested in honoring him.

AMI: Why does Wallenberg deserve more recognition than any other individual who helped rescue Jews—for instance, President Roosevelt, for creating the War Refugee Board?

Friedlander: Raoul Wallenberg chose to be a hero during a terrible time. He volunteered for his post, he executed it with the utmost commitment, and he saved the greatest number of Jews possible. He was the epitome of goodness and sacrifice. His very narrative demonstrates what one person with determination can achieve for generations to come.

Historic Letter Issued by Gedolei Eretz Yisrael

GEDOLIM SPEAK OUT AGAINST DISCRIMINATION AND QUOTAS IN YESHIVOS

An unprecedented letter, conjectured to be prompted by the recent tragedies suffered by the *chareidi* communities in the U.S. and in Eretz Yisrael, has been issued by *gedolei Eretz Yisrael*.

Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, Rav Aaron Leib Steinman, Rav Gershon Edelstein, and Rav Shmuel Auerbach, addressed *roshei yeshivos* all over Eretz Hakodesh:

"We are turning to you concerning accepting students to your yeshivos. Our *daas Torah* is that the yeshivos should accept students from every community.

"Every yeshiva without exception should act according to *halacha* and should not change or deviate from this decision. We give our blessings to the *roshei yeshivos* who act according to these decisions that they will see blessing and success in disseminating Torah and raising *talmidim* for Torah and *yirah*."

A second letter, issued by prominent *roshei yeshiva* and confirming that they will abide by this decision, was signed by Rav Moshe Hillel Hirsch of the Slabodka Yeshiva in Bnei Brak, Rav Y. Rosen of Ohr Yisroel Yeshiva in Petach Tikva, and Rav Y. Eichenstein of Yad Aaron Yeshiva in Jerusalem.

It remains to be seen whether this will change the system of quotas that has been in existence until now.



Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv