

Budapest honors congressman Tom Lantos at childhood home

Ceremony remembers the life of the late Hungarian-born US politician, the only Holocaust survivor to serve in Congress

BY SAM HELLER | June 24, 2014, 2:03 pm |

BUDAPEST — The facade of a gray limestone building looming over Szent István Park in Budapest prominently displays a plaque remembering the life of Hungarian-born US congressman Tom Lantos.

Lantos, a staunch human rights advocate who died six years ago, was honored June 21 outside the Budapest house where he lived during World War II. The ceremony came at the 70th anniversary of a Nazi decree forcing Budapest Jews to live in houses marked with a yellow Star of David, an “honor” unique to the community.

Budapest Jews lived in more than 2,000 marked homes until the city’s ghetto was established in November 1944.

Lantos was arrested by the Nazis at 16 and taken to a forced labor camp outside of the city in early 1944. He escaped twice and in March 1944 returned to Budapest where he lived for six months in a yellow-star house set up by Raoul Wallenberg along with another 70 Jews, including his aunt.

Lantos participated in the anti-Nazi resistance until the end of the war in 1945, when he discovered his mother had perished in the Holocaust.

In 1947, Lantos went to the United States to study at the University of Washington on a Hillel Foundation Scholarship, where he earned a BA and MA in Economics. In 1950, he married Annette Tillemann, a childhood friend from Budapest. Lantos earned a PhD in economics from the University of California, Berkeley in 1953.

Lantos was elected to the House of Representatives in 1980 as a Democrat for the 12th District of California and earned a reputation as a champion of human rights. Lantos served 14 terms in Congress and died in office on February 11, 2008, of esophageal cancer. He is the only Holocaust survivor to serve in Congress.

Lantos’s daughter Katrina Lantos-Swett reminisced about her childhood in a heartfelt video message shown at the ceremony. She recalled her father taking her back to Budapest and

telling her how his former friends and neighbors had turned on him.

Lantos-Swett praised the heroic actions of Raoul Wallenberg in helping to save her father, and emphasized the need to remember the stories of those who rescued Hungarian Jews.

“There should be a renewed commitment not to let history and the legacy be forgotten,” said Lantos-Swett.

Ilan Mor, Israel’s ambassador to Hungary, remembered meeting Lantos while in China.

“He was a good friend of Israel,” said Mor.

M. André Goodfriend, the deputy chief of mission for the United States Embassy, said it’s important that society not forget Lantos’ legacy.

“The story he tells highlights his values: he struggled, was rescued, got back into society and remembered his Budapest roots. He didn’t forget where he came from,” Goodfriend said.

Anna-Mária Bíró, president and CEO of the Tom Lantos Institute said, “When you speak in front of the house, it’s a shocking realization, that so many were hidden. It’s important to remember this dark experience of Hungarian history.”

“I hope this pushes Hungarians to remember and recognize we have to grieve,” she added.

The ceremony was hosted by the [Yellow Star Houses Program](#) of the Open Society Archives, which was established to mark the 70th anniversary of the Holocaust reaching Hungary.