

ADDRESS BY
HER EXCELLENCY MS QUENTIN BRYCE AC
GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
ON THE OCCASION OF
NAMING THE ZELMAN COWEN GALLERY OF AUSTRALIAN JEWISH HISTORY
ST KILDA SYNAGOGUE, CHARNWOOD CRESCENT ST KILDA
25 OCTOBER 2009

My friends, it is with a sense of exhilaration, pleasure, and sincere gratitude that I join you today for this special occasion, here in this sacred place of faith, scholarship and community - the St Kilda Synagogue.

I feel privileged to be part of your celebration of Sir Zelman Cowen's 90th birthday, and to mark with you the refurbishment of the central gallery of the Jewish Museum of Australia: naming it the Zelman Cowen Gallery of Australian Jewish History - in honour of your patron of twenty-seven years.

I thank you for this opportunity to voice my profound regard for Sir Zelman, and to praise your work in cultivating and sustaining the Museum - one of our most significant cultural institutions, "a window on the Jewish world," and the hearthstone of Jewish life in Melbourne.

I had the honour recently of having as my guest Thomas Buergenthal - former American Judge at the International Court of Justice in The Hague. His memoir of surviving Auschwitz as a boy "A Lucky Child" was such a hit at the Melbourne Writers' Festival.

The Judge told me that like no other place in the world, Melbourne had welcomed, enfolded and settled Jewish migrants after the Holocaust.

Your Museum, in the heart of this city, bears the watermark of that unique narrative.

It charts the presence of your people in Australia since the arrival of the First Fleet. It keeps the flame of your pilgrimage, survival, courage, resilience, and joy.

It brings together precious records of dwelling and diaspora, of migration and settlement, of an ancient inheritance being passed in rich and tangible ways to new generations, so important in sustaining Jewish memory and culture, here in Melbourne, and for all Australians.

You have a dedicated, energetic and learned Director in Dr Helen Light - part of the Museum's administration since it opened in 1982 - her expertise and enthusiasm ensure the Museum remains alive and vibrant in contemporary landscapes.

You have described her as "Our most beloved Director," commending her "vision and drive, her belief in miracles, and her conviction that have taken you again and again past your highest expectations."

And you have the quintessential patron in Sir Zelman. Dr Light has told me of his unswerving and substantial support; bringing his immense talents in writing, oratory and advocacy to the workings and futures of the Museum.

In his words offered to you and for you, there is an eloquent fund of affection and esteem.

His sister, June Helmer, was one of the Museum's founders, and has been a guiding light ever since.

Sir Zelman takes his place in the history your Museum holds. His life - one of extraordinary and

exemplary achievement - is woven into the fabric of Jewish experience in our country.

Professor Don Markwell of Trinity College, Melbourne, at the launch of A Public Life - Zelman's memoirs - at the University of Melbourne in 2006, noted that when work began on the autobiography, what Zelman knew with certainty about his own genealogy would not have covered more than half a page.

How true this is for many of us - and yet how much that knowledge serves and enriches us when we find it.

Able assisted by Don Markwell and Geoff Browne, Zelman brought the provenance and passage of his forbears gradually to light, so that Dr Markwell, presenting the finished book, was able to state that "it tells a fascinating and moving story of immigrant and specifically Jewish experience."

Zelman's grandparents voyaged from Czarist Russia to turn-of-the-century Victoria, from Belarus to Ballarat - a new and strange world in which they put down fragile roots.

Their touching stories open Zelman's Memoirs - his own story of growing and belonging here, fulfilling the promise they journeyed so far to find.

I've been looking into the pages again, and reflecting on Zelman's 90 years - looking for my words this afternoon, when there is so much to remember, to laud, to be grateful for.

The essence of a public life is that it is one that is well known, and particularly so in this place where friendship, love, admiration, and respect are in abundance.

I know that in this place I am among people who have known Sir Zelman for a long time - marked many of his 90 birthdays.

I ask you to indulge me in bringing my own perspective to this collective homage - through some snapshots of my friendship with him, how I have observed his qualities and his gifts emerge and shine through the years.

My first knowledge of him came - as it did for so many of my generation - when I was a law student in Queensland.

Zelman was the author of our text books in so many subjects: Constitutional Law, Matrimonial Causes, Family Law, International Law, Evidence. I remember his commentaries on many legal, political and social issues, broadcast on ABC Radio and television.

I recall the deep impression he made on me in my undergrad years - his influence - through his scholarship, personality, and engaging communication style.

With his fierce and robust intellect, he was at the vanguard of significant innovation in legal education in this country.

His own academic career was a glittering one - a Rhodes scholar in 1940; appointed at the young age of 32 as the Dean and Professor of Melbourne University Law School in 1951.

His description of his Law student years gives a sense of his delight and joie de vivre - his love of university life, and of the law, his regard for influential mentors, his engagement in so many pursuits: the annual revues, writing pieces for Farrago, founding the Fine Arts Society in 1937: these were the cradle of a lifelong commitment to the Arts, to supporting artists and musicians - most recently his gallant championship of the National Academy of Music, who grace us this afternoon.

Of his fresher year, he recalls an interview with D.K. Picken, Master of Ormond College.

His proposal to study straight Law met with the rather blunt response that it was "misconceived." Picken told him he would benefit educationally and personally from taking Arts as well.

He followed this sound advice, and was later grateful for the Master's intervention - it enriched and expanded his university education enormously, showing him the university "at its best."

I'm reminded of a Dean of Arts at UQ who said, when confronted with the same dilemma, that if a student does Arts and Law, "he runs the risk of becoming an educated lawyer - if he does straight law he runs no such risk at all."

We were thrilled at UQ, when Sir Zelman's appointment as our Vice-Chancellor was announced.

Perhaps for him it was the time which presented him with some of his toughest challenges.

The 70s were turbulent times in Queensland - socially and politically. "Student protests," wrote one historian, "assumed proportions never previously encountered, and St Lucia became literally a battleground for conflicting forces."

Pressures on the university were "exacerbated by a conservative culture, and by the government's confrontational stance." Where serious issues merged with confusing messages, our Vice-Chancellor upheld the finest principles of civil liberties and free speech.

Zelman and Anna were at the heart of social, cultural and university life in Brisbane at the time.

I was cheeky enough to tell him at a dinner party one evening that I was disappointed that he didn't participate in the Law School as I'd hoped. He replied that no-one had ever invited him.

I immediately said "Come and lecture my first year students on Monday morning!" And he did. He gave the best lecture I have ever heard - my students stood on their seats to applaud.

Zelman and Anna gave generous leadership and support in many good causes, opening their home again and again.

I was involved in fundraising for much needed equipment for the Royal Children's Hospital. I asked Zelman to make a presentation at a dinner; he enquired why I hadn't asked him for help with my campaign.

I have noted his deep vein of philanthropy - his serious purpose in getting the funds, the foundations for institutions, projects that matter.

I understand he can be pretty direct in doing so.

Around the Law School coffee table, we would sometimes speculate on what Zelman would do next. Was there a fitting repository for all this excellence? This superb intellect and great generosity of spirit? We wondered.

No-one thought of the Governor-Generalship - announced in July 1977 - exactly ten years after he published his biography of Sir Isaac Isaacs, the first Governor-General to be born on Australian soil.

Zelman's term is remembered as a time of healing - which is what he wanted it to be. He has described his years in this office as "a challenge that intellectually stretched him - his knowledge, experience and capacity constantly called on and tested."

I referred to those words when I left Queensland to undertake this role last year, and they are often in my mind.

In June, Zelman and Anna came back to Yarralumla for a special occasion when we named a meeting room for him.

He reminisced about his appointment as Governor-General.

Again, his words struck a powerful chord in me. He told us how he asked himself why me? As he watched others getting on with their lives, and scurrying about, as he put it. Why me?

"The answer is mysterious," he mused. "The answer is - 'get on with your job'." I took it to heart! It was a tender occasion for all of us, touched by gentle humour, frailty and quiet dignity.

In 1982, at the close of his term, Zelman returned to Oxford, to become the Provost of Oriel College.

We visited him there - where he was in his element. He and Anna were so hospitable; I remember hours of exhilarating and enlightening talk. He has a remarkable ability, when a book comes into the conversation, to find its place in his vast library almost instantly.

The Cowens came back to Australia in 1990, to one of the most important contributions Zelman was to make in public life: his auspices of the Griffith Law School, where he was Chair of the Visiting Committee for eleven years.

As the Vice-Chancellor's Advisor on Legal Education, Sir Zelman introduced innovative and imaginative new ideas, integrating the students' courses.

He also inculcated an emphasis on social justice, and on excellence in teaching, research, and community engagement. He was a lively and encouraging presence in the School, mentoring the students and staff, and offering advice and counsel. Preparing new generations for contribution to the legal profession, to public life, to our community.

In my Queensland years, I looked forward to seeing him there; he always greeted me with warmth, and a joke. They always involved a certain Mrs Plotnik and some diamonds.

Griffith Law Library is one of the many, many spaces in our nation's institutional contours that now bear his name and legacy.

Your central gallery is the most recent, and it is a wonderful tribute: to his incomparable patronage, his inestimable contribution to the Jewish community, his importance to Australia's identity and progress, and the enduring richness of a magnificent public life.

Sir Zelman: with all my admiration, and all my heart, I wish you and Anna a day of happiness and contentment.