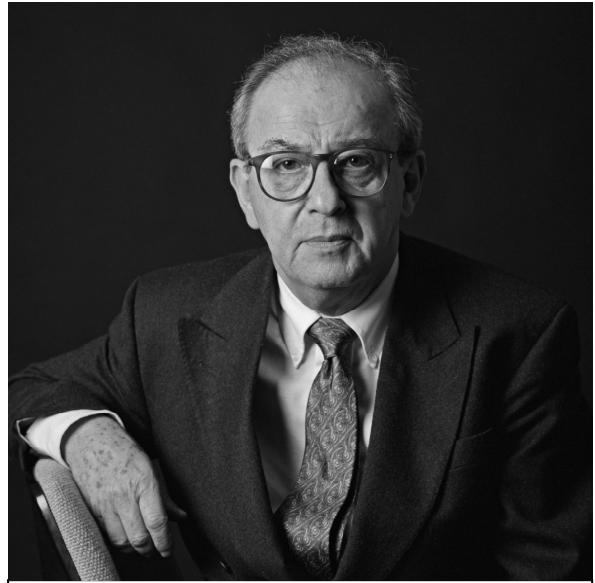


“You cannot live three minutes without hope.” The story of Hugo Gryn.

Hugo Gryn was 13 when he and his Mother, Father and little brother Gabi were forced into a ghetto before being transported to Auschwitz. Hugo and his family lived in Berehovo, a market town in the region of Capathia. The town had an interesting history. It had once been part of the Austro-Hungarian Habsburg Empire, but when Hugo was a child it had become part of the former Czechoslovakia.



Hugo Gryn © Getty Images

A large Jewish population lived and worked in the town, making up almost fifty percent of the community. Hugo’s family lived there, comfortably, for many years alongside their gentile (non-Jewish) neighbours. Geza, Hugo’s father, was a timber merchant and owned part of a thriving saw mill business. He and his wife, Bella, were well regarded in the town. Hugo and his brother spent a happy childhood, growing up in an impressive house with its own orchard and vineyard. They felt privileged to be part of a large extended family, with grandparents, uncles, aunties and cousins all living in the town and surrounding villages.

In November 1938 the town’s inhabitants found themselves under Hungarian rule and that year many lives were changed forever. Hungary was ruled by fascists who were allied to Hitler and the Nazi government. Once the Hungarians arrived in town life for the Jewish community became very difficult. Jewish children were banned from state schools and adults faced intimidation and had their rights restricted under so called “Jew laws” used by the Hungarians. Even before the town was officially taken over, some Hungarians had crossed the border to frighten members of the Jewish community. Hugo’s Grandfather was a Rabbi and a farmer. One morning he discovered that all his cows had been killed in the night. Their stomachs had been split open. Hugo was eight years old when this happened but he never forgot the horrible scene.

By 1939 life had become even more difficult. Carpathia had been split into two parts. Hugo's home was now in Hungarian territory; but Ukrainian Fascists were in charge of the other section and they were driving Jews out of the houses where they had lived for generations. Some members of Hugo's family lost their homes and arrived in Berehovo, Hugo's parents rented some houses to provide these unfortunate relatives with somewhere to stay.

Meanwhile Hungarian officials made decisions about who was allowed to stay in Hungary. They decided that if Jewish people could not prove that they were of Hungarian nationality then they could be "resettled", which really meant deported.

Then, in 1944, the Nazis arrived and with them came real terror. The Nazis took leading members of the community hostage, together with about sixty women and children. They demanded huge sums of money for their safe release. If the Jewish community did not pay then they said that all the hostages would be shot. Agreeing to accept money and jewellery they declared that they would also be prepared to take bank savings books, but only at half their real value, to make up the ransom. The Nazis made a show of negotiating with the community, extending deadlines, accepting different methods of payment. They continued to "negotiate" until they were certain that the Jewish community had nothing left to give and then they released the hostages. This was a carefully planned tactic and it meant that the Jewish community was almost penniless and in effect completely in the power of the Nazis.

Hugo's parents were worried. They made arrangements to escape to Turkey with their sons. Once in Turkey it might have been possible for the family to travel to Palestine, where many Jewish families were settling. Papers, passports and even train tickets were ready but the journey was never made. Hugo's father later told him that the escape plans had to be abandoned following a visit to his grandparents. It would have been too difficult to leave them behind. The older generation needed support from younger family and community members.

Shortly after the plans were abandoned, Jewish people were placed under curfew. Then "commissions" visited Jewish homes, groups of officials who confiscated valuable goods.

Bella buried the family Shabbat candlesticks, the Kiddush cup and chanukiah in the garden so the “commission” would not find them.

Then Jews were forced to move to the local brick factory, which became a ghetto. Everyone had to leave their home and all they were allowed to take with them was one suitcase each. More and more people were transported from the ghetto and told they were to be resettled. They went straight to Nazi death camps. Hugo and his family took part in the last “resettlement” from Berehovo. They were taken to Auschwitz. When they arrived and stood on the selection ramp some of the prisoners unloading the train kept repeating in Yiddish “You are eighteen and you have a trade.” Hugo’s father understood and told Hugo

what to say. The whispered words saved Hugo’s life. The 13 year old boy told the Nazis that he was nineteen and that he was a carpenter. Hugo and his father were sent in one direction but his little brother Gabi, aged 11, could not pretend to be grown up and he was sent the other way, down the road which led to the gas chambers. Bella, Hugo’s mother tried to run after her youngest son but she was held back and told that she could see him later. Then the men and women were separated.

Hugo and his father were sent to the work area of the camp. Hugo asked another prisoner when he would see his family again and the man laughed and told him he wouldn’t because they were dead. Hugo thought the man was joking but soon discovered that he was not.

Shortly after their arrival in the camp Hugo became separated from his father and lost his way. He discovered a group of young children lining up in an orderly fashion. He joined them and they were taken into a building, which Hugo first thought was the camp bakery. Once inside the children were told to remove their clothes. The guards told them that after they had taken a shower they would be reunited with their families. Whilst they were undressing Hugo spoke to a young boy, called Karel. As Hugo was taking off his shoes one of the guards stopped him. Upon asking his age and discovering that he was from another part of the camp the guard told Hugo to get dressed again and leave. Hugo did so but not before he witnessed Karel and the other children pass beyond a set of double doors. As Karel waved to him, Hugo caught a glimpse of the well lit “shower room” beyond the doors and wondered why it had a floor which was not wet. Racing back to rejoin his father in his own section of the camp he passed piles of clothing and ashes.

As the Nazis believed that both Hugo and his father were skilled tradesmen, they confined them to Auschwitz for six weeks. Then they transported them to Lieberose work camp in the Sachsenhausen complex. Hugo spent all his time working alongside his father. Older and wiser than his son, Geza gave him practical advice. He told Hugo to save some of his meagre evening food ration, so he always had something to eat in the morning, to gain some strength for the hard labour of building duties. He also saved his son from despair. You can live for a while without food and water he told him “but you cannot live for three minutes without hope.”

Hugo and his father survived the camps and, as the Nazis fled from Allied troops, the subsequent death march to Mauthausen and Gunskirchen but his father died of typhoid and starvation, in Hugo’s arms, a few days after liberation.

Hugo slowly regained his own strength and made the long and sad journey back to Berehovo. Whilst on the train he discovered that his mother was still alive, having survived her camp experience and a death march. Hugo found it very difficult to get off the train because he knew he would have to tell her that his brother and father would not be coming home.

The family house, orchard and vineyard had been taken over by Hungarians, so his mother was living with an uncle. Hugo went back to his childhood home to search for the things Bella had buried. The Hungarians told him to go away, that the house was theirs not his. Hugo went back and frightened them with a gun and they ran away but Hugo’s mother did not want to live in the house, it held too many memories of happier times, so it was offered to returning homeless Jews. Hugo recovered some of the things which Bella had buried and on special occasions his family still use the Shabbat candlesticks, carrying on the Jewish family tradition which his mother strove so hard to protect.

Hugo left Berehovo and worked in Russia as an interpreter. He came to the UK in 1946 where he continued his education, became proficient in English and studied at Cambridge and London universities. He then went to Cincinnati in the U.S.A. where he became a rabbi, returning to London to become a leading figure in the British Jewish community and a regular contributor on BBC programmes such as The Moral Maze. In 1978, shocked by the growth of Holocaust denial, he began to speak in public about his experiences. He hid nothing, even recalling how he became involved when prisoners killed a sadistic camp

guard. To challenge denial he devoted a whole year of his life to bearing witness. He wrote "Time is short and the task is urgent. Evil is real. So is good. There is a choice."

When his daughter, Naomi, a journalist, was making a radio documentary about the Holocaust, she interviewed her father. She asked him what the best way would be to pass on the stories of those who died in or lived through the Holocaust. He told her to remember that she was descended from a family and community with a long history, from people who strove to live in the right way. Hugo's words to Naomi, used in her documentary, offer a Legacy of Hope to us all:

"I would like you to try and convey to those who'll come after you this very specific thing, that you come from a world that was a beautiful world, that was caring, that was God-fearing, that had a very high set of values. It was honest, it was hardworking, it prized learning, the gifts of the spirit and of the intellect. It was in fact civilised, and whatever you do, make sure that something of what makes for genuine civilisation gets carried into the rising generations. That will be the finest way in which you will honour the memory of those who went before you." (BBC radio 1995)