



"This tragedy should never happen again."

Memory CATCHER

SAM HARRIS

// ILLINOIS HOLOCAUST MUSEUM & EDUCATION CENTER

BASHERT, A YIDDISH word that means "fated" or "destined," comes up often in conversation with Sam Harris. "It was *bashert*," he says, talking about the \$45-million Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center that, without Harris, would not exist today. Many things about the project suggest *bashert*: the idea for the museum, which was galvanized by a Holocaust survivors' dinner Harris attended in New York in 1999; the museum's location in Skokie, a wooded lot that became available only after everyone had given up all hope of securing it; and the museum's collection, 11,000 evocative objects, donated by Midwest Holocaust survivors, that tell a story no one should ever forget.

One of those artifacts is a cracked brown belt that once cinched a tiny waist. Other than the brutal memories, it is all that remains of the six years Harris spent in Deblin and Czestochowa, two Nazi concentration camps in his native Poland. Under the protection of an older sister, Harris (born Szlamek Rzeznik) was one of the few Jewish children to survive the camps; today, at 74, he is one of the youngest Holocaust survivors. "What happened to us is the worst thing to ever happen to mankind," says Harris, who lost his parents and four siblings in the Holocaust. "If the war had lasted six more months, I wouldn't be here. This tragedy should never happen again."

Liberated when he was nine, Harris came to the United States in 1948. He still recalls how he felt seeing the Statue of Liberty. "I stared at it with great interest," he wrote in a 1951 essay. "When I realized what it symbolized . . . my eyes brightened with freedom and my heart beat like the drums of peace." Adopted by a family in Northbrook, Harris joined the Boy Scouts, played sports, and was elected senior class president at New Trier High School. None of his classmates knew Szlamek, who had witnessed the worst of humanity: beatings, murder, forced starvation. They only knew Sam. "All I wanted was to be an American boy," he explains. "I wanted to move on with my life."

Harris had settled into a career as an insurance executive when, in 1976, a Northwestern University professor named Arthur Butz published *The Hoax of the 20th Century*, which asserted that the Holocaust had never happened. "I had to speak in return," says

Harris, who began telling his story, reluctantly at first, in temples and in front of school groups. He helped lobby for legislation that mandated Holocaust education in schools, and he wrote a children's book, *Sammy: Child Survivor of the Holocaust*. He even volunteered at a small Holocaust museum that had opened in Skokie after neo-Nazis threatened to march there in the late 1970s. "But it wasn't enough to have a little museum," Harris says. "We needed a world-class museum."

To make that larger museum a reality, Harris recruited other volunteers and donors, chief among them the local businessman J. B. Pritzker. "This museum, more than any other, was built by Holocaust survivors," says Pritzker, who became chairman of the capital campaign. "The thing that motivated me throughout was that this was their project—we were building it for them and for their mission." Construction was under way by 2006, and last April, the 65,000-square-foot Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center—designed by Stanley Tigerman—opened in a dazzling ceremony that attracted Bill Clinton and Elie Wiesel.

Today, when Harris walks around the museum, everyone greets him by name. Each "Hi, Sam" receives a large grin in return, and Harris says one of his greatest pleasures is watching as the many Midwest survivors' stories are passed on. Standing inside the centerpiece of the museum, a German cattle car of the kind that was used to transport Jews, he is asked how he still has faith in his fellow man after all that he has seen. He responds with the tenacity of a survivor: "Good will prevail in the long run."

—CASSIE WALKER