

SPIRO, NITZA

Born in November 1937.

Educationalist.

Nitza was born in Jerusalem, the daughter of Hannah (born in Kolomeya and grew up in Lvov) and Jacob Lieberman (born in Brodie).

She was educated in Jerusalem and Hadassim (Israel) and later at Oxford University. She was deputy director Ulpan Akiva at Netanya (1959-1968), where she met Robin Spiro (q.v.) whom she subsequently married. She won the Hebrew University Katz Prize for adult education 1964 / 5 which took her to the whole of Scandinavia to study methods of adult education there.

She obtained an MPhil at Oxford University in Modern Jewish Studies (1974).

After a lectureship in Hebrew language and literature at Oxford University (1976-1983), she became a full-time director of the Spiro Institute (1983-1998), which evolved into what became the largest adult Jewish educational and cultural enterprise in the UK. Its success derived from Nitza's and Robin's dynamism, the expertise of the teachers, the adoption of a versatile approach to education, offering a broad range of subjects, innovative and imaginative syllabuses, and many educational benefits from frequent partnerships with Jewish and non Jewish organisations such as foreign embassies, different nationalities cultural centres, international museums, universities, galleries, etc. They have organised over 70 foreign national and local tours led by experts.

Nitza published a Hebrew Correspondence Course which enables students all over the world to benefit from an interactive approach to learning a foreign language. She has been the latest recipient of the International Samaritan Medal for creating better understanding between people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds (2009).

Q1: Being a child of Polish immigrants you have spent your childhood in Israel. Your memories of the time of the UN declaration on the creation of a Jewish State in Palestine are moving and emotional. How did you end up living in UK?

A: As mentioned by you, I was born in Israel to parents who migrated to Palestine from Poland before the outbreak of WWII. My father felt the stench of spreading anti-Semitism and passionately believed that there was only one way to abolish the perils of living as a minority in a hostile environment and this was to create a haven of creative existence in a land of our own. Despite his idealism and enthusiasm, when facing harsh reality, this utopia which he harboured for years did not quite materialize; life was tough, income meagre! He contracted malaria and typhoid and suffered many long periods of unemployment.

My mother, however, who resisted leaving Poland and settling in Palestine, raised me on Polish children's rhymes and lullabies. Still, we as kids grew up as the first generation to fulfil a dream of returning to our homeland. We were true Sabras (authentic Israelis) with a sense

of duty to build a country and while doing so, to build ourselves in an image of a new Jew – healthy, upright, proud, master of his own fate – a new breed.

We all had a strong bond with the land, we felt that under our feet, everywhere we stood, were layers of history. We loved the landscape, the language, the songs...

So, you are right to wonder: how come I have spent the last 40 years in England away from my roots?

What can one do when romance interferes? I had to choose between a partner for life, whom I loved and the country, the likes of which I would never find. I reckoned that there would always be a possibility of coming back, but never an opportunity to get him back.

Now, after so many years of happy marriage, I know that the painful choice I made at the end was the right one. I also hope that together we managed to do things to enhance Jewish identity – so perhaps this was a mysterious plan for my coming here.

Q2: In your writings you are determined to engage people,

not only Jewish, into learning more about Israel in order to right the wrong and distorted picture of the country. Yet, you are often critical of its leadership and the lack of the initial idealism?

Indeed, Israel is a country of beauty and inspiration, its citizens have endless existential problems, yet in time of need they are loyal, friendly and helpful to each other as members of a large family.

A country and people like this deserve leadership which would act as model people whose ego should diminish in the face of national needs. Alas, many of our leaders follow the pattern of world politicians, who are full of self aggrandisement and are often corrupted. We need and deserve better and as we know – power corrupts.

Q3: Jewish history, the language and culture are the essence of what Robin, your husband, and yourself are trying to offer to Jewish and non-Jewish audience for better understanding of Judaism. But all these apply to a relatively small audience. Are you exploiting the ways to approach a bigger audience?

You are right again, in order to

stop a meltdown of Jewish people one has to reach the masses, beyond the individuals who attend classes. Jews who are drifting away, non Jewish partners who are keen to understand the culture and mentality of the people who they married into, those who consider themselves as married 'in' rather than their Jewish partners who married 'out', the half, quarter or eighth Jews who wish to identify, and also non-Jews who wish to know something about why 'Jews make news.'

The Orthodox have of course their key to survival and continuity, but what is the life line one can offer to those who do not feel such a connection to religion?

With the popularity of learning via the Internet, people are less keen to go out to classes – it is cheaper and more convenient to study at home. Robin and a team of superb educators are as usual with their finger on the pulse. They are creating a website which would prove very attractive to all the categories mentioned, from Orthodox Jews who often lack any knowledge of Jewish history as it is not part of their training, to Jews of other denominations who often do not offer history at their religious schools. One's knowledge and appreciation of Jewish survival and with it the knowledge of the Jewish contribution to world civilization is a strong link; thus, the website will be attractive and beautifully designed, user friendly, and intelligent but not 'over the top' academically and suitable for every age. It will make as global as Jewish people and everyone will be able to ask the experts and also to link to every possible aspect of Jewish life.

Q4: Both of you are consciously very Jewish, but at the same time cosmopolitans in a broader sense. Do you think that Judaism and religion are inseparable in terms of self preservation, now that there is a state of Israel?

We do not see the contradiction between being Jewish and cosmopolitan. If you are aware of who and what you are and

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proud to link with your roots, going out to the world as a sympathetic Jew that people can identify with and learn from is an asset.

In the past, religion used to be the only binding force and for

The territory was not always ours in political terms but it was ours in our hearts and souls.

As far as Israel is concerned, going to there for holiday and roasting ourselves on the beaches does not to my mind

study trip or a year off in a well directed manner via university or youth movement or doing social, medical or charitable work is more likely to create a life time bond.

Q5: *We are happy to have had*

your community are obvious. Historically your community was an important and colourful part of the Jewish tapestry in the Diaspora. The knowledge of the history of this community is important to your members and to people outside in understanding the whole Jewish picture around the world and is one added element in building up our sense of pride in our Jewish heritage. Besides, members of your community with whom we collaborated on building up those programmes were lovely, intelligent, warm and enthusiastic people with a sense of humour plus great seriousness. I can't wait to plan more events with them for my own pleasure and for the benefit of the public.

Q6: *Anything else you want to tell us?*

Yes, there is one more thing I wish to say; our work is worth nothing, if we do not have the public to support us.

We would feel truly rewarded if all of you will come to join our many courses and activities, not only those relating to your own community. Each community is only a limb which must be connected to the rest of the body - Klal Israel.

If you are not moved to join us, I have failed in persuading you of the importance of learning and participation.

If I failed here, perhaps we do not deserve to pride ourselves of doing a worthwhile job – it takes two to tango.

Conducted by **Branko Danon.**



those who lead an orthodox way of life, which takes care of their Jewish identity in every step they take. It is probably the only proven way through millennia and a guarantee of continuity.

But in a non-religious age, when only some 14% of the population are regular synagogue and church goers, we need to ask ourselves 'and what about the others?' The knowledge of our past as people and our culture, collective and individual, with our emphasis on education combined with our miraculous survival as a people has to give us hope for the future. Israel is an important factor but again – living there makes you a Jew. Our sources tell us that living in Israel is equivalent to all other Mitzvot put together.

For people in the Diaspora, Israel was one of the most important components of our identity. We prayed facing Jerusalem, our festivals are directed to the seasons in Israel, we utter 'next year in Jerusalem...'

create a true bond; it could just as well be a sunny beach in Spain or Turkey. However, putting an effort into learning the language, studying the history of Zionism, key figures in Zionism, the stories behind the names of the streets, listening to Israeli music, reading Israeli literature to understand issues and dilemmas watch films, etc... - this is a strong hook and for teenagers a group

your support in a few occasions in the past. You did not hesitate to organize in a very short term a concert of Ladino music performed by the Kamhi Family, you have helped us with some of our lectures, and you contributed substantially in organizing in London the promotion of a reprint of the famous Sarajevo Haggadah. Your reasons?

Our reasons of supporting

