

Leading Ladies

By Nancy Honey

Interviews by Hattie Garlick

Helen Bamber: *Therapist and human rights campaigner*

- 1925** **Born in London**
- 1945** **Travelled to Belsen, aged 20, to help the survivors of the concentration camp**
- 1947** **Returned to London, trained in trauma counselling and became responsible for more than 700 children orphaned in Auschwitz, before helping to found Amnesty International**
- 1985** **Founded the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture.**
- 1995** **Awarded the OBE**
- 2005** **Set up the Helen Bamber Foundation to help survivors of human rights violations**

I'm not ashamed of liking nice things – clothes, love, the small patio that I have in my flat – because I am so aware of losses. The people that I see and treat have lost everything. So I know how much the small things matter and how the things one collects form part of your life.

I take pleasure in doing ordinary things, like cleaning the kitchen floor. Because they *are* so simple and they don't demand anything beyond completing that simple task and that, for me, is very refreshing.

In the war, I watched my mother when the air raids came. She would sit at the piano looking beautifully put together and with her hair up. There is something about facing adversity and thinking, "I'm going to look the best I can and feel good in myself."

Sometimes, my lipstick is my armour. It's not always easy. I've been in some very dirty, difficult, uncomfortable situations and I've still tried, not to look glamorous, but to rise above the situation and feel in myself a kind of confidence and the ability to move forwards.

I was twenty when I went to Belsen [the concentration camp, to help Holocaust survivors], and I felt useless for a while. The knowledge that I could be useful came to me as a kind of revelation. I came across a woman sitting on the floor. She was so thin. From a distance she looked like a piece of material. I sat with her while she dug her fingers into my arm and we rocked together, on the floor, while she rasped out her story of loss. She had lost her husband, her children, everyone she had loved. I said, "I can't change history, but I can be your witness. And I promise that your story will be told over and over again."

I do the same thing with present day asylum seekers. There is so much denial on the part of the public and decision makers who turn away out of a desire not to know what happens to strangers. My organisation documents their injuries so that we become a witness to them. And that is extremely important to these people: that somebody hears their story and bears witness to it.

We are all capable of casual brutality, of not opening our eyes and ears and hearts to other people's suffering. It is so easy to turn away because if you do acknowledge the suffering of an asylum seeker, then you have to do something about it – it imposes a responsibility on people. And we all, already, have our own concerns – our jobs and families and mortgage payments to worry about... It's very understandable. But unless we acknowledge what happens to people then there is no hope of working towards a solution. And I wouldn't be able to sit back in my nice flat and enjoy my nice things, knowing that there are people out there suffering and who could use my help.

Love is important to me, and justice, too: its preservation and our understanding of the need for justice. But within all that there is a thread of responsibility – because we are all responsible for those values going wrong.

There are times when you despair in our ability to make any sort of difference. But I say to people that we are all part of a mosaic. We can all be influential in our own fields and ways.

As a child I wanted to go to RADA [theatre school]. I was an only child, so put a dramatic spin on everything that happened to me. But then, the times *were* dramatic. It was the '30s, the rise of fascism, the war. I wanted to express all that in a dramatic form. Any essay I wrote provoked rounds of sighs. Of course, the war meant that the possibility of pursuing that line of work was out. And I don't think I could really have been happy as an actress, perhaps only if I could have portrayed what I believed in.

I think I've probably had to exert authority in a way that I would not have needed to had I been taller. I can be quite authoritative, a bit of a bloody nuisance. I can take people down if I have to. I don't do it very often, I think I do it less now than when I was young and I try not to be aggressive because that is never helpful when you are trying to represent other people's interests. But I *do* do it if I feel that people aren't listening or taking what I'm talking about seriously.

One time, there was a round table conference and there was someone involved who was quite irritating and in quite a high position. Someone came up to me afterwards and said, "thank goodness you took that person down." I was mortified. I had no idea that I had, and the person was really quite influential.

I'm getting older and it is more difficult to follow the things you've always loved energetically. It's so much easier to flop into your flat at the end of a very demanding day. But I do love inviting people to the Thai restaurant on the corner of Museum Street and eating out with friends and colleagues.

I think I've lost friends and let people outside of work down in small ways by not being available and by putting work first, always first. And it has interfered with relationships, definitely. Now I live alone and

have many friends but a seven day week and a preoccupation when the phone goes means some relationships have suffered.

It hasn't been easy to put my head down at the end of the day. It's never enough in my line of work. You get moments of joy, but there's always this feeling that it's not enough.

I remember watching a programme about the 7/7 bombings and watching one of the survivors describe how she was haunted by the feeling that she should have done more. That is something I recognize: the feeling that there is always more to do.