

PROJECT FACT SHEET: 3101 Albemarle Street, N.W.
ANC 3F | February 16, 2017

Context

Over a year ago, the Polish Government, which until today owned the house at 3101 Albemarle Street, put it on the market. Several developers indicated interest in purchasing the property, demolishing the existing house and carving up the lot in order to build five to six “McMansions.” Given that the neighborhood was already dealing with difficult stormwater runoff and erosion issues, a group of concerned neighbors began to investigate how to preserve the character of the property, which in many ways, is a gateway to Forest Hills.

Having discovered that the Tree and Slope Zoning Overlay did not preclude redevelopment of the property, a group of concerned Forest Hills residents hit on a four-part solution:

- a. A long-time neighbor, PG Gottfried and his son Bobby, have purchased the property to preserve the house and preclude the property being leveled, stripped of trees and vegetation and turned into a set of McMansions. As a young teenager, PG played on the property;
- b. The Rock Creek Conservancy has expressed interest in using the former Ambassador’s residence as its headquarters. As stewards of Rock Creek Park, they will be looking out from their front door onto the very land and water they oversee, and also integrate state-of-the-art stormwater management, rain gardens, sustainable plantings and other small demonstration practices;
- c. Applying for landmark designation on the residence and a substantial amount of the property adjacent to it to guarantee its preservation, and honor the former Polish Ambassador and his impact on the end of the Cold War;
- d. Construction of a small number of townhouses that will cross-subsidize the restoration of the historic residence. The townhouses will be designed to minimize the footprint of new construction, facilitate “aging in place” and employ a number of innovative sustainability approaches to minimize any adverse environmental impacts.

As historical research proceeded, we discovered that Romuald Spasowski, former Polish Ambassador to the U.S. and resident of 3101 Albemarle Street, was the highest-ranking Communist official to ever defect to the West. His

defection played a crucial role in the rise of resistance in Poland, and the subsequent collapse of the USSR. President Reagan cites Spasowski as a major factor in shaping his Administration's new and ultimately victorious "roll back the Iron Curtain" strategy.

Two years earlier, Spasowski and his wife chose 3101 Albemarle Street Northwest as Poland's ambassadorial residence. It provided a safe haven from the Soviet spies embedded in the Embassy, and was the site of Spasowski's defection. Key to the end of the Cold War was the six-year period when 3101 stood empty and dark. Today, it remains an enduring memorial to human courage and to one of the greatest foreign policy triumphs in U.S. history.

The House

- In 1926, prolific DC builder Howard Fulmer hired architect John A. Weber (28 houses in D.C.) to design 3101 for his wife Katie Fulmer
- The house had five owners, including Charles Jacobsen (1931-1953) who added the east elevation. Jacobsen brought his uncle Christian Heurich to D.C.. Heurich founded Heurich Brewery, which became the City's largest non-government employer. Jacobsen was Brewery VP, founder of Arlington Bottling Company (Ebay collectibles), and owner of the Washington Senators and first Ford dealership in D.C.
- The 10,000-square-foot stone house—sitting high on a hill among mature trees and overlooking the entrance to Soapstone Valley and Rock Creek Park—is often called the "gateway to Forest Hills."
- The Polish People's Republic, which purchased the house in 1979, is now selling it to one of our Forest Hills neighbors, who played on the property as a child, and wishes to preserve the house.

Spasowski & the Ambassadorial Residence:

Before the Defection

- 1978: Romuald Spasowski's second tour as Poland's Ambassador to the U.S. begins.
- Spasowski, a life-long Communist who helped his mother (recognized by Israel) rescue escapees from the Warsaw Ghetto during WWII, became increasingly open about his sympathy with Solidarity and opposition to Soviet policies and oppression.
- He was Dean of the Polish diplomatic corps; former Polish deputy foreign minister, and former ambassador to five countries.

- Planning to retire after his second U.S. tour, Spasowski soon discovered that “the Polish Embassy [in Washington] was [home to] a Security espionage unit...whatever I say is reported at once to the Soviet KGB....”
- During the first year of the Reagan Administration, security officials from the USSR and Poland played a cat-and-mouse game with Spasowski during which he used 3101 as a “safe haven.”
- To keep out spies and all but trusted colleagues, the Spasowskis acted as their own architect and general contractor whenever they did construction on the house, which included adding the rear addition. Wanda also did all the cleaning and cooking herself—including for large diplomatic dinners.
- After Spasowski discovered his safe at the Embassy had been broken into, he moved his secret diplomatic diary, written in code, to the residence and kept locked and hidden in his bedroom at 3101.
- Spasowski’s trusted son-in-law, a westernized scholar who taught at American University, was believed to be a paid informer for the Polish secret police—and in a nearby house within clear range of 3101, thick telecommunications lines formed a mysterious wall.
- All Embassy servants reported to “Security,” and the Spasowskis were required to attend monthly dinner parties of all Soviet Bloc diplomats that were “hunting and trapping sessions, aimed at snaring dissidents.”
- At one typical dinner at 3101: Spasowski confronted Anatoly Dobrynin—the Soviet Ambassador to the U.S., who had been a principal actor during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis—who teased and threatened Spasowski in front of other Soviet bloc ambassadors.
- The situation became far more complicated and intense in 1981 with the rise of Solidarity in Poland.
- When Lech Walesa was taken into custody, Dobrynin summoned Spasowski to the Polish Embassy. Spasowski refused. Once there, he would be beyond the bounds of American protection.

The Defection

- On a snowy evening, less than a week before Christmas 1981, and six days after the Communists imposed martial law in Poland to suppress Solidarity, Spasowski called the State Department: “I’m asking for protection; I want the

President to grant me and my family political asylum. Please come to my home and get us before the Soviets do.”

From Spasowski’s Autobiography:

We began packing, stopping now and then for a glance out the window.

Fifteen minutes went by. The doorbell rang. Two District policemen stood at the front door. They said they were sent to protect me. Within a half-hour, five unmarked black cars slipped into the driveway and turned off their engines. Taking up sentry positions in the basement, behind the house and out front, the [FBI] began regular patrol, their walkie-talkies crackling.

From the windows, we could see the sharply lit winter afternoon slide into dusk. In the half-dark, we could make out a line of ten or fifteen police cars rounding our corner, their headlights forming a chain.

It was close to eight o’clock when we finally set foot outside. We rolled down the hill. Behind us the stone house was ablaze with an unnatural light. Every window and spotlight shone, and in the rising fumes of many cars’ exhaust, the place had the bewitched glow of a storybook palace. As it grew smaller in the distance, I realized we were truly leaving Poland behind. I took Wanda’s hand. We were both trembling.

- A caravan of police and FBI cars with top lights whirling raced through the city into the night. The next day, Romuald and Wanda were in another FBI caravan en route to the State Department, where he made his public statement to the world.
- Within two days, they were in the Oval Office meeting with Reagan; then Vice President Bush, Secretary of State Alexander Haig and others joined them.
- Reagan altered his televised Christmas message to focus on Spasowski and Poland.

The Significance of the Defection

- Arrival of democracy in Poland triggered destruction of the Iron Curtain; the fall of the Berlin Wall captured world attention, but Spasowski-related events in Poland preceded—and helped precipitate—it.
- Ronald Reagan cited the Spasowski defection as a major factor shaping his Administration’s new—and ultimately victorious—“roll back the Iron Curtain and destroy the USSR” strategy.

- The emergence of an anti-communist government in Poland was in large part the result of economic sanctions and other pressures imposed on Poland by Ronald Reagan from the end of 1981, after meeting with Spasowski, to 1987.
- When Ronald Reagan signed documents ending sanctions against Poland in 1987, standing next to him was Romuald Spasowski, whom the Polish government had sentenced to death following his defection.
- The Hoover Institution at Stanford, the world's leading library and archive on the Cold War, holds 32 linear feet of Spasowski's papers. Researchers are currently working with Spasowski-related material at (among others) Hoover, Oxford University, the U.S. Holocaust Museum, the National Archives, the Reagan Presidential Library, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, Vanderbilt Broadcast News Archives, and the Library of Congress.
- Future scholars will be thrilled that this house has been saved as a living symbol. It stood empty from Spasowski's defection in late 1981 until 1988 when the new Polish ambassador, embodying the growth of freedom in Poland, arrived at 3101 with his family.
- Fresh analysis and understanding of the Cold War (1945-1991) are now emerging. Not only did the world avoid a nuclear holocaust, but also for the only time in recorded history two major powers never used new weapons they had developed to fight each other.
- With the passage of time, emotions about Reagan are fading, more documents are becoming available, and a central story is emerging: Key to the end of the Cold War was the six-year period when 3101 Albemarle Street, N.W., at the gateway to Forest Hills neighborhood, stood empty and dark.
- The house is significant as a symbol of conscience—freedom and courage. In 1989, neighbors walking by 3101 noticed that the large hammer and sickle brass plaque permanently embedded in the tall stone gatepost was gone. The empty slot is still there—memorializing the U.S. victory over Soviet Russia.

NEXT STEPS

The first step was to brief the ANC and the community on the fact that a landmark nomination is proposed, and to provide some background on Ambassador Spasowski and the basis for the landmark application, with no action requested from the ANC. (January 2017 meeting)

We will return to the ANC meeting in February to present and discuss the entire project, including progress on the landmark application. The new owners and architect will show drawings and site plans.

We are adding historical content and making site planning adjustments to accommodate heritage trees, and plan very soon to file a more complete application for landmark status, which we anticipate will be heard by the Historic Preservation Review Board in late April.

At that point, we will be asking the ANC to vote to support the application. It is anticipated that the historic house will be used soon after by the Rock Creek Conservancy as their offices, which will require approval as a special exception.

The other part of the proposal will be the construction of eight townhouses, with special design features to make them suitable for those who wish to downsize and to age in place.

Before any zoning application is prepared, the entire plan will be presented to the community and the ANC for their comments, and hopefully, approval.