Encounters with Bertrand Russell

by Mordecai Roshwald

I FIRST MET Bertrand Russell in the autumn of 1954 in his home in Richmond—on Queen's Road, if my memory is correct. I was thirty-three years old then—which from the vantage point of my present age (if this is the right phrase) seems to me quite young. Lord Russell was eighty-two. He had almost half a century head start. I was fully aware of his prominence as a philosopher and a public figure, but being on my first visit to London and eager to soak in impressions, I decided to request an interview.

There was another reason for this request. I was a junior lecturer in political philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem at that time, and I had reviewed some of Russell's books dealing with social and political issues in Hebrew periodicals and in the English daily, *The Jerusalem Post*. One of these was *The Impact of Science on Society*, published by Allen and Unwin in 1952. I felt that, in some ways, I knew Russell through these writings which revealed not only his clear thinking and sharp wit, but also his compassion for humanity. I was eager to amplify my impressions by an actual encounter.

I wrote him a note in longhand, briefly introducing myself and mentioning the reviews. The response came without delay, inviting me to Richmond for one day in the afternoon—I believe it was three o'clock. I do not remember whether it was Russell himself who opened the door, or someone else, but I was ushered to a room upstairs in a house which seems to me to have been rather undistinguished Victorian. My host revealed a very outgoing personality. I must have had some misgivings as to how the meeting would evolve and probably had had some questions in store to prevent awkward moments of silence. All this was entirely superfluous, for Russell put me completely at ease with his manner and his eagerness to inquire. Indeed, I do not remember asking him questions; it was he who queried and I who responded.

Early at the meeting I remember having referred to Russell's account

in one of his books of how overwhelmed he had been when as a boy he had met Gladstone. I told Russell that I was afraid I would be overwhelmed by him the way he had been by Gladstone, but that had proved not to be the case. I felt perfectly at ease.

There were two salient points which I recollect from this meeting which reveal some characteristic traits of Lord Russell. Russell asked about Israeli politics and we came to talk about the composition of the Government. I explained that the cabinet was composed of the coalition of the moderate labour party, another more doctrinaire socialist faction, the liberal party, and the religious party—as the situation was at that time. Russell snapped with his ready wit: "If all these are in the coalition, who remains in the opposition?" (I then explained that the wide political spectrum in Israel left the communist party and the radical nationalists in the opposition.) Another issue which interested him was the Jewish opposition to intermarriage with non-Jews. Russell told me that when he had taught at a university in the United States, a Jewish student had confided in him that his intention to marry a gentile girl had met with a fierce objection on the part of his mother. Russell wondered what the reason for this attitude was. I do not exactly remember my answer, though I believe I indicated that the antisemitism in Eastern Europe, the place of origin of most American Jews, created an attitude of alienation and mistrust to the gentile world. I mentioned that this opposition to outside marriage, whatever its source, is in contrast to some biblical precedents, as even Moses had married a Midianite woman. "Well," quipped Russell with a twinkle in his eye, "and Solomon among his thousand wives must have had few gentiles."

A year later, when I was in London again, I wrote to Russell again and enclosed a review of a book of his—probably of his short stories collected in *Nightmares of Eminent Persons and Other Stories*, published in 1954. I also sent him a copy of a slim book of mine, *Humanism in Practice*, which was published in London in 1955. Russell lived at that time in Wales and there was no question of a meeting, but he acknowledged my letter and the other material in a note dated 14 September 1955.

In March of 1959 I wrote to Russell from the United States. I taught at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis at that time and in one of my courses assigned Russell's *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare* as required reading. I indicated that fact in my letter and also complimented Russell on his televised discussion with Professor Libby from Chicago about nuclear weapons. There was much talk at that time about the "clean" bomb, and Russell very effectively ridiculed it.

The response, again from the Wales address, came only in Septem-

ber. While Russell was curious about my students' reaction to his book, his letter was mainly concerned with a book of mine, *Level Seven*, a novel about a nuclear catastrophe. My London publishers, on their own initiative, had sent some prepublication copies to various prominent persons, including Bertrand Russell. Russell liked the book very much and he wrote me so. Nor was it merely agreement with the message of the book which made him endorse it—also publicly. For in his private letter to me he compared it favourably with another, quite successful novel on this subject by an established writer, which I, as a matter of fact, found quite impressive. Obviously, Russell made a point of distinguishing between a political message and the way it was conveyed.

Russell had some good words about another book of mine—a seriocomical novel which pointed to the dangers of proliferation of nuclear weapons and their "illicit" use. He said in his letter of 18 January 1962: "I have read your book *A Small Armageddon* with a great deal of pleasure. Although the events related in it are fantastic, there is no reason whatever why they should not actually happen. I hope your book will have many readers and that they will be made aware of the insane absurdity of current governmental policies."

I met Russell again in London in late summer or early autumn of 1960, if I am not mistaken. This time the meeting was in a house in Chelsea. I believe Russell was in London for a visit on this occasion. He was again a most gracious host, pouring the tea into my cup with a trembling but determined hand. He discussed my book a bit and its potential success. When I indicated that, unlike some others who had been successful, "I am not a known writer," he graciously added: "Not yet." Again, his goodwill and generosity complemented his rationality and wit.

I do not recollect whether on this occasion it was he or I that introduced the problem of the relationship between the rational concern and the emotional involvement. I indicated that after I had written my book—an enterprise undertaken out of a strong concern about the nuclear danger to humanity—I became *emotionally* much less involved. Russell's own introspective finding was similar, and he seemed to have been somewhat astonished at himself that his emotions did not always run parallel to his rational concern about the future of humanity.

I do not recollect whether it was another meeting with Bertrand Russell, or a certain moment during the meeting described above, that revealed another aspect of Russell's personality. Whatever the occasion, I remember Russell being upset and tense. For he had just been informed that his involvement in the Committee of 100, which had planned civil disobedience to protest Britain's nuclear armament—an involvement which eventually led to Russell's prosecution and brief imprisonment—had been leaked to the press. (This would suggest that the meeting took place on 28 September 1960.) The tension which was visible on this occasion sharply contrasted with the earlier impression of an imperturbable, though compassionate, philosopher, who looked at things *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Yet, this new aspect of Russell's personality amplified his image. It showed that Russell was human also in the sense that he was not indifferent to the reactions of the world around him—the world at large and the comparatively small world of England, which he loved. He was both a citizen of the world and of the United Kingdom, and his concern for the whole of humanity did not make him indifferent to the response of that part of mankind among whom he had been born and raised. This, to my mind, underscores his greatness.

Nashua, N.H.