

# Helen Bamber

Human rights advocate who cared for victims of torture and other abuses for nearly 70 years

**Helen Bamber (b 1925), had been ill after a series of strokes last year and died on 21 August 2014.**

Helen Bamber was 20 years old in 1945 when, as she put it, her journey began. The second world war was over, but countless victims remained. Bamber, who lived in London, wanted to help them. She joined the Jewish Relief Unit and was dispatched to Germany to work at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

When liberated in April 1945, the camp held 60 000 starving and diseased inmates, and 13 000 corpses that had not been buried. Conditions were so horrific that an additional 4000 inmates died after liberation. When Bamber arrived months later, the original camp had been burned to the ground in an attempt to halt a raging typhus epidemic and lice infestation. Remaining inmates were moved to the nearby German Panzer Division's barracks.

Bamber, who was less than five feet tall, later recalled seeing "awful sights, amputees, gangrene, festering sores." She saw women who had lost loved ones, "pounding the floor, sobbing, pulling their hair, banging their heads against the wall." She listened as survivors told her everything "over and over and over again," like "a pouring out of some ghastly vomit like a kind of horror."

"The most important thing I learned," she said, "was that often there was nothing that I could do for the survivors at the time, other than to listen and to bear witness. I would sit on the ground, holding and rocking with someone who would dig their thin fingers into my arm, rasping out their story. Many were to die, and all I could say was 'your story will be told, I will be your witness.'"

Bearing witness would become a guiding principle for the remainder of Bamber's journey, which lasted nearly 70 years and during which she helped tens of thousands of people from around the world who had been victims of torture and other human rights abuses. Bamber believed there were two categories of people: bystanders and witnesses. Bystanders see only what they want and turn away when they want, sometimes denying what they have seen. Witnesses feel a duty to observe and report truthfully.

Nicolas Bratza, former president of the European Court of Human Rights, describes Bamber as "a formidable force of nature who earned and commanded the respect of all who had the good fortune to meet her." He adds: "She remained throughout her life not merely a witness but a shining beacon of hope for those victims."



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**Helen Bamber co-founded the Helen Bamber Foundation, with an expanded focus that included not only a mandate to help survivors of torture, but a broad range of other human rights abuses**

Bamber was an early member of Amnesty International in the 1960s. She chaired its British section's first medical group, which systematically documented physical and psychological injuries of the victims of state sponsored torture.<sup>1</sup> She felt, however, that documentation was not enough. She wanted medical treatment, therapy, and counselling for victims and their families, most of whom were seeking asylum in the UK. So in 1985—when Bamber was 60 years old—she transformed the Amnesty International medical group into an independent charity: the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, now known as Freedom From Torture ([www.freedomfromtorture.org](http://www.freedomfromtorture.org)).

Operating out of two rent free rooms in an unused wing of London's National Temperance Hospital, the foundation worked with 45 torture survivors during its first year. In a *BMJ* article in 1989, Bamber noted that, with only limited funding and staff, it was an ongoing battle to keep the foundation afloat.<sup>2</sup> In 1990 the foundation was given notice to vacate its offices from the hospital. Bamber told the journal that the situation was stressful not only for staff, but for the torture survivors. "Their lives have been dominated by fear and insecurity, and for some this question mark over our future seems like the last straw," she lamented. "You see, we have become a spiritual home as well as a practical base for these people. We can't let them down."<sup>3</sup>

Helen Bamber did not let them down, and the foundation moved to a new building and continued to grow. It has now served more than 50 000 clients and operates four additional centres in Birmingham, Glasgow, Manchester, and Newcastle.

In 2005, when she was 80 years old, Bamber co-founded the Helen Bamber Foundation ([www.helenbamber.org](http://www.helenbamber.org)), with an expanded focus that included not only a mandate to help survivors of torture, but a broad range of other human rights abuses.

Helen Bamber was born in London on 1 May 1925, the only child of Louis and Marie Balmuth, both Jewish with Polish roots. During the 1930s her father, who spoke German, closely monitored the rise of Nazi Germany, including listening to radio broadcasts of Nazi leaders. He would read passages from Hitler's manifesto, *Mein Kampf*, to his daughter. Her father warned—correctly, as it turned out—where Nazi Germany was headed.

When Bamber returned to London from Bergen-Belsen in 1947, she was appointed to the Committee for the Care of Children from Concentration Camps, which looked after over 700 orphaned children who had survived Auschwitz. In the same year she married Rudi Bamberger, a German Jewish refugee who later changed his name to Bamber. They had two sons but divorced in 1970.

Bamber's various positions during the 1950s and 1960s included working as an almoner at St George in the East Hospital, and as an administrator at Middlesex Hospital. She also worked as personal assistant and editor for several doctors, including medical ethicist Maurice Henry Pappworth, whose 1967 book "*Human Guinea Pigs*"—*A History* exposed the unethical side of medical research.<sup>4,5</sup> In an interview with the *Guardian* in 2000, Bamber says Pappworth taught her about medical ethics, saying: "He was as preoccupied as I was with this question of total power, total helplessness."

Bamber's biography, *The Good Listener: A Life Against Cruelty*, was published in 1998. Although she did not hold a degree in psychotherapy, Bamber considered herself a psychotherapist and was widely acknowledged as being highly competent. Her honours include a European Woman of Achievement award, an OBE, and more than half a dozen honorary degrees, including from the universities of Oxford and Glasgow.

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References are in the version on [thebmj.com](http://thebmj.com).

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## Margaret Brown



**Former general practitioner Peterhead (b 1931; q Aberdeen University 1956), d 27 September 2013.**

Margaret Brown was born in East Wemyss and schooled at Buckhaven and Dunfermline, Fife. She was an only child, and her father died in her teenage years. She strove hard at various jobs in order to provide finances to assist her medical studies at Aberdeen. Her mother's brother and family were particularly supportive. She undertook general practitioner training at Alloa, moving to her professional life's work as a GP at Peterhead, where she developed an interest in obstetrics and gynaecology, assisting deliveries at the maternity unit at Peterhead Cottage (now Community) Hospital. In retirement she spent many happy days in the company of family and friends. An avid globetrotter, she visited many international destinations. She remained unmarried and, for many years, devoted herself to the care of her mother.

**Lewis Ritchie**

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## Nick Kitson



**Consultant psychiatrist Cornwall Partnership NHS Foundation Trust (b 1950; q St Bartholomew's Hospital 1975; FRCPsych), died suddenly on holiday on 28 February 2014.**

Nick Kitson was a consultant psychiatrist at Springfield University Hospital and honorary senior lecturer at St George's Medical School from 1984 to 2002. He was clinical director for the specialist mental health services for the deaf community at Springfield,

and medical director of Pathfinder NHS Trust from 1994 to 1998. He served in the European Society for Mental Health and Deafness, was clinical adviser to the Department of Health and National Institute for Mental Health England, "responsible owner" of a national deaf mental health commissioning project, and a trustee and medical adviser to the SignHealth charity. In Cornwall he initially worked as a community and inpatient psychiatrist, but, wanting to reduce his workload after ill health, he became part time consultant in the psychiatric intensive care unit. He leaves his wife, Karen; two daughters; and grandchildren.

**Richard Laugharne**

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## Harry Kaye Rose



**Former consultant psychiatrist Greenwich District Hospital and Bexley Hospital (b 1924; q Glasgow 1946; DPH, DPM, FRCPsych Eng), d 30 September 2013.**

His experiences as a ship's doctor in the merchant navy prompted Harry Kaye Rose to develop an interest in alcoholism. With the psychiatrist Max Glatt he worked in a pioneering clinic in Warlingham Park Hospital in Surrey in the early 1950s, where they treated alcoholism as a disease and not as an addiction. Harry also worked with traumatised and shell shocked Polish refugees and soldiers and, for a time, was the resident doctor at Brands Hatch motor racing circuit. An authority in forensic psychiatry, he developed a successful private practice, and his patients ranged from government ministers to some of the most dangerous and notorious criminals in the UK. He also did a lot of pro bono work. He leaves his wife, a daughter, a son, and grandchildren.

**The Rose Family, Brian Humblestone**

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## Kenneth Munro Scott



**Former missionary doctor (b 1916; q University of Pennsylvania Medical School 1942), d 15 September 2014.**

Kenneth Munro Scott was born in China, the youngest of five children of Presbyterian missionaries. For the next 30 years, the family was buffeted by the Communist uprising and the

Japanese invasion of the Chinese mainland. Ken attended schools in China, North Korea, and New York. After qualifying he did his residency at the Presbyterian Hospital in west Philadelphia. He served in the US Army in China as a captain in the medical corps and later as a medical missionary under the British Empire in war zones in Burma, Korea, and China. He moved to India to serve as director of the Christian Medical College, Ludhiana, Punjab, from 1964 to 1974. Subsequently, the Scotts moved to North Carolina and lived in Swannanoa. Ken leaves three children and seven grandchildren.

**Kim Mammen**

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## Arthur Llewellyn Lloyd

**Former general practitioner, Small Heath, Birmingham (b 1928; q Birmingham 1951; OBE, MRCS), died from Alzheimer's disease on 27 February 2014.**



After his national service, Arthur Llewellyn Lloyd ("Llew") joined his wife, Barbara, and her father in general practice in inner city Small Heath. The couple and their practice were an integral part of the community and well loved by loyal patients who received a 24 hour service—night service could be out of the bedroom window, and patients were never turned away, day or night. Llew was honorary secretary of the Birmingham division of the BMA, and was to become involved with dozens of organisations and bodies, often as an office holder or patron. He was always impeccably dressed, and his hobbies included skiing, antique clocks, and military medals. Predeceased by Barbara by three months, Llew leaves two daughters.

**Ian McKim Thompson, Fiona Brookes**

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## Barbara Elizabeth Mansell Lloyd



**Former general practitioner, Small Heath, Birmingham (b 1925; q Birmingham 1948), d 30 November 2013.**

Barbara Elizabeth Mansell Lloyd (née Eades) worked as a general practitioner with her husband, Arthur Llewellyn Lloyd ("Llew"), in the practice house in Small Heath where she had grown up. She brought up their two daughters, Fiona and Elizabeth, while "holding the fort" when Llew flew out to his many meetings and commitments. Her hobbies included sewing, singing, and local history. In 1968 Barbara and Llew bought a bungalow in Oxfordshire, where they would spend weekends. They became part of village life and loved belonging to the community. Barbara had a severe stroke in 2001, and life changed forever, but the couple lived together for another 12 years. In 2013 she developed a melanoma of the eye. She predeceased Llew by three months and leaves two daughters.

**Elizabeth McKeown**

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