

TOMI REICHENTAL

“If you see someone being victimized, don’t be a bystander — stand up. If you see someone being treated badly, get involved.” These simple words of Tomi Reichental stand as eloquent testimony to a remarkable life of courage, tolerance and reconciliation.

Tomi Reichental was born in 1935 in Merasice, a small village of around 700 inhabitants in Slovakia. An early idyllic childhood soon gave way to one of hardship, penury and constant intimidation as Tomi and his family were ostracised from Slovak society for the crime of being Jews. As a Jew in Slovakia Tomi Reichental, from the age of four, was not allowed to go to any public places. He was not even allowed to attend the local school. Those difficulties soon became much worse, however, and life for the Reichental family became an all-encompassing quest for survival when, in January 1941, fifteen months into the Second World War, Nazi Germany established an office in Slovakia to plan the destruction of the Slovak Jewry.

In October 1944, after years of eluding capture, the Reichental family was arrested en masse and the following month deported to the Bergen Belsen concentration camp, in what is today Lower Saxony in Northern Germany. In all likelihood the train was diverted to Bergen-Belsen because, that very week, the Nazis had been forced to destroy the crematories in Auschwitz and Birkenau, ahead of the oncoming Soviet advance. Tomi Reichental has written eloquently of that freezing November day and the tortuous journey, in the unheated cattle cars with cracks that let in the freezing air, the vicious dogs scavenging for scraps of food and the stripping of all humanity in the lack of toilet facilities, food and water. Months later in Bergen Belsen he played hide-and-seek with his friends around heaps of rotting corpses and witnessed the horror of his grandmother’s corpse being tossed into a cart filled with other corpses.

In total, 35 members of the Reichental family died in the Holocaust. From a population of almost 90,000 Slovak Jews at the beginning of World War II, only 12,000, including Tomi, survived the Holocaust. On their liberation from Bergen-Belsen what remained of the Reichental family returned to Slovakia, but that devastated land held no welcome for Holocaust survivors and the Reichentals emigrated to Israel. In 1958, Tomi moved to Ireland, at the behest of a relative, and opened up a small zip factory in Dublin which he ran for a number decades. In 1977, he became an Irish Citizen.

Tomi Reichental did not speak of his experiences for over 55 years, not because he did not want to but because he could not. His story is a reminder of the importance of the past. The Holocaust reminds us of the dangers of racism and intolerance, providing lessons from the past that are relevant today. In Tomi’s own words ***“The Holocaust didn’t start with cattle wagons and gas chambers, but with whispers, taunts, daubing and then abuse and murder. One of the lessons we must learn is to respect difference and reject all forms of racism and discrimination.”***

Since breaking his silence in his 2011 memoir, the bestselling ***‘I Was A Boy In Belsen’*** Tomi Reichental has

been on a mission of remembrance and reconciliation. As he explains very simply: **“I realised that, as one of the last witnesses, I must speak out. I owe it to the victims that their memory is not forgotten.”** Nowadays, hardly a week goes by without him travelling up and down the country to talk to students about his wartime boyhood experiences. To date, he has spoken to over 600 schools and before over 70,000 children. He often appears at these talks wearing a sweater with a yellow Jewish star affixed much the same as it was affixed to him as a five year old boy in Slovakia. To most of us the Holocaust is something we learn about from books and films, but regardless of how authentic and descriptive these mediums are, they cannot begin to convey the extent of the horrors and degradations suffered by the victims. This is why Tomi Reichental’s story is so important.

A film about Tomi Reichental’s Holocaust experience ***Close To Evil***, broadcast in September 2014 shows Tomi making heroic efforts to contact one of his former jailors, an SS-woman called Hilde Liziewicz (now Hilde Michnia) who is alive and well and living in Hamburg, aged 94. Following the broadcast of the documentary, formal complaints about Hilde Michnia to the Prosecutor’s Office, Hamburg resulted in an investigation into her past. Tomi, now aged 80 years, is now working on a sequel to that film.

It is testament to Tomi Reichental’s own humanity that since the filming of ***Close to Evil*** he has developed a warm friendship with Alexandra Senfft, the granddaughter of Hans Ludin, one of Hitler’s inner circle and a convicted war criminal. Hans Ludin signed off on the deportations of Slovakia’s Jews, including Tomi’s family, but this has not stopped this remarkable man from describing Alexandra Senfft as a kindred spirit in the quest for historical truth.

In 2012, Tomi Reichental was awarded the Order of Merit, the highest honour that Germany bestows for services to the nation, by the President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Joachim Gauck, for his unceasing commitment to furthering mutual understanding, reconciliation and German-Irish friendship.

In the past number of years Tomi Reichental has proven to be one of the most inspirational figures in modern Ireland. His effort to ensure that the important themes of remembrance, forgiveness, conflict resolution and reconciliation remain to the forefront of modern Irish thought is truly important. In an age where we see horrific pictures of refugees attempting to flee appalling regimes to find sanctuary in the West, Tomi Reichental is a vivid example of the positive impact refugees make to modern Irish society.

Honouring Tomi Reichental with the highest honour that Dublin City University can bestow is a fitting tribute to Tomi and his work. It also expresses this University’s commitment to multiculturalism and inclusion and showcases our solidarity with the plight of refugees today, who seek a better life, as Tomi and his family did over fifty years ago.

A Uachtaráin, I ask you to confer on Tomi Reichental the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (*Honoris Causa*).

