



ALICE L. SELIGSBURG

1873-1940

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By ROSE G. JACOBS

The Jewish community of the United States lost one of its most remarkable, most ethical and profound spirits when Alice Seligsberg died on August 27, 1940, a few weeks after her sixty-seventh birthday. Born into a cultured, thoughtful, and charming home, she early learned the true meaning of philanthropy, of disinterested intellectuality, and the ethical attitude towards life. Her family were among Felix Adler's ardent disciples, founders of the Ethical Culture Society, and the values taught her at home and at the Society remained her standards of conduct throughout an extraordinarily active and diversified life.

The eager intellectual environment in the home of Louis and Lillie Wolff Seligsberg was supplemented by their daughter, Alice, born on August 8, 1873, by a thorough academic training at Barnard College where she belonged to one of the earliest classes. She later did graduate work at Columbia University and at The Friedrich Wilhelm Universitat (Berlin University). But a nature like hers could not be content merely with abstract intellectual values. She went out to the poor: the cause of the underprivileged was always her cause. Shortly after being graduated from college, she formed a girls' club on the East Side, leaving on each of its members so profound an impress of her personality that, throughout their lives, they carried the stamp of her influence. In all the club work she did at Madison House she was always the true teacher, happily bringing her rich background and great gifts to the service of others who were less fortunate.

Her love for children kept her working for them in-

cessantly. Her interest in club work at the Hebrew Sheltering Guardian Society, of which her father was a director, led her to found Fellowship House, a home where orphans might find a social center and a sense of security in the bewildering city after the rural quiet of the cottage orphanage at Pleasantville. Fellowship House, of which Miss Seligsberg was president from 1913 to 1918, has found homes and positions for thousands of children and helped them to overcome the difficulties with which New York life confronts them.

Fellowship House was only one of her important original contributions to social service. Speaking at the memorial services for her, Mr. Herman W. Block, vice-president of the New York Association for Jewish Children, said: "Step by step, directly to the influence of Alice Seligsberg can be traced almost every change of policy which has brought about much of the progress that has taken place in Jewish child-care during the past twenty-five years." It was she who recommended that the boarding-out department of the Hebrew Sheltering Guardian Society be established as a completely independent unit, free from institutional control and responsible only to the directors of the parent society. "The adoption of that program"—to quote Mr. Block again—"completely changed the course of Jewish child-care in New York and throughout the country." It was Alice Seligsberg, too, who was very largely responsible for the establishment in New York of a central bureau for the study of the situation of dependent children and their placement in homes or orphanages most suited to each one's particular needs. She was the executive director of this Jewish Children's Clearing Bureau from its foundation in 1922 to 1936; thereafter she was a member of its board. Always she pressed her creative and unusually progressive ideas upon the community and for all her modesty and gentleness, succeeded in overcoming opposition and obstacles which for anyone less determined would have been insurmountable. She influenced child-care workers of every creed, laymen as well as profes-

sionals, both in private agencies, in the state and city departments of public welfare and in the children's courts.

Alice Seligsberg's humanitarianism grew out of her extraordinarily strong and exacting sense of justice. She was always in the forefront of every fight against injustice — whether it was injustice to an individual, a group, a cause or an ideal. Surely her return to Judaism grew at least in part out of this dominant trait in her character. Professor Mordecai Kaplan, with whose Society for the Advancement of Judaism she was affiliated from its very inception, said of her: "Judaism . . . re-established between her and her ancestral people that inward bond which could render her most serviceable and helpful to them. Where could she find better opportunity to satisfy her need to serve than among her people whose daily existence is turned into a nightmare . . ."

She was of so deeply religious a nature that she could not remain content with the Ethical Culture movement. Her inquiring mind led her always to the roots of problems. She began to investigate the essence of Christianity and of Judaism. In Judaism she found herself responsive to the age-old ethic of an ancient people, in consonance as it was with her concept of conduct and her ideal of personal behavior. She found in the wisdom of the Jewish sages and prophets something her soul had been seeking, and she identified herself completely with the Jewish community. This explains her study of Hebrew, of Biblical literature and Jewish history, her synagogue membership, holiday observance, and lighting of the Friday evening candles, and her concern that in the services consigning her bodily remains to their final resting place, all should be in conformity with Jewish law and Jewish tradition.

What she learned of Jewish culture, ethics and tradition summoned her to aid in her people's present-day struggle for survival. No sooner had she responded to the idea of Zionism than she began to follow and analyze every move

of the Zionist Organization. In Hadassah, with its opportunities for practical expression, she found the channel for making her ideas live. In her work for Hadassah she became the ally and associate of one to whom she owed an inestimable spiritual debt — Henrietta Szold. Miss Szold gave her much of the Jewish content she craved, but the debt was by no means one-sided. "How often," Henrietta Szold wrote in November, 1940, "when I was faced by a (for me) momentous decision, I found myself asking how Alice would approach the solution of my problem, how she would dissect and analyze it, how she would relate it . . . to the vital things of existence." On that close and beautiful human bond more than a personal relationship rested. Henrietta Szold and Alice Seligsberg, working with Nellie Straus and Jessie Sampter, formed the intellectual and ethical foundation stone upon which Hadassah has stood these three decades.

Miss Seligsberg's affiliation with Hadassah was to lead to a daring and adventurous mission of great significance. The scarcity of physicians, nurses and medicaments in war-torn Palestine led to the organization in 1918 of the American Zionist Medical Unit. Miss Seligsberg was put in charge of the personnel and of the execution of the entire venture. The Unit included forty-four persons — physicians, dentists, nurses, sanitary engineers, and administrative staff. On June 12, 1918 the floating hospital sailed secretly from New York Harbor with eleven camouflaged American troop ships, and made its way through dangerous submarine lanes across the English Channel and, later, in the Mediterranean. Despite the perilous war-time conditions prevailing in Palestine, Miss Seligsberg laid the foundations of a country-wide medical service which developed into the Hadassah Medical Organization. Appropriately enough, in 1919 the Joint Distribution Committee appointed her executive director of its Palestine Orphan Committee. She introduced into Palestine modern methods in work for orphans and dependent children, and it was she who pointed out

the need for recreation and play for the children of Palestine.

Upon returning to America, she assumed the important post of director of the Jewish Children's Clearing Bureau, but Hadassah was always to retain a central place in her activities. From 1921 to 1922 she was its national president, and for many years she was honorary associate of the national board. After her death, Hadassah chose an especially appropriate way of honoring her memory. It resolved "to assign the sum of \$25,000 to the establishment in Palestine of the Alice L. Seligsberg Fellowship Center to serve childhood and youth, Arab and Jew alike, by giving to the children of the Holy Land the services she would have wished for children everywhere . . ."

A very significant aspect of Miss Seligsberg's Zionist work was the guidance she gave from 1924 until her death to the Junior Hadassah organization. In the role of adviser on Palestine problems, she molded the young women she led — always with infinite sympathy, understanding, and effectiveness. It is no more than fitting that her name is commemorated by a grove planted in Palestine by Junior Hadassah and by a clinic established at its Children's Village at which, on October 15, 1940, an outstandingly beautiful tribute was paid by the boys and girls to her memory. Henrietta Szold described it movingly in a letter:

"The guests were seated on one side of the site, which had been cleared of all stones by the children. They, the children, stood in a semi-circle opposite to the guest benches. The master of ceremonies, one of the pupils of the place, called person after person from his place of honor himself by placing a shovel of earth (or clay) on the orifice in the ground in which reposed the scroll that had been read to the audience. I was honored in this way . . . After every deposit of earth, a song, solemn, joyful, the whole diapason of emotions, was expressed.

"I have given you an enumeration of the happenings.

What I cannot give you is a realization of the beauty, the dignity, the decorum, the culture, of the whole ceremonial . . . The air was delicious, and the trees were washed of their summer dust. On this background and in this fragrant atmosphere Alice was honored according to her standards."