

Close to Evil

A Story of Reconciliation



IRISH FILM & TELEVISION ACADEMY



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Join Tomi Reichental on his journey as he attempts to meet with one of his former jailers from Bergen-Belson, Hilde (Lisiewicz) Michnia, who is alive and well and living in Hamburg.

Close to Evil shines a light on our staggering resilience and capacity to forgive - Darragh McManus, Entertainment TV Reviews

What struck me most about Tomi was his lack of hatred and the reconciliation in his heart, a big heart we can and should remember and learn from - Headmaster David Lloyd, Solihull School, Britain

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Holocaust survivor Tomi Reichental discovers one of his former jailers at Bergen-Belson, Hilde Lisiewicz is alive and living in Hamburg. Lisiewicz is a convicted War Criminal. In the Spirit of Reconciliation, Tomi states:

“I was prepared to meet Hilde, who had been a perpetrator and who I thought had seen the light and changed her values. I was prepared to reconcile with her and shake her hand, because in my naïve thinking she was also a victim of her own time.”

Instead, Hilde tried to turn history upside down. In an interview in 2004, Hilde claimed that she is a victim of victor’s justice and was unapologetic for her role at the camp, where at least 52,000 people perished.

In the 2004 interview, Hilde insisted that only lazy prisoners went hungry. She said she spent her time working in the kitchens and saw no ill treatment and could not recall any smells from rotting corpses.

She described her role as a guard on an infamous forced march in 1945 from Gross-Rosen concentration camp in which an estimated 1,400 women died of starvation and cold. Hilde said she prepared soup and hot chocolate for the prisoners.

Tomi embarks on a quest to investigate Hilde’s claims of innocence. On his journey, Tomi meets Alexandra Senfft, the granddaughter of Hans Luddin, the Nazi responsible for the deportation and murder of over 65,000 Slovakian Jews, including over 35 members of Tomi’s family.

EUROPE

Breaking Silence, Survivor Sets Out to Meet Holocaust Past

By **DOUGLAS DALBY** MARCH 14, 2015

MULTYFARNHAM, Ireland — The setting could hardly have been more incongruous. Outside the window, lush pastures spread in the perfection of a late winter morning. Inside, a small man with a yellow star pinned to his sweater captivated an audience with the horrors of his boyhood in the concentration camp called Bergen-Belsen.

The man, Tomi Reichental, described seeing his grandmother’s body being thrown onto a cart overloaded with other corpses. He was only 9 years old. By that age, he had already experienced arrest and beatings by the Gestapo; the glow of the crematories through the cracks of the cattle car that took him to Bergen-Belsen; the assault of the spotlights; the shouts and the dogs as his family was hauled from the train; the scavenging for food; and the sight and smell of the piles of decaying dead.

It is never easy to hold the attention of hundreds of teenagers, but for a couple of hours Mr. Reichental did with his compelling story. He will be 80 on June 26, and with his companion, Joyce, at his side he drives around the country giving talks to schools twice a week. He is fully booked for the rest of 2015.

“People tell me I’m the fittest Holocaust survivor alive today,” he said, smiling.

The pupils here at Wilson’s Hospital School were the latest to fall under his spell. Even the self-styled tough guys hung on every harrowing word.

For Mr. Reichental it had started as bullying, with name calling at school escalating to physical abuse and ending with Bergen-Belsen. His message to the

students is simple: “If you see someone being victimized, don’t be a bystander — stand up. If you see someone being treated badly, get involved.” Afterward, they gave him a standing ovation. Pupils and teachers then lined up to buy signed copies of his memoir, “I Was a Boy in Belsen.”

“Take this chance to ask me anything you like,” he told his young audience. “There are not so many of us left.”

It was mid-October 1944 when he was rounded up by the Gestapo in a shop in Bratislava, now the capital of Slovakia. For nearly 60 years, he never spoke about his experiences in Bergen-Belsen. He never even told his wife of more than 40 years or their three sons. But after her death in 2003 and his retirement from the Dublin jewelry business he owned, he has hardly stopped talking about what happened.

There may be an impression of making up for lost time, though he does not see it that way. “I owe it to the victims that their memory is not forgotten,” he said. “It’s not that I didn’t want to speak about it before. It’s just that I couldn’t. There are thousands like me; I believe it is nature’s way of allowing people to deal with things.”

His first classroom appearance, made at the urging of one of his sons, did not go well. He broke down as he told his story; worried parents would complain. But as he continued and his audience grew, so did his demand. Now he travels like some old-fashioned preacher to tell his story so younger generations will know what happened to him and to millions of others.

He still has trouble controlling his tears. “When I’m speaking, I’m reliving my past and occasionally the whole picture becomes so real I can’t help but cry,” he said. “Someone once suggested I leave out the part that upsets me, but so many aspects upset me I don’t know what the trigger will be from talk to talk.”

He tells of how his idyllic village childhood was shattered when Slovakia became a puppet state of Germany, and in 1942 the regime began to deport its entire Jewish population, the vast majority of whom would perish in death camps.

A couple of weeks after he, his brother, mother and grandmother were finally captured by the Gestapo — after evading the Nazis for two years — they were forced into a cattle car on a freezing November day. He believes the train was diverted to

Bergen-Belsen only because the Nazis had been forced to destroy the crematories in Auschwitz and Birkenau that very week ahead of a Soviet advance.

“It was sheer good fortune,” he said. “A few days earlier I wouldn’t be here now. Like so many others in my family, I would have surely been killed in Auschwitz.”

His father was captured separately but escaped and joined local partisans. The family was reunited after the war, returned briefly to a country where they were no longer wanted and left in 1949 for Israel. In 1959, Mr. Reichental came to Dublin at the behest of a relative to start a small zipper factory.

He does not regard himself as vengeful. So in 2012, when an Irish woman living in Hamburg heard about his story and said her neighbor, a former Bergen-Belsen guard, would be willing to meet him, he went.

“As far as I am aware, it would have been the first private meeting between victim and perpetrator,” Mr. Reichental said. “She would have had a lifetime to reflect. I could never forgive, but I could understand how a 21-year-old girl might end up being what she was, so I decided to see her.”

Gerry Gregg, a filmmaker, learned of the intended encounter and decided to record it. “Close to Evil,” which debuted here in September and had its United States premiere earlier this month at the Chicago Irish Film Festival, follows Mr. Reichental from his home in Dublin to Hamburg to meet the former guard, Hilde Michnia, now 93.

The would-be conciliation, however, took an unexpected twist. During their research into Ms. Michnia’s background, the filmmakers discovered a 2004 interview in which she was unapologetic for her role at the camp, where at least 52,000 people perished. Ms. Michnia then backed out of the film, Mr. Gregg said, because of an illness.

After spending a year in jail for beating two starving men senseless when they tried to take a couple of turnips from the camp’s kitchens, she was released in 1946. She married and had three children. In the 2004 interview, she insisted that only lazy prisoners went hungry. She said she spent her time working in the kitchens and saw no ill treatment and could not recall any smells from rotting corpses.

She described her role as a guard on an infamous forced march in 1945 from Gross-Rosen concentration camp in modern-day Poland, in which an estimated 1,400 women died of starvation and cold. She said she prepared stews and hot chocolate for the prisoners.

On Jan. 25, Mr. Gregg showed “Close to Evil” in Lüneburg, Germany, the city where Ms. Michnia was convicted after the war. After viewing it, a local historian, Hans-Jürgen Brennecke, who had contributed to the documentary as the son of a Nazi war criminal, filed a complaint against the former Bergen-Belsen guard for her role in the forced march, for which she was never tried.

In early February, the local prosecutor’s office in Hamburg confirmed that it was investigating. In the end, Mr. Reichental never met his former captor, who told The Irish Times last month, when asked about the complaint: “Not Bergen-Belsen again. It’s 70 years ago. They should leave small fry like me alone.”

He has had little time to dwell on the meeting that never was but remained perplexed as to why she had sought him out. “I was certainly not disappointed she didn’t agree to meet me, but I was certainly distressed to learn of her continued denials,” he said. “It is just as well we didn’t meet, perhaps, because shaking her hand would be something I would have regretted for the rest of my life.”

Correction: March 22, 2015

An article last Sunday about Tomi Reichental, a 79-year-old Holocaust survivor now living in Ireland who speaks to schoolchildren about his boyhood in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, referred imprecisely to the wartime location of another camp, Gross-Rosen, the site of a forced march in 1945 during which an estimated 1,400 women died. At the time, it was in German territory, not Polish, although it was soon reclaimed by Poland.

A version of this article appears in print on March 15, 2015, on page A8 of the New York edition with the headline: Breaking Silence, Survivor Sets Out to Meet Holocaust Past.

Tomi Reichental: 'We, as a human race, have to find ways to reconcile'

Weekend Read: The Holocaust survivor has told his extraordinary story to 90,000 students, and the 80-year-old isn't done yet

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Kathy Sheridan

Shoah: Tomi Reichental at the coat dresser that he recovered from his childhood home in what was Czechoslovakia. Photograph: Cyril Byrne

... In the hall of Tomi Reichental's Dublin home stands an old coat dresser, with a mirror, coat hooks and a little drawer for brushes, all painted with pretty flowers on a deep-turquoise background. An interior decorator might describe it as distressed, but this traditional old piece needed no distressing. Reichental recovered it a few years ago from his childhood home in what was Czechoslovakia.

It dates from a time he calls paradise, when as a child he ran free on his father's farm, in a tiny village called Merasice, with his brother, Miki. It was a short childhood. He was six when it was decreed that no Jewish child could attend a national school, so he and Miki were sent to live with an aunt to attend a Jewish school. The yellow stars they were obliged to wear were magnets for bullies and beatings and cries of "dirty Jew" on the streets. Back in Merasice old neighbours were reinventing themselves as guards in black uniforms and matching boots, strutting into Jewish homes spouting their ideology of hatred.

The net was slowly closing on paradise. By the age of nine Tomi was on a stinking cattle train bound for Bergen-Belsen with his brother and his mother, his grandmother, his remarkable Aunt Margo and his beloved cousin Chava. Starvation, typhoid and diphtheria, cold and despair would carry their loved ones away as surely as the gas and the bullets and the brutal beatings. The children's playground was among rotting bodies. At that point the fate of Tomi's father was unknown.

By the war's end, of a population of 90,000 Slovakian Jews, more than 70,000 had been murdered. They included 35 members of Tomi Reichental's family. By some miracle he, Miki and their mother and father survived the Shoah. A photograph exists of Tomi and Miki at their moment of deliverance, among a group of haunted-looking children waving through a barbed-wire fence.

Does he attribute the "miracle" to God? Where was God when we needed him, he asks. "You see people praying around you. It doesn't help. They were still thrown into gas chambers."

He hesitates when asked if he is an atheist: "I am . . . probably." But he believes that religious people have a tremendous gift. "A trauma can be easily overcome for a religious person; they can find a way to convince themselves that it's the wish of God or something. But I would never say that's rubbish. I respect it."

He sent his three boys to mixed-religion schools but faithfully upholds Jewish tradition. He maintains his paid-for seat at the synagogue and goes once or twice a year. On Fridays the family gather in the home he shares with Joyce Weinrib, his partner of 10 years, to observe the Jewish Shabbat, "to make a grace, make the bread, observe tradition".

Yet he believes that religion has a lot to answer for. "I remember speaking at a Dundalk seminar with students from the North and the South. One side saw the IRA as terrorists, the others saw them as freedom fighters. I pointed out that keeping the Protestants kids in Protestant schools and Catholic kids in Catholic schools was just educating them to hate each other." He pauses in bafflement. "And they all clapped."

Were they clapping the sentiment or simply clapping Reichental, as people invariably do who listen to his story and want to weep – or at least to acknowledge his sheer likability, the lack of bitterness, the straightforward language, the absence of self-pity and, not least, his continuing, superhuman desire to understand and reconcile with those who murdered most of his family and perceived him as something lower than an animal.

Opening a dam

It took Reichental 55 years to talk about it. "I couldn't. My wife died 13 years ago, and she never knew anything about me. All she knew was that I was a Holocaust survivor and had been to Bergen-Belsen, but she died not knowing what I went through."

The silence was broken when his grandson's teacher asked him to speak to the class. It was like opening a dam. Once this shy man started talking he never stopped. His brother, now a successful businessman in Israel, is astonished by the transformation. For Tomi, acutely aware that he is one of the last witnesses of the Shoah, this remembrance has become a compulsion, a mission "to keep the memory of those lost ones alive". In just 10 years, as an extraordinarily energetic member of the Holocaust Education Trust Ireland, he has told his story to 90,000 senior students and is booked out, he notes proudly, until mid-2017.

On his 80th birthday, last June, he addressed the Muslim congregation at Blanchardstown mosque, following an invitation from Shaykh Umar al-Qadri, its imam and now a good friend, whom he describes as "very liberal . . . a man who believes in reconciliation and co-operation. I was astounded to be asked to speak for 20 minutes to Muslims. You know that Muslims deny that the Holocaust even happened? They hate the Jews. Yet there were 150 Muslims there, and they listened and had never heard a story like mine. I don't think there is anywhere in the world that a Holocaust survivor has given a speech in a mosque." They presented him with a birthday cake, iced with the image of a dove and olive branch.

In the space of a few years Tomi Reichental became known not only in Ireland but also around the world, thanks to a 2008 documentary, *Till the Tenth Generation*, by the Emmy award-winning film director Gerry Gregg. Reichental's subsequent autobiography, *I Was a Boy in Belsen*, sparked the interest of a radio listener in Galway, a woman who had befriended a German, Hilde Michnia, while living in Hamburg and had spotted Michnia in SS uniform while leafing through old photographs.

Michnia, it emerged, had been an SS guard in Bergen-Belsen during Reichental's incarceration. In 1945 she had served a year for crimes against humanity, and for some extraordinary reason, rather than destroy her old archive and court testimony, she handed them over to her Galway

friend, saying that she didn't want her children to find them after her death.

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The impression so far is of a loving 93-year-old full of shame, perhaps ready to express remorse for the deeds of her 23-year-old self. And Reichental was determined to meet her. A second documentary, *Close to Evil*, which won the Best Single Documentary award at the 2015 Iftas, traced his efforts. "I set out to reconcile. There was no question of my forgiving her, but the whole idea is that it's now 70 years on, and we, as a human race, have to find ways to reconcile. There has to be a point where people must come together."

He corresponded with her daughter, Sabina, over several months, but it came to naught. The steely former fascist remembered for her ready boot and brutal strap showed no pretence of remorse on film.

Further research enabled Reichental to connect Michnia's self-reported movement of prisoners from Gross-Rosen (during which the prisoners were served with soup and hot chocolate, she claimed) hundreds of kilometres to Bergen-Belsen, in the Reich's dying days, to what he calls the "longest death march in the second World War".

When *Close to Evil* was shown in Germany her flat denial of any ill treatment, of terrible smells (sensed three kilometres away by liberators) and of murderous beatings, particularly her assertion that all the bodies found in the camp were brought in by its commandant, so incensed one amateur historian that he filed a complaint against her.

Although there are witnesses to her involvement, such prosecutions no longer depend on living testimony. Recent German laws allow for participants in such atrocities to be prosecuted as accessories. The prosecutor's decision is due shortly.

"She might be the last SS guard to be put on trial," says Reichental. He has no wish to see her in prison. "I don't care about punishment. It's too late for that." His objective now is to see her story "refuted, put down as lies. From a moral point of view that is important. Say, in 30 or 40 years' time, some academic is researching the Holocaust and comes upon those DVDs [of her evidence]. He will take it as a true story and wonder what they were all complaining about – didn't they get hot chocolate? But if she is prosecuted that story will be refuted."

There is a deep poignancy about seeing the noble, conciliatory attempts of a soft-hearted man laid so low.

Naivety

"I assumed in my naivety she was a victim of her time, that she was indoctrinated from childhood and brainwashed . . . It was very important for me to meet her, but now, of course, I'm glad I didn't meet her. Because I am very sentimental, and she's an old lady, I would have put my arm around her in the heat of the moment, and she wouldn't have apologised and I would have been gutted."

But it failed to slow him down. A friendship struck up with Alexandra, the granddaughter of Hanns Ludin, a fervent Nazi, member of Hitler's inner circle and German ambassador to the

puppet Slovakian regime, is a thing of wonder to him.

"She is a lovely person, also friendly with my brother. To me it is unbelievable. I come to the centre of the Nazi regime." Alexandra's publications and interviews have split her family, according to Reichental. "But Hanns Ludin was responsible indirectly for killing 35 members of my family. He signed every single deportation that left Slovakia. His signature sent them to the gas chamber."

Does he believe in evil? "We are all born equal," he says. "If you fall into bad company, bad influences – look at this Isis, young people looking at films and being radicalised. They are probably good people who just got involved."

For all the horrors of Nazi Slovakia there was goodness and decency too. The puppet regime was headed by a Catholic priest, Jozef Tiso. But a Catholic priest was also a quiet hero when shooting would have been a merciful punishment. Fr Ladislav Harangozo was a family friend who risked his life for the Reichentals by acquiring false papers for them and teaching the boys some basic doctrine so they could pass muster as Christians. The irony is profound. And that story is not over.

What makes Reichental's story compelling still is that, although his mission is to speak of the racism and bigotry of the past, the present has begun to intrude. "Tomi is now leaving the world of consensus," as Gerry Gregg put it. Some weeks ago Reichental gave a radio interview on 98FM in which he said he believed that Ireland should take 5,000 Syrian refugees, a figure that would inevitably become 10,000 when families were reunited.

"I said, speaking as a Holocaust survivor, that it would have been beneficial for Ireland to have taken in Jewish refugees, because they would have brought industry, but Ireland closed the door. These Syrians are educated; they have businesspeople among them. I said I'm not a lover of Syria, as one of Israel's biggest enemies, but it's just being humanitarian."

The outcry was immediate and one-sided. "They were absolutely adamant: 'We don't want Muslims – we are Christian here.'" In a listener poll asking if Ireland should take Syrian refugees, 73 per cent voted no. For all that, he believes Irish people are "very tolerant".

His listeners in schools or elsewhere rarely ask about Israeli treatment of Palestinians, he says. "I don't want to get into that, I say. But I would be slanted towards Israel. It's such a complex issue."

To compare a now peaceful Europe with the Middle East makes no sense, he says. "There is only one little Israel. The Arabs can lose 10 wars and still it will not affect them. Israel has to lose only one and Israel doesn't exist."

In 1959 he was offered the job of opening a zip factory in Dublin. It was here that he met his wife, Evanne Blackman, in a Jewish club and his Irish future was sealed. In 1965, after a spell in Israel, the couple returned to Dublin, where he expanded his father-in-law's jewellery business and set up his own successful distribution company for his brother Miki's technologically advanced engineering products. He and Evanne had three sons, all IT specialists. David, the eldest, lives across the road, Gideon is in England and Jonathan is the award-winning chief information officer for Palo Alto city and an adjunct professor at UC

Berkeley. Reichental's grandchildren's gifts of baseball caps from around the world are displayed on the old coat stand in the hall.

Reichental comes garlanded with honours, among them doctorates from Trinity College Dublin and Maynooth University, the International Person of the Year award and the Global Achievement Award. And one that still draws tears: the order of merit, Germany's highest honour. He broke down when the call came from the German ambassador. "It still makes me emotional," he says, in his heavily accented English.

Reichental, who looks 20 years younger than he is, is writing a second book, and Gregg has a third documentary well in hand, the last of what he calls "the Tomi trilogy". This brings Reichental into contemporary Europe, where long-buried secrets are coming to light.

"When speaking in the Holocaust time, we said 'never again'. And now it's happening again – Rwanda, Srebrenica . . . This is a story of now, appropriate for this time. The idea is to bring up to date the genocide in Europe and anti-Semitism after the war and lots of things that are still kept quiet.*

Dogged research by Fr Patrick Desbois, a French Catholic priest, has shown that more people may have died by bullet than by gas in Ukraine, for example – "that the Holocaust began even before the camps", in the words of the French president, François Hollande. *

"Many are alive today where it happened. There are individuals who really want to speak, to unburden their consciences," says Reichental.

At 80, Tomi Reichental is indeed leaving the world of consensus and heading into a year that will take him across countries and into dark places. But on the itinerary is a meeting in Srebrenica with Shaykh Umar al-Qadri of Blanchardstown, to stand at the graves of both massacred Muslims and massacred Jews. Reconciliation is etched in his soul.

* This article was edited on January 12th, 2016

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