

## A Light Extinguished

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It's not often that a metaphor is so precisely appropriate, but both Scotland and the Jewish Community are darker places, with the passing of Rev Ernest Levy, who did so much to illuminate the darker corners of inhumanity.

Ernest was born in Bratislava in 1925, and was a victim, first of Slovakian fascists, then of the Nazi occupation of Hungary in 1944. He was deported on the first train to Auschwitz, and survived no fewer than seven concentration camps, before being liberated from Belsen, where he believed he had seen Anne Frank just before she died.

After the war, he sang in the choir of the famous Dohany Street Synagogue in Budapest while he qualified as an engineer, but he soon decided to follow his father and brother into the ministry, and went to Tel Aviv to study Chazanut. Knowing his brother, Charles Lowy, had found Scotland very welcoming, he became Chazzan of the small Pollokshields Synagogue in Glasgow, before moving to Giffnock, where he spent the rest of his life and took up what was almost a parallel career.

Most people will remember Ernest for his first-hand account of the horrors of the Holocaust and his warnings against the slippery slope of intolerance, accompanied with an almost superhuman refusal to bear a grudge even against his own tormentors. The Nazi he spoke of most in his countless talks to schools, churches, and others, was the guard at Belsen who saved his life.

But these memories took their toll. I remember as a student, asking him if he would be prepared to talk about his experiences, and his reply that it was too raw and painful. But later he came to realise that, as the numbers of survivors diminished, those who remained had an ever greater obligation to bear witness to the depths of human evil that they had suffered. I know from the many times that I more recently acted as his chauffeur, that remembering, especially in these last two years since his beloved wife Kathy, a fellow survivor whom he met in Glasgow, was no less raw and painful than it had been in earlier days, but it was something he regarded as a sacred duty - a memorial to those who were lost, and a warning to those who remain.

His message was the very antithesis of what he had suffered, and he became an outspoken advocate of diversity:

"Each person must be part of society, without giving up his identity, values and traditions. And each person must recognise the validity of each other's beliefs and religions. There is a fundamental human right to be as different from each other as we please, each human being is unique. Instead of seeking conformity we must turn the whole thing upside down and recognise that differences can be wonderful in adding colour and spice to our lives."

This was the feature of Scottish society that had attracted him here; and he lived to see it become the policy of successive governments under the banner of *one Scotland - Many Cultures*.

Fortunately for those who remain, Ernest has recorded many of his memories in his two books, *Just One More Dance*, dedicated by implication to the Mittel-European cafe society who were blind to the impending catastrophe, and *The Single Light*, named for that literally incredible incident when he found an empty sardine-tin thrown away by a guard and used the remaining drop of oil, not for much-needed physical but spiritual sustenance, lighting a single Chanukah light that extinguished the total darkness.

He still had that tin, and lit it again at the launch of his book at the Scottish Parliament. It is our loss that he will never light it again.