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Zekelman family, company make largest gift ever to Holocaust Memorial Center

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By Sherri Welch



Holocaust Memorial Center

One of the exhibits inside the Holocaust Memorial Center is a WWII-era boxcar used by the Nazis at the time to transport Jews and other “undesirables” to concentration camps.

A \$15 million gift to the Holocaust Memorial Center from the family of its board treasurer, Alan Zekelman, and its company, Zekelman Industries, will help ensure the center can continue its efforts to prevent another Holocaust well into the future.

The donation is the single largest ever made to the center and the lead gift in a \$100 million comprehensive campaign launched this year. It will support the center's goal to raise a \$65 million board-designated endowment.

The rest of the campaign will fund the center's operation over the next five years, update its core exhibit to include personal stories from Holocaust survivors and expand virtual education opportunities.

Alan Zekelman, a Bloomfield Hills resident and past board president of the Holocaust Memorial Center, said the institution is significant to his family.

"We have a Holocaust history. My late father's parents, brothers and sisters were all killed in the Holocaust," he said. "That's a big motivator for our involvement."

Zekelman Industries, based in Chicago, is a steel pipe and tube manufacturer with factories in Plymouth, several other states and Canada. Alan Zekelman serves as its director.

Other members of the family — including CEO Barry Zekelman and Director Clayton Zekelman, who is also president of MNSi Telecom — are longtime supporters of the Holocaust Memorial Center, both individually and through their company.

The most recent donation follows a \$10 million commitment made by the family in 2006-07 to help pay down debt tied to the initial construction of the center and led the organization to rename its Farmington Hills site as the Holocaust Memorial Center Zekelman Family Campus.

The center's purpose is not just to memorialize, Zekelman said. It's also to educate through school tours and visits from the general public about the most studied genocide in human history.

"By having students exposed to it.. they can become much better at seeing injustice in the world," Zekelman said.

"Hate is one of the flaws for human beings because we're prone to it," but we need to be able to control it, he said. "One way (to do that) is to be aware of what other humans have done."

The family is also hoping the gift will inspire others to give, he said.

Beyond the board-designated endowment, the campaign will provide \$19 million in operating funds for the next five years, Rabbi Eli Mayerfeld, CEO of the center, said.

The campaign will also support an expansion of virtual learning opportunities, special exhibits at the center and traveling exhibits that will go around the state, along with updates to the center's core exhibit in 2023.

As part of the updates to the core exhibit, the center will incorporate personal stories from Holocaust survivors, Mayerfeld said.

"In addition to facts and figures, we want people to see survivors who are not different from them: parents, friends, neighbors."

When the museum was designed 20 years ago, there were many Holocaust survivors living in Michigan, he said. "Unfortunately, there are fewer and fewer. We need the exhibit to lift up their voices in a permanent way."



Holocaust Memorial Center

The Holocaust Memorial Center's Zekelman Family Campus.

The Holocaust Memorial Center has collected nearly 1,000 interviews from local Michigan survivors, very few of whom are still alive, Mayerfeld said.

"We need to make sure that when people come to the museum, they see this as a personal story, not just a historical story of an event that took place somewhere else."

In a recent [survey of Millennial and Gen Z residents in each state conducted by the Claims Conference](#) — a group negotiating for compensation and restitution for victims of Nazi persecution and their heirs — 62 percent of 200 people surveyed in Michigan said they "totally agreed" something like the Holocaust could happen again today.

Holocaust and genocide education, now required in Michigan, are vital in enabling people to make personal connections that define their roles and responsibilities in preventing future atrocities, Mayerfeld said.

"Our mission is to engaged, educate and empower — that's what we're being asked to do with this gift. We want to empower others so they act," he said. "They need to call out injustice when they see it... to feel empathy, to act kindly toward those who are not like them."