

# Legislation Introduced to Award a Congressional Gold Medal To Raoul Wallenberg

**WASHINGTON** – On September 21, Members of the United States Congress gathered in the U.S. Capitol for a luncheon to announce the introduction of legislation to award a Congressional Gold Medal to legendary Holocaust humanitarian Raoul Wallenberg.

The emotional luncheon took place in the Lyndon B. Johnson room and featured a bipartisan gathering of the House and Senate as well as organizational, spiritual, and diplomatic leaders across the spectrum. Both bills were introduced simultaneously as H.R. 3001 and S. 1591 in the House and Senate respectively.

Swedish Ambassador Jonas Hafström attended the event and hailed Washington, DC, as the city that has adopted Wallenberg as one of its own.

U.S. Senator Kirsten E. Gillibrand (D-NY), who introduced the legislation in the Senate along with Senators Mark Kirk (R-IL) and Carl Levin (D-MI), spoke passionately of how Wallenberg rose to the challenge during one of the darkest times in our history.

“The heroic rescue of Hungarian Jews by Raoul Wallenberg during one of the darkest hours of human history exemplifies his outstanding spirit and dedication to humanity,” said Senator Gillibrand, who was introduced by Leon Goldenberg.

“It is my honor to introduce a bill in the Senate to award Raoul Wallenberg with the Congressional Gold Medal for the innocent Jewish lives that he selflessly saved during the Holocaust.”

Ruth Lichtenstein, publisher of *Hamodia* and Director of Project Witness, delivered the keynote address and explained how Raoul Wallenberg’s commitment to a life of humanity and morality above all made him a symbol of spiritual resistance.

Others in attendance included András Bácsi-Nagy, Deputy Chief of Mission of the Republic of Hungary, Luncheon Chair Ken Abramowitz, and the Luncheon Master of Ceremonies Jonathan J. Rikoon.

The Gold Medal is part of a larger effort in honoring Raoul Wallenberg in time for his centennial in 2012 by the Raoul Wallenberg Centennial Celebration Commission, spearheaded by CEO of the Friedlander Group Ezra Friedlander.

New York Congressman Gregory Meeks (D-NY), who introduced the legislation in the House along with Congresswoman Nan Hayworth (R-NY), spoke passionately about his hopes to greet the audience next year back in the Congress after the Medal’s successful passage; while Congresswoman Hayworth



Senator Ben Cardin



Senator Carl Levin



Swedish Ambassador Jonas Hafström



Rep Jerrold Nadler



L-R: Rabbi Elie Abadie; Jonathan Rikoon, luncheon master of ceremonies; Rep. Gregory Meeks; Ezra Friedlander, CEO of the Friedlander Group; Luncheon Chair Kenneth Abramowitz

## Who Was Raoul Wallenberg?

In Budapest, Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg epitomized altruistic rescue work. He had arrived on July 9, 1944, after most Hungarian Jews had been deported. However, more than 150,000 Jews remained in Budapest and its vicinity and suffered increasing persecution and threats of deportation. On the suggestion of Swiss diplomat Carl Lutz, Wallenberg and fellow Swedish official Per Anger distributed some ten thousand Swedish protective papers, or *schutzpasse*, to desperate Jews.

The documents secured shelter in 32 Swedish safe houses, which Wallenberg maintained through constant negotiations with the Szálazi government. He also literally pulled Jews from death marches and off trains about to embark to concentration camps. Wallenberg was arrested by the Soviet army on January 17, 1945. His fate has remained a mystery, but it is presumed that he died in a Soviet prison.

(Source: *Witness to History*)

spoke of her recent trip to Israel which moved her deeply.

Chair of the Armed Services Committee Senator Carl Levin spoke of the importance of recognizing Wallenberg on the centennial of his birth and his pride in being an early co-sponsor.

Co-Chairman of the Helsinki Commission Senator Ben Cardin applauded Senator Gillibrand on her leadership in the issue and spoke of the importance of honoring Wallenberg’s achievements.

Other prominent members of Congress who spoke include Representatives Nadler, Grimm, Cohen, Sherman, Rahall, Green, Lamborn, and Rohrabacher.

## An Observer Reflects...

It isn’t every day that you get to see the inner corridors of the Capitol.

It’s even rarer to see Senators and Congressmen sitting at your table.

When it does happen it is an adventure - the thrill of seeing government officials in person. But there is an even bigger thrill of watching these officials listen intently to words that accurately convey the sentiments of those they represent.

The speaker who evoked those sentiments was Mrs. Ruth Lichtenstein, publisher of *Hamodia* and director of Project Witness.

In the keynote address delivered at the luncheon dedicated to introducing legislation to award Raoul Wallenberg a Congressional Medal, Mrs. Lichtenstein focused on the spiritual heroism of Raoul Wallenberg; the need to educate the public about spiritual resistance; and her efforts to make that happen by founding Project Witness, a Holocaust Education Resource Center.

She explained that Project Witness is unique because it emphasizes “the heroic spiritual resistance of Holocaust victims and survivors, as demonstrated in their efforts to preserve not only Jewish practices and beliefs under the most difficult circumstances, but their values of compassion, Torah study, and moral justice.”

Moreover, she informed the audience, comprised of senators, congressmen, ambassadors, and noted members of the Jewish community, “spiritual resistance is a form of resistance that has preserved the Jewish nation in the face of annihilation for centuries. And it is this form of resistance that enabled many to sustain body and spirit against all odds during the Holocaust as well.”

It was a poignant speech that was delivered passionately and with obvious sincerity.

It was also a speech that expressed the voice of Holocaust survivors, the children of survivors, and the Holocaust heroes such as Raoul Wallenberg.

I was deeply moved, and so was every other person in the room.

Raoul Wallenberg, at the age of 31, defied all odds to save Jews, a group of people with whom he was not even affiliated. Mrs. Lichtenstein noted that “Raoul Wallenberg defied the Nazis by believing in the inherent sanctity of life and by clinging to his abiding commitment to live as a moral being, no matter the risk to his own life.”

Mrs. Lichtenstein reminded us that survivors were all “deeply scarred, from a unique form of hell. It took me years to realize that the survivors wore a mask, that they had erected a wall in front of them so they could pretend to the world outside, and to their children, that life was normal.”

It was the end of Mrs. Lichtenstein’s speech that convinced all of us that Raoul Wallenberg deserved a Congressional Medal, not only because of the way he lived but also because of the way he died.

Mrs. Lichtenstein reminded the audience that “there is no grave, no memorial marking his gravesite.”

That is why she urged the United States to “memorialize and honor this unique humanitarian by bestowing on him a congressional medal which will remind future generations of his heroism. This medal can serve as a representation of a grave that we cannot visit, and of courage we can only aspire to emulate.”

By the looks of the audience and by the nods of the assembled, it was clear that everyone agreed.

*E. Engelson*

## I Owe My Life to Raoul Wallenberg

*Miriam Herzog remembered meeting Wallenberg while experiencing the horrors of a Hungarian death march:*

The gendarmes were brutal, beating those who could not keep up, leaving others to die in the ditches ... I was so weak from dysentery and wretched from the dirt and lice that infested me, that all I could do was find a space on the floor and lie down.

Suddenly I heard a great commotion among the workmen. “It’s Wallenberg,” they said ...

As the women clustered around him, he said to them, “Please, you must forgive me, but I cannot help all of you. I can only provide certificates for a hundred of you... I feel I have a mission to save the Jewish nation...” When he saw me lying on the floor he came over to me. He asked my

name and added it to the list. After a day or two, the hundred of us whose names had been taken were moved out and put into a cattle car on a train bound for Budapest. There were a lot more dangers and hardships for us, but we were alive – and it was thanks entirely to Wallenberg.

(Source: *Witness to History*)