

Prepared remarks of Katrina Lantos Swett at UN Hungarian Holocaust Commemoration, January 23, 2014

Good Evening, Dear Friends.

As has already been noted by the earlier speakers, we meet tonight with hearts that are both heavy and full - heavy over the sudden and serious illness of our friend Gyorgy Vamos who has been in so many ways the moving force behind this exhibit and full because we gather today to remember a dark time in history and to commemorate and honor the hundreds of thousands of Jews who lost their lives in the tragedy of the Hungarian Holocaust. As you know my own family is included in the numbers of those who became victims, and my own dear mother and father were saved only because of the selfless heroism of one of the most extraordinary diplomats and humanitarians of the 20th century- Raoul Wallenberg. A monument to Wallenberg stands just a stone's throw away from where we are, across the street from the UN, and perhaps the most notable part of the Memorial is the bronze suitcase, left on the ground to symbolize the unfinished work of Raoul who as we all know was kidnapped and imprisoned by the Soviets when they came to Budapest. I think that image of the suitcase left behind as he was taken is an important symbol and reminder for us here today of our own unfinished business.

This powerful exhibit tells an unforgettable story which we are honor bound to remember and bear witness to. But exhibits such as these have another, even more important purpose. In that sense coming here is quite different from going to admire a Matisse at the Met. We are here tonight not only to remember and to learn but even more importantly to prepare and to arm ourselves to face the very real dangers of the present moment. And as far as anti-Semitism in Europe is concerned, its alarming resurgence in recent years reminds us all of the truth of William Faulkner's words, "The past is never dead, it's not even past."

In just the last few days the dark past has re-emerged in Hungary in a disturbing and outrageous way. In 1941, long before the German occupation of Hungary in 1944, nearly 20,000 Jews were deported by the Hungarian authorities to German occupied Ukraine where they were murdered en masse in the infamous Kamianets-Podilskyi massacre. This was the first mass atrocity directed at Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust. And yet, a few days ago, the director of a government

funded Historical Institute described this unforgivable deportation as simply a “local police action against illegal aliens.” It is hard to properly express my outrage at this appalling attempt to rewrite history and to attempt to evade the Hungarian government’s deep moral complicity in the massacre of these innocent people - the vast majority of them native-born Hungarians. Such an effort to evade, avoid, whitewash and desecrate history is utterly unacceptable and cannot be tolerated by any nation that hopes to command the respect of the world community.

I urge the leadership of the Hungarian government to speak out forcefully against these reprehensible statements and to take appropriate steps to rectify this situation. Hungary is too proud and too decent of a nation to let such shameful remarks stand unrebuked by those at the highest level of government.

When I first learned of these events, I thought immediately of my dear father, Tom Lantos, who was truly fearless when it came to confronting those who would seek to once again fan the flames of bigotry and hatred in Hungary. I know if he were still alive, he would take to the floor of his beloved Congress to denounce these comments and to call upon the government of Hungary to stand proudly and unshakably for the values of human rights, tolerance, democracy and decency. There are many in Hungary who do just that, and I have come to know many of them both as leaders I admire and even more as friends. Foreign Minister Janos Martonyi and State Secretary Zsolt Nemeth are two such individuals; I have been moved to witness their eloquent defense of persecuted minorities, and I’ve been touched by their courageous willingness to honestly face Hungarian history – even its darkest chapters. They do much to bring honor to their country, and I know they represent the millions of decent Hungarians who reject the old prejudices of the past.

I spoke a moment ago about Raoul Wallenberg’s suitcase, now sitting in bronze outside this great Parliament of Man as a reminder of his unfinished work.

His suitcase is waiting there for me. It is waiting there for you. It is now up to us to pick up that suitcase and carry his work forward for as long as we are able in the fight for human rights and justice for all of humanity. That is the work of this exhibit, and we must make it our work as well.

Thank you.