

International Holocaust Remembrance Day

Tomi Reichental



Tomi Reichental is an 85 year-old Irish-Slovak survivor of Bergen Belsen. He was born in 1935 in Piestany, Slovakia to a Jewish family. He is one of the very few Holocaust survivors left in Ireland today.

Tomi was 9 years old in October 1944 when he was rounded up by the Gestapo in Bratislava. Along with 12 other members of his family he was taken to a detention camp in Slovakia, where the elusive Nazi War Criminal Alois Brunner had the power of life or death.

Tomi, along with his mother, brother, grandmother, aunt and cousin were dumped into a cattle wagon on a train bound for the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

"In the camp I could not play like a normal child, we didn't laugh, and we didn't cry. If you stepped out of line, you could be beaten up even to death. I saw it all with my own eyes".

When he was liberated in April 1945, he discovered that 35 members of his extended family had been murdered in the Holocaust.

Tomi moved to Ireland in 1959, where he rebuilt his life. For 60 years, he refused to talk about his experiences, until in 2004 he was invited by his son to appear before a group of schoolchildren. In his own words, he did not speak out *"because I didn't want to, but because I couldn't."*

As to why he decided to take the courageous leap to break into the emotional exposure of public remembrance, Tomi puts it very simply: *"In the last couple of years I realised that, as one of the last witnesses, I must speak out, I owed it to the victims that their memory is not forgotten."*

Ever since, he has been on a mission of remembrance. He travels up and down Ireland twice a week to talk to thousands of secondary school students. At 85 years of age, Tomi Reichental never refuses an invitation to speak to pupils, no matter how far away or how small a class.

His tireless quest earned him a recognition that he never expected. His story has been the object of three documentaries, "Till the Tenth Generation" (2009), the award-winning "Close to Evil" (2014), and "Condemned to Remember" (2017). He has also authored of two books, "I Was a Boy in Belsen" (2011), and "Tomi", which is aimed for children (2018).

Tomi has received many accolades for his efforts, such as Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany for his untiring commitment to furthering mutual understanding, reconciliation, the Human Rights Award of the Bar of Ireland and the RTE International Person of the Year award. He has also been awarded four honorary degrees by prestigious Irish universities.

Since Tomi began to speak in schools, he is also regularly invited to present his lectures for private events. He has addressed the Irish Parliament, the European Parliament, as well as Harvard University, Cambridge University, TEDX, churches, mosques, military bases, and countless other fora.

Tomi's story is a story of the past. It is also a story for our times. The Holocaust reminds us of the dangers of racism and intolerance, providing lessons from the past that are relevant today. In Tomi's words *"The Holocaust didn't start with cattle wagons and gas chambers, but with whispers, taunts, daubing, abuse, and finely murder. One of the lessons we must learn is to respect difference and reject all forms of racism and discrimination."*