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Premium 

Gold compact and a child's photo bring the past to life

As we remember the Holocaust, we must guard against a re-emergence of the conditions that led to it



The Objects of Love, a poignant exhibition by Oliver Sears (pictured), tells the story of one Polish-Jewish family's survival. The exhibition is in Dublin Castle's Bedford Hall Gallery until February 13. Picture by Sasko Lazarov/Photocall Ireland



Colin Murphy

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Aged nine, Tomi Reichental was sent to Bergen-Belsen with his family. Recalling this at a Holocaust memorial event last November at the National Gallery, he described how, even in a concentration camp, children would play hide-and-seek. But they hid not among trees or piles of wood but behind piles of corpses. One time when they were playing, one of the guards called to them from a watchtower. This man was older and found the crusts of his bread too hard to eat, so he threw them down for Tomi and his friends. They immediately started fighting over the stale crusts. Almost 80 years later, Reichental became upset as he described this. "The humiliation I feel now," he said. "It's very difficult."

Reichental lost 35 members of his family in the Holocaust. He moved to Ireland in 1959 and built a happy life for himself here. He is one of our last remaining

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Holocaust survivors. "That worries me very much," he said. "I owe to the victims that their memory is not forgotten." On a return visit to his birthplace in Slovakia, he met the granddaughter of the man who had signed the deportation papers for his family in 1944, condemning them to the camp. She told him: "I will remember you for always. I will pass your memory to my children and to their children."

"I broke, because this is what I wanted," he said.

This mission — memory — came late in life. Reichental was in his 60s before he discussed the Holocaust publicly. It remains "taboo" with his brother. Such silence was common in the homes of survivors. Dublin art gallery owner Oliver Sears grew up in such a home. His mother, Monika, escaped the Warsaw ghetto with her mother. Monika was 51 before she started to speak about the Holocaust. When she did, it was an extraordinary story she told.

That story is documented in an exhibition called *The Objects of Love*, running at the Bedford Hall Gallery in Dublin Castle until February 13. It consists of family objects, documents and photos Oliver Sears has collected. Some of the images are familiar: Nazis marshalling Jews in the ghetto; emaciated men in a camp bunkhouse. Most of the remaining images are unremarkable: a wedding photo; a family picnic; a happy toddler. It would be easy to skim over them.

That, of course, is precisely what most of us do with anything to do with the Holocaust, most of the time.

As a people with our own troubled history, we are happy to share neither in the trauma of the victims nor the guilt of the perpetrators or bystanders (although caveats apply there). Holocaust commemoration — if we engage at all — is something we dutifully nod our heads toward.

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There was a minute's silence in the Seanad last Thursday to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day, but, from a search of the Oireachtas website, there does not appear to have been any dedicated discussion of the Holocaust



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in our parliament since a short committee debate on denial (proposed by the then TD, Michael D Higgins) 15 years ago.

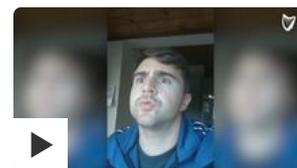
That is a shame, because as Oliver Sears' exhibition reminds us, we have much to learn. Sears has provided an audio narration, accessible via your phone, so his voice guides you through the exhibition, filling the gaps between the photos, forcing you to slow down and see the smiling toddler not as *any* toddler but as two-and-a-half-year-old Monika, who spent part of the war hiding under a table while her mother, pretending to be a Catholic without children, was out at work.

Sears has spent years piecing the story together, from family artefacts and photos and research in multiple archives. Among the items is a gold powder compact: in 1947, having survived the war but still vulnerable in Poland, Monika's mother sold their apartment at a fire sale price, bought gold and had it made into the compact, in order to be able to bring some savings with them as refugees. "When I first picked it up," recalls Oliver, "it was so heavy it fell through my heart."

His exhibition is the necessary companion to the National Holocaust Memorial Day commemoration, which will be streamed live at 5pm this evening from the Mansion House in Dublin. Because, as the American historian Timothy Snyder has written (in *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning*), we "are apt to confuse commemoration with understanding". It is too easy to bow our heads without wrestling with the facts. Those facts promote empathy with the victims; they also may bring us closer to the perpetrators and bystanders, and closer to understanding how it happened.

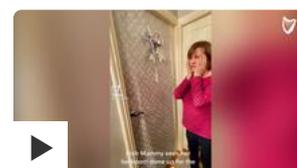
The British historian Laurence Rees once interviewed Toivi Blatt, who had been part of a "Sonderkommando" prisoner work unit at Sobibor death camp. As he recalled for a BBC History Extra podcast, Rees asked Blatt what the experience had taught him. "Nobody knows themselves," Blatt told him. "Because it's not until you're placed in a situation like that that you know what you're capable of and who you are."

Snyder argues: "There is little reason to think that we are ethically superior to the Europeans of the 1930s and 1940s, or for that matter less vulnerable to the kind of ideas that Hitler so successfully promulgated and realised." That is the bleak lesson of the Holocaust: that "we share a world with the forgotten perpetrators as well as with the memorialised victims"; therefore, we must be on our guard against a re-emergence of the conditions that made it possible. But there is an optimistic lesson too. These people survived. Every night in Bergen-Belsen, when Tomi Reichental's mother put him and his brother to bed, she would say: "Don't worry, we will get through."



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“Always a smile on the face,” he recalled. “And we did. This was one of the things that kept us alive.”

When Oliver Sears visited Auschwitz with his mother, he struggled not merely with the inevitable emotions of grief and anger, but also “triumph”. He draws, similarly, a “sense of triumph” from his ability to bring his murdered relatives “back to life” and “give them a voice” through the exhibition and from the fact that it is supported by the Irish State.

As the generation who remember the Holocaust pass, that duty of remembrance falls to younger generations — and not merely to the children of victims and survivors, but to all of us. When conspiratorial thinking — often anti-Semitic — is once again rife, it becomes all the more important for us to be able to say, as Sears does: here is the evidence; I heard a witness speak. Sometimes, that evidence will be too awful to contemplate. But other times the evidence will be objects of love.

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