With the death of Joseph Rotblat on 31 August 2005 the world has lost one of its most engaged and capable advocates of nuclear disarmament and world peace.

Rotblat was born into a Polish Jewish family. His father was a prosperous paper merchant until the business collapsed during the First World War. After the war, Rotblat, penniless, worked as an electrician during the day and in the evenings studied for a physics degree at Warsaw University. He graduated in 1932, and while studying for his doctorate worked in the Radiation Laboratory in Warsaw. Early in 1939, after completion of his doctorate, Rotblat went to Liverpool on the invitation of James Chadwick to work on the study of uranium fission, which had just been discovered. He could not afford to bring his wife, Tola, so was delighted when Chadwick was able to offer him a fellowship in the summer of the same year. He went to Poland to collect her, but had to return to England on his own, because Tola, recuperating from an appendicitis operation, was not well enough to travel. Two days after he left Poland, the Germans invaded, and Tola did not survive the Nazi barbarism. Rotblat never remarried.

At the beginning of 1944, Chadwick and Rotblat went to Los Alamos to collaborate on the development of the atomic bomb, given the fear that the Germans might have a similar project. Later that year, on the occasion of a dinner at the Chadwicks’, Rotblat was shocked by the statement of General Leslie Groves that the real purpose of the bomb was to subdue the Soviets. At the time the Soviets were allies in a fierce war, making huge sacrifices to vanquish the common enemy.

Later in 1944, it became clear that, in Rotblat’s words, “the war in Europe would be over before the bomb project was completed”, making his “participation in it pointless” (“Leaving the Bomb Project”, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, August 1985). He therefore “asked for permission to leave it and return to Britain”.

Given the German defeat, Rotblat considered the continuation of the bomb project to be immoral, and therefore did not want to continue to collaborate. In this he was unique among the many scientists working on the bomb project.

Back in British academia, Rotblat felt that it would be best to work for the application of scientific advances to human and social problems, and switched his work towards medical applications of radioactivity. In 1950 he moved to Bartholomew Hospital Medical School as professor of physics, until his retirement in 1976. In 1947 he organized the “Atomic Train”, two railway carriages filled with exhibits and demonstration experiments, aimed at educating the public about nuclear energy and its risks.

Rotblat’s concern about the danger posed by nuclear weapons was shared by Bertrand Russell. In 1955 the two organized the “Russell–Einsteins Manifesto”, which called attention to this problem and urged scientists to work towards its resolution. Rotblat was one of the 11 signatories. An outcome of the manifesto was the first of the Pugwash Conferences of scientists on nuclear arms problems, sponsored by Cyrus Eaton and held at his estate in the village of Pugwash in Nova Scotia. The Pugwash Conferences have become the chief forum for scientific discussions about nuclear disarmament, and more recently other arms-control and ecological problems. In its now nearly 50 years of activity, more than 300 conferences have been held all over the world, bringing together scientists and others from different nations, to discuss and try to understand these common problems.

Rotblat was the initiator of Pugwash and its leader – committed, devoted, moderate and extraordinarily capable both in his understanding of the issues and in maintaining a collaborative spirit of participants despite conflicting nationalities and divergent opinions. In focusing on specific problems, Pugwash can be credited with contributing to the Partial Test Ban Treaty of 1963, which prohibited atmospheric nuclear weapons tests, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972, which prevented an accentuation of the nuclear arms race.

Rotblat was Pugwash secretary-general until 1973, and became its president in 1988. It was clear to him that the only solution to the nuclear weapons threat as well as to nuclear weapons proliferation is the global elimination of nuclear weapons. A common response to this, especially from the Americans around the table, was that nuclear weapons cannot be disinfected. Rotblat countered this by dividing the question into two: was a world free of nuclear weapons (1) desirable and (2) feasible? Unfortunately, the answer to the first question from the nuclear weapons states, in particular the US, has been negative.

Rotblat attended almost all of the Pugwash meetings, and was its undisputed leader. In 1995, Rotblat and Pugwash were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and he immediately gave his share of the money to the organization. In addition, Rotblat was repeatedly honoured for his academic and humanitarian achievements, including Commander of the British Empire, 1965; the Bertrand Russell Society Award, 1983; the Albert Einstein Peace Prize, 1992; Fellow of the Royal Society, 1995; and many honorary academic degrees. He was knighted in 1998.

Rotblat’s death is a very sad event and a great loss to many of us. Unfortunately he left us before his great dream of a world free of nuclear weapons has been realized. It is up to those of us who are left to continue his important struggle until the goal is reached.

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