

Remembrance: Percy Sutton, Champion of the Soviet Jewry Cause

By Malcolm Hoenlein

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NEW YORK (JTA) -- The sad news of the passing of Percy Sutton at the age of 89 brought back a flood of memories.

In the 1970s and early 80s, I worked closely with the then-Manhattan borough president and a key power broker in New York politics when I served as executive director of the Greater New York Conference on Soviet Jewry and later of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York.

Sutton attended countless Jewish events. He spoke up when Israel was in danger, especially during the Yom Kippur War and on many other occasions. He often spoke of his visit to Israel and publicly called on others to stand up for Israel. He brought me before black audiences and opened many doors, including to the 100 Black Men, enabling us to work with important groups that otherwise would have been less accessible.

But it was my experiences with him on the issue of Soviet Jewry that I recall most vividly. Sutton was one of the first and most consistently outspoken leaders on behalf of the struggle for freedom for Soviet Jews. He led the Black Coalition for Soviet Jews, which we established in the early 70s, and was a delegate to the World Conference on Soviet Jewry held in Brussels in 1976. He earned that recognition by virtue of his oft-demonstrated commitment standing with us in the rain, snow and sleet at demonstrations, marching with us annually down Fifth Avenue, and traveling to Russia to visit Soviet Jewish refuseniks. He did not do this for political expediency, but rather out of a deep commitment to the struggle for the fight for the human and civil rights of the Jews of the Soviet Union.

I recall in particular one headline-making event we staged on a little outcropping in the middle of the East River, opposite the United Nations. Soviet Premier Brezhnev was due to address the opening session of the General Assembly along with other world leaders. In the months before, I had arranged with New York State officials and legislators to provide us the deed to the island, which we dubbed "Soviet Jewry Freedom Island." Percy, as Manhattan borough president, was joined by Robert Abrams, who was then Bronx borough president, and several other officials including Rabbi Gil Klapperman, the chairman of the Soviet Jewry Conference, and Sister Rose Thering of Seton Hall University, whose memory we all cherish.

We proceeded to the island on a small boat provided by the late philanthropist Sam Hausman. A large tugboat we rented filled to capacity with camera crews, reporters and members of press to cover this unique demonstration followed us. We approached the little outcropping, which some say was made from rubble left when they built the subways or the Queens tunnel; others said it dated to a much earlier period. Whatever the

true history, this very small area, strewn with litter collected over the years, was our target.

As we approached the tiny island, the rudder got caught in seaweed. When the captain couldn't get it restarted, Sutton pulled up his well-coiffed sleeve and put his arm over the side of the boat. As he was reaching into the polluted water of the East River, a reporter - - Carl Stokes as I recall -- yelled at him, "Mr. Borough President, is there anything you won't do for Soviet Jews?" Sutton looked up and said, simply, "nothing."

He proceeded to disentangle the rudder, which enabled us to proceed to the island. There, the dignitaries disembarked and we collectively unfurled a 20-foot wide, 6-foot high banner reading "Soviet Jewry Freedom Island."

After the members of delegation made brief statements, we were approached by a police launch that came to remove us from the island following a protest by U.N. Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim, who was, in turn, acting on a complaint by the Soviet ambassador. We looked at the all-glass back of the U.N. building, and every inch of window was filled with diplomats and envoys watching the spectacle.

The police, seeing that the two borough presidents were there, radioed back, asking, "What are we to do? The borough presidents are here!" They were obviously not about to act rashly and were relieved to hear that we were not planning a permanent settlement. It was all very congenial. After continuing with the demonstration for a while, the delegation departed, leaving the sign in place, which remained there during the opening of the General Assembly.

We returned to shore, where the media was waiting anxiously. The next day, it was front-page news from New York to Hong Kong, but not in Moscow. Sutton's quote led NBC news.

I often have had the opportunity over the years to recall with Sutton some of our past adventures. They were a source of pride and inspiration to him, as they were to many others. With his passing, his friendship and his devotion to causes we shared should be remembered.