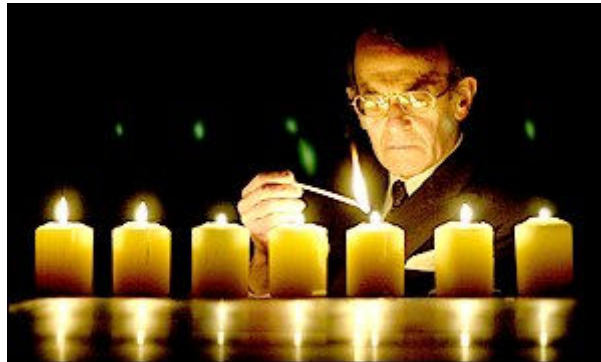


"If there is no respect, there will be pain"

Mike Wade

The Times, Saturday 26 January 2008



In spring 1944, Ernest Levy was jailed in Budapest. His offence was minor and he believed he would be at liberty within a few days. Instead, over the next year, this teenage boy was to pass through seven Nazi concentration camps. He worked as slave labour in a factory and a mine, endured a forced march which killed many of his comrades, until finally he was found by British troops who liberated Belsen in April 1945, a living skeleton, ravaged by typhoid and hours from death.

Levy, who became cantor at the Giffnock and Newlands synagogue when he moved to Scotland in the early 1960s, has made it his duty to speak about these events, though they are full of unutterable sadness for him. For the last 40 years he has visited schools and churches to reveal the horrors of Nazism. Tomorrow is Holocaust Memorial Day. It is right, he believes, that he should bear witness one last time.

But no more. He is in hospital in Glasgow – his heart is weak – and Levy will not speak out again. It is “the bitter end”. He has lived long enough.

“People have to be told. If we don’t co-exist, and don’t respect difference, there will be pain,” he says, in his thin reedy voice, sitting beside his hospital bed.

“Homicide does not occur just from one day to another. I saw it coming step-by-step. Sustained hatred culminated in the Holocaust. We have to make an effort to avoid that hatred. We can’t love everybody but we can co-exist. There are fantastic things going on in the world. Unity within diversity. The world has stepped forward a lot.”

Imaging the scenes of Levy’s life is impossible without conjuring up novels and films. In a series of ghastly cinematic frames, his life flashes by as those around him perish. Many times, only his relative youth and physical fitness – he had been a keen footballer – contrived to save him.

Jailed for missing a duty with the local civil defence force, within four days he had been squeezed onto a cattle truck with hundreds of other prisoners and taken away. One of eight children, he would never see half of his family again.

The first station on his descent to hell was Auschwitz, where his few possessions were stripped away and his head shaven. He became a number, not a name. After a week, came a winnowing of the 'wheat' from the 'chaff'. Levy was wheat, detailed to a work camp, some 60km distant. The rest were bound for the gas chambers and "escaped up the chimney" in the words of some of the deranged inmates.

The dark months that followed in Wustegiersdorf in south eastern Poland were desperate enough. Starvation rations, brutal guards, and all manner of filth surrounded the captives. But as the "1000-year Reich" imploded, and the Red Army advanced, the camp was abandoned and its inmates forced to drag themselves hundreds of kilometres to Belsen in Lower Saxony.

This was a "death march", says Levy, undertaken in bitter winter, by men who had already spent months or years without nourishment or warm clothing. Many died where they fell on the road. Others, who might use the pretence of exhaustion to play dead and then escape, were shot. One night's act of savagery came by the River Elbe. Here, the prisoners were directed to a warehouse, and its double doors flung open.

"Four hundred malnourished Jewish men and boys were ordered into a space that could not possibly hold them. Eighty at a pinch," remembers Levy. "We were among the first 20 or 30 inside and facing the doors we watched horror-stricken as the crush increased. It was a little while before close became too close, became difficult, hard to breathe, became painful, became a need to protest, became a need to beg and shout for help."

The first to die were those crushed into the walls. Others sank to floor and were trampled. A stumble sent Levy down, but he was pulled upright by Joe, his friend. "It was not long before we were moving over the dead and dying. The movement of my feet provoked cries of pain, but the force of the mass compelled my feet to move. I was relatively strong. I survived. The weaker went under, some by my hands and feet. So it was.

"Just after dawn, the doors were flung open to allow the survivors to stagger out gasping and coughing. Some emerged on their knees and collapsed. Others fell to knees in prayer. I would not look back but Joe later described the shed floor covered in broken bodies."

His first task at Belsen was to clear the railway ramp and the rail trucks alongside of the dead and the dying. "Line them up and box them like matchsticks," he was ordered by the Camp Commandant, Joseph Kramer. "Are you listening to me? Like matchsticks. You'll get more in. More space. Do it then." His final memory of

captivity is hauling corpses down to a giant pit of dead bodies, where lime would be added to reduce the mass of skin and bone to a chemical slurry.

Levy has told some of these stories before. But as wise as he is, he can never comprehend their meaning, nor drive their sadness from him.

“It is so difficult to understand a human situation where humanity has disappeared. I saw it from so close. Once you are swept up in a life of violence and crying, you lose all sensitivity for human suffering. It only takes a year,” he says.

In the ‘New World Order’ of the concentration camps, the brutality of the SS was often delegated to ‘kapos’, convicted criminals, mainly Jewish, who were “given interesting things to do around work camps by the Nazis”, says Levy.

“The classical example was Schreiber – a Kapo and a Jew – who could have been an ordinary family man. He was in Auschwitz for years and they taught him how to treat people. He lost all sensitivity. He enjoyed the agony of human suffering. I saw him with my own eyes. Smiling.

“Some young Nazis, enjoyed the agony of suffering. You were lost, you were miles from home. No-one knew where you were, what you were, what was happening. There was no chance of getting out of that hell. And they were counting on that. They had lost their normal humanity.”

At yet, remarkably Levy’s memories are dappled with light. Kindnesses followed his horrendous journey. Arriving in Budapest in 1941, a refugee from Czechoslovakia, he had been separated from his family, when he was taken in by Greta, a prostitute. She fed him, gave him money and directed him to the Jewish quarter, where he was reunited with his mother and father.

Months later, their paths would cross again, and Levy was delighted to find that Greta had married an older man, a retired postman who shared her contempt for the Nazis. The couple would later rescue two Jewish boys and hide them for the remainder of the war. Levy is moved to smile by this memory. “Like us, she came back from the dead. Because she was lost, on the streets, and she came back. With that old postman. It was an unusual story.”

There were Germans who took risks as great and who died to help the Jews. In Wustegiersdorf, Levy was saved by Anton Strummer, the German manager of the engineering workshop, whose generosity and patience towards his 80 strong staff kept them from the inhumanity of the camp outside. Strummer quit his job in a blaze of insubordination, publicly dismissing his successor, a buttoned up Nazi apparatchik, as a fool.

Above all was Helmut, a young German soldier, who was a friendly presence at Wustegiersdorf and on the road to Belsen. By the time the column of prisoners was

loaded onto a train for the final stretch of that terrible journey, Levy was suffering from diarrhoea. Throughout the night Helmut repeatedly helped Levy up on to the side of the cattle truck so he could empty his bowels onto the track. "I would not expect my brothers to help like this," Levy told his good German friend. Now he says: "Like many young men in the Wehrmacht, Helmut was caught in a cleft stick, obliged to 'heil' the 'heils' but at odds with the doctrine."

Levy knows little of what happening to these wonderful people. He met Greta once, her hair greying, in 1958. Her postman husband had been shot dead by a Soviet sniper during the Hungarian rising. Anton and Helmut almost certainly perished in 1945 for their virtuous anti-Nazism.

Yet "by a miracle", Levy first encountered his wife, Kathy, in Belsen. Chased by the brutal kapo, Schreiber, he had fled to an unfamiliar part of the camp, and taken refuge in a brick barracks. "I heard Hungarian, so I shouted my family's name – 'Maybe someone is here,' I thought. There were women. They had their own hair, their own clothing, and something to eat. And she was sitting on a bed, looking down on me. She gave me food.

"All those years later, to remember me was impossible. I had been a skeleton, the living dead. But I had taken a long look at her and after the war, in Glasgow, in Hungarian company, I met her. She told me she was a survivor at Belsen.

"I was invited to her home. In the living room there was a montage of pictures of her growing up. I got a shock. It was her graduation photo. She was 19 and later the same year she was in Belsen. I looked at her in utter disbelief. She had given me a little piece of bread and then I had had to run away." They married and had two children. Kathy Levy died last year.

A decade ago, a family friend who had a business not far from Belsen, asked Levy if he would like to visit the site of the death camp. "It was an awful dilemma," he recalled, and neither then nor today can he come to terms with the visit.

"All through the journey I didn't speak a word. I was ready to say 'Turn back'. But something pulled me there. When we arrived. I couldn't go to the ramp [by the railway track]. I couldn't face it. I went into the memorial hall. And I said my prayers there, because I lost friends."

Reverend Levy breaks off. "I can't even talk about it.

"I have a bag of earth from Jerusalem. And I brought home a bag of earth from Belsen. When I am buried, I want that earth from Belsen buried with me."