

## Daniel Salbstein OBE (20<sup>th</sup> September 1937-12<sup>th</sup> August 2020)

*An appreciation by David Brummell, Chairman of the Great Britain–Russia Society*

It was with immense sadness and shock that we heard Daniel Salbstein had passed away. Daniel was not only the principal founder of the Great Britain–Russia Society and our former Chairman and Talks Organizer, but also a much-loved friend and colleague. Many of us have expressed our heart-felt condolences to Daniel’s daughter, Miriam. These have been much appreciated by the whole family.

Daniel had not been in the best of health in recent months, but he retained his keen enthusiasm for the Society until the very end of his life. He had been following our spring and summer programme of Zoom talks with great interest and was delighted to be able to attend Martin McCauley’s superb talk on 4<sup>th</sup> August on *Revisiting the Brezhnev Era*. The last time I spoke to Daniel was the weekend before Martin’s talk, when – in his characteristic way – he was eager to know how many people had booked for the talk!

Daniel of course had a passionate, life-long interest in Russia and all things Russian. This was awakened – as for so many of his generation – by his attendance during National Service at the Army Russian Interpreters’ course in 1957 at Foxton Hall, near Cambridge. He then studied Russian at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) in London from 1959-1962.

Many of us who got to know Daniel thought that he could easily have had a successful career in academia. But perhaps out of a sense of obligation he decided to go into his father’s business, which he continued and developed very successfully.

But Daniel never lost his interest in Russia. His knowledge about and enthusiasm for Russia in all its aspects – political, economic and social – as well as its history and culture – knew no bounds. This was hugely assisted by his meticulous attention to detail and his phenomenal memory.

Our predecessor organization had been established at the height of the Cold War as the Great Britain–USSR Association, and – following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 – had been re-named in 1992 as the Britain–Russia Centre.

In March 2002, when the Foreign Office withdrew its financial support for the Centre, we were faced with the bleak possibility that this meant the end of the organization. However, it was Daniel who – together with Ute Lynch, Anne von Bennigsen and Charles Stewart – was instrumental in the creation and launching of the Great Britain–Russia Society, which then emerged in October 2002 phoenix-like as the reincarnation of the original Great Britain–USSR Association.

Daniel’s leadership, vision, drive and determination were absolutely crucial at this critical moment. The swift and decisive action he took to save the Centre/Association from extinction and to re-establish it as the thriving and successful



*Daniel, with son David and daughter Miriam, at Buckingham Palace in 2013 immediately after he was awarded his OBE ‘for services to promote UK–Russia mutual understanding’*

Society it became under his chairmanship was one of his greatest achievements. Indeed, without Daniel, it is unlikely that the Great Britain–Russia Society would exist today.

It was Daniel who kept us going during the early years. Until Pushkin House became available for our meetings in 2006, Daniel would tirelessly arrange meetings at alternative venues – whether at the University of London Union in Malet Street or, on occasion, in the upstairs room at what was then *The Cardinal* pub in Francis Street, near Westminster Cathedral.

He secured His Royal Highness, Prince Michael of Kent as our Patron, Professor Geoffrey Hosking as our Honorary President, and a number of distinguished public figures as our Honorary Vice-Presidents.

For nigh-on the next 18 years Daniel was the veritable life and soul of the Society, toiling ceaselessly on its behalf.

He served as Chairman from 2002 to 2008 and as Talks Organizer from 2002 to 2010 – and then again as Talks Organizer from 2016 to 2019. Throughout the time that he was Chairman there were only two meetings that he was unable to attend – and one of those was when he was receiving treatment in hospital.

Over this period, Daniel built up the Society's profile and membership and made the Society what it is today. He organized talks by a wide range of impressive speakers on a diverse range of topics, covering all facets of Russia and the Soviet Union and its former republics. His selection of speakers and topics displayed both skill and imagination, and those of us who were fortunate enough to attend these lectures have benefited enormously from them.

I still have fond memories of the wonderful talk Archbishop Rowan Williams gave on Russian religious thought (at the University of London Union in December 2005). There were also outstanding talks by Grigory Yavlinsky, the economist, politician and leader of the social-liberal Yabloko party (at Chatham House in January 2005), and by the great American historian of the Soviet period, Richard Pipes (at the Great Britain–China Centre in October 2007). Both gave marvellous talks, which were attended by large audiences.

It was only through Daniel's energy and persistence, not to mention his persuasive advocacy and considerable personal charm, that we were able to secure speakers of this calibre.

The last programme of talks Daniel arranged was for the spring/summer session in 2019, when we had a particularly good set of speakers. It was Daniel's idea that we host a conversation at *Open Russia* in June 2019 on the subject of Sir Isaiah Berlin between Dr Henry Hardy (Isaiah Berlin's editor) and Dr Peter Oppenheimer. This was an enthralling evening. It is perhaps fitting that Daniel should have retired as Talks Organizer on such a high note.

Daniel was always keen to point out the wealth of expertise that exists among the membership of our Society. He was very proud of the fact that a significant number of Ambassadors and Professors are members of the Society. Such members are of course particularly knowledgeable about Russia and the Soviet Union. The wider membership has benefited greatly from the unique expertise and experience that – with positive encouragement from Daniel – such members have been able to share with us, both through talks and in informal discussion.

One event that Daniel used to organize which was

extremely popular was an outing to the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in all 12 of the 15 years since 2005 when either the Bolshoi or Mariinsky (formerly Kirov) ballet companies, the finest in the world, have come to London. (with lunch beforehand at *La Ballerina*). For those who took part, this was a most enjoyable occasion, and one which was only possible because of the excellent relationship which Daniel cultivated with the impresarios Victor and Lilian Hochhauser. Daniel was very punctilious about the arrangements, and always drove to a garden centre to choose suitable plants which he would present to Mrs Hochhauser – along with the handmade chocolates and champagne he bought – as a token of our appreciation.

Daniel put his business experience and acumen to good use in the service of the Society, and his prudent stewardship has left the Society's finances in a healthy position. Thanks to his care and foresight, the Society is well placed to cope with any unforeseen emergencies.

Daniel had a great generosity of spirit. He usually took our speakers out for dinner, never charged for his own meal, and sometimes paid for the speaker's guest. But he would take great pains to avoid any unnecessary extravagance on the Society's part. At the same time he was indefatigable in the pursuit of excellence and high standards on behalf of the Society and its members.

Thus it was that for all the years Daniel organized our talks programme, he invited the speakers; brought wine to Pushkin House and served it; chaired the talk; took the speaker out for dinner or presented them with a fine bottle of wine; drove home to Worthing; and then wrote a thank you letter to the speaker.

When Daniel was awarded an OBE in the New Year Honours List in January 2013, '*for services to promote UK–Russia mutual understanding*', this honour was a richly deserved recognition of his achievements and of his selfless dedication to the Great Britain–Russia Society.

He was a man of strong character and also of great warmth and humanity, with a wonderful sense of humour. It is both a privilege and a delight to have known him. He will always be remembered.

As John Roberts (who served with great distinction as Director of our two predecessor organizations from 1974 to 1993) so eloquently said: the Great–Britain Society '*will be [Daniel's] living memorial*'. Let us hope that we can build on Daniel's good work and do our best to ensure that our Society continues to thrive and flourish. By doing so we will provide a 'living memorial' that is truly worthy of him. □