

Clemens N. Nathan

24th August 1933-2nd June 2015

“He was the ‘human’ of human rights” CCJO René Cassin

A German-Jewish refugee who came to England as a young boy in the 1930s, Clemens worked tirelessly as a passionate champion of Jewish causes, international Human Rights and interfaith relations. He was a past president of the Anglo-Jewish Association, Board member of the Claims Conference and the first Chairman of the Woolf Institute.

A highly innovative textile technologist and entrepreneurial businessman, Clemens was an acknowledged leader in the European textile industry, a strong supporter of the development of the Israeli textile sector as a Governor of the Shenkar College of Engineering and Design as well as a past vice-chairman of the Textile Institute, the worldwide professional body representing the industry.

Born in Hamburg, Germany in 1933 Clemens arrived in the UK as a young child when his family emigrated in the mid-1930s to escape Nazi persecution. This seminal event would later drive him to help not only those who were victims of persecution, but more broadly to champion universal human rights. In addition, the haven that he and his family found in Britain would make him a proud and loyal British citizen.

Educated at Berkhamsted Boys School and then at the Scottish Woollen Technical College, Galashiels, Clemens joined his father’s textile business, Cunart Company Ltd, based in London. When Clemens was aged 24 his father Kurt died and Clemens took over the running of the company as Managing Director. This was a daunting role and the huge responsibility put on his shoulders would have sunk many a person of lesser calibre. But not Clemens. For he developed Cunart into a major player in the international textile industry to the extent, inter alia, that during the 1960s and 1970s the majority of men’s suits and more than a third of ladies’ pantyhose sold through Marks and Spencer and other major outlets in the UK were produced with fabric or yarn supplied or sourced through Cunart. He worked creatively at the interface between cloth, yarn and fibre manufacturers and the clothing sector making use of technical innovations across the worldwide textile industry. He played a crucial part in the success of textile manufacturing in several countries, to the extent that his contribution to economic progress was recognised by overseas governments. He was the recipient of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic with the rank of knight, a medal from the State of Israel for his input to its Economic Council, and the Officer’s Cross of Austria. He was also a past vice-chairman of the Textile Institute and later a Companion Member, a position held by 50 living members.

As a person of enormous intellect, energy and interests, Clemens devoted considerable time to a wide range of activities beyond the textile industry. Through his involvement with the Anglo-Jewish Association (AJA), Clemens developed his passion for Jewish causes and international human rights. First involved as a young member of the AJA

(where he met his wife Rachel), he then served as Treasurer, later as President (1983-1989) and as Honorary Life President.

Clemens pursued reparations through the AJA's affiliation with the Consultative Council of Jewish Organisations (CCJO) and especially through the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (the "Claims Conference") based in New York of which the AJA was a founding member. He served as a Board Member for over a decade as well as Chairman of its Nominating Committee. Here he was involved in negotiations with Germany regarding direct payments to Nazi victims and, increasingly, its funding to aid elderly victims with homecare. There were also talks with Austria about its obligations, including to the Kindertransport children. As Joint Chair of the CCJO he represented Jewish interests at the United Nations in Geneva and New York as well as at the Council of Europe and UNESCO.

Clemens became increasingly interested in interfaith work and was the first Chairman of the Woolf Institute (1998-2003) in Cambridge (previously The Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations), which is devoted to teaching, research and dialogue between the three Abrahamic faiths.

Combining his textile knowledge with his love of Israel, Clemens championed the Shenkar College of Engineering and Design in Ramat Gan, Israel where he served as Governor and Honorary Fellow. The College, now Israel's leading fashion and design institute, was established in 1970 as a strategic priority project by the Israeli Government in order to establish and expand an industry that could quickly generate jobs for new immigrants. Clemens was instrumental in obtaining accreditation (Associateship of the Textile Institute) for Shenkar graduates raising the status and profile of the courses on offer in the early days and the career prospects of its students.

Of the many bodies he was involved with, Clemens was a Board Member for the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture (with its mandate to reconstruct Jewish cultural life around the world after the Holocaust); a close associate of over 40 years with the Paris-based Alliance Israélite Universelle (an international Jewish organisation founded to safeguard the human rights of Jews around the world); and Honorary Life President of the Support Group at the Centre for German-Jewish Studies at the University of Sussex.

In 2007, Clemens channelled his human rights activity into the Clemens Nathan Research Centre. In its short lifetime, the Centre has been prolific, organising or sponsoring ten international conferences and producing or contributing to over 20 publications. Perhaps the culmination of Clemens' efforts was the publication of his own book in 2009, *The Changing Face of Religion and Human Rights*, which brought together cutting edge research with his own personal experiences and interests. The last conference he organised in 2014 was entitled *The Duty to Give and the Right to Receive: Jewish Law and Poverty*.

He was an active member of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews' Congregation in Lauderdale Road, Maida Vale serving as chairman of the Education Committee for many years and a Trustee Director of the Sephardi Centre.

In the late 1990s a sarcoidosis of his spinal cord affected his mobility and ultimately left him severely disabled. With great courage and strength of character he continued to lead a normal life, travelling extensively and pursuing all his interests. Blessed with a

compassionate and expansive nature, Clemens exuded charm, kindness and good humour, with a ready smile and a twinkle in his eye.

His many friends in the Church of England, the Catholic Church and the Muslim community helped him to look at religion and human rights as something everyone needed to know more about, encouraging people to better understand each other's traditions and cultures. Whether it was his carers looking after him in the last months of his life, or the Archbishop of Canterbury or a member of the Royal Family at an important London engagement, his approach would be the same.

Clemens was married for nearly 50 years to Rachel who predeceased him by two years. He is survived by his three children and five grandchildren.



Clemens at his desk at the Cunart Company, 1966



Clemens, 2009

Tributes

“Clemens Nathan is admired for his courage and respected for his tireless communal activities; he has led and has extended the boundaries of leadership in public office...”

His activities are breathless in their scope but there is a common thread running through everything he has undertaken – the concept of voluntary service. The desire to put back into society the fruits of one’s work and experience is a mark of voluntary service at its highest, and at its best.

“He is a man of international stature... he is amongst the outstanding Englishmen of today and one of the great Jews of our generation. I salute his contribution to progress and humanity.”

Edmund L. de Rothschild

From the foreword to a book of essays in honour of Clemens, 2006

“He was the human of human rights...energy for international engagement, his genuine concern for the welfare of others, his strong conviction and integrity, and his thirst for knowledge and challenge in all endeavours.”

Rene Cassin.org

“At the Claims Conference, Clemens has been a trusted advisor and colleague. His wisdom was tremendously valued. Whatever the issue – and there were many – I knew I could count on his sage, well-reasoned advice. He will be sorely missed.”

Julius Berman, The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany

“Dedicated his life to human rights fighting for Jews and non-Jews alike persecuted in all parts of the world”.

Alliance Israelite Universelle

“A remarkable person who achieved so much good...nothing was too much trouble for him. He had great energy, perception and drive.”

The Right Hon Lord Woolf

“An inspiration to all who knew him. Despite physical disability in later life, Clemens soldiered on to promote just causes with a passion which was delightfully infectious”.

Jonathan Walker, Anglo-Jewish Association

“He was a great supporter of the Textile Institute...a true gentleman and generous of nature with his advice and guidance always trying to help...Despite his difficulties nothing seemed to hold him back from life, he was an inspiration and had a positive impact on all who met him”.

Stephanie Dick, Chief Executive Officer of the Textile Institute

“Without his help I could never have established what later became the Woolf Institute. As our first chair of Trustees, Clemens was key to the success of the Woolf Institute in its early years. He was, in sum, an incredibly supportive and energetic chair and I will be always be grateful to him”.

Dr Ed Kessler, MBE, Woolf Institute

“He was an inspiration to all those who cared about the rights of the individual and he made a real and lasting contribution to the rich involvement of the Jewish community in this vital area.”

President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews

“Characterised by academic rigour, social concern and a commitment to historical truth, along with an adventurous and innovative spirit”.

Sussex Centre for German-Jewish Studies

“A great teacher in the world of textile, its markets and customers... with a constant love for innovation...his will to overcome all his difficulties and live a normal intellectual life is a great teaching to all of us. In those circumstances, his great generosity, his passion for Human Rights, his vision for a better world have fulfilled his life.”

Silvio Albini, textile colleague

Reviews of Clemens N. Nathan’s (2009) book, *The Changing Face of Religion and Human Rights*

"Drawing on his own personal experience of persecution, Clemens Nathan has produced a wide-ranging and fascinating treatment of the relation of human rights and religion today, which makes a welcome contribution to current debates."

The Rev Prof Richard A. Burridge FKC, Dean of King's College London & Professor of Biblical Interpretation

"This is a remarkable study from someone who both understands the theory of human rights discourse and at the same time has lived within many of the practical debates. It is informed, rich, and powerful. I recommend it highly."

Rev Prof Ian Markham, Professor of Theology and Ethics and Dean of Hartford Seminary, USA

"A fascinating, personal and profound reflection on the relationship between religion and human rights. Anyone interested in the role religion plays in society today will benefit from reading this book."

Dr Edward Kessler, Woolf Institute of Abrahamic Faiths, Cambridge

Medals

Textile Institute Service Medal for services to industry and the Textile Institute (1986)

Italian Cavalieri Al Merito, Knight and Order of Merit (services to the industry) (1966)

The Officer's Cross (Grosses Ehrenzeichen) **of Austria** (equivalent of an OBE, for outstanding services for world humanitarian and understanding in Christian/Jewish work, and for bilateral trade between the UK and Austria) (1996)