

Henry Wuga MBE: Reflections for Burns Night



HOLOCAUST
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Learning from genocide -
for a better future

Henry Wuga MBE was born in Germany in 1924 and escaped the Holocaust by coming to Scotland on the *Kindertransport*. At 16, he was declared as a Dangerous Enemy Alien and interned on the Isle of Man. When released, he made a home in Scotland and developed a love for Scotland's national bard, Robert Burns.

Henry Wuga MBE



'They came to all the houses around us. I saw people getting beaten up, I saw a piano flying out of a first floor window smashing on the pavement. We had to leave. We had to get out.'

Henry Wuga was born Heinz Martin Wuga on 23 February 1924 in Nuremberg, Germany to a Jewish mother Lore and non-Jewish father Karl. At 14, he became an apprentice chef at a Kosher hotel in Baden-Baden. He remembers the antisemitic legislation passed by the Nazis between 1933 and 1939, such as the Nuremberg Laws, which sought to curtail the rights and freedoms of Jewish people in Germany. In 1938, Henry, who loved music, wanted to attend a gala performance of Wagner's opera *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*. His mother pleaded with him not to go and to think of his safety, because it was forbidden for Jewish people to attend concerts. In defiance of the injustice around him, Henry obtained a ticket and attended the concert. He remembers:

'I sat at the top, in the back row - I did this on my own. It has stayed with me since. That was my fight against Hitler. I'll show him who can go to the opera and who can't.'

After the November Pogrom, also known as *Kristallnacht*, when the Nazis initiated a campaign of hatred against the Jewish population and destroyed Jewish homes, shops, businesses and synagogues, Henry's parents arranged for him to travel to the UK on the *Kindertransport*, a humanitarian rescue programme for children which ran between November 1938 and September 1939. Henry was one of around 10,000 mostly Jewish children who were sent from their homes and families in Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia to safety in the United Kingdom.

'We left Nuremberg and crossed into Holland. The German soldiers left the train, and we were greeted by groups of Dutch women giving us chocolate and apples and sandwiches – it was really quite amazing.'

In 1939, he left Nuremberg and travelled first to London and then continued to Glasgow Central Station. Henry was taken in by a woman named Mrs Hurwich, who herself was a Jewish immigrant from Latvia. After World War Two broke out, it became very difficult for Henry to contact his parents, so he wrote letters to them via his uncles in Paris and Belgium. However, Henry, now aged 16, was later arrested for sending these letters and charged with corresponding with the enemy. He was declared a 'Category A Enemy Alien' at the High Court in Edinburgh and was interned on the Isle of Mann.

'I was below the age of internment, but I was there for 10 months, and on the whole, we were reasonably well looked after. The others around me were academics, musicians, artists. It was like being at a university, and it was a powerful experience.'

When Henry was released from the internment, he returned to Glasgow and made a home in Scotland. He married Ingrid Wolff, a fellow German Jewish refugee, who had also come to Britain through the *Kindertransport*. He developed a love for the poetry of Scotland's national bard, Robert Burns, and speaks highly of the country that took him in.

Reflections for Burns Night



'We were refugees, we'd been through the mill. Burns talks of liberty and freedom. His works mean so much more to me than some might think.'

Image: Henry Wuga at a Burns Supper

Henry and Ingrid Wuga married in 1944 and raised a family in Glasgow. They established a successful Kosher catering business and volunteered with several charities, giving back to the community that took them in.

Henry found many of his loves in Scotland. He remembers learning Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and can still recite passages to this day. He also read and was inspired by many of the works of Robert Burns. However, Henry's connection to Burns did not begin in Scotland.

He recollects:

'When the Nazis arranged public book burnings, any volume expressing freedom and liberty was thrown into the fire. The works of Robert Burns, expressing libertarian ideas, also went up in flames.'

On Burns Night, 25 January, Scots around the world hold Burns Suppers to celebrate the life, works and memory of Robert Burns. Two days later, Holocaust Memorial Day is marked on 27 January, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi death camp. Burns may have been writing over 150 years before its liberation, but his words remain a powerful prompt for Holocaust Memorial Day:

'Many and sharp the num'rous ills
Inwoven with our frame!
More pointed still we make ourselves,
Regret, remorse, and shame!
And man, whose heav'n-erected face
The smiles of love adorn, -
Man's inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn!'

- *Man Was Made to Mourn*, Robert Burns

The words, 'Man's inhumanity to man' have become a common metaphor for describing the Holocaust. Holocaust survivor, Primo Levi, in his book *If This Is A Man • The Truce*, incorporated these words from Burns when writing that he was '*constantly amazed by man's inhumanity to man.*' In describing Bergen Belsen Concentration Camp, many have used the words of Burns, Ian Forsyth MBE, who was born in Lanarkshire, was one of the first British soldiers to liberate Bergen Belsen in 1945. On seeing what had taken place there, Mr Forsyth remembered that, '*It was a shock to the system, a nightmare. I cannot fully describe it, but it completely changed my outlook on life and showed man's inhumanity to man.*' Mr Forsyth, before his death aged 97, dedicated his life to helping others through his work in Holocaust education.

Henry Wuga continues to live in Scotland, and he cites the Scottish outdoors as one of his favourite things about his home country. He remembers his first time visiting a beach in Kirkcudbright, cycling in the north Highlands and skiing in Aviemore. He looks at Scotland fondly and highlights the kindness of those around him.

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