

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton
At the Department of State's Annual Holocaust Commemoration

April 27, 2012
Marshall Center Auditorium
Washington, D.C.

SECRETARY CLINTON: Well, thank you very much, Tina. And thank you for the work that you do and the bureau does and the impact that it continues to make. I'm very pleased to join with all of you today. I want to welcome Ambassador Szapary and Ambassador Simonyi – former Ambassador Simonyi, other distinguished guests, and in particular, just a few of the extended Lantos family members. But I would like the Lantos family members, in particular her – Annette's daughters, "little" Annette and Katrina, and the other members of the family just to stand so that we can recognize you. (Applause.)

I used to tell Tom and Annette all the time that their beautiful family, which I always received a picture of for the holiday season, was the single-best rebuke to the Holocaust perpetrators, and I used to keep that picture until I got a new one every year. In particular, one where everybody was in white was a very good – a favorite of mine. And I also want to especially recognize Tomicah Tillemann, who is our very able and effective first-ever coordinator of our outreach to civil society around the world. We talk a lot about how we work with governments; we are increasingly trying to find creative ways to work with the private sector and with civil society, and Tomicah's been at the forefront.

As we gather here today in the well-named Marshall auditorium for George C. Marshall to remember the millions of Holocaust victims and the courage of those who worked to save them, I'm reminded of the words of the great Hungarian novelist, Imre Madach. History, he said, portrays "good and evil in such vast proportion that both appear miraculous." Well, there were few stories that illustrate that truth more vividly than the lives of Tom and Annette. And we particularly miss Tom today, Annette.

Growing up in Budapest in the 1930s, Annette Tillemann's parents ran a successful jewelry store, and she was their only adored daughter. Being the mother of an only adored daughter, I understand that. She wasn't just adored; she was kind of adorable too. In fact, she won Hungary's national Shirley Temple lookalike contest – (laughter) – when she was a little girl. She had a childhood sweetheart, a very precocious young man named Tom Lantos, whom she met when she was six. Life could not have been sweeter for her and her family. They were secure; they had a loving family; they were surrounded by friends; they were pillars of their community.

But as fascism spread across Europe, Annette's father was conscripted into a forced labor battalion. New laws limited Jews' access to many parts of Hungary's social and economic life. Then, in March 1944, Nazi forces occupied Hungary. In the course of a few months, almost 500,000 of Hungary's 800,000 Jews were deported to Auschwitz or shot by roving bands of fascist thugs. By late 1944, almost every Hungarian Jew outside of Budapest was dead.

Amid this storm of hatred and evil, a young Swede accepted a special mission. Raoul Wallenberg was not a traditional diplomat. He had studied architecture in the United States; he had held a series of jobs in business. There was nothing in his background that would have marked him as one of the great heroes of the 20th century. But when the United States War Refugee Board approached him about traveling to Budapest to try and save the largest remaining concentration of Jews in Europe, Wallenberg answered that call. Amid so many missteps responding to the Holocaust, sending Wallenberg to Hungary was one of the things we got right.

When he arrived in July of 1944, thousands of Hungarian Jews were being killed or deported every day. Employing a combination of courage, creativity, and chutzpah, Wallenberg went to work immediately. He began distributing papers to thousands of Jews stating that they were under the protection of the Swedish crown. From a legal standpoint, these so called “protective passports” were a complete fiction. But amid the chaos and miscommunication of war, they worked.

When Wallenberg saw that the documents were saving lives, he persuaded other diplomatic missions in Budapest to issue them as well. With bullets flying all around him, he leapt onto deportation trains and, like a hand reaching into the grave, pulled people out of the box cars, carrying them to safety. He bought up large apartment buildings with funds from the United States, posted oversized Swedish flags outside, filled the rooms with Jews, and claimed that premises were under Swedish protection. He threatened German commanders with postwar prosecution if they went through with plans to blow up the Jewish ghetto. In almost every action he took, Wallenberg vastly exceeded his diplomatic orders. He subverted the bureaucracy. He shredded protocol. And thank God he did.

When Annette’s childhood sweetheart, Tom, escaped from a forced labor camp for the third time, he, like thousands of others, found refuge in one of Wallenberg’s safe houses and survived the war. Annette received a protective passport issued by the Portuguese and escaped out of Hungary with a group of diplomats from their embassy as the frontlines advanced toward Budapest. The danger didn’t end there, however. On Christmas Day 1944, as a lone 13-year-old girl, she had to sneak past armed soldiers and across a no man’s land before swimming an icy river to reach the relative safety of Switzerland.

Now, many Jews, along with countless others – the Roma, the physically and mentally handicapped, homosexuals, dissidents, adversaries to the Fourth Reich – they were not so fortunate. And many members of Annette’s family were killed. As we gather today, we remember them, and the millions of innocent mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters who fell victim to Nazi extremism. But we also take hope in the example of Raoul Wallenberg and other rescuers, some of whose names we know – Carl Lutz, Oskar Schindler and Corrie Ten Boom, and others whose names we are still learning.

I want to emphasize that none of these heroes and heroines worked alone. People may have carried different titles in 1944, but people like Wallenberg had supporters within the institutions. He had program officers and accountants who helped him purchase safe houses; consular officers who assisted in issuing protective passports; motor pool drivers who helped him carry people to safety; policymakers here in Washington who had the vision to send him there in the

first place. So no matter what it might say on whatever job description we have now or in our futures, each of us can do more. Each of us can be part of that chain of humanity that stands for the very best that we can be.

We're striving to do that in our foreign policy, and on Monday, President Obama outlined our new efforts to prevent mass atrocities. We're working through UNESCO to spread Holocaust education to Africa and Asia. We're working with other groups to try to combat extremism. It doesn't matter where it comes from. If it's rooted in ideology or it's rooted in religion or it's just rooted in a perverse drive for power, whatever the reasons, we have to stand against it.

And Annette's life after the war provides a case study into how you could apply the lessons of the Holocaust. When the fighting ended, she came to the United States and married Tom. She built a new life in California, but she always remembered Raoul Wallenberg and her experience in Hungary.

Wallenberg disappeared into the Soviet prison system after being arrested by the Red Army. Annette started lobbying President Carter and the Soviet Union for answers about his fate, even peppering President Carter with questions about the case on a radio call-in show. When Tom became the only Holocaust survivor elected to Congress ever, she helped him pass legislation making Wallenberg the second honorary citizen of the United States after Winston Churchill, hoping it would expand our ability to find out what happened to him.

Annette also worked to persuade Tom, who didn't need a lot of persuading, to create the Congressional Human Rights Caucus. And she spent decades as its unpaid executive director. From Darfur, to Tibet, to Bosnia, to Burma, now to Syria, we need her voice and all of our voices speaking up about every major human rights case. And when Tom passed away in 2008, Annette vowed to continue her advocacy and founded the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights.

So we welcome Annette today not only as a survivor who overcame the evil of the Shoah, but as someone who met that evil with good, who tried always to remember how fortunate she was to have survived, and felt called to continue the work that so many had done to make her survival possible. It is perhaps miraculous, but it shouldn't be. We have to contest with good and evil every day. It's part of the work that I do. We have to figure out ways to support those who are facing great dangers, who are standing up for human rights, and we have to think of ways to outsmart and to stop and prevent those who pursue their own agendas and try to justify what they do, but who cannot escape the label of being evil by anyone with a conscience.

So Annette, we welcome you here. And more than that, we thank you. We thank you for the life you have lived and the example you have set. My friend, Annette Lantos. (Applause.)