

Bernard Ginsborg

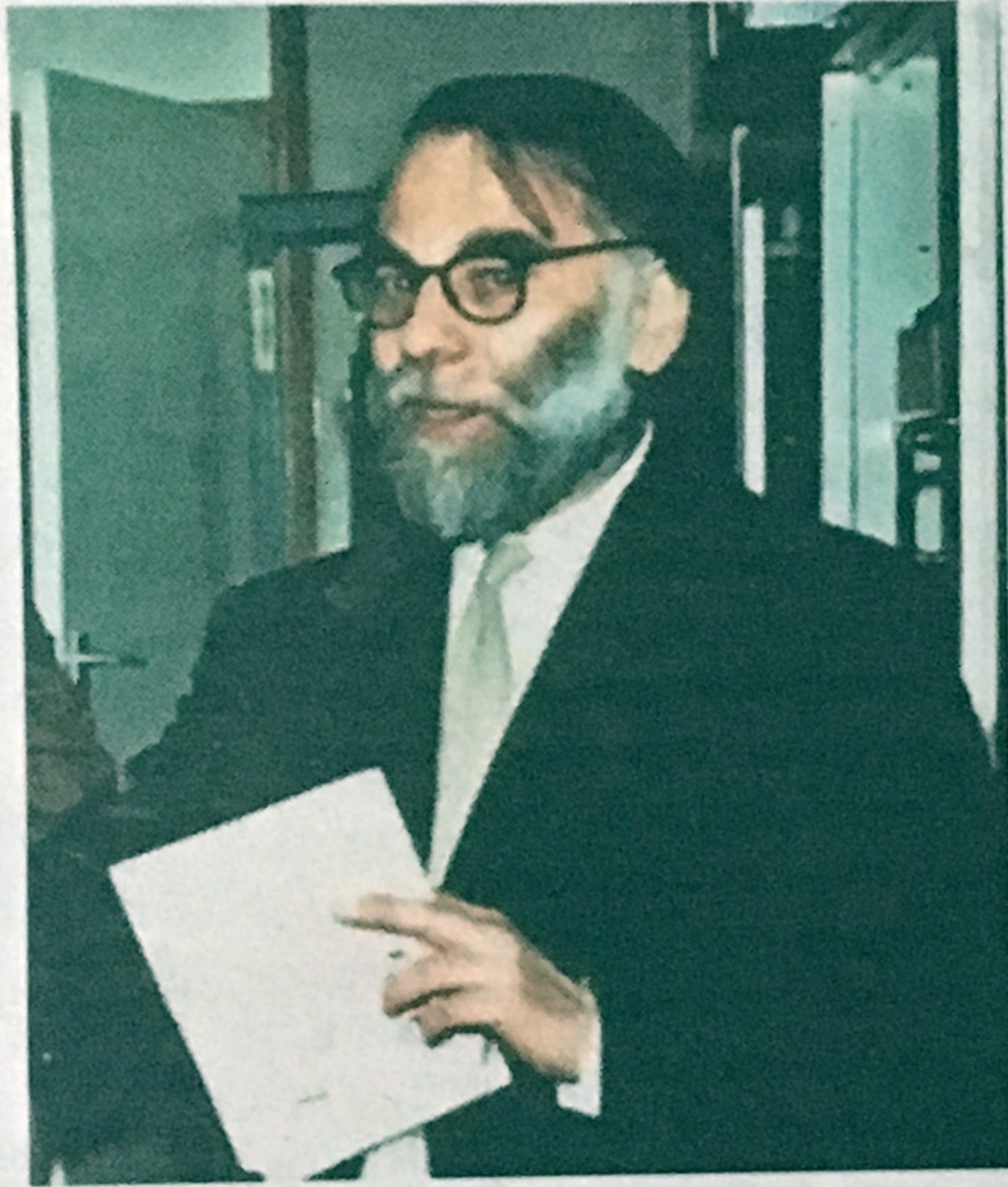
The Times 24/8/18 Scottish edition

Pioneer in pharmacology and physiology who loved the arts and was appointed to a personal chair at Edinburgh University

Bernard Ginsborg's daily quips might suggest that he had failed to reconcile himself to spending much of his working life in Edinburgh, but there must be few who have enjoyed the city and its university more fully. He and his wife, Andy, were regularly seen at concerts, operas and the theatre, the more avant-garde the better. And, unlike many of the Edinbourgeoisie who disappear in August, they relished the festivals.

All this was in addition to his pioneering role in pharmacology and physiology. Early in his career Ginsborg and his colleague Paul Fatt discovered voltage-gated calcium currents, which play a major role in making human cells function normally. This led to his long-standing research interest in synaptic neurotransmission and secretion, the mechanism by which a neuron, or nerve cell, passes an electrical or chemical signal to another neuron.

Bernard Lionel Ginsborg was born in London in January 1925, the youngest child of Henry and Mala (née Rebbe), who were from the Baltic states. Henry worked in a wharf in east London and



Ginsborg was a fan of the avant-garde

became a supervisor in a toy factory. An older brother, Eddie, died before Bernard was born, but he was close to his two sisters, Bertha and Rebecca.

Young Bernard was not an early reader, preferring to play cricket in the rambling garden of the family's house

in Stoke Newington, north London, where his parents let rooms to refugees from Nazi Germany. He won a scholarship to Dame Alice Owen's Boys School, where he was taken under the wing of an inspiring maths teacher.

In 1939 the school was evacuated to Bedford where he was joined by his mother and Rebecca after their home was bombed. He attended concerts by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, who also relocated, and took piano lessons. He turned to the violin when the family's piano had to be sold and had a fine voice, being chazzan, or cantor, for the Bedford United Hebrew Congregation.

He was encouraged to apply for Oxford or Cambridge but resisted because his family was poor and he did not think he would enjoy student life. Instead, he read physics at the University of Reading, flirted with the Communist Party and was active in the drama society, playing Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*.

After completing his first general degree in 1945 he applied for a commission in the RAF, but the war ended and physicists were in demand, so he took a

BSc (Hons) in physics. He graduated in 1948 but did not wish to become involved in producing nuclear weapons. His first research job resulted in water-proof packaging for cigarettes.

He completed his PhD at Reading, which involved recording minute movements of the eye. He also worked as a research fellow at University College London, where he was mentored by Bernard Katz (obituary, April 28, 2003) and worked with Fatt.

Meanwhile, he had met Andrina (Andy or Andie) Taffler who, after war-time evacuation in upstate New York, was studying psychology and economics at Reading. They married in 1953 and Andy enjoyed a long career as a child psychologist at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children in Edinburgh. She died in 2013 and Ginsborg is survived by their daughters, Jane, who became a professional singer and then a music psychologist, and Hannah, professor of philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley. Ginsborg joined the Medical Research Council in Mill Hill, where he worked for Walter Perry. In

1958, when Perry was asked to establish a laboratory at the University of Edinburgh, Ginsborg and his wife moved to Scotland. He became a lecturer in 1962 and, after swiftly ascending the academic ladder, was appointed to a personal chair in 1975, retiring in 1985.

The couple were sociable and their daughters recall frequent visitors, usually scientific but sometimes artistic or musical. They were passionate about the arts and galleries in Edinburgh were their regular haunts. After Andy's death Ginsborg learnt to cook. He became a devotee of Radio 4, read widely and listened to music, although he attended no more concerts, not even those of his grandson, a concert pianist.

A committed atheist, he once said that science, in the form of the Edinburgh Multi-Access System, with its multiple computer terminals, a forerunner of the internet, was capable of proving him wrong.

Bernard Ginsborg, professor of pharmacology, was born on January 22, 1925. He died on June 26, 2018, aged 93