

Administration of Barack Obama, 2013

Remarks at the Great Synagogue in Stockholm, Sweden
September 4, 2013

President Obama. Good afternoon. I want to thank Prime Minister Reinfeldt, Lena Posner-Körösi, and Rabbi Narowe for welcoming me here to the Great Synagogue, the heart of the Jewish community here in Stockholm.

This evening is the first night of the Jewish High Holidays, Rosh Hashanah. For our Jewish friends, it's a time of joy and celebration, to give thanks for our blessings, and to look ahead to the coming year. So to all our Jewish friends here in Sweden, in the United States, and around the world, especially in Israel, I want to wish you and your families a sweet and happy New Year. *Shana Tova.*

Days such as this are a time of reflection, an occasion to consider not just our relationship with God, but our relationship with each other as human beings. We're reminded of our basic obligations: to recognize ourselves in each other, to treat one another with compassion, to reach out to the less fortunate among us, to do our part to help repair our world. These values are at the heart of the great partnership between Sweden and the United States. And these values defined the life of the man we remember today: Raoul Wallenberg.

Now, last year we marked the 100th anniversary of Wallenberg's birth, and I was proud to send my greetings to your ceremony here in Stockholm. Today we're honored to be joined by those who loved him and whose lives he touched: members of the Wallenberg family, including his half-sister Nina and the family of his late half-brother Guy; Wallenberg's colleague, Gabriella Kassius; and some of the countless men and women whom Wallenberg saved from the Holocaust.

We just had a wonderful visit together. They showed me some incredible artifacts, some of the Swedish passports Wallenberg used to protect Jews in Budapest. I saw his diary, his own passport, including a picture of him as he was and as he will always remain: young and determined and full of energy and an enormous heart. And I'm here today because, as Americans, we cherish our ties to Wallenberg as well.

He was a son of Sweden, but he also studied in America. I know he spent most of his time in Ann Arbor, but my understanding is, he spent some time in my hometown of Chicago as well. He could have remained in the comfort of Stockholm, but he went to Nazi-occupied Hungary in partnership with the U.S. War Refugee Board. To this day, schools and streets in America bear his name, and he is one of only a few individuals ever granted honorary U.S. citizenship. So he's beloved in both our countries; he's one of the links that bind us together.

Wallenberg's life is a challenge to us all to live those virtues of empathy and compassion, even when it's hard, even when it involves great risk. He came from a prominent family, but he chose to help the most vulnerable. He was a Lutheran, and yet he risked his lives to save Jews. "I will never be able to go back to Stockholm," he said, "without knowing inside myself I'd done all a man could do to save as many Jews as possible."

So when Jews in Budapest were marked with that yellow star, Wallenberg shielded them behind the blue and yellow of the Swedish flag. When they were forced into death marches, he showed up with the food and water that gave them life. When they were loaded on trains for the camps, he climbed on board too and pulled them off. He lived out one of the most

important *mitzvots*—most important commandments—in the Jewish tradition: to redeem a captive; to save a life; the belief that when a neighbor is suffering, we cannot stand idly by.

And because he refused to stand by, Wallenberg reminds us of our power when we choose not simply to bear witness, but also to act: the tens of thousands he saved from the camps; the estimated 100,000 Jews of Budapest who survived the war, in no small measure because of this man and those like Gabriella who risked their lives as well. It also calls to mind the compassion of Swedes who helped to rescue so many Jews from Denmark 70 years ago this year. And this legacy shines bright in the survivors who are here today and in the family trees that have continued to grow ever since, children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren who owe their very existence to a Swedish hero that they never knew.

I cannot think of a better tribute to Raoul Wallenberg than for each of us—as individuals and as nations—to reaffirm our determination to live the values that defined his life and to make the same choice in our time. And so today we say that we will make a habit of empathy. We will stand against anti-Semitism and hatred in all its forms. We will choose to recognize the beauty and dignity and worth of every person and every child. And we will choose to instill in the hearts of our own children the love and tolerance and compassion that we seek.

One of those whom Wallenberg saved later told this story. He was a young boy in hiding when they came for the women, including his mother. And "my mother kissed me," he said, "and I cried and she cried. And we knew we were parting forever." But then, "2 or 3 hours later, to my amazement, my mother returned with the other women, and it seemed like a mirage, a miracle. My mother was there. She was alive and she was hugging me and kissing me, and she said one word: Wallenberg."

Today we stand in awe of the courage of one man who earned his place in the Righteous Among the Nations. And we pray for the day when all peoples and nations find the same strength: to recognize the humanity that we share and to summon in our own lives our capacity for good, to live with tolerance and respect, to treat everyone with dignity, and to provide our children with the peace that they deserve.

So thank you very much. It is a great honor to be here today. And on behalf of the American people, we want to say to the Wallenberg family how truly inspired and grateful we are for all that he did. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:10 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Lena Posner-Körösi, president, Official Council of Jewish Communities in Sweden.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Great Synagogue in Stockholm, Sweden.

Locations: Stockholm, Sweden.

Names: Kassius, Gabriella; Lagergren, Nina; Narrowe, Morton; Posner-Körösi, Lena; Reinfeldt, John Fredrik

Subjects: Holidays and special observances : Rosh Hashanah; Sweden : Great Synagogue in Stockholm; Sweden : President Obama's visit; Sweden : Prime Minister; Sweden : Relations with U.S.

DCPD Number: DCPD201300601.