



L-R: Ezra Friedlander, CEO of the Friedlander Group and spokesman of the Raoul Wallenberg Centennial Celebration Commission (RWCCC); Jonathan J. Rikoon, Luncheon Master of Ceremonies; Leon Goldenberg, Board Member of the RWCCC, as he introduces Senator Kirsten Gillibrand of New York, sponsor of the Raoul Wallenberg Centennial Celebration Act in the Senate, at the Gold Medal Commencement Luncheon in Washington, D.C.

Why It's Important to Recognize The Heroism of Raoul Wallenberg

BY LEON GOLDENBERG

You might call my parents typical Holocaust survivors. Having lost most of their cherished loved ones in the raging inferno of World War II, they tried desperately to put the past behind them and start anew on American shores. They focused their efforts primarily on bringing up the next generation. As such, they were determined to keep the awful truth from their children.

My father never spoke about his past and I think it was because it was just too painful for him. He was the sole survivor of a large family, including a wife and five children, and that's something you just don't get over, not even decades later. My mother would tell us that he would often wake up in the middle of the night, screaming in the names of his lost children. He was *niftar* in 1974, proud of his well-adjusted *frum* family, but the secrets of his suffering were buried along with him.

I remember as a young child watching the Eichmann trials with my mother. That broke the dam of her silence and she started to talk. Thus did I learn about how she came to Auschwitz with her family, of which only she and three sisters survived. I learned how a shriveled Polish Jew saved her life by pushing her away from the line that led to certain death — she was holding her little sister's hand. I learned how her sister developed typhus after standing for hours in the freezing cold, and how Mengele himself determined that she was healthy enough to remain alive after the camp doctor had sent them to their death.

My mother's story makes it apparent that she survived only through a series of miracles. In fact, every survivor is a walking miracle, who was singled out for reasons that we can only guess at. When they tell their stories, they will speak about the mysterious gentile, the kindly farmer, the fellow inmate or, in my mother's case, the blockmaster, Judith, and sometimes even the Nazi himself, who inexplicably had determined that this wretched soul be graced with yet another day or another week or another month of life.

This is why today I serve on the Board of Governors of the Raoul Wallenberg Centennial Celebration Commission, a project spearheaded by the Friedlander Group. To me, Mr. Wallenberg represents the miracles that kept so many Yidden alive. Against all odds, he stood up to a world gone mad and singlehandedly decided that this could not go on. His story

is fascinating, his heroism unparalleled. He is more than simply a righteous gentile. As far as I am concerned, he is one of the great heroes of Jewish history.

It is said that Raoul Wallenberg distributed Swedish protective papers to some twenty thousand Hungarian Yidden and that, through his intervention, one hundred thousand survived the War. One hundred thousand Yidden! Can you imagine what that means? Today, seventy years later, there must easily be at least a million Jewish souls alive and thriving due to his courage and bravery. These fellow Jews could be our friends, our neighbors, or they could even be us. Just the other day, my wife's cousin mentioned (when I was discussing my role) that her own family owes their lives to Wallenberg. If that doesn't deserve *hakaras hatov* from our community, even posthumously, then please tell me what does.

So yes, I will celebrate Wallenberg's 100th birthday with all the fanfare and glory it deserves. I will attend the events and ceremonies, both in New York City and in Washington, D.C. I will listen to the politicians give their speeches and to the survivors who will offer their grateful appreciation. I will be there, G-d willing, as we launch a year-long national campaign to highlight Wallenberg's heroism and I will be there as we ceremoniously name public streets in his honor and educate our students about him.

I will join Members of Congress as we call for Raoul Wallenberg to receive the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian award the U.S. Congress can bestow, because I know he is worthy of it. I will not consider this another frivolous attempt by our elected officials to score points with Jewish voters. I will participate in these programs because the story of Raoul Wallenberg is very personal to me. And I will join the ceremonies because I am determined to create an awareness of what this one man represents.

Everyone likes to say, "How can I make a difference?" "Who's going to listen to me?" "What can I do to change the world?"

Wallenberg proved that one man can change the world and alter the course of history for generations to come. My mission is to educate the world about what he was able to accomplish. If I have succeeded in creating an awareness of the heroism of Raoul Wallenberg over the course of this year, I will have succeeded. I owe it to the legacy of my mother and father.

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