

Cyrus P Mehta – his life as remembered at his funeral by his son Rointon

Cyrus's family home was in Karachi. His mother's family lived in Surat which is 423 miles from Karachi. The custom was, in those days, for daughters to return to their mum's, to give birth, so Cyrus was born on Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> of October 1917 in Surat.

He grew up in Karachi with his four brothers, two older and two younger and went to the Parsi boys school where he lived in the shadow of his two elder brothers who were academically brilliant. Cyrus told me the story of how he could always rely on Hoshang to help him with his home work and Nowser, who was rather large, to defend from school bullies. But, he was not afraid to speak up when he felt that things were not being done properly.

Can you imagine a hall full of 13 year olds sitting an exam in complete silence except for the scratching of pens on paper and the tap-tap-tap, tap-tap-tap, tap-tap-tap of the teacher's fingers drumming on the desk at the front? Eventually Cyrus had had enough and he spoke up "how on earth do you expect us to concentrate with that racket going on"? He never did tell me what happened to him but those were the days when teachers could use the cane and in this case probably did!

Cyrus's uncle had business ventures which included, flour mills, an ice factory, sea salt production, ceramics, floor tiles, soda bottling, and importing spirits and wines. As his nephews; they were all expected to go into the family business but none of them did.

The eldest did his doctorate in agricultural economics; another did his doctorate in Psychology; Cyrus did Engineering; one joined the armed forces and the youngest went to an Agricultural college.

Cyrus always had a mechanical/ engineering bent even in his school days. One of his nephew's was told that the carpentry tools, that he played with as a child, belonged to his uncle Cyrus. The big bed that both his sister and he used at different times was built by Cyrus. It was a tall bed, high enough to store trunks, filled with winter clothing, underneath.

In 1936 Cyrus, left for a job at the Empress Cotton Mills in Nagpur. He had followed a course in Electrical Engineering at the NED Engineering College and at the tender age of 19 was put in charge of Number Three Turbine producing electricity to drive the mill machinery. It was a very tough job which included shift work and managing the team of labourers who serviced the generator.

The job was also made more difficult by the fact that he had met my mother, Dina, and a relationship was blossoming. Nagpur is 805 miles from Karachi, where Mum lived. Distance often makes the heart grow fonder and they married on August 1<sup>st</sup> 1940.

Over the war years, Cyrus continued to work in the mill whilst his brothers were in the armed forces. One was wounded and invalided out and went to stay with Mum and Cyrus in Nagpur. Cyrus was still in charge of number three turbine and stood little chance of progressing up the management ladder without having a degree, preferably from an English University. At the same time, they were keen on starting a family. In 1944 I was conceived and Mum returned to her mother in Karachi and I was born on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July 1945.

What I did not know until much later was that they had already agreed that Cyrus would leave for England, almost as soon as I was born and by October 1945 he was in London studying for a degree. Trouble was brewing in India and when it became clear that India was to be divided with the creation of Pakistan and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) my parents agreed that they would make their life in England. My mother and I came to England in 1947 just in time for the coldest winter then on record. Sparrows allegedly froze on trees.

Cyrus had given up his degree course to go to work to keep us. He gained a certificate from the Institute of Electrical Engineers by part-time study. He worked at Brimsdown Power Station and then with a company called General Radiological. We lived in various one room flats in Enfield and Ponders End. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 1951, my sister was born.

Cyrus's company relocated to Harlow and we moved into 5 Broomfield in 1952. Cyrus's niece came to stay with us. She told me about this incident which exemplifies Cyrus's sense of humour:

"I walked from your house on one Saturday to the telephone booth around the corner. Once I got back indoors, the doorbell rang and Uncle opened the door. A moment later he called me and said there was a young man at the door who wanted to see *'The goil' in the green slacks'*. Someone had followed me home. He asked me to go to the cinema with him and when I thanked him and said I was busy, he said *'But, but, but, I will pay'*. Later Uncle said *'No one invites me to the pictures and offers to pay.'*

The rest of her family joined us in Harlow so now Cyrus had two nephews and a niece living nearby and my mother had her sister and brother-in-law. Later still, following in Cyrus's footsteps, Cyrus's younger brother came to live in Hainault.

I remember Cyrus and Uncle George (a friend rather than a relative) build our first television with a 9" black and white screen just in time to watch the Queen's coronation.

On Sundays we would often climb on a Green-line bus and ride down to Aldgate and then on a tube to Olympia where we would visit the Zoroastrian House at 11 Russell Road, which was the community centre for our faith in London. Cyrus would tell us

about the history of the Zoroastrian association which was founded in 1861. The association bought this particular house in 1929.

Cyrus and Mum were very involved in the running of the house from the fifties onwards. This is what the current President of the association said in a recent e-mail to me:

“Cyrus and his late wife Dina diligently served the Zoroastrian Trust Funds Europe for nearly three decades, from the 1950s till the late 1970s. Cyrus held various positions on the Managing Committee including Honorary Social Secretary, Honorary Secretary, Honorary Treasurer and Vice President. Amongst his many contributions Cyrus was instrumental in registering our newer Zoroastrian House, 88 Compayne Gardens, as a place of worship with the London Borough of Camden. During his tenure at the ZTFE, Cyrus was involved in numerous Zoroastrian educational activities including children sleeping over at Zoroastrian House at weekends, children’s education classes, going to schools, universities, TV and radio and making presentations on Zoroastrianism, inviting speakers to Zoroastrian House such as the then young Professor John R Hinnells.”

In 1960 he joined Cossor Electronics as a draughtsman and he worked there for 22 years, retiring in 1982. By then several significant events had happened in the family.

- I had left home in 1968 to start my career in education as a primary school teacher in Southwark.
- In 1972 Cyrus appeared on Television talking to Nicholas Partridge about the Zoroastrian Faith and the features that it has in common with Christianity
- Also in 1972 he bought 43 Ryecroft and I married Maggie.
- My sister married Derek in 1973.
- Our son and his first Grand-son, Paul, was born in 1975 followed by his brother Hugh in 1980.

1987 was a year of mixed fortune for the family and especially Cyrus. My mother, my uncle and my father-in-law all died within a few months of each other.

He had to wait until April 2010 for his first great-grandchild. Lyla Tehmina Lyford Mehta was born on April 25<sup>th</sup> 2010 and this is what her father Hugh had to say about the meeting of the generations:

“I was chuffed with his reaction to Hannah (Lyla’s mother), who he sang a lovely song to when he met her - I believe Jess (Paul’s girl friend) received the same welcome. It was lovely to see his enthusiasm for little Lyla. We will definitely treasure the four generations photograph and the ones of him and Lyla taken on New Years Eve - it was good to see such a huge smile on his face, despite being so soon after his fall.”

From 1987 to Christmas 2010 Cyrus lived and worked from his home in Ryecroft. He had a fall on Christmas Eve 2010 after which he needed care 24 hours a day 365 days a year. We were incredibly lucky to get a place for Cyrus at Tye Green Lodge and we cannot thank the staff enough for the care he received whilst he was with them.

Until his fall he lived on his own with the support and friendship of his relatives and his neighbours; Fred, Margaret, Cathy, Bill, Jim, Sharon, to name but a few and the help of “his girls” but more of them later.

Cyrus’s technological skills could be seen in the way in which he adapted his house to his ever diminishing sight, increasing deafness, funny noises and lack of mobility. Working with empty biscuit tins and an old tray he raised the height of his kitchen table so that he could eat and read standing up under the brightest light in the house.

Using a variety of card sourced from cereal packets, string, blu tack and flat-pack shelving, he created a filing system for his books and writing. His ability to use “blu-tack” to hold things together or fix photographs to his walls was legendary amongst his family and friends.

As they got old enough his grand-children went to stay with him, which was a particular delight to Cyrus. My son Hugh reminded me that he and Paul used to entertain their friends with things that Grand Cyrus used to say - such as “I don’t like to phone you on your mobile, in case you are out”.

His spare bedroom became a drying room for his laundry which, until the end of last year, he insisted on doing on his own without help from his family or “his angels”.

Some of you might remember a 1970’s TV series called Charlie’s Angels. Charlie had his Angels Kate, Farrah and Jaclyn to help him and Cyrus had “Cyrus’s Angels”, Maggie, Stacey and Clare.

Maggie, was Cyrus’s principal carer in his latter years ably assisted by her niece Stacey. Together they made Cyrus’s life great fun as his abilities waned. Picture Cyrus on his bed issuing instructions to Stacey to photocopy this or post that and Maggie in the Kitchen making a cup of tea or busy with the bleach and the Hoover. I will always remember the love and laughter that bounced round the house when they were together.

Clare was Cyrus’s research assistant in his work investigating religious belief in general and the Zoroastrian religion in particular.

Here is what Clare would like to say about Cyrus:

I've known Cyrus for fifteen years and in that time spent with him we became great friends. Over the years I knew him, I realised how much his faith meant to him, how passionate he was about keeping his Zoroastrian faith going.

His archive work kept him going especially in the last few years. Working with Cyrus on his archive was never boring, quite the opposite, I enjoyed his sense of humour, and you only had to look in his humour file to understand his wit. He would often wander off the subject we were working on and tell me stories of his days working in a drawing office, his years of lecturing, growing up with his brothers and his children.

Cyrus was so proud of his children and grandchildren and was thoroughly delighted to become a great grand-father.

Cyrus worked hard on his archive and I could see it gave him great joy. He loved sending out his articles, the more he could send out the better. It was a shame that in the last few years he came to rely on my eyes for his work but he would not give up.

Cyrus always knew how to cheer me up and knew when I was having a bad day, there would be days where I would be rushing around sorting out files and folders or looking for his glasses, which were normally down the side of the bed, he would look at me and say "lets have a cuppa, sit down, don't rush". I'd look at him and he would just smile and it would make me laugh.

It's very strange now not to go rushing out the door Tuesdays and Thursdays to go see Cyrus, I thought that when I left to have my baby I would be going back for lots of visits but sadly not. I will miss my friend and am very grateful that I met Cyrus.

Cyrus and his "angels" produced an enormous archive of material which they shared with academics across the world. Cyrus's contribution to research into the Zoroastrian religion has been well documented and acknowledged by leading academics in the field. Professor John Hinnells of Clare Hall, Cambridge not so young now wrote:

"Dear Ron,

I was very sad, but I suppose not surprised, to learn of your father's death. He was truly a wonderful person. As I have said to you before, he was the first Parsi I had met and it was talking and listening to him that inspired me to embark on my studies of Parsees. My children also looked forward to him and your mother coming and they spoiled Mark and Duncan incredibly with generous gifts. It was your father's ideas and encouragement that provoked my 1996 book, 'Zoroastrians in Britain'. We did not meet much in recent years because of our mutual mobility problems, but we spoke often over the 'phone. He was a wonderful man and the world is a poorer place without him."