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Remembering Gay Victims of the Holocaust

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Mr. Speaker, on the occasion of the formal dedication of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, I rise to pay tribute to those victims of the Nazi terror who were persecuted because of their sexual orientation.

In the decades before Adolf Hitler's rise to power, Germany was home to the world's first homosexual rights movement. The Nazis responded with a vicious campaign against "homosexual degeneracy" during the 1930s. Some 50,000 to 63,000 men were convicted of homosexual offenses in Nazi courts from 1933 to 1944; 10,000 to 12,000 homosexuals—most of them men—were imprisoned in the concentration camps. They were often singled out for the harshest treatment, and more than half of them died.

Gay prisoners in the camps wore uniforms that bore a pink triangle—an insignia that has since been adopted as a symbol of the modern lesbian and gay rights movement.

According to materials compiled by the Holocaust Memorial, gay survivors were subjected to continued persecution after the collapse of the Nazi regime. The Allied Military Government of Germany refused to release those who had been imprisoned for homosexuality, and the Nazi law criminalizing homosexuality remained in effect until 1969.

For too long, the Nazi victimization of gay people has remained a secret little known and seldom mentioned. The curators of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum have taken an important step in redressing this neglect by including among the displays a poignant collection of artifacts documenting the persecution of homosexuals.

Visitors to the museum are issued an identity card that tells the story of a person of the visitor's age and gender who lived during the Holocaust. During my visit last Monday evening with some of my congressional colleagues, I received a card describing the life of Willem Arondeus, born in Amsterdam, Netherlands, in 1895. This is his story:

One of seven children, Willem grew up in Amsterdam where his parents were theater costume designers. When Willem was 18, he fought with his parents about his homosexuality. He left home and severed contact with his family. He began writing and painting, and in the 1920's was commissioned to do a mural for the Rotterdam town hall. In 1932 he moved to the countryside near Apeldoorn.

1933-39: When he was 38, he met Jan, the son of a greengrocer, and they lived together for the next seven years. As a struggling painter, Willem was forced to go on welfare. In 1938 Willem began writing the biography of the Dutch painter Matthijs Maris, and after the book was published, Willem's financial situation improved.

1940-44: The Germans invaded the Netherlands in May 1940. Soon after the occupation, Willem joined the resistance. His unit's main task was to falsify identity papers for Dutch Jews. On March 27, 1943, Willem's unit attacked the registry building and set it on fire. They were attempting to destroy records against which false identity papers could be checked. Thousands of files were destroyed. Five days later the unit was betrayed and arrested. That July, Willem and 11 others were executed.

Before his execution, Willem asked his lawyer to testify after the war that "homosexuals are not cowards." In 1945 Willem was posthumously awarded a medal by the Dutch government.

There is a special poignancy in our remembrance of gay Holocaust victims like Willem Arondeus. Unlike those who could marry and have children, many gay people perished with no one but us to remember them. We are their family, and we will never forget them.

Mr. Speaker, I am struck by the remarkable fact that the dedication of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum coincides with what will be one of the largest civil rights demonstrations in U.S. history. The march on Washington for lesbian and gay civil rights, scheduled for Sunday, April 25, 1993, is expected to draw hundreds of thousands from throughout the United States. These people are coming to Washington to bear witness to the continuing discrimination visited upon lesbian, gay and bisexual Americans. Like Willem Arondeus, these American are murdered, assaulted, and denied basic civil rights simply because of who they are. Those who have the moral and physical courage of Arondeus are told they are unfit to serve their country.

This situation represents a tragic failure of our society to learn the lessons of history. We must never forget, nor allow the world to forget, that the degradation and dehumanization of any member of the human family endangers the life and liberty of us all.