

The Honourable Mrs. Laura Wolfson-Townsley

President, Master, Graduates and Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues,

Today it is my great honour to welcome The Honourable Mrs. Laura Wolfson-Townsley to a Fellowship at Birkbeck.

On the 17th September 1897, a baby was born into the household of a cabinet maker who had emigrated from Bialystok (in Russia) to the Gorbals (Glasgow). He was named Isaac Wolfson and was lucky to survive. In the year of his birth, one-fifth of all babies born in the Gorbals died before reaching their first birthday. No other city in the UK had such an appalling death rate. When casting my eyes down the “cause of death” of these innocent infants, there were the usual suspects: premature births, diarrhoea, and respiratory diseases accounted for half – but seven per cent of these babies died of “nervous disease”. I wondered: how does a newly-born infant die of “nerves”? The answer, of course, is poverty.

This baby survived, however; he thrived. In 1926, the young Isaac could be found selling clocks and mirrors at a stall in the Manchester Exhibition Hall. This was when he was recruited as a buyer for Universal Stores. Rapidly – by 1932 – he became joint Managing Director and, after the Second World War, Chairman. By the 1950s, the Universal Stores was Britain’s most powerful retailing empire, selling personal and household goods (and property) to one-quarter of the British population. The Great Universal Stores (GUS) became known as the “Gorgeous Gussies” for its decades of unbroken profits.

In 1955, the charismatic Sir Isaac founded the Wolfson Foundation and he, his wife Edith, and only son – Leonard Gordon Wolfson – became the charity’s Founder Trustees.

Leonard Wolfson—the son – proved to be a genius at business and philanthropy. He was knighted in 1977 and on 13 June 1985 was created a Life Peer with the title Baron Wolfson, of Marylebone in the City of Westminster. In 1981, he became joint chairman of the Great Universal Stores. When Isaac died in 1991, aged 93, GUS was worth £3 billion.

Lord Wolfson had four daughters, Janet, Laura, Deborah, and Elizabeth. It is Laura we celebrate today. Laura Wolfson-Townsley, grand-daughter of Isaac Wolfson and daughter of Leonard Wolfson walks firmly in the tradition of her family. She has inherited her family's keen instinct for business and innovation. She is renowned for her unshakable commitment to philanthropy. Her entire life has been dedicated to making a difference and, as a consequence, millions of people's lives have been transformed.

The Honorable Mrs. Laura Wolfson-Townsley is a Trustee of the Wolfson Foundation. Last year was the 60th anniversary of the Foundation. It was revealed that the Wolfson Foundation had awarded over £800 million in grants (that is, £1.7 billion in real terms) to causes in science, medicine, education, and the arts. Over 10,000 projects have been funded.

In addition, Wolfson-Townsley chairs the Wolfson Family Charitable Trust. This Trust supports capital infrastructure projects, youth activities, and medical research as well as medical, scientific, and technological education. It is probably invidious to single out any one project but, as an indication of their work, the Wolfson Family Charitable Trust has supported the Rambam Health Care Campus in Haifa. This has meant, among other things, providing resources for a cutting-edge cardiac laboratory in the Department of Cardiology, MRI imaging equipment, and a Da Vinci Surgical Robot. This robot is particularly important because it enables surgeons to make microscopic incisions with greater accuracy and control. Minimally invasive surgery reduces pain and blood loss, thus significantly reducing human suffering and

death. In 2012, Wolfson-Townsley was granted The Rambam Award – given to “remarkable individuals for their passion, caring, and special generosity to the State of Israel”.

Although most of its projects are based in Israel, they also support British organizations serving the UK Jewish community. Here, their focus is on helping those with physical and learning disabilities, providing high quality secondary education, and improving access to important culture or heritage, particularly historic synagogues. If that wasn't enough, she is also an honorary fellow of Technion (a world-leading biomedical research centre in Israel) and of King's College London. In 2013, the Wolfson family was awarded the Carnegie Medal of Philanthropy.

But, finally, Birkbeck has been the beneficiary of the Wolfson family. In 1973, Wolfson-Townsley's father – who had a passion for history – established the annual Wolfson History Prize for books that combine scholarship with accessibility for a general reader. Over the years, four members of Birkbeck's History Department have won the prize – Eric Hobsbawm, Richard Evans, Orlando Figes, and me.

In the early 1990s, they provided funds to refurbish a physics laboratory, as well as establishing the Rayne & Wolfson Laboratory in the Department for Biological Sciences, which is lab for protein expression, crystallization, and purification. Between 2003 and 2006, they contributed to the Woburn Square fund and then in 2011 to the Performing Arts space at our Stratford campus. Molecular Biology labs were established with their help between 2008 and 2010.

Most important, perhaps, it is thanks to them that we have the Wohl Wolfson Todderlab. This lab is at the centre of worldwide attempts to understand autism and other behavioural conditions. The research will help develop and assess the efficacy

of early interventions, well before the condition becomes embedded. In the words of Professor Mark Johnson, Founder and Head of Birkbeck's Centre for Brain and Cognitive Development,

“The more we understand the early signs of autism, and how they unfurl into the full syndrome over the 1st years of life, the better we can target support services and help children and their families..... The contribution to both basic science and clinical practice has the potential to transform the lives of millions of people.”

In all these cases, Laura Wolfson-Townsley has kept 4 things foremost in mind. The first is excellence: there is no point in supporting any project unless it is world-changing. The second, and related, question she asks is: where is the need? Third, can the Trust act as a catalyst to lever further support? The “brand Wolfson” is crucial here: it is a guarantor of quality. Finally, she argues, collaboration is key. We are all in this together.

But what about the person? She is passionate about art – and is a collector. She is renowned for her keen sensibilities. With friends, she is warm and funny. She is generous and understands people – not only in the sense of how to manage people, but really understands them – their wants and needs, personalities and quirks. She knows how to bring out their best qualities.

But the most important thing about her is her quiet reserve. In a world where great personalities like to “make a noise”, Wolfson-Townsley just gets things done. In a world of social media, she barely has a presence. She is incisive at board meetings; she knows her mind. But once decisions have been made, she is unique in that she knows how to step back and train the spotlight on those she seeks to help. It is this elegance, resolve, and most of all her sense of privacy that we admire and respect today.

I began this talk by referring to Wolfson-Townsley's grandfather, born in the Gorbals in 1897. Although he was born into poverty, there was an air of optimism in the Gorbals at the end of the nineteenth century. When he was a young baby, there was a bazaar organised to erect a synagogue in the Gorbals. At it, the chairman boasted that their schools were "the first in the UK with regard the efficiency of their Hebrew education". Fifty earlier, he informed people, this had not been the case, due to

"a prejudice, born of ignorance, which reared barriers, almost insuperable, to the proper association and proper understanding of the nature of the Jews. Happily, this prejudice was fast passing away.... The education of the people was at the root of the matter".

Here at Birkbeck, we believe in the power of education to transform worlds. Honourable Mrs. Laura Wolfson-Townsley is a Trustee of one of the greatest philanthropic institutions in the world, investing in medical research, health, science and technology, the arts and humanities, and, of course, education.

We are immensely proud to welcome her to a Fellowship at Birkbeck.