



*Pictured : Zoltan Zinn-Collis addresses learners at National Learning Network in Athy, Co. Kildare.*

## Holocaust Survivor is Living History

National Learning Network in Athy had a visit from Holocaust survivor Zoltan Zinn-Collis recently. He tells *Rehab News* his story.

**“IT’S A GOOD THING** to forgive but you must never forget,” says Zoltan Zinn-Collis about his talks on the war. He was just four years old when his family was deported from Hungary to the notorious Bergen-Belsen detention camp. Conditions were dreadful as the camp, built to accommodate 6,000 people, held 40,000 people. Zoltan’s mother, brother and baby sister died there. He never saw his father again after they were separated while boarding the train.

His journey to Ireland began when a volunteer brought him to the attention of Dr Robert Collis, a paediatrician at the National Children’s Hospital who also founded Cerebral Palsy Ireland, now Enable Ireland.

Zoltan explains, “Bob went to help the people – the orphans – after the occupation. He had a kind of mobile hospital and, in due course,

he came to Belsen. A young Dutch law student, who spoke 10 or 12 languages, found me in the camp and brought Bob over to have a look at me.

“He reported that I said to him in German, ‘My father is dead. You are now my father.’ He simply said ‘Yes’ in English but neither of us understood the other. So the student translated. I think he was taken aback by what had just been said.

“In 1946, Bob brought back five orphans, including me and my sister, from Bergen-Belsen. We were the first refugees or asylum seekers in this country – we had no papers at all. He brought up my sister and myself as his own. He couldn’t adopt us, as they had no adoption then, but he became our father. He gave us a great start in life.”

The camp conditions had a lasting effect and Zoltan had to remain in hospital for a couple of years and was critically ill on a number of

occasions before he started school. He went on to become a chef, married and had four daughters and several grandchildren. He didn’t think about the war until an RTÉ documentary took him back to Belsen in 1999. He describes the trip as both emotionally and physically tough but says, “I’m glad I went.”

Reflection on the past has brought Zoltan a new role as a writer and a speaker. He recently published a book, *Final Witness*, which is being adapted for the screen. He visits schools, colleges and prisons narrating his memories so young people understand the scale of the horror that occurred – 12 million people died in the Nazis’ 1,700 camps. History can seem distant but, as he explains, “You can relate to the individual person. An eyewitness is not a page in a book.”

Looking back on his experiences, Zoltan says, “I have had five goes at life. Most will only get the one. Don’t waste it.” ■