

An Interview with Rabbi Hugo Gryn

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Childhood Years

Could you tell us a little bit about your early years?

I was very young, I can't remember much. Do you mean autobiographical? Yes. I was originally from Czechoslovakia, the Eastern part of it, a small provincial town, its name in Czech, Berehovo. It was a very pretty town; small, about 25000 strong with a big area of farming and forestry in the foothills of the Carpathian mountains. And it was a very old Jewish town. I don't know when my family first got there, but certainly there are records going back to about the 1400s. And, in our town of 25000, about 15000 of the population were Jewish. So you might say it was a kind of a Jewish town. It was created as part of Czechoslovakia only after the First World War. Until then it was really the backwater of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and in the town and in the villages around, there was poverty, farming, small farming, and lots of large absentee landlords who owned the big vineyards.

Czechoslovakia between the two wars was a great experiment in pluralism, democracy, industrialisation, entering into the 20th Century, respecting rights. Extraordinary, all the things one was hoping would happen in the world were happening there. And after twenty years it was destroyed, totally betrayed and destroyed. It ceased to be. First there was communism, then the rise of nazism. The Hungarians allied themselves with the Germans, and then came the great betrayal of Munich when Mr. Chamberlain signed a peace document, saying peace in our time. But actually what they did was to sell Czechoslovakia, gave it away. If I sound bitter it is because I am. And, when people said to him "How can you sell

Czechoslovakia?". He said, "It is a distant place, nobody has ever heard of it" I mean how cynical can you be?

In November, 1938, as a result of the Munich agreement, our town became part of Hungary and that was the end of our Czech life. I was 8 years old. The whole town had to stand on the main road first to watch the Czechs go off and then these glorious Hungarians arriving on horses, helmets, guns, the lot I think I was the only person standing on the road who was crying my eyes out. I can't tell you why. I knew I was witnessing a huge tragedy. And that's exactly what it was. Very shortly after that the Nazis and the anti Jewish fools began to be operational. And, it became the beginning of the end of our Jewish community. I can give you the punch line.

In early 1944, by which time our community had become impoverished, demoralised, humiliated, all the Jews from our town were rounded up into a local brick factory which was turned into a temporary ghetto. And then the trains came in there and took everybody from our town to Auschwitz. And, of the 15000 plus people who were in the ghetto that went on the trains 800 survived, and of those 800, I am the youngest. And, today there can't be more than maybe 50 or 60 of us. So that is the story of my early life.

Religious Education

To what extent did your parents influence your religious outlook?

I lived in a town in which you didn't have a demarcation between religion and life. In a Jewish community the weekly or yearly life cycle follows the religious calendar. So you didn't stop to think. When it got to be sundown on Friday afternoon we knew it was the Sabbath, and it was the Sabbath until it got dark on Saturday. That's how it was. You went to the synagogue and said your prayers. Everybody had to observe the Sabbath. All the shops were closed. It was a day of rest. When it came to the major Jewish festivals like the Passover, Tabernacles and so on, it was the normal rhythm of your life. It was seamless. I think I was three and a half when I first went to religion school. I remember when I came to this first day. The teacher was a layman and, he had a piece of biblical text in Hebrew which was laminated. He had a pot of honey there and he smeared some honey on this thing. He said "Lick it". I licked it. He said, "Is it sweet?" I said, "Very

sweet" "Do you like it?" "I love it" He said, "That's the word of the Scriptures. That should also be very sweet." It seems it was one of my earliest memories.

The Concentration Camp

Would you mind telling us about your experiences in the concentration camp?

Well, I don't know what to say about that. As it so happens, quite against all my principles and convictions about four weeks ago I went back to a couple I was at, because a friend of mine has heard all kind of things about it, and insisted that I should go back with him. So we spent time there together.

What happened ? I survived as follows. We got off this terrible train by which time there were many people dead on it because we were three days without food and water — cattle cars. There was a platform. We were on it, but they wouldn't let us off it until daybreak. It was the middle of the night. It was early summer, May. There were local people. They looked mad; they were shaved; they wore striped pyjamas. They were moving about. As we got off the train the Nazis shouted "Raus raus raus!" One of these madmen mutters under his breath in Yiddish. It is a kind of a language which Jewish people speak, a medieval German. He mutters, "You are 18 years old and you've got a trade", like a madman. Well, I was 13 years old, and I was a schoolboy, and I had a brother 11 years old and he was a schoolboy, and parents and grandparents.

As we were moving towards the head of this line, these elegant Nazis in boots and white coats were selecting, "Left, right, this, that". My father says to me, "When they ask you how old you are, you say in German you are 19." I could speak German. "If they ask you, 'Have you got a profession?', you say 'I am a carpenter and a joiner'". And I said to my brother, Gabby, "If they ask how old you are, say you are just 19." And we come to the head of this line. My father, who is 44 says, "I am 35". When they see my brother they start to laugh and send him the other way. So my mother who was a good looking strong woman goes after him "No, no, you go that way." He can't be alone so my grandparents take him. I waved to my grandparents and my brother. They go that way, the women and my mother that way. My father and I go that way. So, I don't know, an hour, two hours later we have been undressed, our bodies completely shaved,

head, little bits of pubic hair I had, disinfected, put through a shower, standing totally naked on the other side of this shower thing, not recognising any of the people I was with and given striped pyjamas.

So we all looked like those idiots standing on the platform. That's where, in another kind of line, they gave me a number and maybe in another hour or two we were in a barracks. This was middle or late morning, and there were people who had been there for some time. I said, "How long am I going to be here?", and he says, "Well, who knows?" I say "Well, when will I meet up with the others in the family? Do you know?" "You won't" "What do you mean, I won't" "Well, you won't see them again." "What do you mean I won't see them again? Where are they?" "Well, if you want to look out carefully, you see that smoke? Maybe that's it." I said, "Listen I am so scared; I'd appreciate it if you didn't say these things to me." It was only the next day I realised it was true, by which time I wasn't Hugo Gryn, I was a number. I was without any rights, I was without any identity and I mattered to no one. That's what happened. That was the process. And, the rest follows from that.

And that is of course the meaning of how you become a slave. The only thing is that in this case it was different. Normally when you have a slave you believe you have a valuable property, and you want that slave to go on. The difference was here you were a slave but they were happy for you to be a slave just for a short time because ultimately your destiny was to be disintegrated. So anybody who survived this only survived because of chance. You can be clever about it, you can be strong about it, you've got to have a bit of luck with it but it was all a matter of chance. If any one ever tells you, I survived because 'I this, this, this, this', you can tell them 'Bullshit'. And that's one of the problems of the survivors. They don't know why they survived. There is no good reason for it, and many people who were infinitely better than they were never did.

Aftermath of the Holocaust

The survivors of your family, were you the only one?

No. My mother did. She was in another place, and she did survive. She died eventually, quite a young woman, back in Czechoslovakia. And my father died of typhoid and starvation literally in my arms three days after our

liberation. A cousin of mine, I had a cousin in this group who also changed his name to Gryn, he survived. He lives in Israel now.

What about your brother Gabby?

No. I worked it out once; I was one of eighty-two first cousins. Nine of us survived of the eighty-two and today there are only three of us alive. Those are the proportions.

How do you think the Jews have coped with the Holocaust and a belief in a loving God?

Well, that's two very separate questions, and I will answer them separately. They are about to open in the Imperial War Museum in London a permanent Holocaust exhibition.

The Museum is actually about Britain and its triumphs in the various wars of this century, mainly First World War, Second World War. And, fortunately for this country they were victories. When you put in here this Holocaust exhibition it will also be a monument of a loss. It is the way that the Jews lost. This is not triumphant. The fact is that in the holocaust the Jews lost. So when you say, "How did you cope with it?" We lost it. That's how. We didn't cope with it. A few survived, the proportion was very small, and most of Europe is now empty of Jews. In a large Jewish centre like Poland - finished. Much of the Ukraine, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Austria, Holland. There are still Jews around but not in large numbers.

Now, how do you cope with a loving God? Well it's your phrase, not mine. I think to say 'loving God' is saying one part of God. I would shock you now but you are big boys, so you can take it.

There is a statement in Isaiah. It is very hard, especially for a God believer, which I am. It is the prophet speaking in the name of God. And, God says, I form light and I create darkness. I make peace, and I create evil.

That's a terrible mouthful that I have just said. And it is in the daily prayer book of the Jews, but not exactly as I've told it to you. By the time it gets paraphrased into the daily prayers it says, "God forms light and creates darkness. God makes peace and creates all things." See the difference. Like it's too hard to say. But that is how it is. And therefore I have concluded, but this is my personal conclusion, that when people say, "Where was the loving God at Auschwitz?", I don't think it is the right question. The question is:

What happened to man at Auschwitz? What happened to them? If you believe as I do, and perhaps you don't, that there is free will and there is free choice, and there are alternatives, and we make choices all the time. And so the question was not for me, or maybe for a short time, I was a kid there, but not after I came to understand, it was not, Where was the sweet God? But, Where was the human being?

Do you know the older I get, I am 66, the less I understand is how does a man become as they did. Pick up a million and a half children and throw them into gas chambers and into ovens. I don't know how you do it. What is the mechanism that lets you do that? What switches off in you? What lights are switched on? What are you doing? You can't put that on God. You can, but it is a cop-out

Do you feel it appropriate to forgive those who caused the Holocaust?

No. First of all they have never asked me to forgive them. So I don't stand on the street corner dispensing forgiveness. Secondly, who am I to forgive? How can I forgive for the killing of my brother, and my brother can't forgive. I can't do that.. And, nobody all these years, no one ever said they were to be forgiven. They all denied that they did it

A Rabbi

What inspired you to become a rabbi?

A series of mistakes, a whole unredeeming series of errors. It was, you know, absolutely. I was conned into it

Anyone in particular?

Yes, that man over there (picture), as a matter of fact. The man at the top. His name was Doctor Leo Baeck. I was crazy about him. He was a survivor himself. He was the last Chief Rabbi of Berlin, and he was imprisoned and survived by chance. A miracle in that they confused him with somebody else. They sent another Leo Baeck on the transport to Auschwitz. It was the last one. Anyway, after the war I studied with him.

Were you in England?

Yes, after the war. I used to go to him every Wednesday. He lived in Hampden Way, London. He had a daughter who lived here, and her family and I had an hour with him reading Rabbinic texts. It was just for my pleasure. He never charged me. We were both survivors. He was a great teacher. He had an international reputation. And, then after the hour lesson, we chatted. And in those little half hour coffee sessions I'd sound off. As far as I could see there were only two people left in the world seriously interested in Jewish study. Him and me. I wasn't sure about him but me. He took this from me for a long time and I think he had enough of it and he said, "Now look. You know, you are such a big talker, why don't you put your hand where your mouth is? If it is so important for you, why don't you study it? Full-time, devoting your live to it?" Not me. I'm a modern person, but I told you, I was conned into it

Jews in Britain

What difficulties are faced by the Jews living in Britain?

I'll give you a whole series. Perhaps I could do this in short hand form. First of all, the greatest difficulty Jews have is essentially that this is a Christian country and therefore the rhythm of Jewish life and the rhythm of British life don't coincide in religious days. Our Sabbath is Saturday. The official Sabbath, such as it is, was Sunday. A great mistake was made when they abolished the Sunday but that is another story. The country is fast secularising. And, this is having a rub-off effect on the Jews.

Second, the Jewish community is very conscious of the fact that of the various non-Christian communities in this country it is the oldest one. Of course, Jews lived in Britain since Roman times, and they were here again in large numbers in the 10th, 11th, and 12th centuries. Britain was the first country that expelled the Jews in 1290 of all the European countries, and then there was a re-admission. When people say to the Jews, "Well, why don't you go back to your own country?" Well, actually, it is more the Jews' country than anybody else, as it so happens. That is one of the strange ironies. Nevertheless, the vast majority of Jews in this country are I'd say probably third, fourth generation. So that gives you a different kind of half certainty. That's a complication.

Then another difficulty that Jews have is from anti-semitism, which is quite deep. And, the more insecure a society is of itself the more it goes

into various other phobias. Whereas objectively young Jews hardly pay any attention to it, the interesting thing is that older Jews are very conscious of it. And, there have been in this country lately outbreaks of, well I know you are going to call them anti-semitism, racism. There is also anti-Black feeling. There is anti-Catholic feeling. There is anti-this and anti-that, and all of that is, of course, at least that's how a Jew like me sees this, a great betrayal of the 20th Century. And, if it happens in the country in which you live, you love, you work for, this is not a nice pill to swallow. So that is a complication. And, there are also now other minority communities in this country. And, only today, for example, I was at a gathering of people, Blacks and Asians, and Jews. There is, surprisingly, quite large Muslim anti-semitism. There is a man around here now who is talking about, "As a good Muslim I have to kill the Jews." And, he has been given safe haven in this country because the Saudi Arabians are after him. You have these weird bizarre things. They don't actually worry me too seriously, but enough to indicate there is a madness going on sometimes.

I know that in an aggregate this is about part of that same process of the betrayal of God that started at Auschwitz or preceded Auschwitz already, of course. Right now, as it so happens, we are marking the 80th anniversary of what happened on the Somme in the 1st World War. I mean, does it numb your mind that one and a quarter million young people were slaughtered there in the 20th century? In the name of what? Now how do you eighty years later still look and treat people as if they were objects? What have you learnt?

Have you come across anti-Semitism yourself? Have you been exposed to it?

In a direct way, no. I did when I was a kid. Look, I am a Rabbi. I advertise my Jewishness all over, and I am a very secure Jew. I am proud of being a Jew. So, I meet an anti-Semite, I spit on him. And also I am no longer a victim of this. But young people in my community have. They confront them and they complain to me. And people lose their jobs sometimes. And, you see, this is a subtle thing. I, for example, hear that the Jews control this, Jews control that. The truth is there isn't a senior Jew working for any senior bank in the country. There isn't a Jew who is in any senior position in any insurance company. Recently, a young man who was a policeman, Jewish, had to separate from the police because they wouldn't let him observe his Sabbath. And also, and this is the worst thing about being Jewish now, our numbers are going down. We have a very low birth rate in

this country. You need to have something like, I'm told by experts, 2.7 children for a population to stay the same; 2.3 children do it but with great difficulty. The Jewish birthrate is between 1.3 to 1.9 on average. So inevitably, two things are happening to us. We are getting fewer and older, and that for me is actually the biggest worry.

What are your views on the relations between Christians and Jews?

I have many views on that. Do you mean the present or historically? *Present.* Well, there has been a huge change in this. It was an appalling history. But something happened in the 20th century which indicated that the way we had been going was wrong. In this country there is the Council of Christians and Jews which was set up during the Second World War, I think, mainly to combat anti-semitism. Like-minded Christians and like-minded Jews getting together is quite important, and I think, useful. The big breakthrough happened under Pope John's term. The most unexpected saintly figure to appear on the religious scene. I really don't know much about him. You might want to study his life. This aged prelate who was elevated to the papal throne against everybody's expectations was so revolutionary and radical. You see God works in very mysterious ways. And, among other things he revolutionised the relationship between Jews and Christians not least because he said the sin of Christians is to put this charge of deicide on the Jews. There is no validity for it, no authority for it, and it leads to bad blood. Change it. At the same time another great Anglican leader argued, "You have to sort out the mood and atmosphere created in the gospels because the gospels (that's very, very ancient documents we're talking about) demonise the Jews. And, the Jews are being told by their leadership, "Don't look on the Christian as your natural enemy, find in the Christian the brother".

Now there are increasingly those who speak of an Abrahamic tradition and an Abrahamic tradition would involve Jews, and Christians, and Moslems. Now there are a few big 'ifs' in this. If you can take your belief in God seriously then it follows as day follows night that we are related. We are inter-connected, thus we are a part of a family. Then we have to treat each other as members of the family which means you can be critical and so on but nevertheless you know there is a bond. If God is a factor in your life, then you cannot be a hater or a betrayer of other forms of life. Then life is sacred.

If you can erase the image of God from other forms of life and other living beings then, of course, you have dethroned God, and then anything can go wrong. There is a choice. Now, of course, I know faith in God is not like I choose to have or choose not to have. It grows with you and so on. But if God is real, then life is special, holy and sacred. And, if God is just a word it is just a word.

How do you regard the person of Jesus in theology?

There is very little in Jewish sources. There was more. At one time Christian censors rubbed it out from the *Talmud* and we never replaced it. Jews are not taught about Jesus by and large. The Christians wouldn't let it be in our literature at the time when there was censorship. There are now many more people, especially in the 20th century, who have written extensively, Jewish scholars like Professor Samuel Sandmel. There are lots of other younger Jewish scholars who work in this field. Watch this space. It's changing.

Just one final question, Do you believe in an after life?

Yes and No. It is a very strong question. In the Biblical tradition it is just not an issue. You go down into the pit - the biblical phrase. Towards the end of the Hebrew Bible it begins to come into it. By the time you come to the Rabbinic period, first, second, third century, the notion is there in Judaism, unmistakably. I should be able to tell you exactly where it comes from but nobody can actually do that. On a good day I have to say 'Yes, I do', I can't think that that will be the end of it all. But what if it is? In my tradition by and large the motivation for a good or a moral or an ethical life is not so much because you will be rewarded in the hereafter but because it is right for the here. That is the main motivation, but having said that, there is an implication - well, cover all your bets.