

A Thousand Thanks



Holocaust survivor Tomi Reichental speaking about his experiences at Belsen-Bergen concentration camp at WIT's Good Shepherd Chapel on Tuesday last. | Photos: Mary Browne

Holocaust survivor Tomi Reichental enthralls WIT Good Shepherd audience.

Detailing the horrors and ultimate liberation of Belsen Concentration Camp, Holocaust survivor Tomi Reichental vividly recalled one of the 20th Century's most haunting episodes in Waterford on Tuesday last.

Before a 600-strong attendance at Good Shepherd Chapel, and with a further 400 watching via video streaming in adjoining rooms, the Dublin resident, aged 79, captivated the gathering with the power of his words. The standing ovation which accompanied the end of his remarkable account was thoroughly merited.

A holder of an Irish passport, having lived in Dublin for decades, Mr Reichental met with The Munster Express before his speech, when he was presented with a copy of our most recent Christmas Supplement, which included a history of Waterford's Jewish community. He noted many of the surnames included in the well-researched piece, written by Dr David Toms of University College Cork and express gratitude for being presented with it.

Born into a farming family in Piestany, Slovakia, Mr Reichental's family were soon forced to move as the Nazis assumed their land for food production, thus bringing to an end a family connection with the area which spanned almost three and a half centuries. The Reichentals were well-liked; his Grandfather had run a village store for many years.

However, during a further round-up of Jews across Slovakia in 1944 (the mass deportations had begun in the spring of 1942),

under the direction of puppet government leader and Catholic priest Josef Tiso, the Reichentals' lives were to be changed forever.

Having initially escaped the Nazis' clutches, ending up in the Slovak capital of Bratislava, on the run, using false identities created by a local priest in their village (Fr Harangozo), Tomi and up to 13 of his family ended up in Belsen following a week-long train journey. They arrived in Belsen on November 2nd, 1944. Tomi was eight years old.

His father escaped from the Belsen train (a different train from the one Tomi travelled on), and went on to fight for the partisans in Poland, ultimately surviving the Second World War. However, 35 of Tomi's relatives, including his grandmother, perished as a result of the conflict.

Those they saw upon arrival at Belsen resembled skeletons more than people, he reflected with emotion.

Sleeping in cramped conditions, those detained in the camp were forced to make do with 500 calories a day, a fifth of what an adult male requires daily. They were given two pieces of black bread in the morning (also in the evening) while small portions of potato and turnips represented lunch. They were, as Tomi put it, "basically starving all of the time".

People died in considerable numbers every night due to starvation, and every morning, a cart brought the bodies firstly to the mortuary and then to the crematorium where they were burned.

Up to 500 died daily due to starvation; running to 15,000 a month, including his grandmother.

The bodies were, at times, piled four feet high, and Tomi could recall playing hide and seek around the corpses, the air thick with the stench of death. Seventy thousand people were to die in Belsen.

On April 15th, 1945, Belsen was liberated by British troops. The shocking vista of the Nazi killing machine, designed to bring about the 'Final Solution', was captured by a film crew and soon screened in picture house newsreels around the world. A brother of Tomi's was among those photographed at the entrance to the camp.

All detainees, too weak to celebrate their liberation, were quarantined for a further two months.

Over 15,000 bodies which had not been incinerated were bulldozed and buried in three mass graves. A total of 17,000 Slovak Jews survived Word War II. Some historians have stated that in 1938, including 40,000 living in land ceded to Austria, that Slovakia had then been home to 135,000 Jews.

Tomi, author of the book 'I Was A Boy In Belsen', moved to Ireland in 1959, when he arrived on a three-year contract to manage a zip manufacturing company.

Prior to that, he had lived in Israel from the late 40s through to 1957, before working Germany for two years, during which time many Germans would apologise to him for the horrors of the war.

Two years after arriving in Ireland (in 1961), Tomi married Evanne Blackman, whose father ran a jewellery business on Dublin's South Anne Street. His wife, who passed away 12 years ago, never heard of Tomi's experience at Bergen-Belsen; indeed no-one heard it for 55 years until he decided to speak out about his experiences.

During his many lectures and speeches, which have been warmly received throughout the country in recent years, Tomi is accompanied by his partner Joyce Weinrub, who told us: "After talks such as this, Tomi quietens and gets pale, as the old

memories return.”

Not a man to bear grudges – he accepted the German Order of Merit from President Joachim Gauck in 2013 – Tomi readily accepts that ordinary Germans cannot stand indicted for the crimes sanctioned by the Nazis. He is now one of only two Holocaust survivors still alive in Ireland.

Rallying against the concept of racism (a point also raised by activist John Cloono afterwards), Mr Reichental said even the soft edge of discrimination, be it graffiti or verbal abuse, had to be curtailed.

“Bullies should always be stood up to,” he said, noting that fascism had reared its ugly head once more in Europe during a time of recession, with minorities being unfairly blamed for many states’ economic ills.

Mr Reichental, who spoke in Tramore CBS last year, in an audience which included my son, deserves huge praise for talking about his experiences.

That hundreds more heard his story in Waterford last Tuesday, including 90 students from De La Salle College, is to be welcomed as part of a wider awareness campaign addressing intolerance and racism.

He said it was important that the younger generation heard his story so that they too, in time, will stand up to such racism and future denial of the Holocaust.

Tomi, who is also the subject of a new documentary titled ‘Close To Evil’, screened on RTE One last autumn, spent a great deal of time after his speech signing copies of his book, taking questions and posing for photographs, and it was a great honour to meet him.

Last Tuesday’s speech was a moving experience for all whom attended, and we know that many more would have attended the event had it not been for other commitments.

We’ll have further reflections from Tomi’s heart rending talk in next week’s edition.