

# Meet the Dental Volunteers for Israel

EDWARD DOFF | SEPTEMBER 5, 2017, 4:13 PM |

**W**ake up and open wide. I would like to tell you a little about somebody amazing.

I first heard about this lady in 2008 on a dental course organised by the London chapter of Alpha Omega Fraternity, which is the world's oldest international dental organisation. It espouses three precepts – access to oral health and wellness, promoting social justice and Tikun Olam (Repair an Ailing World), which were all subscribed to by Trudi Birger.

This remarkable woman, by a mixture of resourcefulness, courage and ingenuity somehow survived the horrors of Stutthof concentration camp, which had taken the lives of her whole family bar three, and eventually made it to Israel as teenager in 1947 and set out to make a difference. In her memoir, Trudi writes that the one way in which she's not really normal is that she devotes all of her time to volunteer projects.

'The lesson I personally have drawn from the suffering that my family and I have endured is that we must work selflessly to help others.' Trudi says, 'God, I called, if I survive I will do whatever I can to make sure that no children will suffer the way that I have.'

One of her projects was to help poor immigrants, who often had gross social and educational problems. During her work with needy children, she had become aware that looking after their teeth was entirely beyond their means and that they had all the wrong habits. She could also identify with these children, having had teeth knocked out by the Nazis. Neither the Ministry of Health nor the country's health insurance had enough funds to provide dental care, so she decided she would find a way to provide them with state of the art dentistry, free of charge.

In 1980, without any resources, except for her powerful and influential character and assistance from personal friends, she founded the clinic I had heard of at my dental course, DVI – Dental Volunteers for Israel – a not-for-profit organisation, to provide comprehensive dental care and oral health education to impoverished children. She acquired premises in Mevor Chaim, Jerusalem, close to what is now the Hadar Mall in Talpiot, persuaded a French dental supplier to donate an initial twenty tons of equipment for the new clinic, and talked Zim, the Israeli shipping company, into transporting it all for free!

In 2010, I went to visit the clinic and in 2013 went for the first time as a dental volunteer. Since selling my own practice a few years ago, I have been about twice each year and am grateful for the chance literally to keep my hand in, while being able to give something back. It is an opportunity to be free of the more ridiculous rules and regulations of the NHS, and practice dentistry as I was taught. DVI put me in touch with an unrelated organisation named Skilled



Volunteers for Israel to help find a placement for my wife during the times I was at the clinic. As she was working in a high pressure commercial role within the IT Services industry, they naturally came up with a position at Melabev, a memory club for Seniors with dementia! Outside her normal comfort zone but interesting and rewarding work which she has kept up almost every time I have worked at DVI.

The founding principle of DVI, which is unique in Israel, is that treatment is provided to Jerusalem's most needy families regardless of their religious or ethnic origin and is totally free. DVI's remit has recently expanded to work with Atnachta, a not-for-profit shelter for the homeless, and the clinic has started to accept referrals from the Jerusalem Municipality's (kidum l'noar) at-risk youth program, extending the age range up to 26. In 2016, DVI completed a renovation project to allow for improved accessibility for wheelchair bound patients.

The clinic is staffed by volunteer dentists, both Jewish and non-Jewish, general dental practitioners and specialists, from all around the world, together with a small permanent professional staff, including Specialists in Dentistry and a Professor from Hadassah School of Dental Medicine. Children and parents participate in a dental hygiene preventive health care programme and they are given a toothbrush and toothpaste, for some their first ever.

DVI has three free-of-charge apartments for the use of the dentists and their families. The clinic starts early and work stops at 1.00 pm (although the staff stay later) when the volunteers become regular tourists, enjoying Jerusalem and seeing the country. I have met dentists from every continent there and they are all made welcome and quickly fall in love with Israel. The nurses are multi-lingual, patient, intuitive and long serving. They provide continuity in spite of the dentist changing so often and the patients recognise them and call the nurses by their first name.

I had hoped that working at the clinic would improve my almost non-existent Ivrit, but I soon found that before I could utter such a sentence as, 'Tell him not to eat while his mouth is numb...', the nurse would have gone, 'Gabble, gabble gabble....' and reply to me, 'Oh, I just told him that!'

Also last year, thanks to sponsorship, DVI expanded its activities to include a Free Denture Project, for needy elderly and Holocaust Survivors in Jerusalem. In 2016 the Municipality found that there are 23,000 Holocaust Survivors living in Jerusalem, 7,000 needy in some way and receiving assistance from Welfare Services. Dental care is expensive to provide and DVI relies entirely on donations to run. Whenever I volunteer, I try to get a UK dental company to provide some free materials for use in the clinic and it all gets packed in among the sandals and T-shirts, to the delight of the EI AI check-in staff!

The clinic works to high standards using state of the art materials and equipment, whenever possible secured by donation from dental suppliers throughout the world. When DVI's X-Ray machine broke down after thirty years of service in early June 2017, Alpha Omega London jumped in to replace it at their expense. Michelle Levine, DVI's International Relations & Development Director (chief fund raiser, to you and me) would want me to point out that 'DVI needs and has received support from philanthropically minded Brits all over the UK via **myisrael @ <http://www.myisraelcharity.org/project/view/110>**'. So if you feel like helping an amazing worthy cause...

In 1981 Trudi received the President's Award for Volunteerism, in 1991 she was named a Worthy of Jerusalem and in 2000 she was made an Honorary Member of the Alpha Omega International Dental Fraternity.

Trudi Birger died on 18 July 2002 on her 75th birthday. DVI's Board of Directors including her sons Doron, Oded and Gili Birger, is fully committed to her vision and continues the clinic's work.

And in honour of Trudi's memory and to acknowledge her many achievements, the DVI clinic has been renamed 'The Trudi Birger Dental Clinic.'

I was there in June and plan to return at least once more before the end of the year. People seem to find it amusing that the only time I go to work is when I'm on holiday! There is always a little staff party on the last working day of the week (Thursday) for the volunteers when they hand out certificates and DVI badges. They thank the volunteers for coming – but it really should be the other way around!

- ***There is a special link for those who would like to give to DVI at the High Holy Days***  
***<https://m.giveback.co.il/?id=1044#/main> EN at the top is the option for English language.***
- ***This is a link to a new video about the Free Dentures Project***  
***<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzKJMqPqeaw&feature=youtu.be>***