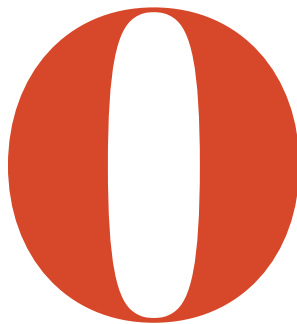


# ALL ABOUT ALICE

An Introduction to a Feminist Pioneer

NAOMI GRYN

72



**O**n the deck of the SS Filippo Grimani bringing Alice Shalvi to Israel in October 1949, a group of Jewish refugees from Greece and the Balkans were singing Hebrew songs and dancing the horah, euphoric in the knowledge that they were only a day away from the Promised Land. Alice enthusiastically joined in. A group of Israeli students watched from the sidelines. She heard one of them sneer, in German, “*So habt Ihr euch das vorgestellt*” – that’s how you imagined it would be – and felt as if a bucket of cold water had been thrown over her.

Alice had been taught how to dance the horah by her handsome older cousin, Alex, at a Seder in her aunt’s house in Mannheim. Since the age of six, dancing a lone horah around the kitchen table singing, “*Anu olim artza livnot u’lhibanot ba*” (“We are going up to the Land, to build and to be built in it”), Alice had known that she would one day “go up” to Palestine, to the Land of Israel. The horah was, for Alice, the physical expression of solidarity with those pioneers who were transforming Palestine’s

arid desert into an earthly paradise.

The student’s gibe was Alice’s first experience of the gap between those who had chosen to make Israel their homeland and those who had been born there. Seventy years later, she longs for a more honest, egalitarian and less corrupt society and sees Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian Territories as colonisation of the worst kind. “All peoples want to live independent of foreign rule,” says Alice, “and the sooner the Israeli government recognises that fact, the less bloodshed there will be.”

I have adored, admired and been inspired by Alice since we first met 25 years ago. Alice’s memoir, *Never A Native*, published this autumn, tracks her evolution as an iconoclast, a social activist and one of Israel’s prototype feminists. Now in her 90s, Professor Emerita of English literature at Hebrew University and founding chairwoman of the Israel Women’s Network, Alice’s contribution to Israeli society has been recognised with a stack of honours and awards, including the 2007 Israel Prize for Lifetime Achievement.

I’d always supposed that Alice’s family were erudite jekkes, (German Jews) but her parents, Perl and Benzion (or Benno) Margulies were actually both born in Galician shtetls. They were also first cousins. Religiously observant and a prominent

Debbi Cooper / Courtesy Alice Shalvi

JEWISHQUARTERLY



**Still going strong:** Alice is still making trouble in her 90s

## At Kingsgate Road Primary Alice was known as “our little refugee girl”

Zionist, Benno had a more bourgeois upbringing than Perl, who came from a poor Hassidic family.

Alice has amazing recall: she remembers an uncle sitting a few rows behind on her first cinema outing to see Charlie Chaplin in *The Kid*. She still loves cinema, as well as opera, literature and theatre, especially anything written by William Shakespeare (her doctoral dissertation was on Renaissance concepts of honour in Shakespeare’s problem plays – *Hamlet*, *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida* – and how the four plays hinge on the many contradictory definitions of “honour”).

In unlovely Essen, the coal town in the Ruhr where Alice was born in 1926, everything changed after the arrival of the Brownshirts in 1933. Her older brother, Willi, was roughed up by Nazi youths on his way home from school. A visit to their home by the Gestapo, scattering Alice’s toys and books, pushed Perl to move her children to Mannheim where they waited for visas so that they could join Benno, who’d already gone ahead to London to join

his younger brother’s business, dealing in clocks, watches and jewellery.

Sharing a house in South Hampstead with Benno’s brother and mother, Alice was the first immigrant pupil to attend Kingsgate Road Primary School, where she was known as “our little refugee girl”. The school still exists, but today most of the pupils don’t speak English as their first language.

Alice’s family then moved to Neasden and she attended Brondesbury and Kilburn High School, where a third of the 600 pupils were Jewish. After the outbreak of war in September 1939, the school relocated to Northampton and, for a year, Alice was evacuated there, too, housed by two Methodist spinsters. School lessons took place in the afternoons only. In the mornings, Alice and her classmates organised play readings; she was also introduced to many English classics, as well as Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, through the Northampton Repertory Company. A school visit to Stratford upon Avon for a matinee performance of *Hamlet* made her “whole scalp tingle”.

Once the Blitz began in 1940, the family bought a house in Waddesdon in Buckinghamshire where, living in the actual landscape of Keats and Wordsworth, Alice’s love of literature reached new heights. Unaware of what was happening on the Continent, Alice says the war years were her happiest in Britain, if tempered by the primitive prejudices held against Jews by the local children at Aylesbury Grammar.

Alice won a place at Newnham College in Cambridge to study English literature. Her involvement with the university’s Jewish Society – eventually becoming its president – not only fuelled her growing enthusiasm for Zionism, but also allowed her to develop the skills of public debate, as Alice puts it: “chairing meetings with elegance, diplomacy, efficiency and the mandatory Cambridge wit”.

In the summer of 1946, the Jewish Society hosted a group of young DPs – as Holocaust survivors were then known – who were living at a shelter in the East End of London. The youngsters were interested not in the sights of Cambridge, but in smoking cigarettes and wanting to visit a brothel. Alice spent the rest of that summer volunteering at the boys’ hostel, accompanying a 14-year-old boy on his twice weekly visits to the Maudsley Hospital where he was being given shock treatment. She decided to go to Palestine to help rehabilitate DPs, and applied

✓ **Burning injustice:** setting fire to *Ketubot*, the traditional marriage contract giving the husband “possession” of his wife

74





to the London School of Economics to study social work. But in 1949, when Alice arrived in what had by then become the State of Israel, she fell instead, into teaching English at Hebrew University.

Alice met her beloved Moshe in 1950. It was love at first sight. Two months later, when Moshe asked “What’s going to become of us?” she responded, “Why don’t we get married?” Home movie footage of their wedding is included in *The Annotated Alice*, the first of two video portraits of Alice made by documentary filmmaker Paula Weiman-Kelman. Moshe looks ridiculously handsome, while Alice’s smile could light up a house. Alice writes in her memoir about Moshe’s openness, his sense of humour and lack of pretension but, of course, everyone who knows Alice understands that this is what he recognised in her too.

**T**heir marriage lasted for more than 60 years, until Moshe’s death in 2013. They had six children: Joel, Micha, Ditzza, Hephzibah, Benzi and Pnina. When Pnina was two years old, Alice was invited to set up an English department at Beersheba University, where she developed an annual course on drama about and by women, initially entitled *Women, Love and Marriage in Drama*, beginning with Chaucer and ending with Harold Pinter’s *The Homecoming*. It was here that Alice’s feminism

### The young DPs were interested not in the sights of Cambridge, but in smoking cigarettes and wanting to visit a brothel

took root, challenging injustices against female academics. “After childhood, adolescence, student days, first work, professional, marriage and motherhood, a volcano erupted. It transformed my personal landscape, gouging into it a series of unplanned turbulent tributaries: feminism, education, religious rebellion, political activism and social reform.”

The great question facing women in the 1970s was whether career and family were compatible. Alice couldn’t have been Alice without the supportive encouragement of a husband who delighted in her achievements. Having worked in advertising, Moshe became a stay-at-home dad, taking on many of the duties that chew up so much time for other working mothers.

One Friday evening, Alice asked her children if

they minded her being away from home so often. Micha, then 16, replied: “You’re not always at home when you’re needed,” while her daughter, Ditzza, countered: “But when you are here, you’re much more interesting than those mothers who’re always cleaning windows”.

Alice writes: “I welcomed Ditzza’s reassurance but in time I came to realise that I should have paid more attention to Micha’s reproach. In retrospect, I’m painfully aware that, while I attained renown for my professional and public activities, I was a failure as a mother.”

In 1975, Alice volunteered to help rescue Pelech, a high school in Jerusalem, originally intended for Haredi girls, where two of Alice’s daughters were studying, and which was bankrupt. To her surprise, Alice was appointed principal. Her ambition was to turn the school into one that would equip pupils to function as informed, committed and involved members in a modern democratic Jewish state that granted equality to all its citizens. Within three years, Pelech was accredited as one of only two officially recognised

experimental high schools and Alice is widely acknowledged as having turned it into one of Israel’s best modern religious high schools for girls.

Alice’s frustration with the misogyny inherent in rabbinic Judaism came to a head on a trip to Milwaukee in 1979 where she was with Orthodox Jews working for greater inclusivity of women in prayer and Torah study. She sobbed with joy at being called up to the Torah for the first time, as well as tears of anger for not having been allowed to do so 50 years earlier. This epiphany sent Alice on a spiritual journey from which she has never returned.

Her crusade for justice and equality found new direction in 1984 when a visit to Jerusalem by Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique*, precipitated the creation of the Israel Women’s Network,

## Even in the kibbutzum, boys drove tractors, while girls did cooking and childcare

with Alice as its chairwoman. IWN's intention was to focus on advancing women's status via consciousness-raising, litigation and legislative advocacy. "Our overall goal," writes Alice, "was equality of the sexes in every respect: representation, status, opportunity and reward."

As IWN's ambassador-at-large, Alice addressed meetings all over Israel, raising awareness of discrimination against the country's female population. Even in the kibbutz movement where women were convinced that they already enjoyed equality, boys were permitted to take driving lessons in order to drive tractors, while girls were not, and female occupations were limited largely to cooking, cleaning and childcare.

IWN became Israel's leading organisation for women's rights, hosting a conference on women writers, offering support to agunot, – women trapped in their marriages by husbands who refuse to grant them a religious divorce – campaigning against trafficking sex workers into Israel, and sexual discrimination in the armed forces. The organisation lobbied, ran training courses and collected data.

In 1989 Alice was summoned to the Ministry of Education because of her public attacks on the Chief Rabbinate for its discrimination against women and failure to deal with divorce, and her participation in dialogues between Israeli and Palestinian women. This was not considered seemly for the principal of Pelech. Alice was told to cease such activities. She resigned from Pelech instead.

Alice is driven, above all, by an intellectual integrity. In 1990 she became Rector of the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, affiliated to the Conservative Movement. Unable to effect structural change, one year later she stepped down. However, one of

Alice's students from Pelech, who had gone on to study at the Schechter Rabbinical School while Alice was its rector, Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum, has – in recent years – created in Jerusalem a kehilla in which Alice has finally found a community of like-minded souls.

In the final pages of *Never A Native*, she writes: "The traditional prayer book neither embodies my belief nor expresses my innermost feelings. I can no longer pray to the Father, the King. The Divine Spirit that inspires me knows no gender. Unlimited in time and space, vast and all-embracing, it is a source of universal love, sustenance, joy." As Alice approaches her final years of creativity, she is still guiding, still teaching, as she invites her readers to awaken to its presence: "summoning us to create a better world, a world of fellowship and human kindness. All that is required of us is to open our hearts to welcome and embrace it."

When I first met Alice in January 1994, the peaceful coexistence of two sovereign states seemed just an arm's length away. I asked her by email how it looks to her now. "I have to conclude that when Yigal Amir murdered Rabin," she writes, "he murdered peace. Not only do both sides lack the required leadership, but increasingly mutual hostility and hatred are being fostered. Insidious right-wing, nationalist propaganda is here, as elsewhere, arousing violent hatred of what are perceived as traitors."

Alice takes some comfort from the fact that there are many others like her. "I sign countless petitions and protests, though some of my colleagues and acquaintances have even given that up in despair. Perhaps if there were an 'honest broker' to be found, there might still be a two-state solution, but our government's current allies (e.g. Trump and Putin) cannot be described as any more 'honest' than our own leaders. If all the opposition parties were to collaborate, we might oust the present gang, but each one is so desirous of 'being the leader' that such an alliance seems utterly unattainable. But who knows? After all, we have in the past experienced miracles. Perhaps there will be another. So am I still optimistic? Judge for yourself, dear friend." **JQ**

◀ **Alice, Moshe and the children:**  
Joel, Micha, Ditz, Hephzibah,  
Benzi and Pnina

