

Orit Margalio

O Captain, My Captain! **Alex Dancyg**

1948–2024

I have done everything in my adult life – everything that I could – to reach a Dialogue. And it is possible, step by step, to build these paths, these roads.

– Alex Dancyg, Voices, Teatr NN

If one wants to summarise in a nutshell Alex Dancy's life & work, you can find it in this quote.

Alex Dancyg was born in Warsaw in 1948, to a family of Holocaust survivors – his parents Marcin and Nina and his sister Edyta. His childhood was a happy one as he recalled many times, with a very strong Polish identity. He understood he was different a little as they didn't celebrate the Christian holidays. In 1957, the family immigrated to the State of Israel and Alex followed the Israeli course of education and army service.

Alex was very much influenced by his youth movement Ha-shomer Ha-tzair (the young pioneer) and his uncles who had come to Palestine before the second world war and were among the founders of the kibbutzim, so he went to Nir Oz kibbutz in the western Negev. The connection to the land was something that was very important to him, and continued to be all his life.

He served in different positions there – as an educator at the regional school, the kibbutz secretary and an irrigation specialist for many years. He married Rachel and had four children. His reconnection with Poland took place in the 1980's, following which the first groups started to go to Poland. This is how Alex described his linkage to Poland and Polish culture:

This was my private madness, I felt that I must do this, that I have a challenge. In my frequent travelling to Poland, I discovered my life's meaning. It was to this end that I had been studying for all the time, it was for this that I had been reading all the time for, not knowing I would do something about it. After all, there were no diplomatic relations between Poland and Israel. I didn't know I would return to Poland one day. I have done everything in my adult life – well, I don't know if everything, because there's no "everything" – I have probably done all that I could to change some things and to reach dialogue. And it's possible, step by step, to build these paths, these roads.

– Voices, Teatr NN

He came to Poland in 1989 in a delegation of the Israeli Ministry of Education, Holocaust institutes and the Diaspora House, and shared his knowledge with his colleagues and connected Polish history with Jewish history. He then joined and became a prominent figure in the guides' training courses to Poland from the early 1990's till 2023.

His greatest input to the courses was in his understanding of how to present the history and offering a different methodology to the guides.

You cannot understand Polish history, Polish culture, without the Jewish contribution. And we have no history, Jewish history, without this enormous civilization of the Jewish diaspora, that unfortunately was murdered all over eastern Europe [...].

[...] You cannot deal only with the Holocaust – a place where two thirds of the Jewish people lived in the 16th century. In exile, you go to where the conditions are better and that's why they came to Poland.

– Voices, Teatr NN

I met Alex first at the Yad Vashem guiding course in 2000. I was young and educated with very anti-Polish sentiments, and found it extremely difficult to accept Alex's lecture about Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust. But this encounter led me to go more in depth into Polish-Jewish history. Two years later, I studied at a training course for guides to Poland and Alex's presentations and approach broadened my mind. Like me, hundreds of guides opened up to Polish-Jewish history, Polish history and culture and to the concept of dialogue between the two nations.

Alex along with Batya Dvir wrote six guides for the traveller in Poland according to regions, which were translated to different languages, and opened new places and knowledge for Israeli guides and tourists who chose to use them.

When in 2006 I transferred to the European department at International School for Holocaust Studies (ISHS), it was only natural also to start to work with Alex at the Polish Desk. This joint work changed my life and gave me a close and dear friend. Alex had already been involved in seminars as a lecturer for some, mostly with Polish groups. The Polish Desk led by us was a new reconstruction based on a few principles: dialogue, lectures but also educational workshops to provide real practices and implementation of the knowledge, as well as a gate to Judaism and modern Israel. Although Alex could be my father by age, there was no ego involved in our work, which enabled each of us to bring our strong sides and complete each other. It was working with Alex and Polish educators which led me to learn Polish and change my views totally. Alex managed to implement in me and so many other educators and people at large in Israel and in Poland what he truly believed and fought for – dialogue.

[...] If everyone takes to heart and takes an interest in another culture and the impact of that culture on their own history, on their own culture – then there will be dialogue, not stereotypes. It's very simple...

– Voices, Teatr NN

Alex's gate to people's heart was through his personal connection to Poland and Polish culture. He knew till his last trip to Poland in September 2023 how to address both adults and 16–17-year-olds (his passion for football and his vast knowledge in Polish sports had a great contribution here). Using also a good sense of humor, vast historical and cultural references – he could reach everyone. I recall that when he lectured to British seminars at Yad Vashem and other international groups, he was always able to connect to their culture, literature, sports etc., a rare quality which was a gateway to people's hearts and attention. There was not a topic he did not know something about.

Alex often stated that he was the luckiest of men because he could pursue his two great loves: the land and intellect with education.

Whenever we spoke, he had a pile of books in numerous languages that he was reading. He had a retentive memory, which always impressed everyone he met.

The Polish Desk was the first section of the ISHS that ran seminars for the clergy (5 in total) in cooperation with Father Tomasz Adamczyk and the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum, which enriched the dialogue by adding an interfaith dimension to it. Also with the priests Alex knew how to reach them, and we are able to assess the impact of these seminars today whenever we return to Poland.

Above all, however, Alex's great dedication was to youth. He was in his element teaching young people, guiding them and leading Polish-Israeli youth meetings. This enterprise was not and still is not easy, and it can feel, as Alex remarked even during our last phonecall on October 6, a Sisyphean task. He initiated it with the Israeli Ministry of Education, CODN (today ORE), Yad Vashem (Polish Desk) and the Polish Institute in Tel Aviv. They wrote together the only bilingual booklet (Polish-Hebrew) to be found for educators, which provided historical introductions and workshops for the meetings. In order to improve the efficiency of these educational undertakings, Alex convinced the above-mentioned institutions to hold seminars for Israeli and Polish educators in Israel and Poland prior to the youth meetings which connected educators from both sides and, through them, students. In its heyday, this amazing enterprise included 120 schools from each side.

Until October 7th, Alex tirelessly brought schools together, constantly thinking about how his work can continue. This is part of his legacy and heritage for us.

For his amazing work, Alex received the Commission of National Education Award – the highest award from the Polish Ministry of Education, and the Silver Cross of Merit from the Polish President Lech Kaczyński.

When asked, this is how Alex always explained his motivation and inspiration:

There is a Hasidic expression "repairing the world" – Tikun Olam. So, in the symbolic dimension, I am such a tzaddik because I want to repair the world so that my students know their story. And in Poland,

you can show nearly a thousand years of shared history. These trips to Poland are about dialogue. They are an attempt to fully understand really important things about our real identity. But it's not easy...

—Voices, Teatr NN

On October 7th 2023, Alex was kidnapped by Hamas to Gaza and was murdered there. In August, his body was retrieved and he was buried in Nir Oz kibbutz.

During the time of his captivity, it was very moving to see his friends and students writing to him, trying to fight for him.

I lost a colleague, a teacher, a mentor and one of my closest friends. We have become orphans with a huge obligation not only to remember Alex but also to continue his legacy. ■

To hear Alex,
his life story and mission,
scan here:

