

Statement of Representative Christopher H. Smith

**Helsinki Commission Hearing
on the
Museum of the History of Polish Jews**

March 13, 2008

Thank you Mr. Chairman, and thank you to our guests who have come here today to bear witness to this important project.

At the beginning of World War II, Poland had the largest Jewish population in Europe. According to some estimates, eighty percent of world Jewry has family ties to this prewar community. Tragically, as a result of the Holocaust, a once thriving community was virtually destroyed.

In 1996, a group of people developed the idea for a museum dedicated to the culture, art, and history of Poland's Jews. As one of the museum's founders told me, "We often learn how Jews died, but rarely how they lived." The Museum of the History of Polish Jews will change this, by not only commemorating the three million Polish Jews who died during the Holocaust and World War II, but also celebrating the rich 1,000 years of Polish Jewish life. The interactive museum will allow visitors to view the long history of Jews in Poland in context, examining their culture, their accomplishments, and the challenges they faced.

It was on a trip to Warsaw several years ago that I met with museum advocates and this vision of a dynamic institution focused on the lives and

contributions of Poland's Jews first caught my attention. I have been following and supporting the development of the museum ever since.

I look forward to hearing more today about the museum's facilities: its multimedia installations and an archive that I understand contains over 60,000 computer files of images collected from around the world. The museum has assembled a team of scholars, historians and museum experts from Poland, Israel and the United States to develop the collections.

The museum will have a 5,400 square-foot, state-of-the-art education center for visitors. Multimedia displays and terminals will share the museum's electronic holdings with visitors, who will also have access to a reading room and library.

This public outreach element is an important part of the museum. Today we know that anti-Semitism is a dangerous and growing force -- in Europe and elsewhere in the world. A better understanding of the great contributions that Polish Jews have made to their communities, in addition to an examination of the Holocaust, will help fight off the ignorance and lies that bring about this bigotry.

There is no better time for a living monument to stand against anti-Semitism than now, and no better place than a country in the heart of Europe -- the lands the Nazis invaded to carry out their murderous plans, killing Jews from a dozen countries, along with Polish Catholics, Roma, and other "undesirables".

The Government of Poland and City of Warsaw have combined to designate some 38 million dollars for the museum, in addition to a parcel of land in the heart of what was once the Warsaw Jewish Quarter. A number of private corporations and individuals from the United States, France, Germany, Israel, Poland, and other European countries have also agreed to contribute. In November, the government of Germany signed an agreement to donate 7.6 million dollars to the effort. All these donors want to do whatever they can to preserve the memory of these communities – and combat anti-Semitism.

In a similar way I felt it would be appropriate for the United States government to do what it could to make this vision a reality, so I introduced HR 3320, which authorizes 5 million dollars for support of the museum. I'm happy to report that 17 members of congress co-sponsored the resolution, including my good friend Chairman Hastings, and the former Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Holocaust survivor Tom Lantos, who sadly did not live to see the museum completed. This bill was just one of many examples of bi-partisan cooperation that I enjoyed with Tom on important human rights issues.

Our bill passed by a resounding margin in the House (407-13) on November 14, and is now being considered in the Senate. I wish to thank my friend Senator Cardin, for his work in guiding this bill through his chamber.

Our contribution of 5 million dollars will be more than just a symbol of American commitment to religious freedom and the fight against anti-

Semitism, although that is important. It will be more than a reminder of the historical ties that bind descendants of Polish Jews in the United States to their roots, although that, too, is a worthy goal. This contribution will help take another step in bringing this project to completion.

I salute all those, including many of our guests here today, who are devoting themselves to the completion of the museum. I, for one, look forward to visiting it when it is completed, and supporting what has been called a “restitution of memory”.