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 legis-
lation, 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 secre-
tarial 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, includ-
ing an award-winning mem-
oir of her Palestine experi-
ences (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 im-
promptu offering. And she
encouraged others through
the Sylva Gelber Music
Foundation, which supports
an annual prize, adminis-
tered 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.