

Ernest Levy – a celebration at the Central Library



‘If you really want peace, you have to declare war on revenge’

Ernest Levy, musician, cantor, actor, writer and friend to many, wrote these words in his [memoir](#). Wise words from anyone, but from Ernest, a survivor of no less than seven concentration camps, they are truly remarkable. The German sociologist and composer [Theodor Adorno](#) said that there could be no poetry after [Auschwitz](#); Ernest was living proof that Adorno was wrong.

After Ernest’s death in 2009, his family gifted Ernest’s archive to the [Edinburgh Library Service](#). On Thursday at the **Central Library** The **Glasgow Jewish Singers** led a wonderful celebration of the life and music of this inspiring man.

Journalist **Mike Wade** began the evening. Mike was privileged to be granted the [last interview](#) Ernest gave before his death. Although Mike only knew Ernest for three hours, the time he spent beside his hospital bed in Glasgow was the most intense experience of his career. Ernest told Mike about his life and his time in the concentration camps. The interview was hard for Ernest – he was tired, ill and ready to die, but he still wanted to share the story of the Holocaust. Born into an Orthodox Jewish family in [Bratislava](#) in 1925, the eighth child of a Hungarian father and a Dutch mother, he and his entire family were thrown out of their home by Slovakian fascists in November 1938. They were deposited at the Hungarian/Czech border, and eventually settled in Hungary. Although their situation was not good, it became far worse when Germany annexed the country to prop up its southern flank; in 1944 the family was deported. Ernest later recalled looking out of the

train wagon and seeing a sign: 'Auschwitz.' 'It marked the entrance to an evilness beyond description; we had arrived in hell.'

After surviving forced marches, slave labour and the brutality of the camps themselves, Ernest was found virtually dead in the dust when the Allies liberated **Belsen** (he had been moved repeatedly as the German forces retreated.) He was eventually repatriated to Bratislava, then moved to Hungary and joined a synagogue choir. He attended the Goldmark School of Music in Budapest for ten years whilst still studying for his engineering qualifications. He qualified as a [cantor](#) but was unable to realise his dream of becoming an opera singer because the physical abuse and neglect of the camps led to him losing half of his stomach. He later moved to Israel but soon came to Scotland to join some of his surviving family. In Glasgow, where he was now cantor of the Pollockshields Synagogue, he bumped into another Belsen survivor; Kathy became his wife, a marriage that lasted 42 years until Kathy's death in 2007. Ernest soon became cantor of [Giffnock and Newlands Synagogue](#) in Renfrewshire, where he stayed until his retirement. He and Kathy made their family home in Giffnock.

Mike said that music had helped Ernest to regain his faith in his fellow man after the war. His grandfather and father had both been cantors, but Ernest took music beyond the synagogue, entertaining the wider Glaswegian community as he proceeded with his mission to educate people about the Holocaust and to do whatever he could to make sure it never happened again:

'He sang from the heart and soul, the sweetness and plaintiveness of his voice recalled all his experience.'

'His singing expressed his life, it was not a performance.'

(Both of these quotes are from people who knew Ernest.)

The Glasgow Jewish Singers are a jolly lot; their leader **Eddie Binnie** must rate as one of the most animated conductors in

Scotland. Eddie introduced each song or hymn, many of which the Singers remember performing with Ernest himself. **L'dor Vador**, which is sung during the repetition of a silent prayer, brings back particularly poignant memories; it is a hymn in which the cantor sings and the choir responds, a slow/fast dynamic that the Singers loved to perform with Ernest. Ernest composed the music to **Ono Bekoach** and **Im Eshkachech Yerushalayim** (Remembering Jerusalem) himself; Eddie explained that the latter is sung at weddings just before the breaking of the glasses – ‘before we rejoice, remember Jerusalem.’ The performance included mournful, beautiful tunes and also some immensely lively ones – Eddie soon had the audience clapping along to **Kariev P'sureinu**, whilst **Yevarech'cho**, another composition of Ernest's, a blessing sung partly in English, recalled [John Rutter](#)'s version of The Lord Bless You and Keep You.



The Singers were expertly accompanied by **Michael Burnett**, a professional pianist who recalled singing in the boys' choir in Ernest's synagogue and also performing with him at social events. The hymn **Shema Koleinu** is sung unaccompanied, so Michael joined the choir to perform this lively piece.

When Ernest tried in that last interview to tell Mike about his return visit to Belsen ten years earlier, he was overcome and unable to continue. Despite the unimaginable horror of those times though, Ernest had carried on educating people about the dangers of extremism for most of his adult life, reaching out not only to other faith groups in Glasgow but to the whole community. Mike Wade recalled hearing the story of how in the darkest days at Belsen Ernest had found an old sardine tin thrown away by one of the guards; later that night he put a string into the remaining fish oil and lit it as the prisoners gathered round to sing the Hanukkah hymn. Ernest said that Jesus may well have heard the very same hymn sung in the Temple. His step-daughter Judy has said that Ernest would

never turn anyone away whatever they had said or done; he believed, Michael Burnett says, that 'there is a special light in every person.'

In a programme prepared for a 2011 celebratory concert people were asked to share their thoughts about Ernest. He was, said one, 'far more than just a survivor, he retained – or perhaps recovered – his ability to hope.' 'He had no bitterness or hatred about the camps, but remembered instead the tiny humanities shown to him.'

In the fascinating video above, **Judy Russell** talks movingly about her stepfather. Other contributors include **Michael Burnett**, **Paula Cowan** (a senior lecturer at the University of the West of Scotland whose principle research interests are in Holocaust education), **Liz McGettigan** (Director of Digital Experiences and Strategy for [Edinburgh City Council](#)) and **Rabbi Moshe Rubin**, the current Rabbi of Giffnock Synagogue.

Ernest Levy kept a handful of dust from Belsen and another from Jerusalem; they were to be buried with him to signify the triumph of humanity over evil. He spent his life letting the light back in, finding it in everyone he met, knowing there was good in us all. His greatest message, says Rabbi Rubin, is this: there is always hope.

This was an immensely uplifting, moving and entertaining evening. Paula Cowan rightly reminds us that terrible events are still happening in far too many parts of the modern world, but The Glasgow Jewish Singers, Michael Wade and the staff of Edinburgh Libraries are all playing their part in continuing to spread Ernest's humane message: there is hope.

Ernest Levy's extensive [archive](#) of music, DVDs, books and manuscripts can be viewed on request in the [Music Library](#) during normal opening hours, although the library staff request that you call first to make sure that they have everything ready for you. There is also a travelling

exhibition available for educational and other interested organisations to borrow free: again please contact the [Music Library](#) for more information.

The Glasgow Jewish Singers can be contacted via davidjack25@btopenworld.com