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SENATOR STABENOW ON THE DEATH OF PETER VLČKO

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Mr. President, I note with sadness the passing of Peter Vlčko, a hero for all of humanity. When immense love and bravery coalesce in one person, as they did in Mr. Vlčko, amazing things are bound to happen.

And they did.

Mr. Vlčko's love for humankind manifested itself in his brave fight against evils such as totalitarianism, fascism, and anti-Semitism. During the dark days of World War II, at huge and constant risk to his own life, he fought against the pro-German Slovak government and rescued over twenty Jews from deportation and death by the Nazis.

His heroic efforts have not gone unnoticed. Among other awards and recognitions, in 1981, Mr. Vlčko received the Silver Medal for Righteous Gentiles from Israel. With descendants of the Jews he saved looking on, he stood witness as a tree was planted in his honor at the top of a hill in Jerusalem. His name has also been forever memorialized in a large granite relief in the *Garden of the Righteous* at the Holocaust Memorial center in West Bloomfield.

Born in a Slovak village in 1912, Mr. Vlčko volunteered for military service immediately upon completion of his secondary education. He rose quickly through the ranks until the invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia by the German military in 1939 forced him to be disarmed and reassigned to a war college in Bratislava. He took a break from his studies to serve a tour of duty on the Russian front, but his service was cut short when he sustained shrapnel wounds and an injury to his left leg from the heavy mortar fire. Returning to his studies, he met his future wife, Georgina Reichsfeld.

The strict anti-Semitic laws could not deter his love for Georgina, who was of Jewish ancestry. At a risk to Mr. Vlčko's life, the two entered into wedlock.

As the danger to his young bride and her family mounted, he hid them until he could obtain false identification papers. His perilous efforts did not stop with his bride's family. He continued on, obtaining false papers for twenty other Jews, which identified them as "essential personnel," preventing certain deportation and death.

Summoning more courage still, Mr. Vlčko offered his assistance to an attempt to overthrow the Nazi-friendly regime in Slovakia. Through a variety of disguises, such as a shoemaker and a woman, Mr. Vlčko managed to evade German forces and twice to escape capture. Forced into hiding for the remainder of the war, he was separated from his family for a year when he escaped into Bavaria.

Once reunited, Mr. Vlčko and his family immigrated to the United States, where they began a new life in Michigan. After attending a community college, he went to work for Ford Motor Company.

His new surroundings, however, could not make him forget his violent past. Through his narrative, he tried to educate people on the horrors of fascism and anti-Semitism. To do so, he both lectured throughout the United States and Canada and published an 860-page autobiography. People needed to know, and thanks to him, we do.

In 1991, Mr. Vlčko was granted honorary Israeli citizenship, and both he and his wife regained their Czechoslovakia citizenship, which was taken from them when they fled Czechoslovakia after the Communists seized power in the 1948 coup. In fact, he had been living under a death sentence issued by the Czech government until 1989. He has been honored by the Czech President and Czech Minister of Defense and has often been the guest of honor of the Czech and Slovak ambassadors to the United States.

Mr. Vlčko is survived by his wife, Georgina, and their four children. Despite what severe images a background as a soldier might evoke, his wife affectionately describes the full picture: "He loved his family very much and worked his whole life to keep them safe."

Mr. Vlčko left behind more than a family, however; he left behind a legacy of love and hope embodied in the children of the Jews he saved and an outstanding example of courage and decency in the face of darkness and tyranny.

It is that legacy that I am sure will surround him as he rests in peace.