

Justine Wise Polier, Champion of Children's Rights (1903-1987)

Outspoken and compassionate, Justine Wise Polier was a visionary family court judge who dedicated her life to improving the lives of disadvantaged children and fighting social injustice, both inside the courtroom and beyond. That work included serving as a founder and vice president of Citizens' Committee for Children of New York.

Born in Portland, Oregon, Polier attended Yale Law School and was appointed justice of New York City's Domestic Relations Court in 1935, becoming the first woman in New York State to hold that judicial rank. During her 38 years on the bench, she pioneered an approach to juvenile justice that emphasized prevention and rehabilitation and popularized the notion of "best interest of the child." Polier was known as a "fighting judge" and a "voice of conscience" for speaking out on controversial issues—an activist spirit instilled by her parents, prominent Rabbi Stephen S. Wise and Louise Waterman Wise, an advocate for children.



Polier's quest for fairness drove her, after college (at Bryn Mawr, Radcliffe, and Barnard), to work undercover in textile mills of New Jersey to witness the deplorable labor conditions. As a judge, she took a leading role in opposing racial and religious discrimination in education, adoption, and other systems. She worked to broaden mental health and other services for troubled children, including co-founding the Wiltwyck School for delinquent boys in the mid-1930s. During World War II, Polier collaborated with close friend Eleanor Roosevelt and others to try rescuing 20,000 German refugee children from Hitler's terror, going up against fierce anti-Semitism and anti-refugee sentiment in the United States.

After retiring from the court in 1973, Polier continued advocating for children's rights, for example traveling across the country to monitor juvenile detention policies for the Children's Defense Fund, one of many organizations she served during her life. Devoted to Israel and the Jewish people, Polier expressed her faith through work, not observance, and was long active in the American Jewish Congress—including as president of its Women's Division. She wrote prolifically, and her last book, *Juvenile Justice in Double Jeopardy*, was published shortly after her death in New York at age 84.

Polier, who married twice (Lee Tulin and Shad Polier) and raised three children (Stephen, Trudy, and Jon), relished spending time at the family's home on Lake Placid in upstate New York, where she painted and carved driftwood pulled from the waters. The title of this play, "The Grain of the Wood," reflects her ability to see beauty in people who are often neglected and disdained by society, as she did with the gnarled driftwood she saw as works of art.