

## U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY

## Press Center



## Remarks of Secretary Jacob J. Lew at the Unveiling Ceremony of the Raoul Wallenberg Congressional Gold Medal

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*As prepared for delivery*

**WASHINGTON** - Good morning. Your Majesties, members of the Wallenberg family, Ambassador Hafstrom, Ambassador Szapáry, our Congressional delegation, and other distinguished guests. I am deeply honored to be here today and for the Treasury Department to host this event.

As many of you know, the Congressional Gold Medal is one of this nation's highest civilian awards, bestowed on individuals who have made a lasting impact on American history and culture. Only 31 foreign citizens have been recognized in this way.

Of course, we all know the unique story of Raoul Wallenberg. His remarkable heroism, in risking his own life to rescue thousands of Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust, is the reason that we are here to celebrate his legacy and unveil the medal's design.

This ceremony has special meaning to me. My father was born in Poland. His family left their small town at the end of World War I. He was lucky. He had the chance to leave before it was too late. And he was especially fortunate to come here to America, a country where he did not have to live in fear. Where the doors of educational and economic opportunity swung open. And where even the son of an Eastern European immigrant could grow up to become Treasury Secretary of the United States.

I've thought a lot about my father's story over the years. How that one decision to leave Poland did not just change the course of his life, but also the generations that came after him. I think that is why the story of Raoul Wallenberg resonates so strongly with me.

At a time when too many others turned a blind eye to murder and injustice, it would have been extraordinary if Raoul Wallenberg had saved just one life. Wallenberg saved 100,000 lives. And by extension, he shaped the lives of millions of their children, grandchildren, and other descendants. What's more, Wallenberg could have easily chosen an easier path. He was born into a distinguished family. He could have elected to remain safely in Sweden during World War II. Instead, he put his life on the line, traveled to Budapest and worked tirelessly to issue "protective passports" to Jewish families, declaring them Swedish subjects, so they could escape the Nazis.

In just one example, Wallenberg was told of a Nazi plot to round up several thousand Jewish women and moved swiftly to engineer their rescue. His staff stayed up all night and made nearly 2,000 passports before 6 a.m. They were all completed and personally delivered to the women in time to save them.

Raoul Wallenberg was, as it says on the front side of the medal we are unveiling, a "hero of heroes." But the two inscriptions on the opposite side of the medal are equally poignant. Etched above the faces of several men and women that Wallenberg helped rescue are the words, "He Lives On Forever Through Those He Saved." Etched just below: "One Person Can Make A Difference" – a phrase that, I am told, hangs over the front door of the Raoul Wallenberg School in Brooklyn.

Henry Morgenthau — who served as Treasury Secretary from 1934 to 1945 — also believed that individuals serving in government carry a special moral responsibility. And he was troubled by mounting evidence that State Department officials were avoiding actions that would have rescued hundreds of thousands of Jews. So Morgenthau took the matter directly to President Roosevelt on January 16, 1944. Six days later, the President issued Executive Order 9417, which established the War Refugee Board – an organization set up to speed the rescue and relief of the victims of Nazi occupation.

Among the War Refugee Board's top priorities was the protection of some 750,000 Hungarian Jews. And it dispatched representatives to neutral countries to secure help in assisting with their evacuation. One of the recruits? A young Swedish diplomat named Raoul Wallenberg. Indeed, with funds provided by the Board, Wallenberg was able to purchase about 30 buildings to use as hospitals, schools, soup kitchens, and safe houses for over 8,000 children whose parents had already been deported or killed.

One of the lives Wallenberg saved was the late Tom Lantos, a longtime Congressman from the San Francisco Bay area. He was a dedicated public servant, an outspoken critic of Communism, and a champion of human rights. Congressman Lantos was a Holocaust survivor – the only one ever elected to the United States Congress, where he served until his passing in 2008. I'm honored to have his wife, Annette, here with us today.

Congressman Tom Lantos used his leadership on the House Foreign Affairs Committee as a platform to denounce genocide and other human rights abuses around the world. Born in Budapest, he twice escaped from forced-labor camps after the Nazis took control of Hungary when he was just 16. However, he survived and fled safely to Switzerland with the help of the passport that Wallenberg had arranged.

In 1981, Congressman Lantos recognized the courage and selflessness of his rescuer in one of his first acts of Congress. He sponsored a bill that made Raoul Wallenberg an honorary citizen of the United States, a designation that previously only Winston Churchill had received.

At the ceremony recognizing Wallenberg's citizenship, President Reagan remarked: "I heard someone say that a man has made at least a start on understanding the meaning of human life when he plants shade trees under which he knows he will never sit. Raoul Wallenberg is just such a man. He nurtured the lives of those he never knew at the risk of his own."

It is fitting that we are gathered here at the Treasury Department, just two floors below the very rooms in which the War Refugee Board was established, to pay tribute to Raoul Wallenberg. A man who chose not to be indifferent to the suffering around him. Who put his own career and life at risk to arrange for the rescue of people he did not know, and whose legacy of courage and self-sacrifice touched not just the men and women that he was able to help, but also future generations.

As the words on this medal make clear, Raoul Wallenberg was a hero of heroes. He was one person who made a difference. He lives on forever in those he saved and in the example that he set for us all. And may his memory forever be bound up in the lives of the living.

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