

## A Survivor's Warning

Dr. Werner Riehheimer, born 1937 in Karlsruhe, Germany, at the precipice of the second World War, shared the story of his journey through Nazi Germany and the events that occurred in tandem. Despite his three-year relegation to concentration camps, Riehheimer initiated his talk with unparalleled compassion by explaining that “you can’t forget what happened to you, but you have to learn to forgive.” He not only underscored the importance of transitioning from a monologue to a dialogue in regard to discussing the Holocaust, but also emphasized its looming possibility in the modern era. Overall, Dr. Riehheimer provided staggering insight into his own experiences surviving the Holocaust, while simultaneously expressing its enduring relevance and offering a warning about its potential reemergence.

Most of Riehheimer’s memories come from a diary his older sister, Lois, kept detailing their journey. On November 9, 1938, Riehheimer’s family’s synagogue was burned to the ground. This, he recalls, was a turning point in the conflict. On that night, his family realized that Europe was being overrun by facism and its consequent oppression and that survival was now the utmost priority.

Dr. Riehheimer then transitioned to August 1940, describing a chilling moment that illustrates the escalation of the Nazi regime’s policies toward the Jewish population. His sister’s aforementioned diary described how authorities arrived outside his door with clipboards. They told Riehheimer’s family that they had 15 minutes to gather their belongings, as they were to be transported to a “nicer place.” With no other option, they departed by foot to a local school, where they boarded army trucks that took them to a train depot. Once there, individuals by the thousands were loaded onto cattle car trains and the doors were locked. After three days, two

nights, and the death of many innocent citizens, the train arrived at Gurs Internment Camp in southwestern France. Richheimer and other prisoners were instructed to form three lines: women and children, young men, and elderly men. As Dr. Richheimer slipped into his numbered pajamas, he did not realize that it would be the last time he would ever see his mother again. On the other hand, he would be allowed to visit his father every few months. At this time, Richheimer explained the overarching sense of separation at this camp. Evident to the outside world by the barbed wire and electric fence, he described an incredible feeling of loneliness and confusion. Presumably, it was difficult for a child to comprehend why he had to live like this, just as it was impossible for an adult to offer no other explanation than a bias rooted in hatred and intolerance.

Years later, Richheimer was secretly transported from the camp with the help of, whom he described as, Quakers. His memory is not complete, but he recalls concealing himself beneath layers of hay in a truck en route to a French orphanage. The truck, however, was subject to frequent stops by Nazi patrolmen. In a moment he described as feeling like an eternity, a pitchfork scraped the surface of the hay and came not more than inches away from his sister. Dr. Richheimer does not like to entertain the thought of what could have happened had they been detected. He commented, though, that despite the risks involved, he knew they had to escape.

As Richheimer and his only remaining family member were forced to travel farther from their home, they realized the massive scope of the genocide and contemplated the undoubtedly innumerable subsequent deaths. When Richheimer reached a subsection of the French resistance, an underground liberation network, he felt his trepidation rise along with his optimism. After these years of torment, it was difficult to believe relief was possible. Richheimer rode a bicycle

five kilometers to the Swiss border. He crossed the border that day in 1947 and he was finally free. He would regain his health after six weeks of hospitalization and make the decision to emigrate to the United States. After arriving in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Richheimer and his sister would be raised by their aunt and uncle. He would meet his future wife, Carol, become a dentist and a United States Army veteran, and become a father of four children and grandfather of several grandchildren. If one thing was made clear while Dr. Richheimer shared his story, it is that he refused to let evil triumph. And now, he refuses to let it resurface.

In reflection, Dr. Richheimer offered that he fears for his grandchildren's future. He is reminded of his aunt who told him that "what happened in Germany can happen here [the United States]." In this poignant moment of truth, it is ascertained that the world in its current state has not totally learned from the horrors of the Holocaust. It is dangerous to assume that the country or world has progressed away from anti-semitism when hateful sentiments are commonplace, from vandalism perpetrated against synagogues to rising attacks on social media. The courage he exhibited in his testimony was the result of strength and perseverance in the face of the most daunting obstacles the world has ever put forth, and as a result, Dr. Richheimer's story cannot be disregarded. It indicates that bigotry at the highest level is not a form of leadership, but rather a blaring alarm that understanding and compassion are necessary now more than ever for the sake of a just, thriving society. This is where Richheimer again expressed the importance of maintaining a robust dialogue, not a common monologue, centered around the Holocaust. To truly prevent recurrence is to confront evil in its simplest form by agreeing to never forget the tragedy of the Holocaust and never failing to take action to prevent another one: "To forget a Holocaust is to kill twice" (Elie Wiesel).

### Works Cited

“A Conversation with Werner Richeimer.” Holocaust Stories: In their Honor. 10 Sept. 2017,

Milwaukee, Harry & Rose Samson Family Jewish Community Center.

Nathan and Esther Pelz Holocaust Education Resource Center