

Council on Social Work Education Spotlight

Dr. Alice Salomon

(1872–1948)

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**Dr. Alice Salomon**

**(1872–1948)**

*Dr. Alice Salomon, scholar, educator, international women’s activist, and peace advocate is often referred to as “The Mother of Social Work in Germany” and in North America as the “Jane Addams of Germany.”*

Alice Salomon was born on April 19, 1872, and raised in an upper middle-class Jewish family in Berlin, Germany, that had settled there long ago under special provisions by the Prussian king. Being born shortly after 1871, when Jews in Germany were acknowledged for the first time as citizens with full rights, she became an exceptional representative of the so-called Jewish emancipation and seemed destined to live an extraordinary life that would affect the international development of social work. Jews and other minorities were later again discriminated against, persecuted, and silenced during the Nazi period in Germany. This spotlight will not only portray and summarize her life from an observer’s point of view but also—finally and again—will help us listen to her own words and voice. She writes:

Even as a young child, I had hoped for a career. At five, before I went to school, I wanted to become a teacher, and I began to want to help others when I was twelve. Besides, all my life, as long as I can remember, I wanted to travel and see the world. (Salomon, 2004, p. 12).

Salomon became intrigued with social work when she received an invitation to join the Women’s and Girl’s Groups for Social Work in 1893 (Wieler, 1989). This nationwide program provided the opportunity for students to work in various social institutions and gain practical application instruction through concurrent lectures. During this time, Salomon was mentored by women and male social reformers who challenged the social systems by linking social welfare and feminism as well as pacifism. They believed that professional “social work required systematic preparation, an understanding of legal and economic structures and the human side of poverty” (Salomon, 2004, p. 39). These experiences provided Salomon the impetus to create courses in social welfare and eventually a school of social work.

After 8 years of working in various social institutions, coordinating social work projects and organizing this group of volunteers, she was asked to direct the first 1-year and full-time

training course for social work in Berlin. She published her first of numerous articles on policy analysis, education, and international and intercultural social welfare and also decided to continue her own education (Wieler, 1988b).

Women had great difficulty gaining admission to German universities in the early 1900s, but due to her exceptional activities, Salomon was accepted to Berlin's Friedrich Wilhelm University in 1902. In 1906, against male opposition in the department, she was awarded a doctorate with a specialization in economics and a secondary field in history. Her dissertation was titled "The Causes of Unequal Payment for Men's and Women's Work."

In 1908, when women were officially admitted to German universities, Dr. Alice Salomon founded the Social Work School for Women in Berlin-Schöneberg. Although this school was grounded in academics, it did not mean that social work training became part of the university system. It can best be described as training in professional schools with emphasis on practical aspects of social work practice plus a wide range of instruction and ongoing reflection that we now call supervision.

In 1917 Salomon established the German Conference of Schools of Social Work, which was similar to the subsequent American Council on Social Work Education. In 1928 she headed a section on social work education for the worldwide social welfare organization congress, the Quinzaine Sociale in Paris. This group evolved into the International Committee of Schools of Social Work (now the International Association of Schools of Social Work, or IASSW) and was officially founded in 1929 at her school in Berlin. Salomon served as IASSW's first president (Wieler, 1989).

In addition to her many educational accomplishments, Salomon believed that social work required peace for its most successful efforts and emphasized the importance of peace issues in the training of social work practitioners (Wieler, 1988). In 1909, as the secretary of the International Council of Women, she traveled throughout Europe and the United States to collaborate with women activists on the front line of social change and peace. In 1915 she joined the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom as a pacifist and was associated with Jane Addams' peace and disarmament work. She was the first German woman to address the International League for Peace and Freedom at The Hague. Her activism in

international organizations allowed her to fulfill her wish to travel the world, engage in working for peace, even in the midst of war, and stay true to her belief “in supporting a greater sense of gender based solidarity among women, leading toward a unity that transcends all philosophical and ideological differences in order to help all of humanity” (Salomon, 2004, p. 237).

Salomon’s extensive pioneering work in theory and practice in the social work field was internationally recognized and culminated in numerous awards and accolades in the early 1930s. During the Weimar Republic she traveled with a German diplomatic passport. On her 60th birthday in 1932 she received an honorary medical degree from the University of Berlin for her accomplishments in social medicine. That same year she received a silver medal from the Prussian Ministry of State. In addition, the institution she had founded in 1908 was renamed the Alice Salomon School of Social Work.

However, her many accomplishments were set asunder when the Nazi regime took power in 1933. Social and educational institutions became indoctrinated with National Socialist tenets. Many German scholars and peace activists either fled the country or were placed in concentration camps (Gardella, 2011; Wieler & Zeller, 1995). Although she was often encouraged to emigrate, Salomon chose to stay in Germany for as long as possible. She wrote:

The younger people who could no longer follow their professions of work or trade could not stay; their lives were not yet lived. The older ones who had lost their incomes also had to go. ... For people like myself, I would still be useful in a modest way. Like a captain of a small vessel, I wanted to help my young friends into the lifeboat. (Salomon, 2004, p. 190)

To relieve Alice Salomon of the pressures in Nazi Germany, she was asked by IASSW and financially supported by the Russell Sage Foundation to conduct the first world-wide and interesting comparative study on social work education under politically controversial circumstances (Salomon, 1937; Wieler, 1987). She was also “invited to the United States and on an extensive tour, gave numerous speeches on this topic. Unfortunately, she could not talk openly about her life circumstances in Berlin because she would have endangered her Jewish relatives in

Germany” (Wieler, 1987, p. 144). In fact, after her return to Berlin in 1937, at the age of 65, Dr. Alice Salomon was specifically targeted by the Nazi regime. She wrote:

The secret police summoned me on May 24, 1937 to appear the following morning for a “report on my trips abroad”. After four hours of questioning, I was ordered to leave Germany within three weeks. It was an enforced emigration so as to avoid the concentration camp. (Salomon, personal communication, June 16, 1937)

After a moment of shock, she realized how precarious her situation was. She wrote:

It seems pretty short notice to say goodbye to lifelong friends whom I shall never see again; nor to find a refuge; nor to go over the papers accumulated by a scholar and author and teacher during forty years, to decide what would best serve me in my profession in new and alien surroundings; nor to liquidate funds that have been entrusted to me. (Salomon, 2004, p. 224)

Because of threats of persecution and arrest, it was difficult for her to share final farewells with her friends and colleagues. She wrote: “To have been marked by the Gestapo provides an insight into human nature beyond anything psychologists can teach. It is a supreme test of friendship, loyalty, and courage, for any communication with a marked individual may endanger the others” (Salomon, 2004, p. 112).

On June 12, 1937, alone, without money, and with an expiring passport, Alice Salomon left Germany and traveled to England. With the support and encouragement of her English and Scottish friends, she waited for a visa to America. On October 14, 1937, she arrived in New York as a refugee.

Her final years in the United States were difficult and painful. Although she was able to live in relative comfort in New York, she suffered from melancholy and increased isolation. In 1939 the Nazi regime attacked her personhood once again by stripping her German citizenship and revoking her honorary doctoral degree. This meant that “until she acquired US citizenship in 1944, she was officially a woman without a country, and technically an enemy alien as well” (Wieler, 1987).

Due to her refugee status, she was unable to secure employment. She tried to publish papers and offered speeches and courses, but with little success (Wieler, 1987). Because of her age and frail health, she struggled to adjust to her new surroundings. She also grieved her lost relationships that included family, friends, and colleagues due to aggressive German nationalism and the enduring hostile politics of the time. Although her life was difficult, she experienced some moments of recognition. Eleanor Roosevelt invited her to the White House, and other famous friends from Germany had not forgotten her. For example, Rudolf Serkin and Adolf Busch played for her at her seventieth birthday. She finished her autobiography, *Character is Destiny*, and negotiated with publishers, but did not see her memories in print.

She died alone on August 29 or 30, 1948, in a small New York apartment. Four or five mourners accompanied her casket and, without ceremony, she was set to rest in Brooklyn's Evergreen Cemetery with a gravestone bearing the inscription: "Alice Salomon 1872–1948" (Kellogg, 1948; Wieler, 1987). Since her lonely death and during the chaotic aftermath of the war, Alice Salomon was almost forgotten; it took years for her to be remembered and known again.

Ten years later in 1958, the first biographical account in Germany about her was written based on two slightly different manuscripts with some of her own handwritten corrections. There were also additions that came from earlier colleagues who also had been forced to leave and found new homes in Australia and in England (Muthesius, 1958). These manuscripts had been lost for some years and are the basis for the first German autobiography, *Charakter ist Schicksal*, that was published in 1983 through the school of social work that she founded (Salomon, 1983). More editions followed a few years later, and the English autobiography she had written 60 years before for her new American guest-land and an international audience was published in 2004 (Salomon, 2004).

Dr. Alice Salomon, in our opinion, is one of the most important social reformers of the twentieth century. Her commitment to social welfare, social justice, and international collaboration for the wellbeing of all persons was undaunted. She wrote: "Everything I had done during my life had one object: to help bring about social order with more justice, more equality of opportunity, and a deeper sense of solidarity and brotherhood" (Salomon, 2004, p. 201). It would be prudent and inspirational to study and reflect on her legacy. Her personal and professional experiences provide critical insights about the development of social conscience along with the ongoing

challenges facing those who strive to cultivate a world community grounded in human rights, empathy, and good will. Throughout her life, Salomon offered hope. At the end of her autobiography Salomon (2004) wrote: “May a sacred fire be ignited in our hearts. This will not be a destructive fire but instead one that projects new light and warmth into the area of social life, kindling additional fires as well” (p. 238).

### **Afterward by Co-Authors**

As a former graduate and instructor from the Alice Salomon Hochschule (ASH) in Berlin, Germany, it has been an honor to write a spotlight on Dr. Alice Salomon for the Council on Social Work Education with Prof. Dr. Joachim Wieler.

In 2012 I returned to the United States and became an associate professor at The College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, MN. I am grateful for my ongoing relationship with the ASH and enjoy interacting with ASH faculty and students.

The sacred fire sparked by Dr. Alice Salomon is evident in the work both colleges are doing to address the significant challenges of our times. Engaged students and faculty members in both countries continue to carry Salomon's vision of the future, a vision of peace and compassion for all persons.

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As a social worker with training, practice, and teaching in Germany and in the United States my research on Alice Salomon lead to an oral history project with a good many social work refugees from Nazi-occupied countries who still knew Alice Salomon. Some of them hosted students of our German schools of social work in their homes and in their social institutions for field work. Others have come to visit us in Germany, and we are still building transatlantic bridges that Alice Salomon would definitely approve of—according to the wisdom that “social work is not only an academic exercise but that all real life is encounter.”

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### **Additional Archives and Media Resources**

Alice Salomon Archive in Berlin: <http://www.alice-salomon-archiv.de/>. This archive is in the Pestalozzi-Froebel-Complex, Schöneberg, Berlin, Germany.

Alice Salomon: Ciclo de Coloquios Trabajo Social 2016. Pioneras y precursoras: memorias e igualdad. Conferencia Alice Salomon. Zaragoza 2016:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2\\_wVCZaHiM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2_wVCZaHiM)

Archive collection at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York:

[http://digital.cjh.org/view/action/singleViewer.do?dvs=1540492333180~934&locale=en\\_US](http://digital.cjh.org/view/action/singleViewer.do?dvs=1540492333180~934&locale=en_US)

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Jewish Women's Archive: <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/salomon-alice>

Social Welfare History Archives at the University of Minnesota (Minneapolis) is an important source on Alice Salomon (particularly on the background of the International Association of Schools of Social Work.

Sophia Smith Collection, Women's History Archives, Smith College Archive in Northampton, MA, particularly on the International Council of Women (ICW) and Salomon's long involvement with the ICW.