

Raleigh, N.C. - Congressman David Price (D-NC) today offered the following remarks on the campus of Meredith College, as part of the North Carolina Holocaust Commemoration.

"Take care and watch yourselves closely," the writer of Deuteronomy admonishes, "so as neither to forget the things that our eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children..." (4:9).

Once again we gather for the Days of Remembrance. The theme for 2009 designated by the Holocaust Museum – "Never Again: What You Do Matters" – reminds us that authentic remembrance must include an assumption of personal responsibility. As we vow "never again," we must find ways to give that vow force as individuals and as a community.

Few stories illustrate more powerfully the difference an individual can make in creating a more just and humane world than that of Raphael Lemkin. This year marks 50 years since the death of this Polish-Jewish lawyer who watched from the shores of the United States as the Nazis persecuted and murdered members of his family along with millions of other Jews, solely on the basis of their identity. Winston Churchill described this mass murder as a "crime without a name."

Lemkin was a prominent attorney and an expert in international law working in Warsaw when Germany invaded Poland in September 1939. He answered his country's call for able-bodied men to go eastward in the hopes of forming a new defensive line against Germany, but all hope collapsed when the Soviet Union suddenly occupied eastern Poland. Lemkin escaped to Sweden by way of Lithuania. There he completed arrangements to immigrate to the United States, coming to North Carolina. He began work at Duke University in April 1941, shortly before the United States entered World War II.

In 1944, Lemkin became increasingly alarmed as the extent of the destruction of Europe's Jewish communities became apparent. He was determined to name the crime that had killed his family. He coined the word "genocide" as a first step in his relentless personal drive to help prevent its repetition. Lemkin next conceived the Genocide Convention and wrote its first draft. In the shadow of the Holocaust and in no small part due to his tireless efforts, the United Nations approved the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in 1948. Lemkin did not celebrate, but called it "an epitaph on his mother's grave." He continued

PRICE REMARKS AT HOLOCAUST COMMEMORATION

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his efforts to prevent genocide until his death in 1959.*

It is vital to our humanity to face evil and to name it. The Days of Remembrance compel that, and often prompt despairing thoughts about the depravity of which human beings are capable, demonstrated anew in our own day. But that is not and must not be the last word. We know that even in the depths of the Holocaust there were courageous acts of defiance and rescue, and we face the unsettling fact that thousands more could have acted but did not. Remembrance obligates us not only to memorialize those who were killed but also to reflect on what could have been done to save them. And the same applies as the Days of Remembrance open our eyes to the cruelty and hatred and suffering still around us: we must face our responsibility not only for naming evil but for finding ways large and small to overcome it, for affirming the spark of humanity we share with all people over all the earth.

*See "Days of Remembrance" from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum website, www.ushmm.org, April 2009.

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