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Obituary: Mr David Hofman 

A Luminary in the Century of Light – Mr David Hofman

IF THE 20TH CENTURY was the Century of Light then David Hofman, whose life spanned almost the entire period, may well be seen by future generations as one of its indefatigable torchbearers. This was a life of service par excellence. With his passing, the Bahá'í community of the United Kingdom has lost one of its most distinguished believers. In its tribute to Mr Hofman, the Universal House of Justice speaks of his “exemplary zeal”, his “adamantine loyalty to the Cause”, his “unfailing response to the call and guidance of the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice”, his “central role in the advancement of the British Bahá'í community and the launching of the brilliant Africa Campaign”, and “his outstanding contributions to Bahá'í literature both as an author and a publisher.”



*The Universal House of Justice in 1987 –
Mr Hofman is second from the right.*

Born in 1908 in Poona, India where his father served in the British Army, Mr Hofman spent a brief unhappy spell in the Royal Air Force before setting off to see the world. In the 1930s he travelled to Canada where he worked variously as a clerk in lumber camps, an actor, a bookkeeper, a life insurance salesman and as an announcer with CFCF Montreal – one of the country's first public service radio stations.

It was in Montreal in 1933 that he became interested in the Bahá'í Faith through meeting the architect, William Sutherland Maxwell, his wife May and their daughter Mary – later ‘Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhiyyih Khánum. At that time a declared atheist, Mr Hofman had formulated his own thinking on creating global justice and equality, and the bright new future he envisaged for the planet had no place for God in it. May Maxwell challenged him: “You think you believe that – but you don't.” More than six decades later, he said he recalled with absolute clarity the feeling her statement created within him. “I felt as if I were split down the middle,” he recalled. Half of him believed what he was saying but the other half knew she was right. He had to make a choice and, overwhelmed by a “palpable feeling of warmth and unity” around the Maxwells and their circle, he declared his faith in Bahá'u'lláh.

Continuing his travels, David Hofman found gainful employment acting as chauffeur to the early Canadian believer Lorol Schopfloch, who embarked on a travel-teaching journey throughout North America with Mr Hofman at the wheel. Within a matter of months, he had met most of the prominent Bahá'ís in the United States, including Juliet Thompson and the actress Carole Lombard, and was introduced to many of Mrs Schopfloch's high-society friends. He settled for a period in Los Angeles, where he served on the Local Spiritual

Assembly and met Marion Holley, a former US Olympic athlete and then budget analyst for San Francisco City Council, whom he would later marry.

In Hollywood, Mr Hofman resumed his acting career, appearing in movie serials, including playing seven different roles in one 25-installment serial of “The Three Musketeers”, and becoming acquainted with such legends as Greta Garbo. Returning to Montreal he read “The

Thirty-Nine Steps” on Canadian radio to mark its author John Buchan’s appointment as Governor-General.

In January 1936, he returned to England, was elected to the National Spiritual Assembly and, at the following National Convention, became its Secretary. With brief intervals he served on the National Assembly for 27 years. He continued to act on the touring circuit and in the West End, notably in Edgar Wallace’s “The Frog”. Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, he responded to an advertisement for television announcers, armed with a glowing reference from Lady Blomfield. The BBC was running its first television transmissions every day at 3pm and 8pm. He succeeded Leslie Mitchell who had left to voice newsreels, and became the only male television presenter in the world. Each day he was taken by car to Alexandra Palace in north-east London where, wearing full-evening dress he would speak to the small number of homes which had television sets. Once a week, the actress Yvonne Arnaud joined him on the cosy drawing-room set to play the piano while Mr Hofman talked and turned the pages of her music. He was much amused at this time to get a call from Moss Bros who offered to clothe him in return for public endorsement of their suits. The TV transmissions closed down on the outbreak of war. Mr Hofman returned to the stage and appeared as the devil, complete with horns and tail, in a number of short propaganda films. He was also employed by the BBC as an announcer at Bush House, working on the Empire Service. The announcers worked 6 weeks of 12-hour shifts followed by a week’s leave. Mr Hofman was dismissed when his immediate manager took a dislike to the Bahá’í teachings, but he was reinstated on a freelance basis when the BBC was later suffering a shortage of competent announcers. During his BBC service, Mr Hofman produced a broadcast of King George VI who was so nervous that he began delivering his speech before the red light came on.

Shortly after the outbreak of war, he was drafted into the National Fire Service and, when he was invalidated out in 1943, he returned to the theatre. Marion Holley joined him in England and, after a nine-year engagement, they married and formed a dynamic partnership, becoming the spiritual and organisational backbone of Britain’s small but growing Bahá’í community. The Hofmans moved constantly around the country, founding Spiritual Assemblies in Northampton, Birmingham, Oxford, Cardiff and Watford. With a young family to provide for, Mr Hofman tried to maintain his stage career, starring alongside Evelyn Lay in a play and even directing Shakespeare’s Timon of Athens at Stratford but he became tired of the relentless pursuit of jobs. “Being an actor in London means walking up and down Charing Cross Road telling everyone how good you are so they’ll employ you,” he complained.

Following consultation with Shoghi Effendi about what he should do to best serve the Faith and support his family, Mr Hofman decided to turn his hand to setting up a small independent publishing company – George Ronald Publisher, so called after his own middle names. The company flourished and is still operating to this day, specialising now in books for Bahá’ís, although in the early days anything from a factual history of helicopters to light novels was standard George Ronald fare. Over more than five decades, it has published editions containing the sacred Bahá’í Writings, and works by eight Hands of the Cause. Mr Hofman was himself a prolific and highly regarded author on Bahá’í topics. His books include a portrait of the life of Bahá’u’lláh, published in 1992. His introduction to the Bahá’í Faith, “The Renewal of Civilization” was first published in 1946 but was revised and reprinted some nine times from then until 1992. The book has been translated into six languages. Mr Hofman also wrote a children’s book, “God and His Messengers”; a 1950 commentary on the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (with a 1982 epilogue), and a compilation about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá from the notes of Hand of the Cause of God, George Townshend. In 1983, he wrote and published a literary biography of Townshend, who while a Church of Ireland official resigned his duties to promote the Faith. Mr Hofman – who was the publisher, literary executor and a close friend of Mr Townshend – travelled to Ireland to present the book to the country’s eight bishops. Additionally, his statement on the aims and purposes of the Bahá’í Faith made a regular appearance in volumes of “The Bahá’í World”, an official international record of Bahá’í activities throughout the world.

In 1963, the worldwide Bahá’í community elected the first Universal House of Justice and Mr Hofman was among the nine voted to serve for a five-year term. He presented the first statement from the Supreme Body in April that year to the World Congress in London.

statement from the Supreme Body in April that year to the World Congress in London's Royal Albert Hall. He continued to serve on the Universal House of Justice for five successive terms, until 1988 when he retired at the age of 80. The period saw an enormous increase in the growth and spread of the Faith around the world as well as the fierce outbreak of persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran following the 1979 revolution. Mr Hofman was given special responsibilities for publications and oversaw the production of a number of new volumes of translations into English of important scriptures and texts. When asked in 1997 about his experience as a member of the supreme body for so many years he said: "When you have experienced true consultation, there is nothing else like it." Mr Hofman added that in his time on the Universal House of Justice there were only two or three times when a vote had to be taken.

Following his retirement Mr Hofman launched himself on two round the world teaching trips over three years. In 1992, he received a rapturous reception at the opening session of the 2nd Bahá'í World Congress in New York in front of 30,000 believers gathered to mark the centenary of the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh. In his twilight years, Mr Hofman continued to travel widely, meeting with Bahá'í communities, where he was admired as a brilliant public speaker, for his deep knowledge of the Bahá'í Faith, his energy and for his warm, inclusive personality. He also met public officials and leaders of thought in many countries, including Australia and Canada.

His energy and enthusiasm for life sustained him. Following the death of Marion, his final days, spent in Oxfordshire with his second wife Kathleen, were passed revising the George Townshend biography which was republished at the end of 2002, collecting and transcribing his many talks and lectures, and sharing stories of his colourful life with the friends. His last public appearance was as keynote speaker to a conference of Bahá'í historians and biographers at Landegg International University in Switzerland in December 2002.

During Mr Hofman's years in Haifa, a believer working in the Archives came across his first ever letter to the Guardian, written shortly after his declaration in Canada. Instructing his secretary to reply, Shoghi Effendi had written on the envelope, "Answer carefully. This one shows promise." David Hofman certainly fulfilled the Guardian's expectations – and how!

Rob Weinberg

