

VERA BRYCE SALOMONS

By Malcolm Brown

When the Editor suggested my putting together a biographical sketch of Vera Salomons, my readiness to go along with the proposal was hampered by fear that ignorance would limit me to a few disjointed notes. I began the first of three catalogues of objects in the Memento Rooms in 1966; Vera Salomons died in 1969, and since then I have worked in rather different fields. But (like all authors) I well recall my first meeting with the person who commissioned my first book.

One autumn afternoon in 1965 I was invited to tea at the Sesame Club, 49 Grosvenor Street, Mayfair. I was not then aware that the building had previously been the family's town house. I was shown into a large private drawing room upstairs, and greeted by an elderly lady wearing what I now realise must have been a tea gown of Edwardian style. I was to see her only twice more, since she lived for most of the year in Switzerland and enjoyed the business of correspondence. I was not encouraged to ask questions bearing directly on herself, and what little I did learn came from asides confided by my mentor, Professor Otto Kurz, one of the polymaths of the Warburg Institute who, as an expert on Islamic art, served as a trustee of the museum in Jerusalem, then in its final stages of construction.

Vera Salomons was born in London in 1888, the third daughter of Sir David the inventor. It seems that of all his children she was always the one closest to him. She shared his admiration of France and things French; in her early 20s she wrote a series of monographs on three 18th century French book illustrators: Gravelot, Choffard and Eison [Eisen]. The illustrations to these beautifully-produced volumes were taken from originals in the Broomhill library. The outbreak of the First World War delayed the appearance of the third volume until 1919, the year in which she married Lt. Col. Edward Bryce, whom she had met while nursing in a Voluntary Aid Detachment. In 1925, the year that her father died, she visited Palestine. Apart from a collection of press cuttings about Zionism on the shelves of the Broomhill library, there is nothing to indicate any previous interest in the land of her fathers. She was so appalled at seeing the indignities endured by the Jews wishing to pray at the Wailing Wall, that she suggested to Lord Reading that he offer the Moslem Wall [Wakf] the sum of £100,000 for the rights of ownership, and put the money at Lord Reading's disposal. The plan never materialised, but she set the capital aside to establish a fund named David Salomons' Charity, from which Israeli educational and cultural life has long benefited.

From 1925 on, Vera Salomons became a constant visitor to Palestine and one of that country's most far-seeing philanthropists. She always maintained as an essential condition for her financial help, that no distinction was to be made between creed, colour or race. She insisted on money being spent on promoting Arab-Jewish understanding, on bursaries for Arab students in Israeli universities, and for the blind among Arabs and Jews. At some point in the 1930s she met the head of the department of Islamic art and archaeology at the Hebrew University, Professor L.A. Mayer, who for many years acted as her adviser. Based in an apartment in Paris, she spent many days studying the subject at the Bibliotheque Nationale, but as the political shadows lengthened she turned to the practical problem of relief work for the refugees from Germany seeking asylum further west. Her mother died in 1935. As the inheritor of the family property, it was she who conveyed Broomhill to Kent County Council and arranged that the Jewish Board of Guardians should take responsibility for the Memento Rooms. Bracklett, Moon & Lee [Brackett & Sons], the local auctioneers, held a sale on the premises lasting five days, and the contents of the library, together with Sir David's collection of Breguet timepieces, were consigned to storage. Twentyfive years later, as her project for the Museum of Islamic Art in Jerusalem was taking shape, the trustees of the L.A. Mayer Memorial

Foundation decided to add certain items to the contents of the Memento Rooms. That was the point at which I was called in.

The last two occasions I met Vera Salomons go back to 1967 and 1968. In 1967 she asked me to dinner at her flat in Sierre. I was struck by the simplicity of her surroundings, in particular by the sight of a cheque book lying open on a table in the living room. Next year we met at a convalescent home in Montreux. I had just seen the Keeper of Prints at the Bibliotheque Nationale and obtained an estimate of the cost of producing a catalogue of Sir David's large collection there. I named the price. "No", she replied, "I can use that sum myself!" Vera Salomons will continue to be remembered as a woman of outstanding generosity, and it is to her, as much as to her father, that the legend on a medallion in the Memento Rooms (No. 270) applies.

"Fit spargendo ditior" - "Generosity enriches the giver".

*Malcolm Brown is the Chairman of Publications of the Jewish
Historical Society of England.*

‘The Sir David Salomons Society Journal’. Vol 3, No 21. January 1990. pp.1-3.