

Obituary

BERT ROTH 1917-1994

ANYBODY with an interest in labour history has lost a friend. Those of us who try to write it have lost a living reference 'book'. What he could not remember he could usually look up. If you were visiting him in the old days, when he and Margot shared a house, and a point emerged during a discussion, Bert would rise, slip away for a book or a box, and return with a triumphant smile, waving a paper or one of his immediately recognizable typed summaries (his typewriter produced a print face which had more individuality than the hand-writing of many people). I recall one incident especially. He kindly read drafts of my book on the Red Feds and I remember reading, startled, his comment on my claim that nobody now knew of some obscure activist who had cycled around the North Island preaching revolution. Bert had not only heard of him but provided a biographical sketch, the details culled from newspapers and journals around the world!

Bert's passion for labour history, and especially the history of unionism and socialism in New Zealand, grew out of his Socialist convictions. So too, no doubt, did his generosity and helpfulness. He was always on the side of the 'workers', the more militant and 'left wing' the better, and labour history was in some ways a memorial to the brave men and women who had struggled to protect the interests of the weak and vulnerable. Anybody working in the area could expect his generous help and lively interest. I do not know what role he played in persuading the University of Auckland Library to begin collecting union records, but that invaluable collection almost certainly received his enthusiastic support (as did library staff who wished to unionize). Equally important, he helped to allay the suspicions of 'blue-collar' unionists about academics and librarians. His dedication to their cause, his cheerful willingness to write their histories, and his own commitment to unionism allayed their suspicions and saw increasing numbers pass their historic records into the hands of Bert, or some other archive.

Bert must have been born into a Socialist family for he was active on the Viennese left from childhood. In 1935 he enrolled in chemistry at the University of Vienna but in the poisonous atmosphere of the late 1930s he became increasingly involved in underground youth politics. In *Work in the Under-*

ground he noted: 'Every Sunday, weather permitting, our group would go for a trip into the Vienna woods ... thus outside the jurisdiction of the police Mornings were usually taken up with political study, lectures and discussion. Afternoons were devoted to sports and games In the evening we sang Then we marched back in orderly ranks, still singing our fighting songs' The Nazi invasion changed things. Bert, of non-practising Jewish parents and strong left-wing beliefs, was in mortal danger. Somehow he slipped through Germany and Switzerland to France, where he enrolled to study electro-chemistry at Grenoble. The Germans followed. Eventually he made his way to New Zealand, one of a small but distinguished group of Europeans of Jewish ancestry accepted uneasily as refugees. They were to make a remarkable contribution to New Zealand culture. Bert, disembarking with his bicycle, typewriter and snow-skis, must have symbolized something different, something nobody counted on. The *Evening Post* interviewed him and the police registered him as an 'enemy alien'.

Almost from the beginning he found new roots in the union movement and the 'left' intelligentsia. He joined Bill Sutch's WEA class, attended the WEA Summer School in Feilding, joined the Esperanto Club in Wellington and quickly met almost every interesting figure on the 'left'. He worked in various jobs, none for long, served in the RNZAF for three years, including a stint inflating meteorological balloons on Norfolk Island, and enrolled for his BA at Victoria in 1944. In 1945 he became a New Zealand citizen (his security record noting that 'he is not pro-Nazi, but he is not pro-British either'). After the war he married, entered Library School, and worked in the National Library. He also belonged to the PSA. Few would have guessed that this quietly spoken, unfailingly polite man with a puckish wit would one day write the union's history, and many more. Although he retained his Austrian accent he mastered the art of writing in English. In the 1950s he frequently contributed short pieces to *Here & Now* and published his first scholarly articles on New Zealand's labour history (his first book, *George Hogben: a biography*, appeared in 1952, one of the few things he ever wrote that could not be classified as labour history). Many of the articles were the first, and some of them remain the last word on important subjects, such as the Knights of Labour, the early Socialist Party, and Atkinson's Labour Church. His curiosity and commitment fused to ignite a passion, but in all he did he was serious, meticulous and careful. It was only appropriate that he chair the Labour Working Party of the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, and fitting that his large contribution to labour history was acknowledged at a special conference in his honour.

Bert's lifelong commitment to a world free of oppression and injustice, and to labour history as an aid to achieving this, will remain his enduring legacy. Fragments of Bertold Brecht's *To Those Born Later*, attached to his will, echo as one recalls that tall and intense man: 'Truly, I live in dark times!' 'The man who laughs/Has simply not yet heard There was little I could do. But those

in power/Sat safer without me: that was my hope.' And his life perhaps is summarized in his faith, captured in Brecht's stanza:

Our forces were slight. Our goal
Lay far in the distance
It was clearly visible, though I myself
Was unlikely to reach it.
So passed my time
Which had been given to me on this earth.¹

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¹ I am grateful to Kerry Taylor for providing me with a copy of his obituary for the *Evening Post* and a summary of key events in Bert's life. I am also grateful to my secretary, Liz Malthus, for drawing to my attention Mike Coleman's obituary, 'From refugee to labour historian', *PSA Journal*, July 1994, p.2.