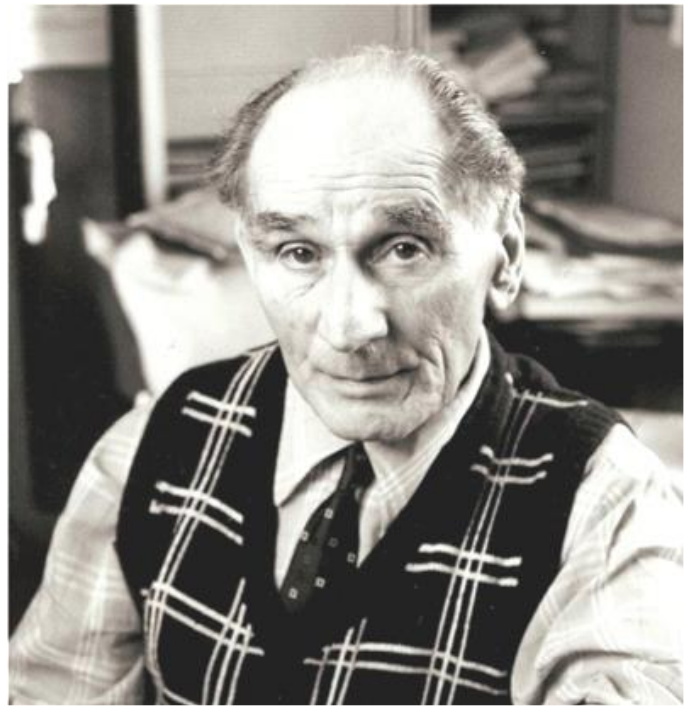


## **A note to students: an overview of Leon Greenman – by Ruth-Anne Lenga – and an invitation to reflect...**

*Dear students*

*I am Ruth-Anne, Programme Director at UCL's Centre for Holocaust Education. I would like to tell you about Leon Greenman who became a very close friend of mine in his elderly years.*

*Leon was quite a character. He was of small stature – about 5 foot 4", he walked with a stick but was exceptionally strong. It is hard to believe but, even in his 80s and 90s, Leon kept himself fit by doing 30 press-ups a day. (I cannot even manage one). He also loved to sing and could burst into song given half a chance at any function whether he had been invited to do so or not! His amazing tenor voice would reverberate around the room and capture everyone's attention.*



*Before I got to know Leon well, he earned his living as a market trader of house -hold knick-knacks and became a collector of small interesting antique items which often appeared for sale on his market stall. He certainly had the 'gift of the gab' and shoppers regularly returned home having purchased from him many peculiar things that they hadn't set out to buy – just because he had a unique charm and was so easy to warm to.*

*Leon lived a very modest life without the normal creature comforts – he didn't have central heating in his home and he managed the cold nights very well, somehow. He liked to do everything for himself. In the kitchen, he mastered the perfect 'boil in the bag' chicken and rice and supplied himself with endless cups of tea, which satisfied him most nights. He never wasted food nor did he ever bin any food product that became 'out of date'.*

*On entering his home one could think that it was incredibly messy, but it wasn't; he simply preferred not to put away paper cuttings, books, photographs and other items that related to one particular terrible event that took place in Europe during World War 2. This event is known as, The Holocaust.*

*But, why did Leon want to surround himself with this stuff? What had this history got to do with him? Why do you think he needed to do this?*



*I am going to tell you something about what happened to him when he was a younger man, long before I knew him. This information may help answer these questions and could make us wish to ask many more.*

*Leon was born into a Jewish family in London's East End on the 18<sup>th</sup> of December 1910. His grandparents were of both Dutch and Eastern European heritage. When Leon was young his family decided to live in Holland. Later he became an apprentice hairdresser, joined a boxing club and became an amateur singer of romantic ballads. During a musical evening held at a club for young Jewish people Leon met his future wife Esther (Else) van Dam – a Dutch girl living in London. He moved back to London, the town of his birth, to be nearer to her and the romance blossomed.*

*Leon and Else were married in London in the Stepney Green Synagogue in June of 1935. They honeymooned in Brighton. Shortly afterwards they went on a visit to Rotterdam in Holland to see Else's grandmother. While there, she persuaded the young couple to settle in Holland to look after her. They agreed.*

*On the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 1940 Else gave birth to a boy named Barney. The happiness was short lived. Nazi Germany invaded Holland just two months later. Leon, entrusted his British passports and money to non-Jewish Dutch friends for safe keeping. He was worried that these important documents and all the money he had may be confiscated. If this happened Leon and the family would be in danger of the same fate as the Dutch Jews who were now under German rule. But when Leon came to reclaim his documents, he discovered that his friends had burned the passports for fear of being caught helping Jews. Leon's money had also 'disappeared'.*

*Later one night in October 1942 Leon, Else, Barney and Else's elderly grandmother were forcibly taken from their home by Dutch police working for the Germans occupation forces. They were taken to Westerbork, a transit camp for Dutch Jews. Whilst there Leon tried many times to explain his British citizenship and the family's right to be interned under international law, but it was all to no use. They were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 1943. On arrival Leon was separated from Else and Barney. What followed for Leon was a horrifying two years of slave labour, experimentation, beatings and starvation in numerous concentration camps. He was eventually liberated by the Americans at Buchenwald on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 1945.*

*During his time in the camps he had made a 'covenant' with God: if he and his family survived he would dedicate his life to bearing witness to the Holocaust so that the despicable acts might never happen again. Leon was eventually to discover that his wife and son had been murdered in gas chambers soon after they had arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The last sighting Leon had of Else and Barney was of them crowded in a waggon waiting to be taken away – their matching red velvet hats*

*peeping out from the group of the others facing the same fate. This tragic picture would play heavily on Leon's mind and remain with him for the rest of his life.*

*Despite this torment, he began a life-time mission to tell the world about what happened. While most survivors at this early stage were (understandably) too traumatised to speak out, Leon began touring schools, universities, and various faith groups to tell his story to anyone who would listen.*

*Leon built his life in London where he remained for the rest of his life. He never remarried.*

*On retiring he was able to pursue his lecturing with greater voracity. He also became a human rights activist and campaigner with the Anti-Nazi League, standing up against far-right groups in spite of being in his 80s. It was at a cost. In the early 1990s he became a target for attack by such movements. He was sent death threats and the windows of his home were smashed. Leon remained undeterred and continued his fight.*

*In his final years, he built up a hoard of material relating to the Holocaust which surrounded him in his terraced house in Ilford. Hardly an inch of space remained free of items including many of his own paintings that recorded the details of the regular nightmares he had about the things he saw during the Holocaust. I often suggested that I help him 'tidy' up (I was worried he might trip over something) but he preferred things exactly as they were – and he knew where everything was. Why do you think he needed to do this?*

*Eventually at the age of 97 on March 7<sup>th</sup> 2008 Leon passed away.*

*Leon asked me to be responsible for sorting out his home after he died. There I found this remarkable little poem that he must have written. He typed it on an old-fashioned typewriter. What do you think he is asking himself in the poem? If you could respond to him what would you write?*



Ruth-Anne leads a team of experts at University College London Centre for Holocaust Education. Ruth-Anne and the team help teachers to bring to students the very best classroom lessons about the Holocaust. The story of Leon Greenman features in much of this material.