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120 PEOPLE BECOME U.S. CITIZENS IN SPECIAL NATURALIZATION CEREMONY AT ILLINOIS HOLOCAUST MUSEUM

Universality of stories of Holocaust survivors who found safe haven in the United States after WWII, stories of new U.S. citizens in search of a better life highlighted as new citizens take Oath of Allegiance

SKOKIE – Today, 120 immigrants took the *Oath of Allegiance* and became United States citizens during a special naturalization ceremony of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services at the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center. The new citizens are residents of Skokie, Chicago and the surrounding suburbs and come to the U.S. from more than 30 different countries around the globe, including Mexico (23%), India (15%) and Poland (8%) with the highest representation. Other countries represented at the ceremony were Russia, Ukraine, China, Korea, Ecuador, Egypt, Columbia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and the Philippines.

Hosted by the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center, in cooperation with the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS Chicago), the ceremony highlighted the universality of the stories of Holocaust survivors who found safe haven in the United States after WWII and the stories of new U.S. citizens also in search of a better life and the opportunities the United States has to offer.

“We are very grateful to the Illinois Holocaust Museum for opening their doors to us on such a special occasion,” said Ruth A. Dorochoff, Chicago District Director for United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) who served as master of ceremonies at the event. “Today’s newest United States citizens hail from so many different countries and backgrounds, and they bring with them their own stories of struggles and triumphs. We are privileged to recognize their journeys to this country, and celebrate their new citizenship in this extraordinary setting.”

“Immigration and naturalization in the United States are inextricably linked to the history of the Holocaust, as well as that of other genocides and atrocities across the globe,” said Richard S. Hirschhaut, executive director, Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center. “Throughout our history, asylum seekers have looked to the United States as a place of freedom, safety and economic opportunity. We are honored to be a part of this important day and welcome America’s newest citizens.”

Following WWII, more than 80,000 Holocaust survivors immigrated to the United States. Looking to resume their interrupted lives, thousands traveled to Chicago with little money and family to begin the process of starting over in a new country. Survivors were determined and ambitious to make up for lost time and, for some, the United States was a land of dreams that could overtake the nightmares they had experienced in Europe and allow them to continue their education, pursue a career and begin a family. The Museum’s Karkomi Permanent Exhibition highlights the survivors’ triumphs of becoming Americans and rebuilding their lives as the United States became their new home. In honor of their journey to start anew and realize the American dream, the Museum features a wall of U.S. Certificates of Naturalization that were issued to Holocaust survivors who made their new homes in Chicago.

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A child of Holocaust survivors himself, The Honorable Morton Denlow, U.S. magistrate judge, U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, presided over the naturalization ceremony. Samuel R. Harris, Museum board president and a Holocaust survivor from Poland, who became a U.S. citizen on May 5, 1953, offered the keynote address. And Skokie Post 328 - Jewish War Veterans of the U.S.A posted the colors for the ceremony. Cook County Clerk David Orr was also in attendance to personally conduct voter registration for the new citizens.

“For almost 100 years, HIAS Chicago has helped persons such as yourselves to become United States citizens, including more than 30,000 refugees and immigrants in the past 15 years and one here today,” said David Zverow, director, HIAS Chicago, to the new citizens. “Where our ancestors brought their energy and inspiration to this land, you do the same today. In fact, right here, you have the opportunity to sign up to participate in one of the most important duties of U.S. citizenship—the right to help decide who will govern you, who passes the laws that affect you in many ways, and when we go to war. There is no more important act you can take than registering to vote.”

After the ceremony, new citizens were given the opportunity to tour the Museum with their family and friends, viewing exhibits highlighting the stories and artifacts of Holocaust survivors who fled Europe to start new lives in the United States during and after WWII.

In Fiscal Year 2008, USCIS naturalized over 1 million new citizens nationwide. For additional information about USCIS, please visit www.uscis.gov.

Over the years, hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to leave their countries of origin seeking refuge from desperate conditions. During these difficult times, people have looked to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) Chicago to be helped one by one, family by family. Since 1911, HIAS Chicago has been a leader in the community, assisting people through the immigration process. Through its caring, knowledgeable staff and proud partnership with Jewish Child & Family Services, HIAS Chicago helps Jewish people and others in need seek shelter in America and move forward on the road to citizenship.

Likely the last international institution of its kind built with the active participation of Holocaust survivors, the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center is the largest facility in the Midwest dedicated to preserving the memories of those lost in the Holocaust and to teaching current generations to fight hatred, indifference and genocide in today’s world. To learn more, visit www.ilholocaustmuseum.org.

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