

The **Shap** working party on World Religions in Education



EDITORIAL 1997 - Alison Seaman

It is nearly 30 years since the Shap Working Party first met and the passage of time inevitably brings many changes. With the death of Hugo Gryn, the Working Party lost one of its best known members and, not surprisingly, it was their wish to dedicate this edition of the Journal to his memory. In his appreciation, Alan Brown captures something of the essence of this remarkable man.

THIS EDITION OF THE SHAP JOURNAL IS
DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
RABBI HUGO GRYN
1930 - 1996

I am a Jew,
The Mortal Jew
Who is immortal.
I am the ancient and the new.
I have prayed by the Jordan
And bathed in the Nile;

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I wept at Babylon
and rejoiced on the Sinai.
I was reared through centuries by Fate
To a timeless chant

I was loved for seconds,
Tolerated for seasons,
But loathed in the end.
I danced to the rhythm of race - hatred,
I performed to the mood of chance
To an audience of monarchs and gods.
When I pleased I was applauded,
When I failed I was chased
To find a new stage for my act.
A gambler for life,
For life, naked life, any life,
With enough foul air to breathe.
I will bow, I will hush,
I will steal, I will lie,
I shall beg, I'll crawl,
For life, a bit of life.
Let it be misery,
Let it be treachery,
Let it be slavery,
Let it be hell,
But let it be life.

But oh, the world has shunned me!
Blinded by the hatred of mankind,
Deafened by the curse of civilisation,
I hide in the dark of the night;
An outcast for ever - a Jew.
Following his death in
1996, a memorial booklet,
"In Memory of Rabbi Hugo
Gryn 1930 - 1996" was
sponsored and produced by
the members of the West
London Synagogue. In it,
was this moving personal
reflection written by Hugo
Gryn in 1948, when he was



18 years old.

It is reproduced here with kind permission of his widow, Jacqueline Gryn.

Nearly 50 years later, a friend and fellow member of the Shap Working Party, reflects on the life of Hugo Gryn.

HUGO GRYN: AN APPRECIATION - Alan Brown

In India', said the Rabbi, 'there is a verb "to english". It means to be two-faced, hypocritical'. This was not my introduction to Hugo Gryn many years ago but I had not known him long when he produced this provoking epigram. I've remembered it, partly because I'm not English, and partly because both the telling of it and the manner of its telling summed up much of Hugo Gryn; he enjoyed a challenge and the vigour and rigour of disputation; he exuded energy, compassion and a speed of wit rarely experienced.

He was, quite simply, a remarkable man. He never skirted a challenge, indeed he positively appeared to relish a challenge, even seek one out. But he was also ready to seek a resolution. Conflict and conflict-resolution were both an integral part of Hugo Gryn.

It was the BBC Radio Programme, The Moral Maze that made him most famous, at least to the British public at large, yet in the programme he was rarely allowed to function in his most effective mode because he was relied upon to conclude with a Jewish aphorism or some healing quotation from Scripture. Perhaps that too was part of his nature, to engage in vigorous, often ascerbic, debate but end with a gesture that left the door open for reconciliation.

Anyone who ever met Hugo would have to be amazed by his vigour, energy, perception and knowledge. He was not always right and could recognise this generously on occasion, but he would put his heart and soul and considerable intellect into promoting his view. He used that energy to support a whole range of interests and, for him, inter-faith understanding was one of those; there would not be a better world or a better society unless the religions could live together in some degree of toleration. 'Toleration' is often regarded as a minimalist word and there were times when Hugo's commitment to the existence of the State of Israel appeared to suggest intolerance: yet it was not intolerance of



Muslims, Islam or the Palestine situation; it was the intolerance of political systems which did not allow peaceful coexistence. One should add complexity to his public persona for he had the intellect and the grace to recognise that simple solutions are often, perhaps usually, wrong - complexity is the order of the day.

For Shap he was an immense strength, the poser of difficult questions and the person who could untie the Gordian Knot; if something could be done it should be done and done well with all one's energy. He provided Shap with a bridge from the world of RE into inter-faith/inter-cultural concerns and he always answered the call to support Shap. He always did everything he could and that was considerable.

The disputation within the Jewish community caused by his death, is in an inverted way, a fitting memorial to Hugo Gryn. He challenged, in life and in death. As the waters of time surge up the beach obliterating our footprints, the imprint of Hugo's feet, will last a little longer than yours or mine for he walked further up the beach of life than most of us.

He was a singular man, not just for his humour, his wit and humanity, but most of all for his ability to share in each person's feelings and emotions.

Obituary: Rabbi Hugo Gryn

Albert H. Friedlander - Tuesday 20 August 1996 00:02

Rabbi Hugo Gryn was probably the most beloved rabbi in Great Britain.

In part, this was due to the self-sacrificing service he rendered for over 30 years to one of the largest congregations in Europe, the West London Synagogue. His students there numbered in the thousands, his admirers in the tens of thousands.

Beyond that, this gentle and great soul who went through the torment of Auschwitz came to serve a far greater community than the Jews of Great Britain and Europe. He was the leading voice in the field of Interfaith where Jews and Christians (and now Muslims) come together in an effort to understand other religions through meetings, lectures and personal encounters.

Hugo Gryn moved freely and openly through that world, preserving his integrity and honouring his neighbours. He was also closely associated with television and the media, as an active participant of BBC Radio 4's The Moral Maze and other programmes.

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Many saw him as the central figure in The Moral Maze, where contemporary ethical problems are discussed with great openness and honesty. Generally, it was Gryn who summed up the conclusions of the group, adding the special insights of his faith in that warm, mellifluous voice. The occasional slight stutter only added intensity and conviction as this gentle spiritual figure of small stature dominated the scene, even in his final broadcast when he was clearly ill.

He was also an adviser in the field of religious broadcasting and in the area of religious education where he has left an enduring mark. He furthermore played a significant part in all aspects of Leo Baeck College, the progressive Jewish seminary which trains Liberal and Reform rabbis for Great Britain and Europe. The RSGB (the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain), the Reform Movement, recently made him its Honorary President.

Within that progressive centre movement of the Jewish community, his vision of respect for the past and the ability to create new patterns could realise itself fully. In the world after the Holocaust, Hugo Gryn taught a relevant faith and worship in a Jewish world which had to confront the anguish of the past with faith and hope.

Thus, he sponsored and initiated significant religious texts, but still remained a rabbi, teacher and lecturer working what seemed to be a 25- hour day. Recently, despite his illness, he insisted on officiating at the funeral of his young colleague Robert Shafritz. In the last days of his illness, he left his bed to give lectures in Wales; that total dedication may have hastened the end, but for Gryn there was no other choice.

Hugo Gryn was born in Czechoslovakia on 25 June 1930, in a home of great Jewish learning and warmth. The story of his travels with his father through the "Holocaust Kingdom", has often been told. Watching his father fashioning Chanukah candles in Auschwitz with the precious fat which might have kept the spark of life going, he was instructed in spiritual resistance by the father who did not survive the ordeal.

The experience was one of many reasons which led him to the rabbinate, encouraged by Leo Baeck, who had been the head of the German Jewish community in its most difficult time and had survived the concentration camp / ghetto Theresienstadt. The Hon Lily Montagu, one of the founders of the spirituality and radical thinking of much of Liberal Judaism, also encouraged the boy she met when he was a refugee child in London.

Gryn came to the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in the late 1940s (after studying at Cambridge and London Universities), where I first met him and was instructed by his friendship. After ordination, he turned to the work of healing the wounds of the Holocaust,



serving the JDC (the Joint Distribution Committee, in charge of refugee work), as a Senior Executive both in the United States and Europe.

Gryn also felt an obligation to the WUPJ (World Union for Progressive Judaism) which he later served as chairman of its executive and as a president. On their behalf, in 1957 he went to Bombay as the rabbi of its Jewish Religious Union, and stayed for the next three years.

In all areas of this work he did well; but it was London which ultimately became the place of his greatest achievements. There he had earlier met and married Jacqueline Selby who shared in so much of his work and the joy of raising their children: Gabrielle, Naomi, Rachelle and David.

Hugo Gryn was one of the great architects of Reform Judaism in Great Britain. It is significant that a movement initially shaped and carried by the grandees of the Jewish community eventually became influenced by the refugee rabbis from Europe who gave a new and deeper dimension to that earlier, colder structure. In that congregation, Gryn advised the "merchant princes" of British Jewry - but his door was open to everyone, and those who were needy found their way to his door.

During the period of his greatest activity, the Reform movement grew and developed a new liturgy, an expanded youth programme, and a greater awareness of its need to create a new rabbinate which would work in partnerships with the Liberal movement (the ULPS).

At West London, Gryn had been influenced by his predecessors, Rabbi Harold Reinhart and Rabbi van der Zyl, both linked to him through mutual respect and affection. In the end, he went his own way, moving towards his individual achievements. He became a world leader, particularly through his work with the Memorial Claims Conference, trying to rescue aspects of the greatness that had once been the Jewish community in Europe.

The various survivor organisations which developed in Great Britain knew him as a concerned and helpful member; and he was one of the prominent advisors to the Imperial War Museum and its plans for a Holocaust exhibition. When Ronald Senator's Terezin Requiem with my libretto was performed at Canterbury, Gryn was the narrator and blew the shofar, a glorious twisted ram's horn he had found in India.

Rabbi Hugo Gryn could never be parochial; his concerns reached out to all aspects of British life. He was one of the founders and leaders of the Interfaith Network, the chairman of the Standing Conference of Interfaith Dialogues in Education, and a friend and dialogue partner



with Cardinal Hume, various Archbishops of Canterbury, and the current and past Chief Rabbis of the British Commonwealth. His leadership on the British scene in many areas became so evident that the government's award of the CBE seemed almost a foregone conclusion.

Hugo Gryn was also a "rabbi's rabbi", not only the chairman of the Rabbinic Assembly, but also the personal friend to whom his colleagues could come to benefit from his advice and often his direct help. The shared work of Liberal and of Reform Judaism and also Orthodoxy meant as much to him as the interfaith dialogue.

He was a man of peace, who recognised the need for compromise but strove for equitable solutions. In Michael Hare Duke's *Praying for Peace: reflections on the Gulf crisis (1994)*, he wrote: "All commandments have appointed times in Judaism except one: 'Seek peace and pursue it'. To achieve peace you should anticipate it, run after it, and never cease to do all in your power to bring it about."

That rule was central in Rabbi Hugo Gryn's life to his last day. His family, his countless friends, and the world have lost something infinitely precious in his death

Hugo Gabriel Gryn, rabbi: born Berehovo, Czechoslovakia 25 June 1930; ordained rabbi 1957; Rabbi, Jewish Religious Union, Bombay 1957-60; Executive Director, World Union for Progressive Judaism 1960-62; Senior Executive, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee 1962-64; Senior Rabbi, West London Synagogue 1964-96; Vice-President and Lecturer, Leo Baeck College 1964-96; married 1957 Jacqueline Selby (one son, three daughters); CBE 1992; died London 18 August 1996.