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Written by Maureen Younger

VOICES

## Remembering Helen

An unstinting campaigner for human rights, Helen Bamber died in August, aged 89. *Maureen Younger* recalls a wonderful example of a life well lived.

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Perhaps it's my Scottish roots, perhaps it's due to the fact that I've always felt a bit of an outsider, perhaps it's simply down to watching one Frank Capra movie too many, but I've always had a great admiration for people who are willing to stand up for others no matter what the odds. They are those indomitable human beings whose lives seem to encapsulate that most wonderful of human qualities – the human spirit. Helen Bamber OBE, who recently died aged 89, was one such person.

As a psychotherapist, Helen worked tirelessly with survivors of gross human rights violations for almost 70 years. When I first met her in 2010, Helen was in her 80s and still working with clients on a daily basis at the Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF), a charity she founded in 2005.

In 2007, I tried to see an installation HBF exhibited in Trafalgar Square. I arrived too late but had an interesting talk with someone from the charity. They explained how HBF helped victims of sexual exploitation and handed me a couple of leaflets. By 2010, I had become furious at some of the blatant misogyny bandied about by some on the comedy circuit with regard to violence against women (in layman's parlance ill-judged rape jokes).

For once, however, I decided to put my anger to good use and use my comedy nights to raise money for victims of such violence. The Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF) seemed the obvious choice. An incorrigible hoarder, I still had the leaflets and, most unusually for me, I even remembered where I'd put them. I rang the charity to ask if I could raise money for them and thus began my involvement with the Helen Bamber Foundation and my eventual meeting with its founder.

Helen's work had started as far back as 1945 when, aged only 20, she travelled with a relief unit to help survivors from Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp. Bergen-Belsen was liberated in April 1945 by the British, who found 53,000 half-starved prisoners still alive. At first, the relief unit was not allowed into the camp until Camp 1 was burnt down due to an outbreak of typhus. (Around 35,000 prisoners were to die of typhus in the weeks leading up to and after liberation.) Nor were they allowed in until all the corpses had been scooped up into mass graves. (Approximately 13,000 corpses were strewn around the camp.) Although Helen had been suitably prepared beforehand and spared seeing the more horrific sights, she wasn't spared the grief and the tragedy of so many people still dying around her, grasping out their stories like – to use Helen's words – a kind of vomit, trying to tell her what had happened to them.

It was here Helen realised that it is crucial for survivors of man's inhumanity to man to be able to tell their story, to have a witness. The Foundation that Helen founded was thus set up to witness, document and treat survivors of gross human rights violations, torture, political oppression, trafficking for sexual exploitation and other forms of extreme cruelty, often based, Helen noted, on the same sentiments she heard and learnt about in the 1930s.

Helen knew only too well what she was talking about. Before setting up HBF, she worked for Amnesty International, as well as the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture for 17 years. She had learnt a lot about survival and the attitude towards the stranger, the asylum seeker, the refugee, who is always defiled and targeted when things are bad. Helen worried about the present day climate with its poverty and lack of resources. She firmly believed that, although times are hard, we have a duty to those about whom we know nothing.

Part of the work HBF carries out is to prepare medical, psychological and psychiatric documentation of a client's injuries when applying for asylum. Although Helen admitted that the authorities have a difficult job to do, she felt that how you work with that difficulty is key, as is how you understand that difficulty in the light of targets and political agendas, and the fact that the public do not want asylum seekers.



She pointed out that while the public will cheer on Mo Farah in the Olympics, it's a different story when it comes to a fellow asylum seeker who is sobbing quietly in a corner about his lost life, his lost body and his broken mind. These are the people that HBF deal with.

Having spent decades talking to survivors of torture, Helen was convinced that we will never succeed in combatting terrorism by using torture. Torture survivors would tell her how, in the end, they would just say anything to stop the pain. She recalled an ex-Second World War officer who spoke at their first conference on torture; he recounted how, during the war, he had learnt how to get all the information he wanted without laying a finger on anyone. Helen concluded that if we can get to the moon and have iPads and all the other extraordinary technology we enjoy today, surely we can think of a better way to question somebody than pushing their head into contaminated water until they are near drowning. She felt there is a corrosive effect on a society which permits torture, as by implication, it is saying torturing a fellow human being is the right thing to do.

Helen's decision to join a relief team to Bergen-Belsen began a journey that saw her spend her life helping those in most need of help, those with no voice, the victims of man's inhumanity to man. Helen Bamber achieved so

much in her life and had a quiet dignity and charm that was truly touching. She was inspiring. Meeting her inspired me to put on a show to raise money for her charity in London's West End. (Up to then the biggest show I'd ever organised was for 80 people in a plant shop/café in Birmingham.) The show sold out, featured acts including Jo Brand and Jenny Éclair and, more importantly, through the Crying With Laughter nights, we raised almost £18,000 for HBF.

One of the biggest compliments I've ever had was when one of her co-workers told me Helen would use my name as shorthand for a dedicated friend to the Foundation and say: "They should do a Maureen." How much better the world would be though if more people would "do a Helen".



[www.helenbamber.org](http://www.helenbamber.org)

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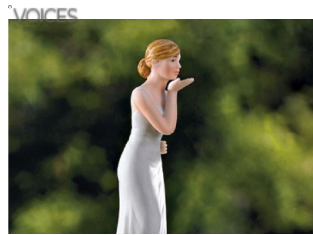
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