Speech

Address By

Her Excellency the Honourable Quentin Bryce AC CVO
Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

On the occasion of

Honorary Australian Citizenship for Mr Raoul Wallenberg

Government House, Canberra
6 May 2013

Prime Minister

Leader of the Opposition

Mr Peter Wertheim
Executive Council Australian Jewry

Rabbi Jeremy Lawrence

Members of our Parliament

Your Excellencies

Holocaust survivors and those here today because of the courageous actions of Raoul Wallenberg

Distinguished guests

Nobel Laureate, writer and Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel has said:

“The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.
The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference.
The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference.
And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.”

With these words, Professor Wiesel has reminded the world of its tragic failure to prevent one of the darkest periods in human history, the Holocaust. This was a time when the Nazi war machine, not geared to victory on the battlefield but to the systematic annihilation of their fellow man, destroyed the innocent lives of countless millions of Jewish, Romani, disabled and homosexual people. But within this dark abyss of sadness and despair, there were flickers of light. Acts of bravery and humanity by those who were not indifferent. Acts of righteous and courageous people. No actions shone brighter or reflected better on the qualities of humanity than those of Raoul Wallenberg, a man whose courage in the face of adversity must be remembered for all time.

Born in Sweden in 1912, Wallenberg was an architect, businessman and diplomat who served as Sweden’s special envoy in Budapest, Hungary from July 1944. Confronted with the reality of Hitler’s Final Solution, he set about trying to save as many Jews as possible. Repeatedly putting his own life at risk, he succeeded in issuing ‘protective passports’ and providing shelter
for up to 100,000 people whose lives would otherwise have been lost. He rented buildings which he would label ‘The Swedish Library’ or the ‘Swedish Research Institute’ seeking to extend to them the protection of diplomatic immunity when these buildings were really just providing a safe haven for those he had rescued. He would confront the Hungarian fascists, the Arrow Cross, as they were transporting men and women to the gas chambers, desperately handing out Swedish passports to all those he could find. And his intervention would help thwart Adolf Eichmann’s plan to liquidate Hungary’s General Ghetto, which would itself have killed almost 70,000 Jews just as the Nazi occupation of Budapest was coming to an end. These were the actions of one selfless man who was to be tragically taken by the Red Army after they entered Budapest on 17 January, 1945. He was never to be seen again.

But since that time, much has been done around the world to ensure Wallenberg’s memory is not forgotten. At Israel’s Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial he is honoured as ‘Righteous Among Nations’ and the United States, Canada, Hungary and Israel have each made him an honorary citizen. In Australia Wallenberg has already been honoured by parks and monuments created in his name. I am proud that today our nation goes one step further in making Raoul Wallenberg our first ever honorary citizen. I cannot think of a more appropriate and significant figure to welcome to our Australian family. Wallenberg’s life is an example to us all. His brave, selfless and compassionate actions are proof that just one person can make a real difference. Today may not have occurred but for the efforts of people who understand how important it is to perpetuate Raoul Wallenberg’s memory. None more so than Dr Frank Vajda, who with his mother Maria were rescued by Wallenberg. You have done so much to honour his name. To you we say thank you.

Ladies and Gentleman, today is a special day. A special day for the Swedish community who see us honour one of their own. A special day for survivors of the Holocaust and their families, some of whom are with us today. We say to you that Australia proudly welcomes its newest citizen, and we assure you that the proposition ‘Never Again’ beats firmly in our hearts and minds. It is said in the Old Testament, that one who saves a life is considered to have saved an entire world. Today we honour the heroic deeds of one man who refused to be indifferent in the face of inhumanity and hatred. He ultimately would give his life so that others could have theirs. For this, and for all that Raoul Wallenberg symbolises, we should all be eternally grateful.