

## **Tom Lantos**

Photographed with his wife Annette (Agi)

Wartime Experience: Escaped from Hungarian Labor Camps

I was born in Budapest on February 1, 1928, an only and adored child. When I was nine years old, my bachelor uncle, Bondy took me to Budapest's largest jewelry store to purchase a birthday gift for my mother Anushka's birthday. My demeanor entranced Mary Tillemann, who owned the store with her husband Sebastian. Mary selected a bauble beyond my budget, on the condition that I visit often. When I returned, Mary's daughter, six-year-old Agika, was waiting. We became fast friends, and one day I confessed that though I would someday wed Agika, I would always be in love with her mother.

My friendship with Agi was one of the few things that didn't change when the Fascists seized Hungary. Amid the darkness of hate, an unlikely hero, Swedish Diplomat Raoul Wallenberg emerged as a beacon of hope. In an effort that eventually cost him his life, Wallenberg saved tens of thousands of Jews. Agi and Mary Tillemann used the ingenious "Protective Passports" Wallenberg invented and fled to Switzerland and France respectively. While in a Hungarian labor camp, I endured beatings, malnutrition, and the bittersweet horror of allied air raids. When I escaped to the international ghetto of safehouses, I put my blond hair and high school German to use smuggling papers, medicine and supplies.

At war's end, Agika and I found each other, but Sebastian Tillemann, Anushka Lantos, Uncle Bondy and many other loved ones had been killed. In 1947, I won a scholarship to study in America. I brought Agi to join me, and she completed high school while I earned a BA and MA from the University of Washington. We moved to San Francisco where Agi studied art history while I completed a doctorate at UC Berkeley. For thirty years, I taught economics, and worked as a consultant and television host.

In 1980, I won election to the US House of Representatives. Annette (Agi) and I founded the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, which Annette ran as a volunteer. I was the Ranking Democrat on the House International Relations Committee. In June 2000, Annette and I celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary with our two daughters, their husbands, and our seventeen grandchildren.

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## **Additional Information**

Lantos was born Tamás Péter Lantos (Hungarian: into a Jewish family in Budapest , Hungary the son of Anna, a high school English teacher, and Pál Lantos, a banker. His family was heavily involved in education and included an uncle who was a professor at the University of Budapest and a grandmother who was a high school principal. His life in Hungary would change after the

Third Reich annexing of Austria in 1938, with the Austrian border just 100 miles Budapest. Lantos remembered this period and a newspaper headline he read when he was ten years old, "Hitler Marches into Austria". Even at a young age, he understood the significance of this invasion and sensed that this historic moment would have a tremendous impact on the lives of Hungarian Jews and his family,

Six years later, in March 1944, the German military invaded Hungary and occupied Budapest, its capital. As he was Jewish, Lantos, then 16, was arrested and sent to a camp outside of Budapest. He escaped but was soon caught by the Germans and beaten severely, then returned to the labor camp. He again escaped, this time making his way back to Budapest, 40 miles (64 km) away. There, he hid with an aunt in a safe house set up by Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat.

Lantos joined Wallenberg's network; his fair hair and blue eyes, which to the Nazis were physical signs of Aryanism, enabled him to serve as a courier and deliver food and medicine to Jews living in other safe houses. In January 1945, less than a year later, Russian military forces fought door-to-door battles and liberated Hungary from Nazi occupation. However, Lantos, then 17, returned home only to discover that his mother and other family members had all been killed by the Germans, along with 440,000 other Hungarian Jews, during the preceding 10 months of their occupation. Wallenberg, for his part, was later credited with saving the lives of thousands of other Hungarian Jews.