Remarks by Ambassador Lee Feinstein at the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous Luncheon

Marriott Hotel
July 18, 2010

Mr. Ambassador, Rabbi Schudrich, Mr. Turski, Distinguished Guests. It is truly an honor for me to speak to you today.

In her remarks at the Oskar Schindler Factory in Krakow just two weeks ago, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted the importance of seeing the two realities of the Holocaust.

One involves the mechanized slaughter of millions of men, and women, and children, many of them torn from their communities, herded into boxcars and sent to die in mass graves or in camps like Auschwitz.

The other involves the stories of the righteous, the thousands who risked their lives, fortunes, and reputations to rescue friends and strangers from the horrors of the Shoah. The courage of the righteous gives us proof that, in the face of the worst that humanity is capable of, there are among us individuals who are willing to resist hatred and bigotry.

It is an honor to have the opportunity to speak to you, the righteous, whose bravery inspires us and reminds us of our sacred duty to remember and to confront evil in our own time.

I would like to thank the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous for helping to bring the stories of your courage to light, not just so that we can express our gratitude, but also so that your stories can be shared with others.

The Foundation's European Study Program, which allows a group of outstanding teachers to visit Holocaust sites of memory and to speak first-hand with survivors and rescuers, is especially important because it will help teachers convey to younger generations the unprecedented and unparalleled evil of the Holocaust. Monuments, museums, statistics, and even photographs, as shocking as they are, cannot capture the full horror of the Shoah.

Preserving the stories, the first-hand accounts of survivors and rescuers, is essential if one is to grasp both the inhumanity and the humanity of the Holocaust. Only in this way can we truly understand our own sacred duty to remember and to act.

Stories of your goodness and generosity remind us that, while war and suffering can bring out the worst in people, they can also bring out our most noble qualities. Your stories remind us that we, too, have the potential for incredible courage and compassion, if we are willing to do what is right and to stand up against what we know is wrong.

It is a real honor to stand here today before a group of people who have performed deeds more noble and courageous than most of us could even

imagine. Reading through your stories, I cannot help but be amazed at what some of you did, without a thought for your own safety, on behalf of other people, often mere acquaintances or even complete strangers.

Every one of you, who could have closed your doors and shut your ears to the tremendous suffering of others, chose selflessness and compassion over comfort and security. No one ordered you to risk your life to save another, and yet you all chose to do so.

In a time when simple actions like passing your neighbor a loaf of bread carried with them harsh penalties, many of you kept entire families hidden and fed for the long years of the war, often when you did not have enough to eat yourselves.

Others worked to secure false papers for fugitives; still others cared for children from the ghettos as your own.

Many of you were still children when you performed these heroic actions: one of you, as a young girl, exchanged clothes with a girl in the ghetto to allow her to leave safely.

Another sat on a couch that concealed a hiding place with entire families hidden beneath the floor with a gun pointed at your head while Gestapo agents searched your house.

Others brought food to people in hiding and obeyed your parents' instructions to say nothing to friends about your new cousins.

Your powerful stories show each of us what we can achieve, if we are willing to do what we know to be right. The survivors you rescued, and their children and grandchildren, are living proof of the power of a single act of courage in the face of overwhelming force and fear.

It is no surprise that there are more Poles among the righteous than any other nation. Today, Poland's thriving democracy and flourishing civil society is based on Poles' deep and abiding commitment to promote democratic values and human rights around the world. Poles know that they are not truly free as long as others languish in poverty and oppression.

Your courage reminds us – Poles and Americans alike – that we have the capacity and the duty to do good in the world, even if that means taking risks and making sacrifices to promote and uphold the principles and values we believe in. While few of us will be asked to accept the grave risks you did, we are all grateful for your inspiration. Thank you.