

The launch of
*Keeper of the Nuclear Conscience: The Life and Work of
Joseph Rotblat*

8 February 2012

British Pugwash, in conjunction with Oxford University Press, launched Andrew Brown's biography of Joseph Rotblat, *Keeper of the Nuclear Conscience* at a packed meeting in University College London. Andrew Brown was joined by Professor Paul Rogers from the Department of Peace Studies at Bradford University and Sandra Ionno Butcher, Director of the Pugwash History Project to discuss the significance of Joseph Rotblat's life and work and the role of Pugwash in the long struggle to achieve a world free of weapons of mass destruction.

Andrew Brown, author of *Keeper of the Nuclear Conscience*, described Joseph Rotblat as a post-enlightenment visionary who will matter for generations to come. He outlined Rotblat's early life – the influence of his childhood experiences in war-torn Warsaw, the beginnings of his career in experimental physics, his work with James Chadwick at Liverpool University and the experience of working on the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos in 1943/4.

From his return to the UK, having left the Manhattan Project, Rotblat's scientific work became interlinked with his lifelong effort to oppose further development of nuclear weapons. As a founding member of Pugwash, he participated in and later led its innovative work in influencing international policy on weapons of mass destruction, using a combination of behind the scenes diplomacy and public awareness raising.

In Brown's view, Rotblat's legacy is relevant today. Nuclear weapons still exist and there are many obstacles to their elimination. Rotblat and his colleagues excelled in "slow history – painstaking deep analysis and explicit consideration of unintended consequences and the perceptions of others. Those charged with these onerous tasks in future would do well to study Rotblat's contributions, even when he was wrong."

Paul Rogers, Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford, recalled Rotblat's key role in establishing Bradford's Department of Peace Studies and his inspirational relationship with younger generations. Looking back to the period of the Cold War, Professor Rogers argued that Pugwash had an important role in breaking the "bureaucratisation of homicide" where officials and scientists became locked in a

mindset dominated by what was known as the “balance of terror”. Its role was again enhanced as it was able to influence key voices around President Gorbachev, persuading him that Russia could not sustain this balance of terror.

Today, Rogers considers that the world has moved from the “edge of the abyss” of nuclear confrontation to a “slippery slope” of proliferation and risks of war. This presents massive dangers where we will need “wisdom to exceed our own capacity for destruction”, in which movements such as Pugwash are so important.

Sandra Ionno Butcher, Director of the Pugwash History Project, examined some of the approaches developed by Joseph Rotblat and his Pugwash colleagues, which exhibit a mix of pragmatism and idealism. They were pioneers of “Track-2 diplomacy” – bringing together influential people to move negotiations on when they become blocked at the highest levels. They were also among the early examples of transnational organisations working on disarmament, though others have since been developed. Rotblat in particular believed in public engagement wherever it was relevant, particularly with young people, leading him to develop the WMD Awareness Programme and PeaceJam, where young people work with Nobel laureates.

She recalled that during the early days in the 1950s, when MacCarthyism still held sway in the United States, Rotblat and Pugwash were accused of being dupes of Soviet propaganda or worse. Even after Rotblat won the Nobel Prize he was still sometimes described as naïve. Yet in the present century, high-level support for a nuclear weapons free world has significantly increased and is no longer seen as a naïve dream. Nonetheless, the current situation is still very challenging and Pugwash internationally now addresses not only disarmament but also conflict reduction in areas where nuclear weapons are present.