

Alex Rafaeli - A EULOGY

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Some years ago an unusual and unexpected event happened in our family and I said to my daughters Karni and Varda, “you see - if you live long enough you see everything.” This saying has become part of our family folklore, used on various appropriate occasions. Today is one of those occasions. Did I ever imagine that I would one day make a special trip to New York, with members of my family, and stand before a distinguished audience to talk about my late husband Alexander Rafaeli? Yet here I am, a bit of an authority on Sasha-Alexander Rafaeli after 50 years of marriage, trying to convey to you the essence of this unusual man.

Our story begins after I arrived in Tel Aviv with my brother Alec in February 1949 and found work at the WIZO Head Office as a writer for their international magazine. The Women’s International Zionist Organization is the parallel of Hadassah in England and Europe. One day in November, an extremely attractive gentleman came to the office to visit a staff member, Dr. Vera Lewin, with whom he had studied at Heidelberg University. I thought regretfully that some women had all the luck. We were introduced and talked about how to entertain his uncle Isaac, a WIZO donor from Sydney who was coming to visit. This pretext wasn’t really a lie because Isaac did come at the end of 1950. The truth was that Vera had told him about the “new girl” from Australia and he decided to have a look. I was very surprised when Alex phoned me and invited me to see the Ingrid Bergman film, “The Arch of Triumph.” I said I had already seen it (that’s how naïve I was), but Alex was very gallant and soon invited me to a concert, the first of many dates.

A few weeks later, he asked me if I was free on the 20th of January. I said primly that I didn't make arrangements so far ahead. He said it was his late mother's birthday and he would like us to marry on that day. I had already told my brother that if Alex should propose, I would accept. And so it was. I informed my parents in Melbourne and the family in Israel and we quickly began to get organized. We wanted to marry in Jerusalem and came up to register with the Rabbinate. We were told we would have to bring two witnesses to vouch that we were both single. I could supply one but where would we find another at such short notice? We walked out of the Rabbinate on to Jaffa Street and the first person we met was Dr. Haim Shalom Halevi, the husband of Hillel Kook's sister Cilla. He and Alex knew each other from the early days of the Etzel and were happy to meet again, especially for such an occasion. We returned to the Rabbinate and completed our registration.

Unexpected guests at the small noon-time wedding on January 20th were Mike ben Ami and his first wife Marcia. They happened to be in Tel Aviv and heard that Alex was to be married. "This I have to see," he said, which sounded a bit ominous to me. Later I heard that some guests were sure that I was not Jewish and that bets were made about how long Alex could survive marriage. It is very fitting that Mike's son, Jeremy is here with us today, but I first met him when he was four or five years old.

Alex grew up in turbulent and bewildering times. He was born in 1910 in Russia (Latvia was not independent at this time) to Rosa and Boris DovBer Rafaelowitch, whose family had lived in Drissa for several generations, dealing in production and sale of flax. As a child he witnessed the Russian Revolution and civil war first hand. His background and Russian education endowed Alex with a Slavic soul. He was a romantic who loved poetry and was intellectually adventurous; he was generous and loved the grand gesture but could also be a formidable opponent.

He was known as Sasha until he came to the States in 1940, and is still called so by relatives and friends who knew him during those years.

His mother Rosa Kahn, came from the German-speaking province of Kurland and believed in the superiority of German education. At the age of 12, Sasha was sent for a year to Memel to learn German, returning to Riga for his Bar Mitzvah. There he learned to be punctual, to behave correctly, to plan meticulously, and to be orderly and responsible. He became a Yekke as well as a Russian.

Alex' family was not Zionist but *he* understood the need for Jewish nationhood at an early age. In 1924 at the age of 14, he heard Jabotinsky speak in Riga. He was captured for life by his personality and by his ideas and became a founding member of Betar. Now he was a Yekke, and a Russian and an enthusiastic Zionist. So enthusiastic that for a whole year he attended the Hebrew Gymnasia (high school) in Riga without telling his parents. As you can imagine the family was not at all pleased with this deceit.

His mother was a campaigning Socialist and two of her sisters were communists and went to live in Moscow and St. Petersburg. "Why do you bother with the problems of such a small people as the Jews", they asked him, "when Communism will be established their problems will also be solved. You should be helping us."

However, two of Rosa's brothers, Isaac and Louis Kahn and her sister Ella, came to Palestine in the 20's. We later discovered that my father, then a laborer in the building trade, actually worked on the house Louis and Hannah were building on Rambam Street in Tel Aviv. This became a home away from home for Alex when he came to the country in the 30's. I am happy to say that Louis' American grandson Michael Klausner is here today with his wife Allison and their children.

Rosa visited Israel in 1928 and saw the country and the efforts being made to develop it. In spite of their differing ideologies her attitude softened and she began

to encourage Alex in his political work even though it took him away from his family.

His knowledge of German became an important factor in his life. It led him to choose Heidelberg University over Oxford, where he found busy Jewish fraternities and an active group of intellectuals and devoted Zionists. Many life-long friendships were made and in the 30's quite a number of the graduates made aliyah, contributing greatly to the economic and intellectual life of Palestine. A representative of this period is Rabbi Sara Paasche-Orlow, a granddaughter of one of Alex' Heidelberg friends, who is here today from Boston with her husband Dr. Michael Orlow. Alex was the last Jew to graduate from Heidelberg before the Nazis took over.

Alex joined the American army in 1943 and after participating in the Normandy landings, was transferred from the infantry to the Counter Intelligence Corps because of his command of German and Russian. In this unit which was searching for Nazi leaders in hiding, he was responsible for the arrest of Alfred Krupp of the munitions family and interrogated him in preparation for his indictment. He felt a measure of revenge for the murder of his mother and brother.

Unlike Alex' family my parents were religious and Zionist. They made aliyah from Poland in 1922 with my brother, and I was eventually the first baby born in Herzliya. Conditions were then very difficult and after an attempt to settle in Jerusalem my parents decided to go to Australia with the big emigration of the late 20's. In Melbourne we were foreigners. The people we mixed with were foreigners, we spoke Yiddish at home, and the focal points of our lives were our families in Poland and Palestine, and Zionism. There were always foreign letters in the mail box. Europe was a living entity for me and I felt more European than Australian.

When I came into Alex' life I could relate to the stories of his past. In addition, my father was a great admirer of Jabotinsky and was a member of his party, the New

Zionist Organization. We followed the activities of the Etzel underground in so far as they were reported in the Jewish press. Alex did not have to make any explanations or educate me.

In the early 1950's all the members of the Bergson Group, except Mike ben Ami, lived in and around Tel Aviv. Although Alex' political work was over, the camaraderie of the Group continued. I remember cheerful parties where Russian and Hebrew songs were sung, and wineglasses occasionally smashed, in true Russian tradition. There was a constant stream of supporters and activists coming to inspect the new Israel. At long last the entire group of bachelors was married, and the second generation was in the making. Betty Kook and I were pregnant at the same time, my Asi being born at the end of November 1950 and Asti a month later. I remember that Hillel came to the hospital to wait out the hours with Alex and my mother, who had come from Melbourne for the birth of her first grandchild. In his excitement Alex celebrated by walking on his hands.

I was fascinated by the group and their stories. I was impressed that six random young men could band together to advance on the U.S., and without knowing the language, quickly learned the psychology and techniques of public relations. They learned how to work the System, and succeeded in making a tremendous impact on public opinion nationwide. The dedication to their ideals and concern for the Jewish people, their intelligence, their enthusiasm and engaging personalities were the tools at their disposal. They were a great team.

Alex and I made Jerusalem our home in 1954 and raised our four children there. He loved Jerusalem from the moment he had set foot there in 1933 and it was a source of great satisfaction that he could contribute to its industrial development by

opening several factories. He gave much time to public matters. He had time to develop his interest in art and to expand our collection of paintings and African masks. Our home became a meeting-place for friends we had made at various times and in various countries. They constituted "Our Crowd."

The Russian aliyah which began after 1967 rejuvenated Alex's neglected Slavic soul. Many of his school friends from Riga arrived and their stories about Jewish life behind the Iron Curtain were fascinating and incredible. Alex' command of Russian recovered its fluency and he was asked by government departments to lecture to newcomers about the economic conditions in Israel, work possibilities, politics, etc. He was also extremely helpful to many olim in their trials of absorption.

Alex had a deep historical consciousness and saw great importance in "telling the story". After Jabotinsky was reburied in Jerusalem, in 1965, a process of legitimization of the Underground soldiers began, which was accelerated after Begin came to power. A renewed interest in the Bergson Group brought many students to Alex seeking primary source material for their doctoral theses. Later he wrote his memoirs and published some of the letters his family in Riga had written to him in the early years. These letters were his most treasured possession, the only tangible evidence of his loved ones and of his destroyed world. Even I had not known about them previously.

Besides his intellectual attributes, Sasha was also an athlete, a runner. In his youth he belonged to Jewish sports clubs and ran in national competitions. All his life he maintained a great interest in athletics. At first I went with him very unwillingly to international sports competitions, but I began to enjoy the excitement

of the games and the beauty of the athletes in action. In 1958 Alex insisted that we absolutely must go to the Rome Olympics in 1960 and began in good time to get tickets, no easy matter then for Israelis. He bothered his friends in the States who thought he was crazy but in the end it was a wonderful family excursion. Later in life, Alex took up walking and became a familiar figure on the Jerusalem scene as he took his 12-kilometer walk every Saturday morning, measured of course by stopwatch. He participated in many of the 4-day marches which were then an annual national sport and our sons Asi and Lonny joined him when old enough.

A few words about names: Sasha arrived in NY in 1940 and was taken directly to a press conference with Jabotinsky. He had to adopt a pseudonym immediately and chose the name "Hadani" which he used professionally for many years, but in the very early Etzel years in Palestine, he had used the name Nahshon. As you know Nahshon, of the tribe of Judah, was the first to plunge into the Red Sea when he saw that everyone else was hesitating, and so he has come to symbolize courage and initiative. Through his PR work for the Committee which took him all over the States, Sasha gradually metamorphosed into Alex and his 3-year service in the army, helped him acquire an American patina.

The multiplicity of his names has led to an interesting development. When Alex first came to NY, he found a cousin from Riga, Judith and her husband Abrasha Udem, who had left Riga at the very last moment, shortly after their marriage. They kept up a close relationship since neither had any other relatives in the States. The Udem's had two children, Dr. Steven and Edith, both present today, and Edith in turn had two children Jackie and Daniel. A few weeks ago, Jackie gave birth to her second daughter and decided to call her after Sasha because of the great affection they all had for him, and also Judith after her grandmother who was killed in a car accident just a year ago. So now there is a little girl Sasha in Miami, and a little Alexander in Ra'anana who are both named after the same person. Edith has come from Miami with her son Daniel to be with us today.

During the last years of his life Alex felt the need to tidy loose ends. In 1991, after an absence of almost 60 years, he decided he must return to Riga and visit his childhood, but mainly he wanted to say Kaddish at his father's grave (he had died in June 1940 before the Germans came) and to visit the mass grave in the forest of Rumboli where his mother had perished in the winter of 1941. His brother Asya died in a skirmish between partisans and Latvians in the forests and his burial place is unknown. It was a very emotional journey, and suddenly a neglected factor in my own background emerged into my consciousness.

I too had a real connection to Riga. My great-uncle R. Moshe Shapiro, second son of R. Aisel Harif of Slonim, had been chief Rabbi of Riga from 1882-1909. We looked up population directories and found the site where he and his family had lived for 40-50 years, within the compound of what was then the Jewish school. My shares went up tremendously and if only I could have spoken Russian I would have been accepted as an honorary citizen of Riga.

In 1995 we made another trip to the States as Alex wanted to see his good friends a last time. These visits were an important "closure" in his emotional life.

The last years of Alex' life were not easy. He had endless trouble with his eyes and his sight was failing. It was a great effort to maintain his usual, cheerful self and his favorite Russian proverb at this time was "Staress ni Radiss," "Old age is no joke." One morning in February 1999 he fell in the bedroom and broke his hip. To our amazement, when he woke after the operation he reverted to speaking Russian and to reliving childhood experiences. We had to have Russian-speaking help so we could understand what was happening to him. He passed away on the 28th of February 1999, after a massive heart attack.

Yet there was still a surprise in store. When I eventually got around to sorting his papers, I found poems written in his dashing handwriting which gave expression to his feelings in times of stress or intense emotion. There was a poem he had written to Asya our first-born, soon after his birth, and I quote:

Above all have no illusions Asya
 And look this world straight in its crude face,
 Taking note of its tough and cruel manners
 And its tricks, treason and deceit;
 But remember it's your world too,
 And behind the curtain of blood and dirt
 There is hidden beauty and goodness
 And myriads of sparkles and warmth
 Some day this beauty will be strong
 Enough to break through
 And make the bad disappear.

Alex was always aware of the fact that he lived in momentous times. He saw himself as a soldier in the service of the Jewish people. His multi-cultural background and many talents enabled him to make his contribution in various ways. He survived the terrible years with courage and determination but they left their mark. He was a dreamer and a do-er. His time and his energy were dedicated to the Jewish people and to the state of Israel. That was the essence of his life.

Although Alex loved to quote Russian proverbs, I will quote a traditional Hebrew one, from the book of Proverbs, chapter 17. "עטרת זקנים בני בנים, ותפארת בנים אבותם." That is, "Grandchildren are the crown of the aged, and the glory of sons is their fathers".....

Perhaps at this moment you will allow me to fantasize in Hollywood style, and think of our happy band of warriors observing us from some corner in Paradise. "Look at them", they are saying, "our friends, our children and grandchildren -- they are talking about US, they haven't forgotten Us"..... and we never will.

I want to thank the Wyman Institute for all its outstanding work to ensure that the Bergson Group will indeed not be forgotten. Special thanks to Dr. Rafael Medoff the director, for his ongoing work, and for tireless and devoted efforts to bring this special event to life. I wish to thank the speakers who are participating and the relatives and friends from Israel and the States who made the effort to be here with us today. I take it as an affectionate tribute to Alex, and my family and I appreciate it very much.

Thank you.