

Here is the full transcript of Holocaust survivor Werner Reich's talk titled "How the Magic of Kindness Sustains Us" at TEDxMidAtlantic conference.

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TRANSCRIPT:

In the rather delightful book "The Little Prince," there is a quotation, which says:

"It's only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible."

And while the author wrote these words sitting in a comfortable chair, somewhere in the United States, I learned this very same lesson 3000 miles away in a filthy, dirty barrack in an extermination camp in Poland.

It isn't the value or the size of a gift that truly matters, it is how you hold it in your heart.

When I was six years old, my mother, my father, my sister and myself left Jew-hating Germany, and we went to Yugoslavia. And we were in Yugoslavia for seven happy years, and then Germany invaded Yugoslavia. And we suddenly were persecuted again, and I had to go into hiding.

And I was hiding for roughly two years with a couple who had worked for the resistance movement. And I developed films, and I made enlargements.

One day, when I was 15 years old, I was arrested by the gestapo and beaten up, and, for two months, dragged through various prisons, and eventually, I ended up in a 150-year-old fortress in Czechoslovakia, which the Nazis had converted into a concentration camp.

I was there for 10 months. I laid railroad tracks, I exterminated vermin, I made baskets, and after 10 months, about 2,000 of us were loaded into cattle cars, the doors were closed, and we were shipped east.

For three days, we traveled like that, and when we were unloaded, we were smelling of urine and of feces, and we found ourselves in the Auschwitz extermination camp. A camp that, by that time, had murdered already over one million people and sent them through the chimney into the sky.

We arrived, we were stripped of all of our properties, whatever we had, and were given striped uniforms, were given a tattoo on our arms, and we also were given the message that we would be there for exactly six months.

And after that, we would leave the camp. Through the chimney.

We were assigned to different barracks. And the barracks were filled with wooden bunks, six people on each level, three people sleeping in one direction and three in the other direction, so whichever way you slept, you always had a pair of feet in your face.

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(Transcript)

The man next to me was an extremely nice gentleman, and he introduced himself as Mr. Herbert Levine.

Mr. Levine was kind and polite to me. One day, when I came back from a work assignment, I climbed up, I was at the top level of the three-tier bunk, and there was Mr. Levine with a deck of cards. And he was shuffling these cards.

And I couldn't understand it, you know, having a deck of cards in

Auschwitz was like finding a gorilla in your bathroom. *You know, "What is he doing there?"*

And then Mr. Levine turned to me and offered me the deck, and said, "Pick a card." So I picked a card, and he performed a card trick for me. He performed a miracle. And I'd never seen a card trick before, and the man who performed it was sitting right there.

And then Mr. Levine did the unthinkable. He actually explained the trick to me. And the words got burned into my brain. And I remembered every single word, and from that day on, I practiced that trick every day. Although I didn't have any cards, I just kept on practicing.

About three weeks later, the entire camp, with the exception of a couple hundred of us, were sent to the gas chambers. I was sent to another camp where I worked in the stables, and then, in January 1945, when the Russians advanced, 60,000 of us were sent on a death march.

And we walked for three days, on and off, and in the middle of the winter, and by the time we arrived at a railroad siding, out of the 60,000 people, 15,000 had died. And the rest of us were loaded into open railroad cars, and for four days, shipped all the way from Poland down to Austria.

And we found ourselves in a death camp, in a concentration camp called Mauthausen, which again was built like a fortress. And at that point, the SS abandoned us, and there was no food there, and there were thousands and thousands of bodies there.

I slept for three days next to a dead man, just to get his ration of a tablespoon of moldy bread. And two days before the end of the war, May 5, we were liberated by American forces.

At that time, I was 17 years old, and I weighed 64 pounds. And I hitchhiked back to Yugoslavia. And when I came back to Yugoslavia, there

was communism there, there was no family there and there were no friends there. I stayed there for two years, and after two years, I managed to escape to England.

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And when I came to England, I couldn't speak English, I had no education, I had no skills. I started working, and about a year after I arrived in England, I bought myself a deck of cards.

And for the very first time, I actually performed the trick that was shown to me in Auschwitz on top of a bunk bed. And it worked. It worked beautifully. And I showed it to some friends of mine, and they loved it.

And I went to a magic store, and I bought some magic tricks, and I showed them to my friends, and I bought some more magic tricks and I showed it to them.

And then I bought some magic books, and I bought some more magic books. There's a very, very thin line between a hobby and insanity.

Anyway, I got married, and I came to the United States. And one of the first jobs that I had demanded from me to speak to small groups of people. And I managed it, I was very good at it.

And then, 25 years ago, I retired. And I started speaking in schools. And the only reason why I could speak in schools is because a very friendly man showed a rather scared kid a card trick in a concentration camp.

This man who showed it to me, Mr. Levine, had been a professional magician. He worked in Germany, and when he came to Auschwitz, the SS knew who he was, so they gave him some cards, they gave him a piece of string, they gave him some dice, and he performed for them.

And then he also taught some of them. He survived the war, but his wife and his son died. He came to the United States and performed in various venues, but I never met him again.

But the trick that he showed me stayed with me and enabled me to go around schools and try to make this world just a little bit better.

So if you ever know somebody who needs help, if you know somebody who is scared, be kind to them. Give them advice, give them a hug, teach them a card trick.

Whatever you are going to do, it's going to be hope for them. And if you do it at the right time, it will enter their heart, and it will be with them wherever they go, forever.

Thank you.

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