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Joseph Rotblat - A scientist and a pacifist -

Born in Warsaw in 1908, Joseph Rotblat died this year on the 31st of August after a short illness.

As a physicist he took part in the discovery of nuclear fission in the years 1938-39. Realizing the importance of that discovery, he left his country to participate in the atomic bomb research at Liverpool university as he feared Germany would acquire that massive destruction weapon. He then left for the United States to join the Los Alamos team of researchers in charge of designing a bomb as a means of dissuasion in case Germany would herself design it. By the end of 1944 it became obvious that Germany was in no position to carry out that plan. From that moment Joseph Rotblat decided to leave Los Alamos as a nuclear deterrent had no more reason to exist.

He was the only scientist to leave Los Alamos in order not to be party to the "Manhattan Project" whose aim had been totally deviated to be turned into a criminal device of intimidation. For Joseph Rotblat it was quite clear that the Americans wanted to use the bomb against the USSR, a country which had made great sacrifices to crush nazis. He went back to Britain. For about twenty years he was not allowed to stay in the United States and regarded as a traitor, or even a potential spy.

Being aware of the danger of nuclear proliferation, Joseph Rotblat actively took part in the work of the Pugwash Association which campaigned for nuclear disarmament. For many years he was the secretary of the association and he ended his career as president.

In 1995 Joseph Rotblat and Pugwash were awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. Just a few weeks before, he had attended a symposium called "Hiroshima sans amour" ("Hirohima without love" - a reference to the film of the French film-maker Alain Resnais) organized by the Mons-Hainaut University on the 15th and 16th of September. In his speech Joseph Rotblat strongly emphasized the necessity of reconciling science and ethics, and again pointed out the uselessness of nuclear weapons as a means to ensure security. Moreover he denounced the dangers of such weapons which, in spite of the end of the cold war, are a great threat to peace and to the human race. When awarded the Nobel Prize, Joseph Rotblat ended his speech by reminding all scientists of their duty to denounce the harmful effects that can be attached to scientific research. On that occasion he also warmly appealed for the liberation of Mordechai Vanunu and for a humane society.

Joseph Rotblat must be regarded as a scientist of exceptional value, aware of the dangers of science and of the necessity to establish regulations in order to protect not only scientists but also those who publicly denounce nuclear weapons and advocate the political will of nuclear disarmament - a will still lacking in our society.

As a conclusion, it would be appropriate to ask for a "Joseph Rotblat oath", similar to the Hippocratic oath, which would urge scientific researchers to work exclusively for a sustainable and pacifist development of humanity. A utopian wish indeed, absolutely necessary though, which demands that people take action to ensure the survival of mankind.

Pierre Piérart