



Sir Harry d'Avigdor-Goldsmid

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Sir Harry d'Avigdor-Goldsmid

Sir Harry d'Avigdor Goldsmid, 1909–1976 ([London, 1977]: privately printed); memorial address, West London Synagogue, Berkeley Street, LONDON W1, 8 February 1977



WE ARE GATHERED here today to remember our friend Harry d'Avigdor Goldsmid, and to express our great sorrow at his passing. He was a man of rich and varied gifts: a brilliant intellect, high principle, deep and abiding loyalties, public spirit, and a proud independence of character. To these he added a keen eye for the ridiculous, and increasing enjoyment of the quirks and absurdities of life. This alone served to free him from all trace of solemnity or pompousness. He was a man of great generosity to a wide variety of friends, to whose help he came, unobtrusively and effectively, at difficult moments in their lives. I speak of this last from my own experience, for he came to my aid and placed his wisdom and knowledge at my disposal, at a critical point in my own life.

I first met Harry at Oxford. We were exact contemporaries, born within a few days of each other. He came to Balliol from Harrow, where, he once told me, he had not been particularly happy. One of the masters who had taught him there told me that he remembered him as an impulsive, sensitive, unusually intelligent, imaginative boy, easily wounded, liable to be moody, not particularly good at cricket, then evidently more highly prized at Harrow than intellectual gifts.

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At Oxford he felt liberated. With his unerring sense of quality, a love of literary talent and of books, which remained with him for the rest of his life, he loved the society of gifted men. At Oxford he seemed happiest in the company of poets, painters, the civilised, amusing undergraduates who set the tone in the University in those days. He loved social occasions, entertained widely, and even in those days acquired a reputation as a generous and charming host, member of an exhilarating and spirited group of friends, in which he felt secure and happy.

In later years he counted among his closest friends such talented writers as Cyril Connolly and Peter Quennell, Sacheverell Sitwell, Alan Pryce-Jones, John Betjeman, Anthony Powell and, in France, Gérard Bauer, all frequent guests at Somerhill. The marvellous hospitality dispensed by him and his gay and charming wife Rosemary, who contributed so greatly to his happiness, became proverbial: the feast of reason and the flow of wit – and equally of what the late Winston Churchill was in the habit of calling ‘liquid [2] nourishment’ – were a source of wonderful pleasure to their wide circle of friends.

After Oxford, he joined his family firm of Mocatta and Goldsmid, bankers and bullion brokers: managed his large estate, collected rare books and, since he was endowed with a massive brain, a capacity for hard work, and sufficient ambition, made a success of it all. His unswerving integrity, his business acumen and his firm sense of reality made this inevitable.

His instinct about people was remarkably reliable: he knew honest men from crooks and charlatans, the competent from the ineffective, clever men from fools, and was not to be deceived. This useful gift he preserved to the end of his days: it stood both him, and the public causes which he took up, in very good stead.

He inherited the characteristics of both sides of his father's family, symbolised by the hyphenated name that his family came to bear. He was proud of his ancestors, and with justice. The Goldsmids had been London bankers for more than a century and a half before he was born. Solid, respected, public-spirited, the family counted soldiers and prominent politicians among its members. Harry's great-great-grandfather, Isaac Lyon Goldsmid, had been a famous patron of the arts, especially of music, a friend of Nelson and other notabilities of the day, a firm adherent of the

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Jewish faith and Jewish institutions, and the first member of the Anglo-Jewish community to be ennobled.

The d'Avigdors were somewhat different: originally bankers based in Nice, in the domains of the King of Sardinia, they were brilliant, mercurial, pleasure-loving, cosmopolitan and highly adventurous, and did well, particularly in Paris during the Second Empire, where the head of the family was much honoured by Napoleon III and other heads of state. Harry's grandfather immigrated to England, where he wrote fashionable sporting novels, reminiscent of Jorrocks, under the pen name of 'Wanderer'; and became an acknowledged authority on the hunting field. In an excess of noble enthusiasm, together with Colonel Albert Goldsmid, his contemporary, to whom he was related by marriage, he became an ardent early Zionist and presided over a branch of the society of the Lovers of Zion, in both London and Paris. His son, Sir Osmond, was Harry's father. The qualities of both families, the solid business [3] sense, public spirit and integrity of the one, and the sense of fantasy, the literary sensibility, the ironical wit, the love of good living, the sporting tastes of the other, met in Harry.

He inherited, too, from his father, a traditional devotion to Jewish communal life. If he could scarcely be described as a regular attender of the services of the synagogue, he was an indefatigable servant, indeed leader, of the Anglo-Jewish community. He headed the Anglo-Israel bank, he worked for AJEX, for the Jewish Memorial Council, for the Hebrew University, for the Anglo-Jewish Association, for the Museum of Islamic Art in Jerusalem, above all for the Jewish Colonisation Association [ICA],¹ founded by Baron de Hirsch, over the affairs of which his father, and then Harry, presided.

I do not know how much he actually enjoyed any of these tasks. He suffered from frequent changes of mood and tended to be somewhat impatient. He liked decisions to be swift and firm. The hesitations, the slow grinding of the wheels of a typical English committee, tended to bore him to distraction. Indeed, he was more easily and rapidly bored than anyone else I have ever known. But he did not find public service tedious, and he usually found his associates, both on public bodies and in his City activities, congenial and stimulating.

¹ The exact explanation of the 'P' in 'ICA' eludes your webmaster.

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His colleagues on ICA have testified to the devotion, energy and luminous, often brilliant, intelligence with which he guided their affairs, and he, in his turn, spoke of them with great respect and liking. The same reciprocal ties, as I can testify, bound him to the Governors of the Hebrew University, the only body on which I was one of his colleagues. I have no doubt that his Jewish activities did give him considerable satisfaction. He displayed at times a certain disdainful grandeur of manner, and a very strong wish to have his views respected, both in public and in private life. In this he somewhat resembled the great Whig magnates of the Regency, with their ironical wit, their confident, *beau monde* breeziness, their sense of superiority, aristocratic tolerance, their respect for civilised values, their contempt for prejudice, pedantry and servility. Like them, he could not abide the company of fools or bores, he loved the bold, the original, the interesting – courage, dash, effectiveness. These qualities, modified by his native prudence and rigorous honesty, characterised [4] his entire life. He brought these qualities to bear on his activities in local as well as national affairs: a loyal son of Kent, he became, in due course, a Justice of the Peace, High Sheriff and Deputy Lieutenant. He took these duties seriously, and, by all accounts, performed them most honourably and successfully.

When war came, he joined the Royal West Kent Regiment and rose to the rank of Major. His bravery in action was outstanding: twice mentioned in despatches, he was awarded the DSO and the Military Cross, and was wounded. His courage was not of that essentially physical kind with which some human beings are naturally endowed, and which makes them scorn danger, or perhaps not even notice it. All men express fear. Harry was certainly subject to it. He told me that he suffered fits of trembling before and, at times, during battles, and that he felt fear acutely. Like Henry IV of France, he triumphed over it, again and again, by great and painful effort, which is, perhaps, the rarest and noblest form of courage. In a sense, this was characteristic of his entire life; things did not come easily to him. His achievements were the fruit of conscious exercise of will. He was self-doubting and self-critical, and suffered from periods of deep discouragement: but until his very last years he did not give in.

After the war he decided on a political career. He was elected to parliament for Walsall in 1955. His intellectual power, his integrity and his financial skills were much prized in the House of Commons:

after acting as Parliamentary Private Secretary to his friend Duncan Sandys, then Minister of Housing and Local Government, he was chosen to head important new committees – on public expenditure, on corporation tax, on nationalised industries. On all these he made his mark. But his gifts deserved higher office: if he did not obtain it, this may, in part, have been due to his very virtues – his unbending refusal to compromise his stern Conservative principles in an effort to secure promotion: to behave, as the late Lord Salisbury once said of some of his colleagues, like an earthworm. Partly it may have been due to his inability to move at the pace of the slowest members of his party, and to his at times caustic tongue and unconcealed contempt for trimmers and cowards and to his impatience with mediocrities, in [5] his own as well as other parties. Such attributes seldom make for complete success in democratic politics in normal times.

Until the early 1960s, if somewhat disappointed in his political ambitions, he had led a full and happy life, both private and public. He enjoyed his activities in the City, hunted, bred horses, derived satisfaction from his work for the Jewish community, his country, his constituency, his Parliamentary committees. At Somerhill he was surrounded by a host of friends and acquaintances whose company he vastly enjoyed, and above all by the love of his wife and his two delightful daughters. Then, in 1963, a terrible calamity fell upon him and his family. His beloved daughter Sarah was drowned in a boating accident. All joy went out of Harry's life, and went from it for ever. The rest of his life was lived under a permanent unlifting cloud. That which had hitherto given him so much pleasure or moral satisfaction – national politics, public activities, the books he read, the perceptive and beautifully written reviews he contributed to literary periodicals, the society of his familiar friends – all these things began to turn to ashes. From this overwhelming tragedy, he never recovered. His wife Rosemary, and his younger daughter Chloe and her young husband, were devoted and loving companions, he adored his grandchildren, who proved to be an endless source of comfort to him, but nothing could restore him fully. He soldiered on. His pride, his sense of public duty, came to his aid. By deliberate self-mastery, which had made him so brave in the hunting field and in battle, he carried on his public activities conscientiously and effectively.

In 1974 he resigned his seat in Parliament. His generosity was unimpaired. Under an occasionally crusty manner he had a most

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responsive human heart, as friends and beneficiaries, to whom he gave quiet and well-hidden help, can testify. He preserved a proud and gallant demeanour, and still, at times, was again his old, unpredictable, charming, high-spirited self, with that characteristic ominous slight pause, which would be followed by a pungent, pulverising stroke of wit, directed at some action or opinion which seemed to him mistaken or ridiculous. These occasions became rarer. He was often dispirited. But when they did occur, they were still life-enhancing and heart-warming.

[6] He was a richly gifted man whose potentialities were not fully realised, partly owing to circumstances, partly to an all-too-human pride, and love of independence, and desire not to be beholden to any man. He would not bend his knee, or bow down in the house of Rimmon. Intense loyalty, to traditions, to men, to principles; deep patriotism untouched by nationalism; integrity, courage, public spirit, unpublicised acts of kindness, a clear conscience – these, and the love of family and friends, are perhaps better than glittering worldly success.

I esteem it a great privilege to have been allowed to offer this tribute, insufficient as I feel it to be, to an eminent and admirable public figure in both British and Jewish life, a notable human being, and above all to one of my oldest friends, to whom I was bound by ties of warm affection, and whom I shall greatly miss. His passing will be deeply mourned by all who knew and loved him – but the pain of parting is the price we must pay for love and friendship. *Zikbrono livrakba*. May his memory be blessed.

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