

At 99, a journalist recalls a life fighting injustice|



From *Ahead of Time: Ruth Gruber in Alaska in 1941*, where she was sent by the Roosevelt administration to document the territory's suitability for American soldiers to homestead after World War II. Photo courtesy Vitagraph and Reel Inheritance Films

by [Debra Rubin](#)
NJN Bureau Chief/Middlesex

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Ruth Gruber always thought she could do anything she put her mind to, whether it was earning a doctorate at the age of 20 or tackling a journalism career that put her at the forefront of events surrounding World War II and the founding of Israel.

In 1935 she became the first reporter to be allowed into the Soviet Arctic, in 1944 she escorted the first Holocaust refugees to America at the request of U.S. Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, and in postwar Germany she covered the Nuremberg war crimes trials.

Gruber's reporting about the plight of the ship Exodus as it carried European Jewish refugees to Palestine helped coalesce world sympathy for a Jewish homeland.

She has written 19 books detailing her life as a foreign correspondent, her relationships with such leaders as Eleanor Roosevelt and Golda Meir, and the rescue of Ethiopian Jews and others dealing with the founding and early years of Israel.

The 99-year-old Gruber spoke about her often dangerous and daring exploits over a 70-year career following a Nov. 7 showing of *Ahead of Time* at the Regal Cinema in North Brunswick.

The documentary about her life was part of the 11th annual Rutgers New Jersey Jewish Film Festival.

“We all have to look into our souls to find our tools to fight injustice,” she told the sold-out crowd of several hundred who had given her a long standing ovation.

Her own tools were her camera and pen.

Dressed stylishly in a blue pantsuit with a gold broach, manicured nails, and coiffed hair, Gruber was asked the secret to her longevity.

“There’s no secret,” said Gruber. “It can be answered in four easy words: never, never, never retire. Retirement is the beginning of death. Keep your mind active; keep your body active.”

She still answers e-mails, writes, spends time with her grandchildren, and lectures frequently.

Gruber spoke with impressive recall and humor about becoming a confidant of David Ben-Gurion.

Calling Israel’s first prime minister “the most prophetic leader I ever met,” Gruber said Ben-Gurion “promised” her just before he died that there would be peace between Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East, accurately predicting it would begin with Egypt.

A feminist before most had ever heard the word, the Brooklyn native said her father encouraged both his daughters to have careers. She entered New York University at age 15, and developed a “crush” on her German professor, subsequently developing a love of German language and culture.

“It was the most fortunate thing that I took German,” she notes in the movie. It would open up worlds to her. Gruber received a fellowship in 1931 from the Institute of International Education to study in Cologne.

Gruber was placed with a Jewish family, “Mama and Papa Herz,” and their daughter Louisa, two years her senior. Gruber recalled going to a Hitler rally with thousands of Germans shouting “Heil Hitler” and the fuehrer himself shouting, “Death to Jews! Death to America!” She remembers thinking, “These are the words of a madman.”

Gruber said she arranged for a visa for Louisa, who was getting married, but her parents were trapped, although they later escaped to a safe house in Holland. Gruber’s brother, Harry, an officer in the U.S. military, located them and supplied them with food. The Herzes were brought to the United States by the Grubers after the war, settling in New Jersey.

Louisa, with whom Gruber maintained a lifelong friendship, is featured in the movie, which was shot more than two years ago. She died last year.

Gruber, who married at 40 and had two children, said she likes to think she passed her sense of integrity on to her children.

“So many people see injustice in this world and don’t do anything,” said Gruber. “If you see injustice you have to try to make this a better world. I tried to do what I could with a full heart.”

The festival is a program of Rutgers University’s Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, with support from the Karma Foundation.