

David Harris's Global Mission

And what drives him in his tireless crusade for human rights.

By LISA ST. JOHN

“Home” is a sacred word to David Harris, global citizen, human-rights champion, President of the American Jewish Committee – and Chappaqua resident for almost 15 years. One autumn afternoon we sat together inside his sunny living room filled with his wife Giulietta’s playful and colorful artwork, to discuss the pivotal moments that had shaped and inspired his personal and professional life.

With folded hands and a soft voice that belie his fiercely passionate nature, Harris spoke of the religious discrimination that drove his parents and other relatives from their beloved German and Russian homelands.

As a young boy he overheard stories about the difficult refugee life of his family. The challenges they faced, overcoming daunting language barriers to establish new lives on foreign soil, seeded Harris’s future work. This child and grandchild of refugees would grow up to help more than a million exiles find a longed-for haven in the Jewish homeland of Israel and in other places.

Harris’s childhood was spent on New York’s Upper West Side, at 74th Street and Riverside Drive. His mother, Nelly, was born in Moscow, and her family was one of the last groups of Jews to leave Paris in 1940 before the Nazis arrived and sealed the border. Harris’s father, Eric, left Germany by himself in 1933 and



American Jewish Committee Executive Director David A. Harris meeting with French President Jacques Chirac at the Elysee Palace in Paris earlier this year, one in a series of regular meetings Harris holds with top French government officials.

was brought to the US after WW I by the OSS. An only child, Harris literally grew up next door to his maternal grandparents, aunts and uncles, who lived in adjacent apartments. Their presence provided a “transmission belt for values, security, and well being.”

“The genius of David Harris is that he can smell and analyze threats to Western civilization before the rest of us can even imagine them.”

Per Ahlmark,
Deputy Prime Minister of
Sweden, 1976-1978

When David was 12, his father, an engineer at CBS, agreed to a job transfer to Munich, despite having powerful misgivings. His wife and son boarded the SS America one month later and sailed to Germany, to join him. The family lived abroad for a year. When they returned to New York, his parent’s marriage ended in divorce.

An Affinity for the Russian Language and a Love of Debate

Back in New York, Harris’s great occupation was pick-up games of all sorts, which abounded in the streets and playgrounds in his neighborhood. He longed to wake up one morning “so agile that I would be recruited by a top-ten school for basketball.” He had an affinity for Russian, which he studied at the Franklin School on 89th Street. Model UN debating at Franklin took him all over the East Coast and Canada. He relished competing at a very high level, preparing for months on global issues, learning to look and think through the eyes of the people/leaders/statesmen of a particular country. This laid the foundation for his later diplomatic work. When it came time to go to college, he received an offer of a full scholarship from the University of Pennsylvania, but his mother, a single parent working as a bookkeeper, insisted on paying her son’s way.

The transition from Franklin, a school with only 55 pupils, to Penn, where Harris knew none of the 1600 other students, was difficult. He continued studying the Russian language and also spent much of his time studying civil rights issues. After graduation, he pursued advanced studies in international relations at the London School of Economics, followed by a year as a junior associate at St. Anthony's College, Oxford. Harris did not take any Jewish studies courses while at Penn, and he did not attend a Shabbat dinner until he was 23, "I was always linked to my Jewish identity," says Harris, "but never thought it would become determinative." The melding of his love of international relations and diplomacy and his commitment to the Jewish community was the "unexpected piece along this journey."

A Visit to Israel Inspires Harris's Mission

Harris's first visit to Israel began a transformation that would take five years and show him his life's work. The young Israelis he met who were committed to building a vibrant new state, despite the political and religious differences within the society, contrasted sharply with dispirited young Americans who, like Harris, felt disenfranchised from their country by the Vietnam War and the power of the Establishment.

Riding a bus in Israel, Harris noticed a Holocaust concentration-camp number etched into the forearm of an older man. While this sight was not new to Harris, the connections between the man, the number, and the state suddenly posed a question that seemed more important than any previous question. "What did it mean to this man to live in a Jewish state? What might he have escaped in life had this Jewish state existed before the Second World War, when he may have had a chance to find refuge there?"

The monumental and difficult work facing the Jewish people, prompted Harris to make the decision to "marry my love of international relations and politics with my realization that there were opportunities and challenges for me in the Jewish community where I could

fulfill both my intellectual and emotional needs professionally."

Returning to the States, Harris began working for the American Field Service, a distinguished non-profit exchange organization that ran international exchange programs. To his dismay, he discovered one nation missing from the roster of participating nations: Israel. They were not refusing to participate but were excluded. As a Jew and a New Yorker, he had never before

"David Harris is a man who believes in the power of the written and spoken word—and he proves this power in his own work time and again. With his exceptional talent he uses words as word, as shield, but above all as ploughshare to labor for a more just and peaceful world,"

**Joschka Fischer,
Foreign Minister of
Germany.**

encountered anything anti-Jewish or anti-Israel.

His heroic image of Israeli invincibility shattered in 1973, when Arab forces attacked Israel on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year. Suddenly Harris, like many others, imagined the unimaginable. The possible death of Israel "meant more than I had ever verbalized or realized and felt like an impending second Holocaust. The notion that Jews could be slaughtered on my watch this time, in my lifetime, was simply unthinkable."

The 24-year-old Harris called the Israeli consulate in New York and asked how he could help. A few

standard screening questions led him to unwittingly reveal that he was an only child. Because Israeli policy was to not take any "sole surviving sons," he had inadvertently ruled himself out as a soldier.

Harris Witnesses the Plight of the Russian Jews

The next year, at the height of the Cold War, Harris was selected with five other Americans to teach English in a Soviet school in Moscow, where he had the then-uncommon and utterly extraordinary experience of living and working in the Soviet Union. There he gained rare insight into the Jews known as "refuseniks," who had applied to leave for Israel but had been turned down and were now living in limbo. One day a young girl slipped him a note that read, "David Harris I think you are a Jew. I feel it. If I'm right, please know that my parents are refuseniks. Would you come to our house one day after school?" He ended up visiting a host of Jewish families during his stay.

On the advice of a friend in New York, Harris attended synagogue on the holiday of Simchat Torah. Walking toward the synagogue, he beheld, much to his astonishment, a street aglow with several thousand Russian Jews singing and felt a deep loyalty blossom within him, perhaps the first stirrings of a deep commitment to finding them a home where they could nurture and live out their heritage. "Jews were alive!" he exclaimed, remembering the sight of the worshipers. "They came out of the woodwork, they risked their jobs, they risked imprisonment, but there they were!" The KGB agents followed, monitoring and eventually disbanding the event, and his witnessing of state-sponsored anti-Semitism inspired in Harris a fierce determination to fight it.

The realization that he had been presented with certain challenges crystallized for Harris. The last straw came in 1975, when the United Nations General Assembly adopted the so-called "Zionism as Racism" resolution. The notion that all who believed in a Jewish state were suddenly branded racists by the UN was bad enough for Harris. "Worse was the fact that we consid-

ered ourselves the quintessential anti-racists. After all, many of us were part of the generation of the late '60s that devoted much of our time to anti-racist efforts, to civil rights efforts."

Helping Jews in Limbo Find Permanent Homes

Harris began work as a caseworker for the Hebrew Immigration Society (HIAS) in Rome, where he met his future wife Giulietta, who was born in Libya, and where he counseled thousands of Soviet Jews in "suspended animation," living in transit while waiting for visas. Harris's contribution was critical to the successful emigration of more than 1 million Soviet Jews from the USSR to the West, where they constructed new lives and homes. Observing firsthand the refugee's desperate need for education, religious culture, and information about the United States, he wrote the book "Entering a New Culture" in both English and Russian. His second book, "The Jewish World," gave him his own sense of religious identity as he explored "the vast civilization of which Jews were heirs and trustees." The books are still given to every Jew arriving in the United States from the now former Soviet Union.

Honoring a Lifetime of Dedication to Human Rights

In 1979, the American Jewish Committee offered Harris a job "close to the mailroom," and he and his wife moved from Vienna to New York. In 1991, they settled in Chappaqua, where the schools, the idyllic setting, and the warmth of the community all beckoned to them.

As Executive Director of the AJC, Harris's work has been to ensure the safety of Jews and all minorities around the world. He is one of the most visible and foremost American advocates for Israel. In 2003, Harris received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Russian Jewish community in the U.S. His work to protect Israel's right to live in freedom and peace, and his fight to combat anti-Semitism and promote human rights for all people, continue to define his professional and personal mission. Addressing heads of state and ambassadors at the United Nations' "Diplomatic Marathon" in New York City this September, Harris spoke with a quiet dignity that seemed to rise

from a deep moral center. Without notes, and in multiple languages, Harris spoke on a multitude of issues. The respect of the leaders for Harris was tangible.

Asked if peace in Israel was possible, he said, "To be a Jew is to be an optimist and to believe that the world can be a better place." He identifies the current challenge facing Jewry as twofold: helping children experience the joy and beauty of Judaism, and continuing the external struggle to preserve the state of Israel and fight international terrorism, which threatens us all.

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Harris on Calling Chappaqua Home

During the interview, I asked Harris to recount a few New Castle moments. "Chappaqua," he sighed, after a moment's pause. "Every nook and cranny is inextricably linked with the lives of children." He recalled his youngest son, Josh, now a freshman at Cornell, beginning kindergarten at Westorchard as the new kid in town. His middle son, Michael, would meet a host of friends at Westorchard, and on the 4th grade East Hudson soccer team, which spawned a soccer career that continues today at Brandeis University, where Michael is a senior. Harris's eldest son, Danny, entered Bell in 7th grade, in his Bar Mitzvah year—an awkward time to break into a new community and school system. Today he

is a graduate student at Princeton University.

Thirteen years later, after hundreds of sleepovers and slices at Mario's and Pizza Station, scores of Bat Mitzvahs, Bar Mitzvahs and sweet sixteen celebrations, over a thousand ice hockey and soccer games, heavy use of the Chappaqua Public Library, and a fierce loyalty to Takayama, David and Guilietta Harris are the proverbial empty nesters. His wish list for the community has always included a UN debating model for students at Horace Greeley, additional sidewalks, a public skating rink and a greater mix of ages. "Was it perfect?" Harris asks out loud. "Nothing in life is. But Chappaqua comes pretty close."

—Lisa St. John



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