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Repairing the World: Sam Fried, Holocaust Survivor

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Forward to Repairing the World: Sam Fried, Holocaust Survivor
Rotary Speech by Jim Fried, 28 August 2013

Sam Fried does not need an introduction in Omaha. His vigor, generosity, and commitment to humanity are as apparent to all who meet him as they are in this moving and eloquent speech by his son, Jim. From perhaps the most violent social cataclysm of our time, Sam made his way to America's heartland because, as he tells it, from there he would be halfway to everywhere. It is to all our great benefit that he never decided to leave.

Sam's Holocaust is both unique and typical in its own way. The Nazi plan to exterminate the Jews of Europe destroyed his life and family as it did for most survivors. Yet, even as his family was being taken from him, Sam made the choice to live. And as his son demonstrates, he *has* lived. Sam Fried chose, against all the evidence, to remain optimistic and to have faith in humanity. Upon hearing of the increasingly disturbing trend of Holocaust denial as well a general ignorance among Americans, Sam and his wife, Frances, decided to do act, rather than to wring their hands. Thanks to their collective efforts, the history of the Holocaust and other genocides is being brought to thousands of people. It is through their generosity that the position I now hold as I write this exists.

In this speech to the Rotary of Omaha, Jim Fried speaks of *Tikun Olam* (Repairing the World). I cannot think of a better way to summarize Sam and Frances' efforts to spread the light of knowledge and a message of hope to their community.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "W. Wade Beorn". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "W" and a long, sweeping underline.

Dr. Waitman Wade Beorn
Louis and Frances Blumkin Professor of History and
Assistant Professor of History
University of Nebraska-Omaha

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Ladies and Gentlemen, Honored Friends and Family,
I am delighted to join you today in honoring Frances and Sam Fried, whose achievements together are extraordinary and whose lives are role models for all of us.

I am the first generation beyond the Holocaust, beyond the eyewitnesses who survived the Nazi death camps. Both my Father, Sam, and my beloved Mother, Magda, survived the most horrifying and efficient mass murder system ever devised. I was born in Omaha. My parents came here from New York a few years after the war as refugees, as survivors; barely teenagers when they lost everything in an instant at the gates of hell in Auschwitz. Orphaned, starved, and tortured, my father had escaped and my mother was liberated. No money, no English, no support group to take them through the Post

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Traumatic Stress Disorder they surely endured. They had a powerful will to live and a chance at a new life in a new world in Omaha. Soon they had me and my two siblings, Susan and Ed, as they set about blazing a trail to a better future through the ashes of their past.

One of my most vivid childhood recollections is of my parents sharing their excitement as they studied for the U.S. citizenship exam. I think I was only 5 when I started hearing them discuss our amazing system of government, with all its checks and balances. They savored reading the Bill of Rights aloud, like it was poetry. More than anything, my parents wanted to be Americans, and they wanted their family to have an American way of life.

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My folks spoke 5 foreign languages and they didn't teach me one of them. Later in life, I asked why and they said it was because they thought it was more important for me to teach them English than the reverse. My father is still fond of saying he never had an accent until he came to this country. So I was raised in a home where, whenever I was not to understand the adult conversation, a foreign language was used, and it worked! No one ever spoke TO me in a foreign tongue, and, therefore, I didn't learn a syllable. I knew I wasn't supposed to be listening! The two exceptions are my mother taught me to say "I love you Mommy" in Hungarian and my dad taught me how to curse like a sailor. Long before I knew the meaning of the words, he told me never to repeat what I was saying outside the house. But he used to chuckle every time I would burst out with what he'd taught me. Dad, can I speak those choice phrases now?

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Anyone interested in learning how to swear in Hungarian can see me after the program, but I can't teach you anything else... By the way, my brother is here and he might be willing to teach you some interesting things to say as well.

My parents didn't discuss the Holocaust much. They wanted to protect us. So, I didn't yet really understand the true meaning of the tattooed ID's on their forearms, marking the moment when their captors turned them from humans into numbered objects.

I do remember friends, even from my early childhood, talking about their extended families, lots of cousins, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and wondering to myself why I had so few or in some cases, none.

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When I was 12, at religious summer camp, I attended a presentation where, for the first time I saw photos of Auschwitz taken by GI liberators. One picture showed a heap of the naked dead, emaciated skeletons each covered in a thin layer of skin, laying helter-skelter like broken dolls, piled so high I would have had to climb to get to the top. Here, I suddenly realized, were the cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents I had been missing. That image was burned into my memory. From that day, I desperately wanted to understand what really happened in the Holocaust. I knew my parents had many stories the world and I needed to hear, but I also knew that even to broach the subject with them I ran the risk of awakening horrifying nightmares they were trying so hard to forget. So, out of love and respect, I mostly kept my silence. My parents seemed larger than life to me, and life didn't seem very fair. How had

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they survived? What had they experienced? Where did they find the strength to go on?

I began to ask who did this and why? Were these uncultured savages, without a moral context, without a legal framework? Who would have built such a killing machine, intended for only one purpose, the mass extermination of millions, yes millions of innocent people?

As I learned the answers, my faith in humanity was shaken to its core.

The truth was the nation that perpetrated these atrocities was one of the most advanced cultures ever to exist, spawning the likes of Beethoven, Gutenberg, and Einstein; some of the greatest geniuses in all of human history.

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And, who carried out the heinous crimes I now came to know? Were they highly trained military professionals? No, mostly these were ordinary soldiers, whose sense of reality had been so transformed by propaganda and a blind sense of duty that they lost complete touch with the most obvious human values; their minds twisted to the point that they could commit what were clearly unthinkable crimes against humanity; their obedience to the state so compartmentalized that, after a long day of gassing babies, children, mothers, and fathers, they could go home to their own families and hold them lovingly in their arms, as though they had just finished a shift making tractors in a factory.

And, who were the people they slaughtered? Were they combatants, terrorists, criminals?

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The truth was that the victims, exterminated en masse, were not at war, they weren't even activists. There was no due process accusing them of any crime. These millions of dead, among them my never to be known kin, were indistinguishable from the rest of Europe's citizenry, except for their religious beliefs and their genealogy. They were the shopkeeper next door, the butcher down the street, the tailor around the corner, the lawyer, the doctor, the laborer, and the farmer, living in peaceful coexistence with others in their communities for generations. They perished for no reason, but for the fanatical raving of a madman against them, a state run propaganda machine designed to hide the truth, and the consent of the uninvolved.

For a time I was consumed trying to understand what makes us

destroy the truly innocent and the best of who we are? I found
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no easy answers. I learned that the Holocaust, unprecedented in its scale, and horror, stands alone in history. But I also learned that genocide and terror are an integral part of humanity's story, part of a never ending dark impulse against which we must always be on guard.

So, here in Omaha, safe, our little family went forward, following the beacon of America, building a life, and making a world.

Then, in the 1970's, a number of truly misled fanatics, who came to be known as Holocaust Deniers came on the scene. They claimed that the volumes of eyewitness testimony, and the visual record conclusively establishing the facts of the Holocaust, were insufficient proof that these events ever took place!

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My parents were outraged and called to action. My father said, "Here I am an eyewitness to these events! I'm still alive and someone is already claiming it didn't happen!" Suddenly the events of the Holocaust were in my family's life, front and center. Day after day, night after night, my parents made themselves available to speak at schools, churches, and civic organization, literally anyplace and to anyone who was interested in hearing personal testimony my parents could hardly bear to tell.

It was amazing to me, this whole phenomenon of giving testimony, of bearing witness, and it took tremendous courage and strength from my parents.

Then, this phase of life in my family came to a halt, just as

quickly as it had begun. My parents began to plummet into the
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past. At night they were reliving the same nightmares they endured decades earlier and the fabric of the present wasn't strong enough, even with all its goodness, to hold them in place. They were exhausted, emotionally spent. They stopped speaking so, once again, they could survive.

In 1985, we lost my mother. She was young by today's standards, younger than I am today.

This closed a chapter in my life highlighted by revelation for me and eyewitness testimony for my parents. I didn't know it at the time, but it ended so another could begin.

Time passed, and as the wound of our loss began to close, another miracle happened. My father met Frances. They were so good for each other, right from the start.

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Little did I know then, that together, Frances and Sam would fulfill a dream to start a new phase in my family's life, a dream to build a bridge from the past into the future, a bridge of teaching and knowledge, of understanding and enlightened behavior for future generations to cross into a brighter tomorrow. And the construction project for this bridge would span our community and take many years to complete.

On many occasions, I have heard my father say that the Holocaust could not have happened without 4 types of people: Perpetrators, Victims, Collaborators, and Bystanders. Dad is quick to challenge us with the question, "Could the Holocaust have happened if Bystanders had acted? The role of bystanders is at the heart of understanding not only the Holocaust, but every act of genocide, every wave of terrorism. I

believe that crimes against humanity are never spontaneous.

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They are always the result of complex changes: Economic pressures, breakdowns in the political process, corruption of moral values, state propaganda and loss of liberty, followed by scapegoating, and ultimately atrocities. In some combination, these forces always precede every nightmare which exposes the worst we can be.

And, at every step along the path, atrocities require bystanders. Atrocities require people not to care, for a long time and on many levels. Evil doesn't occur spontaneously, and it rarely ends on its own. Evil ends because another set of players ascend the stage, an opposing force. Evil is eradicated by heroes.

So, what makes a hero? We usually think of heroism as a BIG act of courage: The fireman overcoming his fear to run into a

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burning building in case someone is still inside. But, do heroic acts require unusual strength and courage? No. A hero is simply a person who understands the importance of taking action whenever one's duty as a human being calls. Heroism is about rescuing the truth from a lie and freedom from oppression. It's about using knowledge to overcome ignorance. And heroism is a learned behavior. Heroes are raised in heroic families, in heroic communities. The drive to take heroic action comes from understanding what is just, what is humane. Heroism requires having a moral compass pointing to good judgment. It needs an ethical battery to power the right behavior at the right time. Heroes recruit bystanders by their example. This is the biggest lesson I've learned.

Today we honor two exceptional people who well understand that lesson. Together, when they see a need, Frances and Sam Fried share a powerful drive to act, and to create a lasting contribution to the betterment of the world for generations to come. This is heroism. Without being asked, they know the right thing to do, and they do it.

They understand that the best way to predict the future is to create it. Their accomplishments are myriad, from the interactive educational memorial at Wyuka, our States' largest cemetery in Lincoln, to sponsoring children's visits to the National Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C.

But, the crown jewel of their legacy is their educational foundation, which subsidizes higher learning courses in genocide and terrorism all over our great state. And, the

brightest facet of that crown jewel is the Louis and Frances Blumkin Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies position at UNO, created by the Blumkin family and the Sam and Frances Fried Holocaust and Genocide Education Fund. Dr. Waitman Wade Beorn, is the first scholar to hold the position. Dr. Beorn is widely recognized as a leading authority on Holocaust and Genocide Studies. We're very fortunate to have him in Omaha under the auspices of this program.

There is a saying in Judaism that the highest calling in life is Tikun Olam, which means, "Repairing the world". Sam and Frances, you have answered that call. You have devoted yourselves to Tikun Olam, "Repairing the world." Your good works and your role model will help ensure a better world for future generations. I love you both. I am very proud to be part

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of your family. You are truly heroes. God bless you both and
God bless America. Thank you.