**EMERITUS PROFESSOR RONALD TAFT AM: A CENTENARY APPRECIATION**

*Leon Mann AO*

Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal 2020. Vol 25. (1) 48-57.

**Abstract** Professor Leon Mann here reflects on the life, achievements and outlook of his friend and colleague Professor Ronald (Ron) Taft, who in mid-2020 became a centenarian. This tribute describes Ron’s involvement and leadership roles in the Jewish and wider community and his contribution to research on immigration, ethnicity, identity, and multiculturalism. The influences on Ron’s outlook, values and philosophy stemming from his family background, upbringing, and career in academic psychology are examined.

**Keywords** Biography (Australian Psychologists), Jewish Academics, Ronald Taft, Leon Mann, Grisha Tafipolsky, Taft (Tafipolsky) family, Ukraine, Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, Studies in Immigration, Multiculturalism.

Professor Ronald Taft AM is a significant figure in the cultural and intellectual life of the Australian Jewish community. Ron was born on 3 June 1920, in Canterbury, Melbourne, to Russian Jewish parents, Grisha (born 1879) and Olya (born 1893) Taft (Tafipolsky). Ron turned 100 years of age in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020. This appreciation celebrates the life of an eminent, internationally recognised psychologist who for many decades has contributed greatly to the Jewish and wider Australian community*.*

***My World: Reflections on My Life and Times***

Ron wrote his autobiography *My World: Reflections on My Life and Times*1 in 2015 when 95 years of age. *My World* describes his parents and extended Jewish family from the Ukraine, his marriage and love for his wife Ellen (1923-2005) and their three children Barbara (b. 1945), David (b. 1950) and Marcus (b. 1952). It describes his childhood, upbringing, friendships, family, philosophy, career, and achievements. Rabbi John Levi AM reviewed the book in this *Journal*. His review begins: 'This is the inspiring story of a happy man' and ends 'this is an inspiring and deeply Jewish Book'.2 I totally agree. I draw on Ron’s autobiography and his article in this *Journal* on the rescue of 16 members of the Taft family from the Ukraine 1921-22,3 to explore Ron’s family history, influences, and values. Another rich source of Taft family history is a file titled Taft (H) Company Pty Ltd. held in the University of Melbourne Archives. We also learn about Ron’s leadership roles and activities and his achievements as a scholar from his extensive curriculum vitae and recognition by his peers. Finally, I draw on my long association with Ron as a valued friend and colleague and, more recently, our phone conversations in 2020, the year of the coronavirus pandemic.

**Family influences**

Ron’s father Grisha Tafipolsky emigrated to Melbourne from Ekaterinoslav (now Dnipro) in the Ukraine in 1906 when 27-years-old. Soon after arrival Grisha changed his name to Harry Taft. I will use the name Grisha, the name Ron calls him. In 1908 Grisha founded a stationery shop on the corner of Elizabeth and Collins Streets, Melbourne. Four years later the business moved to Centreway at 302 Collins Street where it became famous as 'Taft’s The Pen People', retailers and repairers of fountain pens (new to Australia at the time) and sellers of stationery and postcards. The Taft family also established Merino Knitting Mills and Hillcrest Hosiery. In 1909, 30-year-old Grisha returned to Russia via the United States to visit his family and wind up his affairs—and, with encouragement, to find a wife. He married 16-year-old Olya Mushatsky from Melitopol, Ukraine, and returned to Melbourne, where their children were born: Boyard in 1913, Tamara in 1919, and Ronald in 1920. Arguably Grisha was the primary influence in shaping Ron’s character and values. Grisha exemplified the East European Haskalah (Enlightenment) tradition. He was educated, interested in culture, art, poetry, and sculpting. He was ambitious, competent, and entrepreneurial. He had integrity and was generous in philanthropy and service to Jewish and non-Jewish organisations and causes. In 1911, 'in the face of the Anglo-oriented Melbourne Jewish establishment', Grisha helped found the Kadimah Jewish Cultural Centre in Carlton.4 Ron explained that Grisha became involved in the Kadimah and served as its first secretary partly because in Melbourne the established community of British Jews looked down on Eastern European Jews. Much can be said about Grisha. Here are a few items. In mid-1917 Grisha gave a lecture 'The Russian Revolution', to the Jewish Undergraduate and Graduate Student Society at the University of Melbourne. He was a life member of the Jewish Aid Society and life governor of the Austin Hospital. In 1937 he sent clothing parcels to Russia through the London Federation of Jewish Relief Organisations. In 1945 he established the Hirsch and Olga Taft interchange scholarship between the University of Melbourne and the Hebrew University.4

Grisha and his brothers were admirable role models to Ron and the Taft family. Ron’s article 'The rescue of the Taft family from the Ukraine in 1921-1922' recounts the remarkable story of the hazardous and protracted rescue of 16 members of the Tafipolsky family from the Ukraine in the wake of World War One and the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. The party of 16 rescued family members who arrived in Melbourne in June 1922 included Ron’s elderly grandparents, Abram and Golda Tafipolsky. Ron wrote that a key factor in securing the family rescue was Grisha’s generosity and organisational skills working with the Australian authorities to secure immigration visas, and the improvisation, determination, and courage of his two uncles, Misha and Yusha, based in Egypt, executing the rescue.5 The rescue of family from Russian antisemitism and threat of pogroms echoes the story of many Jewish communities in Eastern Europe around the turn of the twentieth century. The story resonated with Ron as he grew up and inspired him and his family. Ron’s academic and professional interest in immigration and refugees was no doubt influenced by the epic story of the Taft family rescue from the Ukraine. In his 1966 article about the rescue, Ron mused that around 200 family members would attend if the Taft Clan held a reunion. In 2020, the number would probably be around 500. In December 1979, to mark the hundredth anniversary of Grisha’s birth, Ron delivered The Grisha Taft Centenary Lecture to family members assembled for the occasion. In September 1993, on the hundredth anniversary of his mother Olya’s birth, she was remembered with a centenary lecture.

**Academic career**

Ron Taft contributed significantly to the field of psychology in a distinguished career spanning 40 years. His teaching and research interests encompass social values and attitudes, cross-cultural psychology, immigration, ethnic groups and language, creativity, personality and personality assessment, cognitive processes, and education. He has degrees from the University of Melbourne (BA,1939), Columbia University (MA,1941), and University of California, Berkeley (PhD, 1950). He began at the University of Melbourne when 16 years of age, completing his BA in politics and philosophy when 19. Ron explains he was not a prodigy. Because of Grisha's poor health the Taft family spent four months in Queensland in 1927. Each day Grisha tutored seven-year-old Ron and his sister Tamara in mathematics. On returning to Canterbury primary school, Ron was promoted several grades because of his prowess. As an undergraduate at Melbourne Ron became interested in the rapidly growing field of psychology. Study abroad was unusual for Australian students at the time. But Ron’s parents and family were 'culture travellers' and an inquisitive, ambitious Ron had the travel bug and was ready to see the world. His MA in psychology at Columbia University 1941 was supervised by Professor Otto Klineberg, who sparked and mentored Ron’s interest in cross-cultural psychology. Ron's PhD at the University of California, Berkeley in 1950 was supervised by Professor Donald McKinnon, who fostered his interest in personality studies and creativity. Ron’s graduate studies in the United States led to a lifelong attachment to America, where his mother’s cousins, the Rostov’s, had emigrated from the Ukraine around the turn of the twentieth century.

During World War Two Ron was employed as an industrial psychologist in the Australian Department of Aircraft Production. Ron began his academic career in 1946 as a tutor in psychology at the University of Melbourne. He taught at that university (1946-48 and 1966-68), at the University of Western Australia (1951-65), and at Monash University (1968-81), where he was professor of social psychology until his retirement in 1981. During his academic career Ron took on major leadership roles in the field of psychology. In 1963 he was president of the Australian Psychological Society, the peak body for psychology in Australia, and from 1966-72 was editor of its flagship journal, *The Australian Journal of Psychology*. From 1982-86 he was president of the International Association of Cross-Cultural Psychology, and from 1987-90 was a foundation chair of the National Committee for Psychology in the Australian Academy of Sciences. He was awarded the Royal Society of Victoria Medal for Excellence in Scientific Research in 1975. Ron was made a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia ('The Academy') in 1962, and was named a Jubilee Fellow of The Academy in 2014 in honour of his more than 50 years of membership and service. He is now the most senior Fellow of The Academy. Ron's lifetime of service includes support for middle school and university students: a PhD scholarship and the Ron Taft Teaching Equity Grants for disadvantaged students at Monash University, and scholarships for young Aboriginal women studying at Worora Aboriginal College, Healesville, Victoria. He continues to act as a wise guide and mentor to colleagues and students. In 2017 he was awarded membership of the Order of Australia (AM). The citation reads: 'For significant service to education and research in the field of psychology, and to the community'.

**Immigration, ethnic identification, multiculturalism**

It could be expected that Ron, member of a successful immigrant family, would develop in his career an interest in the factors that lead to successful absorption and adaptation of immigrants. Ron’s pioneering research on the psychology of immigration began in Western Australia in the early 1950s. Over the years he studied immigrants from the United Kingdom, Hungary, Malta, South America, Netherlands, Poland, and Russia (Soviet Jews). The research is reported in his many publications, including his book *From Stranger to Citizen* (1966).6 Ron identifies four aspects of immigrant adaptation to a new country: adjustment; national and ethnic identity; cultural competence; and role acculturation. The two most important aspects are national and ethnic identity (commitment and a feeling of belonging) and role acculturation (conformity and accommodation in language usage, dress, eating habits etc). Ron was also interested in the related fields of ethnic identification and multiculturalism. He studied Australian Jewish identity -attitudes toward being both Australian and Jewish. He was principal researcher in the Melbourne Jewish Community Surveys of 1967 and 1991. The surveys became a rich historical record of the social, cultural, and religious identifications and attitudes of the Melbourne Jewish community and a valuable resource for community projects and educational initiatives. Ron published chapters and articles about the ethnic identification of the Melbourne Jewish community and its attitudes toward Israel in the 1973 Middle East War.7

Ron’s prominence in immigration and multiculturalism research led to many voluntary roles in support of immigrant and ethnic groups, such as the Good Neighbour Council, the Immigration Reform Association, and the Monash University Centre for Migrant Studies.

**Jewish community involvement and leadership**

Ron’s attachment to Judaism, the Jewish community, and to Israel is based on parental example and family ties, a Jewish education, close friendships, and participation in and leadership of several Jewish youth organisations during the 1930s, and the influence of two inspiring rabbis—Israel Brodie and Herman Sanger. Ron became chairman of the Jewish Youth Forum in 1939 and President of the Melbourne Jewish Youth Council in 1941. Ron was inducted into Melbourne B’nai Brith Lodge as a foundation member in 1945. He gave a talk to the Lodge one year later 'What B’nai Brith means to me'.8 His wide international perspective is apparent in the B’nai Brith talk. He identifies B’nai Brith as an international organisation that brings its members into 'a harmonious relationship with other Jews of high standing in most countries of the world'. He advocates the Melbourne Lodge goes beyond its tie to US B’nai Brith and establish ties with other overseas Lodges, specifically England and Palestine. While teaching at the University of Western Australia, Ron was forefront in establishing Temple David in Perth in 1953 and became its first president. In 1992 he was awarded a Menorah Award by B’nai Brith Council of Australia in recognition of his outstanding contribution to the Australian Jewish community.

**A reflective and well-lived life**

In his nineties Ron Taft continued to avidly read newspapers, books, journals, and write letters to newspaper editors. He wrote guest columns for *Quadrant* magazine, reminiscing (in 2013) about his first visit to Israel in 1950 and (in 2014) about Apartheid in South Africa in 1960 and (in 2015) about the Chinese restaurant scene in pre-war Melbourne and in Perth. At 98 years, Ron was interviewed for a story in *The Age Good Weekend Magazine* about creativity, which cited his research while a postgraduate student at the University of California Berkeley, 1949-50.9

When Ron was 99, well-known artist Peter Wegner sketched his portrait for an exhibition featuring 100 centenarians. The story with Ron sitting for his portrait in his new home, Kew Gardens Aged Care, was published in the Melbourne *Herald Sun* 10 Ron has aged with grace and dignity. Lunch and a chat with Ron in his favourite Chinese restaurant in Kew is always a stimulating and rewarding experience. He retains his zest for life, good humour, innate curiosity and interest in family and friends, and world affairs. With a keen intellect, enquiring mind, and prodigious memory, Ron remains involved and engaged. Ron muses that the insights acquired from a lifetime as a psychologist has helped him to observe and understand life-span changes in personality, thinking, and memory, and how people can adapt well to new environments and challenges.

Some quotes from Ron to conclude. Ron wrote in his autobiography:

[M]y ethnicity is ‘Jewish Australian’. I am an Australian and I identify strongly with this, and I am also strongly Jewish. In fact, I am even more culturally rich ... as there is a little bit of American in me from living there, English like most Australians of my age, Scottish from my schooling, Russian by my family background, and Israeli through sentiment. I feel like a real multicultural person!11

"As a child my nickname at home was 'Professor'... I had a great curiosity about the nature of everything and I was absent-minded. I was always asking questions.'12 In 2014 on reaching 50 years as an Academy Fellow: 'I can’t stop my old habits of mulling over the elegant mysteries of human behaviour. I hope that I shall continue to do so until the end comes.'13 In a conversation in May 2020: 'You know, every good conversation should include something new'. In the Academy’s 100th birthday video tribute in June 2020 'The Remarkable Ron Taft'14 Ron explains his wide interests and deep curiosity: 'I always wanted to know more and more, about more and more'. Ron in his autobiography disputes Kafka’s statement 'the meaning of life is that it stops'. Ron asserts '[A] life does not stop if a person leaves behind some meaning for the lives of others. I hope that I have achieved at least a modicum of that goal.'15

**Endnotes**

1 Ron Taft, *My World: Reflections on My Life and Times,* Langwarrin: Milestones Books, 2015.

2 See *Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal*, vol. 22, part 3, 2015, pp.578-79.

3 Ron Taft., 'The rescue of the Taft family from the Ukraine in 1921-1922', ibid., vol. 13, part 3, 1996, pp. 463-76.

4 Taft (H) Company Pty Ltd. University of Melbourne Archives. Accession No.1981;1985. 0045. Two Boxes. More Taft (H.), Company business records are held at the Jewish Museum Australia, in St. Kilda, Melbourne.

5 Ibid and Taft, *My World*.

6 Ibid., *From Stranger to Citizen: A Survey of Studies of Immigrant Assimilation in Western Australia*, London, Tavistock Publications, 1966, p.171.

7 Idem,'Jewish identification of Melbourne Jewry', in Peter Medding (ed.), Jews in Australian Society. Melbourne, Macmillan, 1973, pp.61-102; idem., 'Beyond the third generation', op.cit., pp.193-222; idem., 'The impact of the Middle East Crisis of 1967 on Melbourne Jewry', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, vol. 9, 1967, pp. 243-62; Ron Taft and John Goldlust, 'The current status of former Jewish refugees in Melbourne’, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1970, pp. 28-48.

8 Written notes for Ron Taft talk to B’nai Brith.

9 Shelley Gare, 'Risky business: In search of those Aha! Moments', *The Age Good Weekend Magazine*, 6 October 2018.

10 'Melbourne artist Peter Wegner sketches portraits of people', www.heraldsun.com.au› leader › inner-east › news-story.

11 Taft, *My World*, p. 78.

12 Ibid., p. 54.

13 Australian Academy of the Social Sciences, Fellows' booklet, 2014.

14 'The Remarkable Ron Taft' (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfM5pPj2Ffg; accessed 10 August 2020).

15 Taft, *My World*, p. 99.