

HERBERT ROTH

(1917-1994)

I was among those privileged to attend a memorial tribute for Bert Roth held at the Auckland Trades Hall shortly after his death in May this year. It was a memorable celebration of a remarkable life.

Bert was born in Vienna into a comfortably off Jewish family. Although he started university studies (in chemistry) in 1935, the growing power of fascism in Austria pushed Bert into activist socialist politics. When Austria was annexed by Germany in March 1938, Bert became a refugee, escaping from Austria through Germany and Switzerland into France. In 1939, after the outbreak of war, he was interned by the French as an enemy alien and the following year emigrated to New Zealand.

In New Zealand his status as an enemy alien continued for a number of years and various restrictions were put upon him in terms both of employment and of office holding in political organisations. Notwithstanding such restrictions Bert quickly established himself in the 1940s within left-wing political and social networks in Wellington. He also furthered his education, initially in a WEA study group run by Bill Sutch, subsequently at Victoria University (where he completed a BA in 1946) and at the New Zealand Library School in 1947.

After Library School Bert worked in the cataloguing department of the National Library Service for 14 years, moving to Auckland in 1962 to become Deputy Librarian of the University Library, a position he held until his retirement in 1983. He was active in the development of the University's New Zealand and Pacific collection as well as in the promotion and expansion of a labour history collection.

It is Bert the labour historian who will be most familiar to readers of this journal. Bert was active in the formation of The Industrial Relations Society of New Zealand in 1974, being one of the Society's original committee members and becoming its second National President in 1976. When the Society turned its original newsletter into the *NZJIR* in 1976, Bert contributed the first book review. In 1977 the "Industrial Relations Chronicle" was introduced into the Journal for the first time and the following year Bert took over the writing of this chronicle, a labour of love he continued until his death.

Bert started to put together his own remarkable collection of labour history material in the early 1950s, retrieving old union records and papers and collecting pamphlets and bulletins dealing with current conflicts. He quickly moved from archivist to author, contributing articles to newspapers and journals, writing the definitive work on New Zealand trade union history (*Trade Unions in New Zealand*, 1973) and a series of histories of different unions and union organisations - the carpenters (1973), the Auckland Trades Council (1977), the Engineers Union (1984), the PSA (1987), the Engine Drivers (1988), the Post Office Union (1990) and the Auckland Waterfront Workers (1993).

Bert consistently supported projects that might advance the interests of working people and trade unionists and lead to a better understanding of their history. In recent years he actively encouraged the establishment of the Trade Union Studies Centre at Waikato University, the Centre for Labour Studies at Auckland University, and, in 1987, the formation of the Trade Union History Project. In November 1992, on the occasion of his 75th birthday, the Trade Union History Project presented to him a series of essays in his honour and paid tribute to his pioneering role as a New Zealand labour historian. The subsequent publication of these essays, edited by Pat Walsh (*Pioneering New Zealand Labour History: Essays in Honour of Bert Roth*, Palmerston North, Dunmore Press, 1994), stands as a permanent memorial alongside the more personal memories of those who knew and cherished Bert and who will continue to value his work and his life.

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