

Alan Slifka, 81, co-founder of the Abraham Fund

By *Raphael Ahren*

Alan Slifka, a wealthy investment manager committed to promoting Arab-Jewish coexistence in Israel, died last Friday at the age of 81 in his home in the U.S.

"Alan was a kind, caring human being who truly believed it is possible to make our world a better place, and went about all his life trying to do just that," said Haifa native Jehuda Reinharz, the former president of Brandeis University, where Slifka established a master's degree in coexistence and conflict 10 years ago.

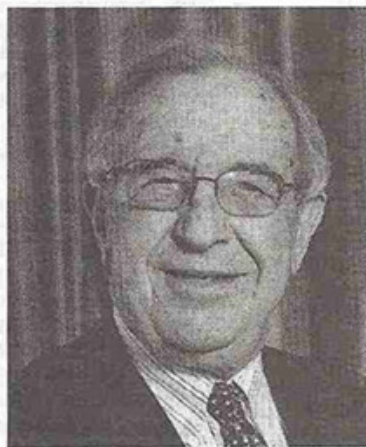
Born in New York, Slifka graduated from Harvard and Yale before he embarked on a successful career in finance. In 1989, he and his friend Eugene Weiner – the late U.S.-born Haifa University sociologist – founded the Abraham Fund (now known as Abraham Fund Initiatives), a nonprofit promoting coexistence and equality among Israel's Jewish and Arab citizens. (See box)

"Alan paved the way toward a desired new reality, a reality of coexistence," Amnon Be'eri-Sulizeanu, the Fund's co-director, told *Anglo File* this week. "He was a pioneer who brought a fresh, unbiased look and who saw what others could not."

During his many visits to Israel, Slifka had become deeply concerned about the widening gaps between Jewish and Arab citizens here, and founded the initiative, for which he received the Knesset Prize in 2000. The Fund today runs many different projects, reaching from the promotion of Arabic languages studies in Israeli high schools to an initiative aiming to develop the Galilee as a "model for shared living in an ethnically mixed

region," which has Jewish and Arab municipal leaders work together in the areas of environment, regional development, education and health.

"I knew Alan to be a man of vision and foresight, a man who never ceases to search for the right answers for the problems we face in Israel," the Fund's other co-director, Mohammad Darawshe, told *Anglo File*. "It took me no time to appreciate his strong moral commitment to civil rights and equality. He was a loving father to us active leaders of the field of Jewish-Arab coex-



Alan Slifka

istence, a field that owes him a great deal of direction."

Slifka, who was buried Monday in the U.S., is survived by his wife Riva Ariella Ritvo-Slifka; his sons Michael, Randy and David; his step-children Victoria, Skye and Max; and his sister, Barbara Slifka.

An investor of human capital

By *Carl Perkal*

Alan B. Slifka was my boss. He was also my teacher. He was a very successful venture capitalist in the United States, but in Israel he only invested in human capital – Jews and Arabs who believed that they could do the seemingly impossible – live together. Alan never tried to make money here – he just wanted to give it away. His only condition was that it be used to advance a shared, democratic and equal society for Jewish and Arab citizens.

Alan relished telling the story about a visit to Israel where he was schlepped around for a week by politicians and organization heads hoping for a donation. At the end of the tour that left no Jewish stone untouched, Alan, in his quiet and unassuming manner said to his hosts, "I hear there are also Arabs living in Israel..." They quickly nodded their heads hoping to change the subject. Alan smiled and asked tongue-in-cheek, "Then how is it that I didn't even meet one? Where are you hiding them?"

Throughout the late 90s and into the 21st century the Abraham Fund Initiatives he founded with Eugene Weiner gave away almost one million dollars a year to projects in Israel that brought Jews and Arabs together for encounters, cross-cultural training, provided vital services to the Arab community and encouraged joint ventures between Jewish and Arab businessmen.

Alan, always thinking about the bottom line, used to say that for \$10 per person, people could have a "life-changing coexistence experience."

ALAN B. SLIFKA, 1929-2011

February 11, 2011

By Carl Perkal

Alan B. Slifka, who passed away on February 4th, was my boss. He was also my teacher. He was a very successful venture capitalist in the United States, but in Israel he only invested in human capital – Jews and Arabs who believed that they could do the seemingly impossible – live together.

Unlike many wealthy Diaspora Jews who mix (and sometime mix up) public philanthropy and private business in Israel – Alan never tried to make money here – he just wanted to give it away. His only condition was that it be used to advance a shared, democratic and equal society for Jewish and Arab citizens.

In the late 80's when Alan and his partner in crime, Professor Eugene Weiner of Haifa University, began sketching the outlines of a foundation that would support grass-roots efforts to advance "coexistence" between the Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel, the Arabs in Israel were off the radar screen.

Alan relished telling the story about a visit to Israel where he was schlepped around for a week by politicians and organization heads hoping for a donation. At the end of the tour that left no Jewish stone untouched, Alan, in his quiet and unassuming manner said to his hosts, "I hear there are also Arabs living in Israel..." They quickly nodded their heads hoping to change the subject. Alan smiled and asked tongue-in-cheek, "Then how is it that I didn't even meet one? Where are you hiding them?"

Indeed when he concluded that the issue of inter-ethnic tension in Israel was no laughing matter, Alan decided to do something about it and together with Weiner established The Abraham Fund Initiatives, which he generously endowed. Throughout the late 90s and into the 21st century Alan's fund gave away almost one million dollars a year to projects in Israel that brought Jews and Arabs together for encounters, cross-cultural training, provided vital services to the Arab community and encouraged joint ventures between Jewish and Arab businessmen. Alan, always thinking about the bottom line, used to say that for \$10 per person, people could have a "life-changing coexistence experience".

But Alan wasn't naïve and knew that education wasn't enough – that Israeli government policies that denied equality to the Arab citizens also had to be reckoned with at the top. So he made his biggest grantee a shared Jewish/Arab civil rights organization (which I happen to work for today). He enlisted highly respected Israelis like former President Yitzhak Navon, Judge Abdel Rahman Zuabi, senior advisor Dan Patir, Professor Faisal Azaiza, future MK Nadia Hilu and many others in the ranks of the fund's board and public council.

In the USA he targeted the Jewish community which was blissfully unaware that Israel had an "Arab problem". He brought names like Bill Clinton and Mandy Patinkin to the Abraham Fund's annual dinners and in time, this generated interest and major changes in the way the organized Jewish community related to Israel's Arab citizens. Today, the "task force" that he inspired has more than 80 Jewish organizations on its roster who affirm their commitment to equality for Israel's Arab citizens.

No matter where in the world Alan was on business, he was always on-line and always available to instant message about what was going on in Israel and advise me on my work at the Abraham Fund. I think we (Jews and Arabs in Israel) had become his real business.

The optimistic days of the 90s were followed by the difficult early years of this millennium with the "October events of 2000" and the Intifada and many of Alan's friends told him that maybe the whole premise of coexistence that he espoused was nothing more than a mirage and a failure.

The difficulties only made Alan more determined and more committed.

I last saw Alan a few years ago at an event at Tel Aviv University marking the anniversary of the Or Commission findings that had affirmed that discrimination against the Arab citizens of Israel was both endemic and the cause of past and possible future civil unrest in Israel. Age and illness had slowed him down a bit but his analyst's mind was as sharp as ever. I shared details about a new project my organization was setting up to work with and within government ministries to identify the barriers to equality – and develop strategies to eliminate them. He was pleased to hear that despite everything I hadn't despaired and was carrying on the ideals that he had taught me when I worked for him.

Suffice it to say, he funded that project too.

Alan is gone but he has left behind in Israel thousands of Arabs and Jews who were inspired by his enthusiasm and tempered by his realism – and who continue to believe that Jews and Arabs can live together in this land as equals.

May his memory be a blessing.

Carl Perkal worked for the Abraham Fund in the 1990's and is the resource development director for Sikkuy, the Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality.

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