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Obituary:

Ada Rapoport-Albert

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Ada Rapoport-Albert

EMMA HARRIS

The loss of Professor Ada Rapoport-Albert will be felt far and wide but not only to those who knew, admired, and loved her, were taught by her, and worked alongside her. I feel a great sadness for the next generation of students, especially for those who climb the stairs of Foster Court in Malet Place to reach the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies (HJS), University College London (UCL). They will read her books, they will soak up the knowledge gleaned from their pages, but they will never encounter the incredible person. For that, I am profoundly sorry. I had that opportunity – both as a student and as a colleague – and I feel extremely lucky.

I first met Ada twenty-seven years ago when she interviewed me in her capacity as Admissions Tutor in the Department. I had spoken to her on the telephone that same morning, and had a picture in my mind of what she looked like. I was not expecting Ada. Her long, flowing jet-black hair complemented her black clothing. I wondered whether, in my naiveté, this look was a university thing and all lecturers were eccentric. I soon realized that Ada was not eccentric; she was Ada with a film star appearance.

I was taught by Ada in my first undergraduate year, and while our paths did not often cross in the classroom after that, she was an ever present source of encouragement and inspiration. Over the years I grew in confidence especially when I worked as one of the administrators in the same department. We got through painful times – the death of our beloved Head of Department, Professor John D. Klier, in 2007 was particularly shattering, but Ada stepped in to lift us up. He was my mentor and she could not step into his shoes – no one would have asked that of her – but we all had to move on, and with Ada at the helm I felt that John's legacy continued. At the time of his death, John had been the President of the Jewish Historical Society of England, and Ada was invited to take on this role, which she did with dignity and pride. I was a committee member then and we attended the meetings together. We walked from work, Ada gliding through the West End crowds with me walking beside her, watching onlookers as they gazed intently at this film star.

On entering Ada's office daily, I had the annoying habit of saying "It's only me". Ada's response in a slightly irritated tone, "it's not only you, it IS you", eventually sank in. At that time, there were many who did not consider administrative staff as important or worthy of an opinion. But Ada was different. With those few words, Ada taught me that everyone is important, everyone has a voice, and everyone deserves to be heard. I don't need to apologise for being me, and when colleagues and students utter that same phrase to me today, I am reminded of Ada's wise words and share them. Ada lives on.

When I found out that Ada was dying and there would no chance to speak to her again, I sent her an email. I shared my story with her – she already knew it, of course, as she had helped to create it, but I wanted to tell her again before it was too late. I wanted to remind her that I was one of the lucky ones; she had given a shy, quiet eighteen-year-old the opportunity to study at UCL, to be part of the HJS family, and to carve out a career for herself. She encouraged me time and again to have a voice and be true to it. I hope I have repaid her faith in me.