Noble dreams never die

Ana María Cetto and Octavio Miramontes

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BOOK REVIEW

NOBLE DREAMS NEVER DIE


reviewed by Ana María Cetto* and Octavio Miramontes

Instituto de Física, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Circuito de la Investigación Científica, Ciudad Universitaria, CP 04510 México, D.F.

The future belongs to those who see a future. J. Rotblat, 1994

There is perhaps no other international top award that arouses as much polemic as the Nobel Peace Prize. From the 1973 prize awarded to Henry Kissinger to the one recently awarded to Barak Obama, several examples illustrate its controversial nature. However, there have been cases in which the award has been met with unanimous joy and acclaim because it has served to rightly recognize an extraordinary contribution to the furtherance of fraternity, peace and disarmament. An example of the latter case is the award given to Joseph Rotblat in 1995, jointly with his ultimate creation: the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs.

Having been born in Warsaw in 1908, Rotblat witnessed one of the most turbulent periods of recent history, spanning from the prelude to World War I to the dramatic aftermath of World War II. The fact that he was a Polish Jew, and a very capable nuclear scientist, made of him much more than a simple witness and put him at the centre of this turmoil. One can only try to imagine how an accumulation of horrors, tragedy, disgrace, conflict and courage can shape a personality that is called to play a decisive role in influencing the course of history for the benefit of humankind.

This book by Andrew Brown helps the reader in this effort of imagination and understanding, by providing excellent guidance through Jo Rotblat’s personal life, from his childhood surrounded by distress and hardship of all sorts, through his demanding days as a nuclear scientist first in Liverpool and later in the Los Alamos ‘paradise’, to his mature period fully devoted to ensuring that future generations would grow up and live in a world free from large-scale confrontations involving the threat and possible use of nuclear weapons of mass destruction.

The book is so well documented that probably even readers who were closely acquainted with Jo Rotblat will discover many aspects of his life that are unknown to them. Let us mention as an illustrative example a specific passage that strikes our minds with particular intensity. When the Israeli nuclear physicist Mordechai Vanunu was illegally abducted by Israel’s secret services, Rotblat took that action very seriously. He symbolically imprisoned himself to protest and was very strong in

*Author for correspondence (ana@fisica.unam.mx).
demanding Vanunu’s immediate release. Brown’s book includes a photograph of Rotblat behind bars, and this single image is worth thousands of words in describing Jo’s humanitarian character combined with his strong convictions.

That a world free of the perils of a nuclear confrontation is a goal difficult to achieve has been clear to everybody, but it is precisely this that makes the way chosen by Rotblat to struggle for such a high goal the more exemplary for future generations. *Keeper of the nuclear conscience* offers a concise account of many of the crucial passages of the Cold War that kept Rotblat’s heart and mind, and those of some of his colleagues, engaged in the struggle. This confers a special value on the book, because it helps in understanding the historical context and personal endeavours of one of the founders and the most ardent promoter of the Pugwash Conferences.

The Pugwash Conferences have been widely recognized as having been largely influential in building bridges for communication between scientists and public personalities in the recent scenario of West–East political and ideological confrontation. Jo Rotblat’s intense engagement in this organization, since its creation in 1957, was not circumstantial: it was the result of a deep conviction that scientists had a special responsibility because of their technical knowledge and understanding of nuclear weaponry, including the dangers involved in their development and potential use. But the responsibility of diplomats, politicians and the military in averting these terrible dangers was no less. And the need to bring all these actors together to reach common understanding of peaceful solutions was urgent. This sense of urgency, already elegantly but bluntly expressed in the Einstein–Russell manifesto of 1955 (to which Jo Rotblat was one of the signatories), was the main driver of the Pugwash movement in its early days and continued to fuel it for several decades—perhaps even beyond the official end of the Cold War.

The total proscription and actual elimination of nuclear weapons is, for many, not more and not less than a naive vision, an absurd desideratum. But for a utopian, such as Jo Rotblat was, having a vision that would guide and drive the efforts of the Pugwash movement was as essential as the concrete steps—big or small—that could be taken towards such a distant goal. This often confronted Rotblat and other visionaries with the pragmatists (outside Pugwash, but also within the organization) who would be content with reaching some compromise solution in which nuclear weapons, ‘under due control’, could still play a role in deterrence.

Nuclear disarmament is in fact recognized today by the world community as an objective of the highest priority, as we are constantly reminded by public declarations and commitments by governments. However, efforts to reduce nuclear arsenals and to prevent nuclear proliferation have had only limited success; still today nuclear weapons—arguably the most destructive weapons of mass destruction—are not yet subject to a global prohibition agreement, unlike biological and chemical weapons.

For many of us who were fortunate enough to have known Jo Rotblat personally, to have benefited from his lucid thinking and to have enjoyed his warm and loyal friendship, his dream continues to be an important driver. In present times, a large part of the younger generations around the world are concerned with their immediate survival and have lost the capacity to have a vision and think about the future. Jo Rotblat’s example, so eloquently presented in Brown’s book, is an invitation to recover the capacity to dream. Because, as the Uruguayan poet and writer Eduardo Galeano has put it, ‘although we cannot know what will happen, we have the right to imagine what will happen. . . . That is what Utopia is good for: to make us walk.’