

Happy Birthday, Ben Ferencz

*John Q. Barrett**

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March 11, 2014, or some date around that date, marks the 94th birthday of Benjamin B. Ferencz.

Ben, then “Berrel,” was born in Transylvania, then part of Hungary, on or about March 11, 1920. He became, at very young ages, an American, then a lawyer, and then a World War II soldier and war crimes investigator.

In 1946, Ben Ferencz became a United States prosecutor in Nuremberg. During 1947 and 1948, he served as chief prosecutor in the *Einsatzgruppen* case. He charged the defendants, leaders of Nazi killing operations in Eastern Europe, with crimes against humanity (“a systematic program of genocide”), war crimes, and membership in criminal Nazi organizations.

Ben’s cases against those defendants, built on their contemporaneous reports of their crimes, were brief, horrifying and irrefutable, in his Nuremberg courtroom and in history. More than twenty defendants were convicted. The *Einsatzgruppen* case was and is the biggest murder trial in human history.

In the 1950s, Ben returned to the United States and, for a time, to law practice. In recent decades, he moved up, and back, to bigger things. He has been and is a champion of justice, a builder of international and national legal institutions, a guide to and teacher of peace through law.

It is fitting—not to mention no surprise—that Ben Ferencz is the last living Nuremberg prosecutor, and going strong. He has been a moral exemplar to many, many thousands, maybe millions. What he is and represents is great, global and permanent.

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For more information on Ben, I refer you to *the* source: his own wise, not to mention witty, voice—

- Ben’s website is a treasure house of his writings and speeches: www.benferencz.org;
- It includes his autobiography, “Benny Stories,” which are must, must read material ([click here](#));
- Ben is all over YouTube, including most recently [here](#); and, of course,
- You can follow him on Twitter ([click here](#)).

None of that, alas, will pin down Ben Ferencz’s birth date—even he, skilled investigator, has never found an authoritative record of that event. So he guesses at this date, and that’s good enough for me.

Ben’s birth is imprecisely dated. But I can say a few things about it with confidence that approaches certainty:

- Ben’s birth was important, and I hope joyous, to his family.
- Ben’s birth was and is alright with him—he is inherently glad to be here, with decency and fierce dedication to each person’s equal right to that feeling of peace and welcome.
- Ben’s birth also turned out to be an event that was and is enormously significant for humanity.

So happy birthday, Ben, and thank you, sincerely, from me and from all of your grateful friends and clients.

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HAPPY BIRTHDAY, BEN FERENCZ

A postscript: After receiving the initial version of this post via Jackson List email on March 11, 2014, Ben Ferencz sent back this reply:

Since you are such a stickler for accuracy, let me explain the confusion about my birth date. (The New York Bar's character committee also wanted an explanation.)

My mother, who presumably was present at both conception and creation, told me that I was born on March 15, 1920. I was not taking notes at that time. I was about 15 years old before I somehow managed to procure a birth certificate from a province in Romania, which used to be Hungary. Of course, I could not understand a word of it. There was no reference to March 15! The closest was March 13. Thenceforth, I used the 13th as my date of birth.

When I got to law school, a certified translation was required. It stated that it was issued on March 13 to record my birth on March 11. I promptly confronted my mother for cross-examination. She explained, without being under oath, that my father (a cousin from whom she was peacefully divorced when I was about 6 years old) got things all mixed up when he applied for a visa to America in 1920. I suspect that since March 15 was a national holiday, in honor of Lajos (Louis) Kossuth, an idealistic revolutionary, my mother figured that the 15th would be a more suitable date to commemorate her son's birth. Of course I could not challenge my only mother's veracity, but thereafter I used the official recorded date of March 11.

It follows therefore that today [March 11, 2014] I completed my 94th year. If that is now behind me, I can no longer say I am 94. I prefer to speak the truth: On March 12, I entered upon my 95th year, even though I accept accolades on March 11, 13 and 15 for having reached 94—which was last year.

You may honestly record that you knew a little man who had 285 birthdays!

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Ben Ferencz in Courtroom 600, Palace of Justice, Nuremberg, circa 1947 and November 21, 2010.