

# Hungary Launches Wallenberg Memorial Year

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Janos Martonyi, Swedish counterpart Carl Bildt, and Israeli Cabinet member Yossi Peled were joined at the inaugural event at the National Museum in Budapest yesterday by members of Wallenberg's family and just a few of the many Holocaust survivors he saved.

Speakers stressed Wallenberg's heroics and the importance of passing on the lessons of the Holocaust.

"He risked his life in a struggle against one of the evil ideologies that has haunted our continent," Bildt said. "There is a duty never to forget, always to remember. We have to pass on the knowledge of what happened during the Holocaust to generations to come."

The Nazis, who occupied Hungary in early 1944, launched mass deportations of Hungarian Jews to concentration camps such as Auschwitz with the collaboration of local authorities.

Martonyi said the Holocaust

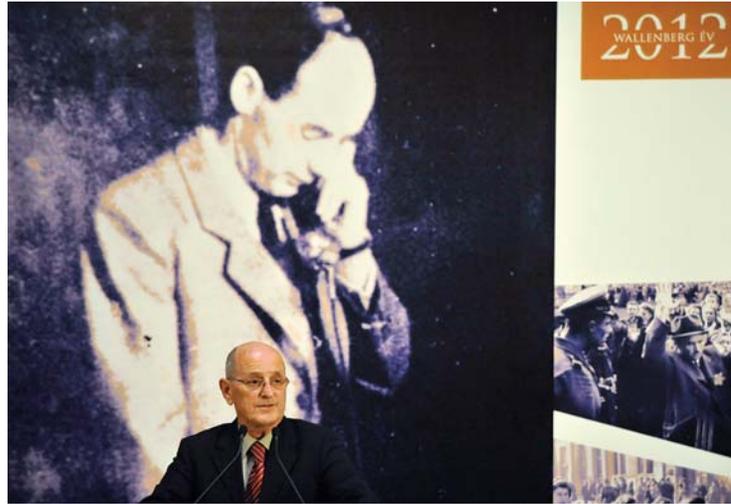
was the "tragedy of the whole Hungarian nation."

"During the Holocaust, the Hungarian state was weighed in the balance and found wanting... It was unable to defend its citizens and, while under occupation, assisted their deaths," he said.

There is some confusion as to what happened to Wallenberg after the war. The Soviets initially denied Wallenberg was in their custody, but then said in 1957 that he had died of a heart attack in prison on July 17, 1947.

After the Soviet collapse, that version of events was challenged by Alexander Yakovlev, the one-time chairman of a presidential panel investigating the fate of repression victims. In 2000, Yakovlev said he had been told by a former KGB chief that Wallenberg was killed in Lubyanka prison.

That year, Russia also conceded that the Soviet authorities had wrongfully persecuted Wallenberg and posthumously



Israeli government cabinet member Yossi Peled delivers a speech at the opening of an exhibition memorializing Raoul Wallenberg, in Budapest, Hungary, yesterday. The centennial exhibition, "Man Amidst Inhumanity," pays tribute to the legendary Swedish diplomat who rescued of tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews during WWII.

renamed him as a victim of political repression.

Unverified witness accounts and newly uncovered evidence have suggested, however, that he may have lived beyond his official death date.

Wallenberg commemorations and celebrations of his efforts in Hungary include a memorial concert on April 15, the issue of a Wallenberg postal stamp on May 10, conferences, and a September memorial event at the Dohany Street Synagogue — the largest in Europe.

In the United States, a Gold Medal effort was launched by the Raoul Wallenberg Centennial Celebration Commission (RWCCC), whose mission it is to honor Wallenberg across the United States in commemoration of his upcoming centennial in August 2012. The effort is being led by Ezra Friedlander, CEO of the Friedlander Group. About two months ago, a bipartisan coalition consisting of members of Congress announced legislation to award Raoul Wallenberg the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian award Congress can bestow.

The Bill was introduced by Senators Gillibrand, Kirk and Levin in the Senate, and has already attracted co-sponsorships from Senators Barrasso, Brown, Casey, Feinstein, Johanns, Kirk, Levin, Lieberman, Moran and Nelson. In the House, the Bill was introduced by New York Reps. Meeks and Hayworth.

"But the work is far from over — now's the time to gather momentum to honor a most deserving hero," said Friedlander, spokesman for the Wallenberg Commission.

"The Centennial Celebration of Raoul Wallenberg's life provides great opportunities for all of us to remember the selfless efforts of this great hero of humanity," said Kenneth Abramowitz, Board Member of the RWCCC.

"Raoul Wallenberg represents a great example to all of us of how

we must step forward as individuals to confront injustice wherever we see it, in whatever capacity we have to oppose it," said Erol User of Istanbul, Turkey, a prominent investment banker and Chair of the Wallenberg International Board of Governors. The International Board includes Andras Bacsinagy, Deputy Chief of Mission, Republic of Hungary, and His Excellency, Dr. György Szapáry, Hungarian Ambassador to the United States.

"We must remember that Raoul Wallenberg did not have to get involved. As a Swedish diplomat, he represented a neutral country," said Mrs. Ruth Lichtenstein, the director of Project Witness, a Holocaust Educational Resource Center.

She pointed out that "there is no grave, no memorial marking Wallenberg's 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."

The Gold Medal is just one of many ways of raising the profile of Raoul Wallenberg closer to his centennial. In the New York City Council, legislation has been introduced by Council Members Greenfield, Lander and González to rename Thirteenth Avenue "Wallenberg Way" in honor of the vibrant Jewish community that currently resides there today.

"As a child of Holocaust survivors, it is our responsibility to recognize individuals who risked their lives, went the extra step, and saved so many people" said Leon Goldenberg, another board member. "Had there been more Wallenbergs, perhaps my brother, four sisters, and many more family members would be alive today." (With reporting by AP)

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