

2017 Sachem Award – Eva Mozes Kor
Governor Eric J. Holcomb
April 13, 2017

Remarks as prepared for delivery

Thank you, Dr. Madison.

Good morning. I'm delighted to be with all of you.

As Indiana's governor, I have the privilege of recognizing some amazing and accomplished people.

But today's honoree is in a category all by herself.

A lot of people have heard of the Sagamore of the Wabash, but I'm guessing that fewer know about the Sachem, so let me take a moment and explain the difference.

In 1945, Governor Ralph Gates created the Sagamore of the Wabash as our state's highest recognition for distinguished Hoosiers.

In 1970, Governor Edgar Whitcomb brought together a group of civic leaders to nominate potential recipients for the Sagamore.

He called the group the Sachems – "Sachem" being the Algonquin term for "village leaders," meant to suggest wisdom, judgment and grace.

While the bar was high for Sagamores, Governor Whitcomb proposed an even higher honor called the Sachem.

The idea was to recognize those rare individuals who combined a lifetime of accomplishment with moral virtue that has brought credit and honor to Indiana.

Achievement alone – without exemplary virtue – would not qualify someone for the Sachem.

While it was a terrific idea, after Governor Whitcomb left office the award wasn't pursued, until Governor Mitch Daniels revived it in 2005.

Since then, only 11 Sachems have been appointed, including legendary college basketball coach and teacher John Wooden, and former Notre Dame President Reverend Theodore Hesburgh.

I am honored – and humbled – to present my first Sachem as Governor – and only the 12th in Indiana history – to Eva Mozes Kor.

Most of you here know Eva’s heroic story of surviving Auschwitz, so I am not going to recount it.

Instead, I want to share a letter with you. It’s from a middle-aged son to his father – a veteran who fought in World War II.

In 2009, the veteran had visited Arlington Cemetery and told his son he felt guilty that he had survived the war when so many of his comrades had not.

The son wrote him a letter back. Here’s part of it: *“If you think that all those men whose graves you visited deserved to be called heroes any more than you do, I think you are wrong. Now I’ll tell you why.*

“In February of 2008 I attended a speech given by Eva Kor, a survivor of Auschwitz Concentration Camp. She told the audience of high school students that when she got off the train after traveling for four days like cattle, she was separated from her mother and father and older sisters. She never saw them again. She and her twin sister became experiments for Dr. Mengele’s campaign to create a perfect German race.

“When she saw human bodies in the hospital, she established one goal in her life: to stay alive.”

The letter continues with Eva’s survival and her description of the liberation of Auschwitz.

Then the son writes: *“If you, Dad, and millions of others just like you had not gone to war, she would not have been standing there addressing a group of young people who were more than amazed at her story. If Hitler had won the war, she would have been burned in an incinerator like we burn our grass clippings.”*

This is just one small example of the power of Eva’s story to inspire – whether high school students, a conflicted veteran of the war, or all of us in this audience and beyond.

But if Eva’s story ended with her survival – as powerful as it is – I’m not sure that she would be receiving this honor today.

It’s what happened after Auschwitz that makes her story all the more remarkable.

Eva lived with her pain for a long time. She says, *“I was a really good victim and proud to be a victim. I hated everybody.”*

But when her twin sister Miriam died in 1993, Eva was determined to transform her horror and pain into something positive.

Just as she had once pledged to stay alive, now she pledged to devote her life to ensuring that the Holocaust would never happen again.

In 1995, she founded the CANDLES Holocaust Museum in Terre Haute, Indiana, to share the lessons from her experiences.

She even found it in herself to meet with a former Nazi doctor, Hans Munch. She asked him if he would join her at Auschwitz to testify that the gas chambers were real. Dr. Munch agreed, which was no small thing – as it served as a powerful rebuke to Holocaust deniers everywhere.

Because of the importance of this act, Eva wanted to give him a gift. But she struggled over what the gift should be.

Then she had a revelation. She would write him a letter of forgiveness. It took her four months to write.

And while she knew it would be a meaningful gift for him, she also realized it would be a life-changing gift for herself.

By being able to forgive, she said: *“I felt all the pain and anger I carried for 50 years was lifted from my shoulders. I was no longer a victim of Auschwitz, nor was I a prisoner of my tragic past.”*

What began as a single act of forgiveness has grown into a philosophy with the power to transform each one of us, and our world: Forgive your worst enemy; forgive everyone who has hurt you.

Forgiveness is an act of self-healing, self-liberation and self-empowerment; it will heal your soul and it will set you free.

These profound ideas speak to us today. We’re reminded every day that acts of hatred and violence are not confined to the distant past.

In fact, in 2003, the CANDLES Museum was firebombed by an arsonist and burned to the ground.

When asked by reporters how she felt, Eva responded with her characteristic humor and stoicism: *“I’ve had better days. But I’ve also had worse days.”*

Then, with the help of the community, she rebuilt the museum and reopened it in 2005.

In the exhibit on the firebombing you will find the words, *“Light prevails over darkness, and love will always conquer hate.”*

Like many of you, I’ve had the privilege of hearing Eva speak, and have found her life, her words, and her example truly transformative.

She is the living embodiment of true compassion. Her life proves there are no bounds on forgiveness and human decency.

Eva shows what our response should be to acts of bigotry and hatred through her daily mission to educate people and spread messages of peace, respect and civility.

It is my deep honor to present my first Sachem award to an exemplar of both achievement and virtue: Eva Mozes Kor.

Governor’s remarks continue after Eva Kor receives Sachem Award and speaks:

Thank you, Eva. You truly embody what the Sachem is all about, a life of exemplary achievement and exemplary virtue.

We are all better for your example, your courage and your inspiration.

On the wall just inside the CANDLES Holocaust Museum, you will see the words of Irish author and statesman Edmund Burke: *“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”*

Eva, you remind us that each of us has a responsibility – an obligation – not only to be good, but also to oppose hatred and bigotry and to fight for a world of peace, respect and civility every day in all that we do.

Your example lights a path to a better world. For that, we offer our deepest thanks.

And now, I invite all of you to join us for the reception.

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