

Sylva Gelber

1910 - 2003

Sylva Gelber was born in Toronto and was educated at Havergal College, University of Toronto and Columbia. She spent four years (1934-8) in Palestine as a medical social worker and administrator under the British mandate. She left after her offices were bombed and she was unable to accept some of the directions she foresaw the new Israeli government would pursue.

As consultant with Canada's Department of Health and Welfare (1950-68) she helped to establish universal medicare. She also served as Canada's representative on



the UN Commission on the Status of Women and at other conferences in the 1970s. But it was through her role as head of the Women's Bureau (1969-76) that she made her greatest mark on Canadian society. She unceasingly prodded the medical establishments, universities, corporations and government to tear down the barriers that kept women from many professions. Her outspoken advocacy helped

to introduce equal pay legislation, maternity leave and women's pension benefits. A passionate proponent of equal opportunities for women, she explained that she never learned to type, to avoid confinement in secretarial work.

Retirement was a time to redirect her energies to organizations such as the CIIA, UNA-Canada, the Canadian Human Rights Foundation and to service on the Board of Governors of Trent University.. She also made time to write, including an award-winning memoir of her Palestine experiences (*No Balm in Gilead*). She loved music. She set up

a home studio and recorded herself singing spirituals and George Gershwin songs and she always carried a little harmonica, which would be whipped out for an impromptu offering. And she encouraged others through the Sylva Gelber Music Foundation, which supports an annual prize, administered through the Canada Council, to one or more young classical musicians.

Sylva was predeceased by four brothers who were each remarkable in their own way. It was the end of an era when she died.