

**Alon Confino. Stephen Clingman.**

**Institute for Holocaust, Genocide and Memory Studies, University of Massachusetts, 20 September 2023.**

Alon Confino was one of those people who have affected me deeply, profoundly. If we are fortunate, we all have a few of these individuals: those we learn from not only through what they say and do but also how they *are*—how they go about being in the world. Alon was such a person for me.

I think I first saw him at an event on campus when I heard him speak and thought, I'd like to get to know him. There was a clarity about him, a kind of upbeatness even as he discussed serious issues; or maybe it was his trademark red shoes I think he was wearing that day. I introduced myself. I don't know that he was terribly impressed, but soon he invited me to the institute for lunch. We sat and talked: he from his direction, I from mine. We found we had much to say.

I want to stress here: I am not in Alon's scholarly fields, he wasn't in mine. I have never written on the Holocaust, German history, Israel-Palestine, the complications of Zionism. Yes, we were both Jewish, but he was from Israel, I from South Africa, our life experiences so different. Yet that was the point. It was precisely *because* of the differences as much as the crossovers that we had much to talk about. This was a profound commitment of Alon's: to learn from difference, to engage with it, to subject oneself to it wholly and with full commitment even as one brought one's full self to the encounter. That, at base I believe, was what brought him to engage so deeply with the entanglements of Israel-Palestine. He wanted to face the truth wherever and whatever it was. It was a commitment that was ethical, bodily, part of his spirit. He was *there* in everything he did, and he somehow managed to do it with a buoyant touch, a smile, a sense of irony and humour, and levels of insight and clarity that few have.

So we engaged in things together: he from his perspective, I from mine. Some years ago, when there was a large pro-Palestinian event planned on campus and much tumult and opposition in advance, at Alon's initiation we wrote an open letter together saying the event should go ahead. This is what universities are for, we argued, venues for—to use one of Alon's favourite terms—difficult

conversations. So long as such events are held peacefully and with respect, there are voices in the world that need to be heard. Later, Alon brought me and others such as David Mednicoff onto the planning group that developed the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism. I told him, Alon, this is not my territory, I'm from South Africa. That's why I want you there, he said. As always for Alon, it was voices from outside the encampment that could provide key perspectives, not only those from inside. And so, for more or less a year, across continents on Zoom, we discussed back-and-forth the shape and purpose of the JDA. It was in the end a powerful—if underused—alternative to the IHRA document on antisemitism which has been weaponized in various ways to prevent criticism of Israel. But as important as the JDA was and is, what I also remember is the sheer quality and energy of our discussions. Alon helped lead it like a seminar, one of the best I've ever been in, and he took key executive decisions when necessary; he was capable of that too.

Alon brought me into other things as well—for instance, onto the Institute board. Again, this was not despite my different background but because of it. Just as he widened the frame of what the Institute did, so too he wanted to widen the frame of the perspectives that underpinned it. He took seriously the full range suggested by the *name* of the Institute: holocaust, genocide, and memory studies. South Africa had a history of colonial and apartheid rule, a struggle for freedom, a resolution of seemingly intractable identitarian politics, a vision of liberation that applied to all, not just to some. Could we not learn something by sharing these perspectives rather than narrowing ourselves into an enclave?

All this sounds scholarly and intellectual, and it is. But I want to stress: Alon's effect on me was personal. We took walks together at the Renaissance Centre, with his and Tal's beloved dog Flesha, discussing the campus and the world. We exchanged writing. We watched soccer together at my house—he an Arsenal fan, like me. My wife Moira and I enjoyed a spirited Passover seder at Tal and Alon's, together with all their children; it was reverent, irreverent, spirited, the kind of evening that

leaves you energized and enlivened. I looked forward to years of friendship with Alon, to conversations that would go on and on, someone important to accompany me. After his treatment began in Boston I visited him there; we had lunch outside at a café, and he was himself—more serious perhaps, but still with his spirit intact. After October 7th and Gaza I was desperate to speak with him, to get his views, his perspectives, his guidance, but that was not to be. Towards the end—in what was about the last week of his life—I felt blessed to be able to see him one last time at his house. We sat outside and couldn't speak for long; he wasn't up to it. We discussed the Institute, so close to his heart, and also himself. It was too soon, he said to me, too soon. In such moments one is able to say important things. I told him how much he had meant to me. I told him he would always be in my life.

I believe that is true. It was a friendship of too few years, and I miss him hugely, but Alon will always be in my life. There was something about Alon's clarity, his brightness, his courage, his outlook that I hope will be with me all the way.