

Tomi Reichental



Tomi aged six

the protein-rich army rations and died. Despite the Allies' best efforts the deaths continued for some months.

As young children, Tomi and his brother, Miki, had to wear a yellow star of David on their clothing. Going to school they suffered bullying, taunts, assaults and humiliation from their peers, simply for being Jewish. Eventually, Jews were no longer allowed in the school.

When an SS unit stormed the village, Tomi's father was taken away and bundled onto a cattle truck bound for Auschwitz. He managed to escape by jumping from the moving vehicle with another man. He then joined the local resistance and fought with the partisans during the war.

In November 1944, despite having false papers, Tomi was arrested along with his mother Judith, brother Miki, grandmother Roselle, aunt Margot and cousin Eva. They were deported to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in northern Germany.

In his 'new home in hell', each morning Tomi faced roll call in the freezing cold. He would become inured to the stench of the rotting corpses piled high around the camp, eventually playing among them, taking care to keep out of the way of the Nazis who practised their marksmanship on human targets. He watched as hundreds of people around him fell ill and died from typhus, diphtheria, tuberculosis or from starvation. Tomi credits his survival to the fact that he was one of the group the Germans showed the outside world as proof that the prisoners were well cared for. He was given extra rations before being displayed to outsiders.

One day in April 1945 the German guards disappeared from the camp and another group of soldiers, with movie cameras and food rations, arrived. The camp had been liberated. Many people, whose stomachs had shrunk from months or years of malnutrition, were unable to tolerate

Tomi's grandmother passed away in Bergen-Belsen. Tomi, his mother, brother, aunt and cousin Eva survived. Tomi lost 35 close family members in the Holocaust. He came to Ireland in 1960 and has lived here ever since.

In 2007 Tomi returned to Bergen-Belsen for the first time in 63 years as part of a documentary being made about him called *Until the Tenth Generation*. He and his brother, Miki, and cousin, Eva, attended the opening of the Bergen-Belsen Museum and laid a memorial plaque there for their grandmother.

We arrive at the site and walk slowly up to an open area with forest all around us. It is now a peaceful, tranquil place but for me, 63 years too late! When I arrived in 1944 it was 'hell on earth'. This open area represented an open graveyard. The memories flood my mind – back then there were corpses lying all around as far as the eye could see. The enormity of this place hits us when we pass the mounds of earth which are the mass graves containing thousands of corpses. Each one has a concrete plaque stating the number buried within: 2,500, 1,000 and on and on. It is, in fact, one of the largest cemeteries in Europe. There are over 70,000 murdered victims buried within these mass graves: 20,000 POWs and 50,000 Jews. We stopped at the Jewish memorial monument, where Kaddish was recited for the thousands of murdered Jews who had perished in this place. It was the most emotional experience for all of us.

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Tomi Reichental today

A documentary about Tomi called "Until the Tenth Generation" was premiered at the Cork Film Festival in October 2008 and a television version called "The Boy from Belsen" shown on RTE 1 in January 2009.