

Op-Ed

Point of View

Justice for Raoul Wallenberg and Raoul Wallenberg Park

By THOMAS L. BIRD

For so many people here in New York and around the world, what does Raoul Wallenberg represent during his six month Holocaust rescue mission, and his prolonged gulag survival experience?

On Jan. 17, we will reflect on his saving about 100,000 Hungarian Jews from certain death. We also will focus on his kidnapping as a Swedish diplomat by Soviet authorities. They held him in isolated captivity for the rest of his long life.

His heroic intervention in the hell of the Hungarian Holocaust is well documented. In contrast, his disappearance and confinement in the Soviet gulag camps have been shrouded in mystery, surrounded by misinformation, subjected to manipulation, subverted by machinations, and sealed off by maneuvers.

More recently, one of the ways to remember him and to learn from his legacy was manifested through the creation of Raoul Wallenberg Park by a citizens coalition. Certain public officials provided key support. Among them were Bronx borough president Fernando Ferrer, Assemblyman Oliver Koppell, state parks commissioner Orin Lehman, and U.S. Reps. Jack Bingham and Ted Weiss.

The issues currently pending include the restoration of the legal name, "RAOUL WALLENBERG PARK," as well as necessary corrections to the historical sign on the site. Another issue is doubling the official size of this unique park, while increasing public usage, especially by the 14,000 students in nearby public, private, and parochial schools.

The intriguing element in this entire process is the parks department's reaction to the Bronx Council for Environmental Quality and Community Board 8's initiatives. Actually, other than an agency representative's comments on the incorrect sign published on the front page of The Riverdale Press in January 2015, the parks department has done nothing so far on any of these four important opportunities.

I serve on the board of BCEQ, and participated in the formulation of our unanimous resolution on the park's status. We then coordinated with CB8 via its parks committee.

The first communication with the parks department was April, then November 2013, and later two statements on May 29, 2015. Numerous subsequent phone calls and consultations at the highest level of the agency produced no written responses, and no specific results.

Additionally, I should point out that neither BCEQ (nor Riverdale Nature Preservancy that Irma Fleck and I co-founded in 1985) have been confrontational with various parks department's commissioners and their staffs. On the contrary, we have maintained a collaborative and ongoing relationship with them, which should have provided a solid foundation for positive action on these four related initiatives.

This puzzling mystery continues to this day, more than five years later! Many individuals and institutions within The Press coverage area--and beyond--participated in the 11 year struggle to create RAOUL WALLENBERG PARK, not "Raoul Wallenberg Forest," and certainly not "Wallenberg Forest."

This first alteration was imposed arbitrarily by the illegal intervention of the parks commissioner himself.

To the best of my knowledge, American parks are not named after entire families (Raoul was the person who defied Adolf Eichmann in Budapest with his staff of 340 liberated Hungarian Jews.)

That parks commissioner ignored the required naming process by unilaterally establishing a "forest" instead of a park.

The resulting reality is unacceptable, and can readily be remedied. City parks commissioners do not have the statutory authority to single-handedly overturn a City Council "Local Law" naming a new park. The previous legal designation by the City Council is the established, determining factor in creating and maintaining an official park name.

To recognize this fundamental fact, our duly elected representatives do have the authority to champion their constituents' consensus. They can ensure the restoration of the park's original, official name: "RAOUL WALLENBERG PARK", and add natural acreage from Seton Park, thereby doubling its size.

During the last five years or so, what (or who?) has been preventing these four creative and cost-free opportunities from proceeding? If the parks department personnel had done their job --correcting their errors -- it would not be necessary to come forward at this time to shed light on this unfortunate circumstance.

The overall 11-year period of ongoing struggle occurred from November 1980 until the formal dedication program with diplomats & officials on May 10, 1991. We had to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles (unknown private ownership, excessive purchase price, and top level secret sessions). Mayor Ed Koch actually organized a marathon meeting to sidetrack support for the park project. It involved the personal participation of his deputy mayor, the city planning commission chair, and the parks department commissioner.

The public was supposed to remain in the dark as the second objective of this secret meeting.

However, *The Press* broke the story on the front page with a banner headline in 1987. The revelations exposed the facts surrounding the Koch regime's behind-the-scenes betrayal of the established popular coalition and the supportive elective officials.

We in the Bronx are fortunate to have a community newspaper capable and willing to speak truth to power via their investigative journalism.

In conclusion, I urge New Yorkers -- Jews and gentiles alike -- to collaborate for a second time regarding the four objectives: to ensure proper recognition of Raoul Wallenberg (legal park name and historical sign), to double the size of his park (adding natural acreage from Seton Park), and to increase student usage (regular park ranger programs).

Once these four objectives are achieved, readers and residents can gain real satisfaction from their individual input.

Meanwhile, you can visit the park site itself and our Wallenberg website at raoulsfate.org, established by the Independent Investigation into Raoul Wallenberg's Fate, a fully tax deductible, non-profit we organized years ago.

Individuals and institutions can also promote a new park re-dedication program--via the city's parks department--using the previous May 10, 1991, event as a target date for 2019.

Let's "rescue the rescuer" from possible oblivion in a distracted and divisive world!

"To life and the future," Raoul's message of hope in the hell of the Hungarian holocaust.

The author, a lifelong Spuyten Duyvil resident, was a founding member of PARC, Parkland Acquisition and Restoration Coalition. He is also on the board of the Independent Investigation into Raoul Wallenberg's Fate.