

**A**S ONE of the great horrors of living memory, the Holocaust has a unique resonance. Current events in the Middle East, tragic in their own right, have also seen the attempt by the Nazis to exterminate Europe's Jews regularly trivialised or demeaned by trite comparisons with unfolding miseries in Gaza.

On Sunday, January 28, 88-year-old Tomi Reichental will attend Holocaust Memorial Day in Dublin, an event that will also welcome President Michael D Higgins and other dignitaries. It is held every year on the Sunday closest to January 27, which is International Holocaust Memorial Day, and the date on which Auschwitz was liberated in 1945.

That day Tomi will have a small but important job — to tell those gathered his story, about being a nine-year-old boy herded on a cattle train in 1944. It was bound for Bergen-Belsen, and he was in the company of his mother, his brother, his grandmother, an aunt and a cousin.

Tomi is a Holocaust survivor or, as he terms it, a 'witness', one of the diminishing band of



## by Shane McGrath

people who endured one of the defining horrors in modern history.

'There is a little speech I make,' he explains. 'I speak about my memories. It's important for me, but also for the Education Trust.'

That is Holocaust Education Ireland, the body which organises the commemoration, and which more generally is dedicated to creating awareness of the Holocaust in this country.

Tomi does not talk about what is happening in Israel now directly — little surprise given the temper of much public discourse, especially in Ireland. But he has an acute understanding of the suffering of ordinary people, how the burden of evil is invariably shouldered by the innocents, the young, the vulnerable.

His voice is light and he laughs often, which perhaps runs counter to what we expect of a Holocaust survivor. He was born in what was

then Czechoslovakia in 1935, in a place called Merasice. He was excluded from school at the age of six, as Nazi discrimination took an ever-firmer grip. Then in 1944, he and his loved ones were forced on a voyage of which the ultimate destination, for millions, was death.

He and his brother Miki played among the degradations and everyday evil of Bergen-Belsen. He can recall bodies littering the ground, and prison guards using people as live targets for shooting practice.

Every night, the relentless misery drove many to throw themselves against the barbed wire keeping them from freedom. They knew this would draw the fire of the guards, killing them and bringing an end to their suffering.

Tomi survived, as did his brother and mother, with his father also surviving the war. But he lost 35 relatives in the Holocaust.

A work opportunity took him to Ireland in 1959, where he opened a factory and met his late wife, Evanne. They lived briefly in Israel before returning to Ireland permanently in 1965. He set up a successful business and throughout his working life, he never spoke about what he had seen, or heard, or lived through in the death camp.

His wife died in 2003 and had known nothing about his experiences. She was aware he had survived Bergen-Belsen, but he had never discussed it with her or their three sons.

There was no revelatory moment that triggered his memories — he was simply asked by his grandson's teacher if he would speak to the class about what he had endured.

He started talking 20 years ago, and he has relayed his story thousands of times since, in school after school all over Ireland.

'It was purely accidental and it just grew and grew,' he says. 'I started doing this after I retired, and I became so busy that I was busier than when I was working. When I started, I realised that I was one of the last witnesses to this horror.'

'People here didn't know much about the Holocaust, and the curriculum was not aimed at it. I used to ask the students what they knew and

### *His wife died knowing nothing of his experiences in Bergen-Belsen*

they talked about six million Jews having perished.

'But they didn't just perish — it was a genocidal programme that wanted to murder every Jew in Europe, and that's what prompted me that I have to speak about this, especially to young people.'

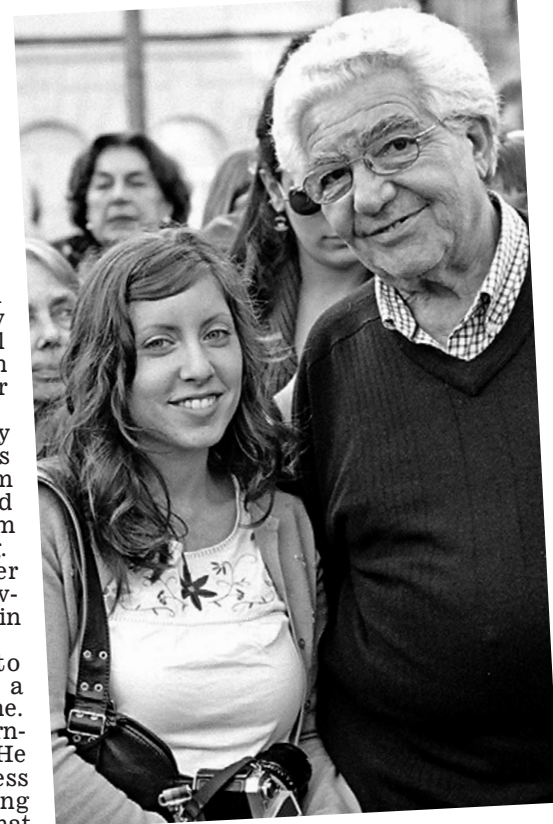
He was booked out up to two years in advance, and when Covid and serious illness intervened, he resumed on Zoom. The requests are still coming in.

'I think today it is more important,' he says of his story. 'All that has happened in recent years is so horrific, and watching it on television as entertainment...' he trails off, baffled by the chaos engulfing the world, but also the way these stories are consumed.

'Now, they show everything, and of course the people are so immune to it, people watch it as entertainment. I always see the people behind and how they suffer, and the consequences it has for a family that have lost their livelihood, their property, their memories, everything.'

He knows better than practically anyone else in this country today where the suffering falls.

'That's what happened to us when the Holocaust started. One day, everything stopped,' he says, his voice dropping slightly, briefly. 'It's gone. We were in a totally different condition. I was only nine years old,



but the adults among us saw this crime happening. We were incarcerated, our lives were destroyed, our education stopped. When I went to school at 10, I couldn't read and write. We have to remind people this isn't [just] a story.'

His determination in that regard is supported by Holocaust Education Ireland. The annual commemoration is the most vivid manifestation of the work that goes on throughout the year.

One of its board members is Caryna Camerino, a Canadian native living in Ireland over 20 years. All four of her grandparents survived the Nazis, with one living through the agonies of Auschwitz.

'When I was growing up, my [paternal] grandfather Enzo Camerino was quite vocal about his experience and what he wanted was for people, not just to learn about the Holocaust in a book, but to really learn about it, to really study it to make sure that something like that never happened again,' she says.

Enzo's wife and her family escaped Nazi attention after a tip-off from a police officer.

On the other side of the family, Caryna's maternal grandmother, who was French, was sheltered along with her family by villagers, who would hide them when Nazi soldiers were in the area.

Her maternal grandfather was Romanian and he escaped from a work camp. All four eventually moved to Canada.

'To have someone in your family who was a survivor of Auschwitz was remarkable, but where I grew up in Montreal, there are a lot of Jewish people, so it's not especially remarkable to be Jewish or to know a survivor or have a survivor in your family,' she says.

'But coming to Ireland, and I'm here 22 years, when I go to speak to students, sometimes I'm the first Jewish person they've ever seen, or met. That feels remarkable.'

The effect of growing up in a community with a significant Jewish population also meant that she understood the story of the Holocaust at a young age.

'The effects of the Holocaust on survivors are all around me and you can learn about it, nearly through osmosis,' she says.

'There was just an understanding of this having happened, whereas the teachers and the students that make an effort to learn about it here, I think that's so important.'

'I really respect that so much, because you have to seek it out here,' she says.

Countless schools and their teachers have sought it out, specifically in the incomparable form of Tomi Reichental. A gratifying feature of his talks has been feeling their effects years later.

'The fact that I speak, people don't forget the story,' he says. 'I meet people now who I spoke to 15 or 20 years ago. They see me and they say,

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Memories: Tomi at Bergen-Belsen camp, where he was held as a child. Right, with his brother Miki and cousin Laco. Left, Caryna Camerino and her grandfather Enzo

# I don't carry hatred but I have to keep speaking out

**Tomi Reichental saw the horrors of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp as a nine-year-old prisoner and says as one of the last remaining witnesses, he has to ensure others know the truth of the Holocaust**

"We will never forget the day you came to the school".

"People will stop me on the street or at the Luas, and they will say, "Your name is Tomi Reichental?" And I'll ask, "How do you know my name?" And they say, "I'll

never forget your story". 'After the war, I remember the slogan was, never again,' he recalls, sadness making a rare intrusion through his words.

"That was forgotten completely. It's all repeating itself. The atrocities

are repeating themselves. It's dreadful."

You wonder if he dreams about the camp. Even though he was a small boy when he was in Bergen-Belsen, the conditions there were so brutal, emptied of any

shade of kindness, decency or basic humanity, that they must have seared deep.

"No, I'm very, very lucky," he replies. "I never spoke about it for over 50 years. I wanted to wipe it out, it was so horrific. The fact that

I'm speaking about it now, and have done so many times — I must have spoken about it thousands of times — it's with me.

"Every time I speak about it, I'm reliving the horrors.

"There are not many doing this," he explains. "I'm not unique in not speaking about it for a long time. Most of the people don't speak about it all their lives. You want to forget. But when I started to speak, I said I'm one of the last witnesses, I have to speak. I forced myself to speak.

"I'm lucky in the sense that I was a child during the Holocaust, and therefore I didn't have the full understanding of what was happening around me. Thank God, I never had nightmares. I never dreamed about it.

"I followed the proverb: make peace with the past, so it won't spoil the present. I don't carry any

*'Every time I speak about it, I'm reliving the horrors'*

hatred or revenge in my attitude. I rather think about my future. That was my motto that I adopted for 20 years. Really, I must say I'm very lucky in that."

To think himself fortunate testifies to the character of the man. His voice is strong, his thoughts lively and easily summoned, and it feels certain that his story will soon be heard again in a school hall as students sit, rapt.

His words may be delivered through a screen, thanks to the efficiencies of modern technology, but they will be no less powerful for that.

Soon, on a cold January evening, he will stand behind a microphone and speak to an audience that includes the President, and share his memories in person.

Their impact will be as powerful, as shattering, as ever.

They will never lose their force. How on earth could they?

"The Irish people should be reminded we are not monsters," he says quietly.

His words are shaped by what he lived through, by the understanding of a hatred that has burned through centuries, and by the instincts of a kind, good man who survived a nightmare to reach for light.