

TOMI REICHENTAL

Review: History: I Was A Boy In Belsen by Tomi Reichental

Holocaust literature is a vast and lucrative business. Indeed, as survivors continue to become increasingly rare and their unique stories die with them, to be lost forever, it is vitally important that we all read as many of these accounts as we can -- the survivors deserve to be borne witness to, after all. Having said that, there are some examples of Holocaust writing that seem to be almost the literary equivalent a violent slasher movie, such is the ferocity and brutality and sheer unbelievable savagery on display.

Indeed, I have only recently finished one book about Majdenek death camp which contained a passage about a guard called 'Mr Hammer' because of his proficiency at killing children with one -- you don't sleep easily after absorbing something like that. Tomi Reichental's memoir of his time in Belsen and his subsequent life and eventual move to this country does not scale the heights of depravity as evidenced by 'Mr Hammer' but it is a vital, important and worthy book, albeit one which could have been edited more tightly.

Having lived a life of bucolic bliss in rural Slovakia, where his family were one of the most respected in the town, their world as they knew it ended forever on one cataclysmic day in October 1944 when the Gestapo finally caught up with them -- some of their former friends and neighbours weren't so friendly or such good neighbours after all.

Eventually, Tomi, along with his mother, brother, grandmother, aunt and cousin ended up in Belsen, where a new life in hell begins. Reichental talks movingly of how desperately the parents of young children tried to keep them from hearing about the gas chambers and the horrific final fate that was in store for them.

As he was only nine, and with a protective mother trying to shield him from the Dante-esque horrors that were being perpetrated around him on a daily basis, it's obvious that he must have missed some of what was going on, but that doesn't stop him from vividly describing the constant sense of dread and terror that they lived with on a daily basis. And alongside the psychological torment they were forced to endure, there were the physical deprivations also -- the perishing cold, the inadequate clothing and, of course, the gnawing starvation that never went away.

As if this wasn't bad enough, there was the camp administration to worry about. The camp commander was none other than Josef Kramer, a vicious sadist who encouraged his staff to emulate his style, which they did with relish. Reichental recalls, almost dispassionately, watching a female camp guard beat an inmate almost to death and he recalls how vivid the woman's blood looked; he remembers the 'latrine dolls' which were actually the bodies of dead babies that had been discarded in the stinking, fetid hole that was the camp latrine.

He also remembers watching his grandmother's corpse being thrown on a pile of rotting bodies as the kids played obliviously around them. It's an almost endless litany of humiliation, violence and whole-scale, systematic slaughter, the planned eradication of an entire race from the face of the earth.

Upon liberation, he returned to his home town in Slovakia but just because the war was over didn't mean that attitudes towards Jews had changed -- there were pogroms still happening for years afterwards and any Jew returning from a camp looking to retrieve their property from their neighbours faced as much a possibility of being shot as actually receiving their belongings. Having joined a Zionist group, he emigrated to Israel as a teenager and then moved to Germany to become an engineer.

Then, in the latest move of his peripatetic life, he moved to Ireland in the late 1950s for his job. While here, he met and married an Irish girl and had three children. For a country that should shudder with shame every time we think about our role in the war, the fact that Reichental found a good life in Ireland and was happy here -- he became a full Irish citizen in 1977 -- is a source of some comfort, and the differences between the two worlds really hit home when you move from one chapter about living in hell in a death camp to then blithely talking about the synagogue in Terenure.

Like many survivors, he remained silent for over 50 years before deciding that he had to bear witness to what he had seen. And to that end he still gives talks to schools and other groups about his experiences, trying to educate the ignorant the dispel the myths of the misinformed.

If you have the chance to hear him talk, take it. Until then, this moving book will be a handy replacement.

Taken from The Irish Independent written by Ian O'Doherty-November 12 2011

