



10 things i believe

WITH BENJAMIN FERENCZ, THE LAST SURVIVING
PROSECUTOR OF THE NUREMBERG TRIALS
AND CHAMPION OF WORLD PEACE.

Interviewer Patrick Pittman. Illustrator Bea Crespo

WE ARE ALL MEMBERS OF THE CLUB

When I came into this world 98 years ago, it was quite different. My family came to the U.S. from Transylvania as paupers and refugees. We lived in a cellar, and my father got a job as a janitor. Of course, there was no such thing as human rights being taught back then. But there was a growing awareness that there were people around the world who were suffering. Finally you had the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted at the United Nations, and there was the beginning of a recognition that we are all members of one small planet, and we should share its resources so that everyone can live in peace and human dignity. Of course the world is still very rough today, but we have an awareness now that we didn't before. I have no doubt whatsoever that we can achieve world peace if we have the political will to do so. We just haven't got there yet.

MAPS DON'T MATTER

I was nine months old when we left Europe. My sister, who's a year and a half older than me, was born in the same bed I was born in. She's by birth a Hungarian; I'm a Romanian. So what happened? They moved the border.

So I know from firsthand experience it's not important what you call a country, but how you treat its people. Yet still people kill each other because they don't like the name of the country. And that's the environment I came from: living in a cellar, poor parents, no skills, no money, happy to get a job as a janitor in a tenement house.

CAN'T BE A CROOK? BE A LAWYER

I grew up in New York, in what was the highest crime density area in the U.S. People picked on me, and told me I'd either make a good lawyer or a good crook. I didn't know what a lawyer was, but I didn't want to be a crook, so that left me no choice. I focused my studies on juvenile delinquency, because my friends were all juvenile delinquents. I was at law school when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. I went into the army because I didn't want people getting killed for me while I stayed home. I wanted to go to the Air Force, but had trouble getting in due to my height – I was five foot two and couldn't reach the pedals. But by chance I had a good education, so they sent me on war crimes work. I was sent to General Patton's army headquarters, where I was told, "We've been

ordered to set up a war crimes branch, your name has been forwarded from Washington, and by the way, *what's a war crime?*"

WE GLORIFY WHAT WE SHOULD DESPISE

After getting an education and winning the war, the next step was catching the criminals and holding them accountable. That was my job, and I found the evidence. If I hadn't, there wouldn't have been the Einsatzgruppen trial at Nuremberg. I insisted on the Nazi extermination squad members being tried and they said, "Okay, you do it." The next step I worked on was to prevent something like that from happening again. People don't want war – they want a job, they want to be able to live in peace, they want to get fed, they want someone to take care of their sick babies. It's only politicians, who are more interested in power than they are in the people, who want war, and that's why we end up with what we've got. We glorify what we should despise, and we have done so for centuries. I'm trying to reverse this.

>>

PROGRESS DOESN'T MOVE IN A STRAIGHT LINE; IT SPIRALS UPWARDS THEN GOES DOWN. BUT TO GET DISCOURAGED IS TO BECOME AN ACCOMPLICE.

<<

I'M NOT INTERESTED IN MONSTERS

At Nuremberg, I selected those who were going to be tried on the basis of their education and their rank. I had no enlisted men in my dock, just generals, who all had PhDs. I spoke only with the lead defendant, Otto Ohlendorf, and went down to see him in the death house – I knew he was going to hang for sure, as he admitted to murdering 90,000 Jews. People have asked me, “How did it feel for you to be talking to these monsters?” They were not monsters. The man who dropped the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima killed thousands of children. Does that make him a monster? Ohlendorf explained that he was told by Hitler that the Russians were planning to attack and therefore what he did was in self-defence. Well, I asked, why did you kill all the Jews? He said that everybody knew the Jews were sympathetic to the Bolsheviks. So why did you kill their children? Well, if we killed the parents, the children would become enemies of Germany. He had an explanation for everything and no remorse whatsoever; in fact he said he would do it again under similar circumstances. And he was a well-educated gentleman. I'm sure he was kind to his cats and dogs. But war makes murderers out of decent people.

NO CHOICE BUT TO CHANGE

I prosecuted the largest murder trial in history at Nuremberg when I was 27 years old. Later, when I delivered my closing remarks at the trial of Congolese warlord Thomas Lubanga at the International Criminal Court, I was 92. I've seen how long change takes, but the deterrent effect of what we achieved is there. When law is not effective, as in wartime, all the other crimes occur, too. This is part of what makes war hell; without law there is chaos. I have no choice but to try to change the world, but

I also have no illusions about my capacity to do that. The progress we have achieved is enormous, but there's still a long way to go, and the danger is increasing. Still, I'm an optimist by determination, because without optimism you don't have the strength to carry on and do all the million things that have to be done for a more peaceful world. Even in a world that is irrational, I still hold on to my belief in the rule of law. I have no choice.

BIG THINGS TAKE TIME

The International Criminal Court might not have stopped any genocides yet, but it's a prototype. Things on the universal scale take long periods of time. When the Wright brothers got the brilliant idea of saying you can take a bicycle and put a wing on it and it will fly, everybody thought they were stark raving mad, but there are thousands of planes flying all around the world at this moment. The idea of having an international criminal court, which would seem to be common sense, has only existed for 70 years or less, and it's just beginning to crawl, nothing more. One day it will stand up, but not yet. Now I get reports of international courts and tribunals all around the world that I never heard of, in countries that I never heard of. It's a slow process and it doesn't move in a straight line. It spirals upwards then it goes down, it spirals again a little higher then it goes down again. But to get discouraged is to become an accomplice. If you don't have courage, you don't have the hope to make things better.

EVERYTHING IS BACKWARDS

I'm often called to speak at events. When I have a young audience, I say, “In the current system, if two heads of state are unable to agree, they take young people like you,” and I point to one side

of the auditorium, “and they send them out to kill other young people like you,” pointing at the other side. “And they continue killing each other until they get tired of killing each other. Then they rest and each side declares victory. After they've paused for a while they start again.” That is the current system of relations among nations, and it's insane. They spend all their money on building new and bigger and better armaments to kill more people. In doing that, they have more people who are hungry and unemployed and sick. They're doing the whole thing backwards.

HAVE A SLOGAN

People live not by reason but by slogans, so you have to have a slogan. Mine is very easy: law, not war. If you could have law instead of war, you would have enough money to take care of the students for their tuition, for the old people, for the refugees who are looking for a place where they can live in peace and hide and feed their family. All of that would be taken care of if you just take those three words. “Ah,” my students say, “Mr Ferencz, how are you going to do that?” I say I have three pieces of advice. One: never give up. Two: never give up. Three... and I don't say anything but point the finger at them, and the audience says: “never give up.”

YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU

In this terrible, terrible world, my optimism comes from the fact that the world was at least twice as terrible before. I was not only a witness; I've experienced it. I was raised in poverty, and today I've given away millions of dollars to different peace organisations. I want to go out the way I came in. My kids are all educated, and my wife is 98 years old. We've been happily wed for 72 years without a quarrel, and you can't match that. The world's been good to me. •

CAMELBAK®

THE
ORIGINAL
HANDS FREE
HYDRATION
COMPANY

PREMIUM BOTTLES & HYDRATION PACKS

ONLINE camelbak.com.au | INSTORE Lower Ground, QVB, Sydney