

REMEMBERING JOSEPH ROTBLAT, REMEMBERING OUR HUMANITY

By David Krieger

Joseph Rotblat was one of the great men of our time. As a young physicist from Poland, Rotblat realized that it might be possible to create an atomic weapon and worried that the Germans might succeed in developing such a weapon before the Allied powers. Due to this realization and his belief that the Allied powers needed a deterrent to a possible Nazi bomb, Rotblat agreed to work during World War II on the British bomb project and then on the US Manhattan Project.

When it became clear to him in late 1944 that the Germans would not succeed in creating an atomic weapon, Rotblat resigned from the Manhattan Project and returned to London. He was the only Allied scientist to resign from the bomb project as a matter of conscience. The following August, he read with shock that the American atomic weapons had been used on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He decided to devote the rest of his life to seeking the abolition of these terrible weapons. He would never again work on a weapon project. Instead, he found work as a nuclear physicist at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London.

Joseph Rotblat was the youngest signer of the Russell-Einstein Manifesto in 1955. Most of his colleagues who signed the document were already Nobel laureates, and Bertrand Russell told Rotblat that he was sure that Rotblat would someday receive the prize. Rotblat was a founder and leader of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, which began in 1957 to bring together scientists from East and West. In these conferences, Rotblat carried forward the spirit of the Russell-Einstein Manifesto: "Remember your humanity and forget the rest."

Rotblat did indeed receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995 for his years of dedicated effort in seeking a world free of nuclear weapons. He was 87 years old at the time. He continued to speak out and be a powerful voice for abolishing nuclear weapons until his death in 2005 at the age of 96.

I had the pleasure to know Joseph Rotblat and work closely with him. He was a man of enormous optimism. He believed in humanity and trusted that we would live up to our potential. He said on many occasions that his short-term goal was to abolish nuclear weapons, and his long-term goal was to abolish war. He believed that a world free of nuclear weapons was both desirable and feasible, and he patiently explained to all who would listen why this was so.

November 4, 2008 marks the centennial of his birth. It is a good opportunity to pause and remember a man of great compassion and humanity. Above all, Joseph was kind and decent and was unwavering in his commitment to create a better world – a world in which humanity's future was not threatened by the nuclear weapons that he had helped to create.

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