

## **HENRIETTA SZOLD, 1860-1945**

### **Zionist Leader**

**ELAINE G. BRESLAW**

Henrietta Szold, according to Francis Beirne, is "the best-known Jew of Baltimore birth throughout the world at large." Although her major contributions to Jewish life as a Zionist were made after she left Maryland, she had her roots in Baltimore City and began her first public activities in Maryland. The oldest of eight daughters born to Rabbi Benjamin Szold and Sophie Schaar Szold, Henrietta received the education and religious training traditionally accorded only Jewish sons. Although denied college education because of her sex, that early and unusual scholarly training provided the necessary intellectual discipline to sustain her work as writer, scholar, teacher, administrator and humanitarian.

At the time of Henrietta's birth, December 24, 1860, the Szold family lived on Eutaw Street, her father serving as Rabbi of the (Reformed) Oheb Shalom Temple on Hanover Street. Both parents were born in the Austrian empire and had come to the United States as a young married couple at the invitation of the recently established Oheb Shalom Congregation. They began life in the New World not as refugees, which was more typical of Jewish immigrants, but as respected and respectable members of Baltimore's German-Jewish community.

Henrietta graduated from Western High School in 1877, first in her class with an average of 99, the only Jewish girl in that public school. She was invited to teach there in 1878 as a temporary substitute, and subsequently found a regular job in Misses Adams's School for Girls teaching everything from algebra and geometry to German, French literature, botany and physiology. At the same time, she taught German and German literature at Oldfields, a boarding school for girls 20 miles from her home. During those

early years she also taught children at the Temple's religious school and conducted Biblical history classes for adults on weekends.

The rigorous scholarly training and the facility with the pen acquired under her father's aegis were put to many uses. Even though she maintained a heavy teaching schedule, Henrietta also acted as a scholarly assistant to her father who, soon after settling in Baltimore, began to develop a distinguished reputation as a Hebrew scholar. Proficient in English as well as in her father's native German, each week she summarized the Rabbi's sermons, which were delivered in German, and prepared an English language synopsis for the press. By the time she was seventeen, she had written a series of articles on Jewish life for the *Jewish Messenger* and, still in her early twenties, had begun to contribute to *Harper's*, *The Critic* and the *Nation*, popular magazines of her day. In 1883 she prepared a description of the new experiment in education at Johns Hopkins University for *Education* magazine. She concluded her account with the suggestion that women might also benefit from graduate education. The article was widely reprinted in newspapers from Baltimore to San Francisco. Her scholarly ability received recognition from the Smithsonian Institution when, in 1887, it approved publication of her translation of a biography of Heinrich Fleischer, a German Orientalist. The *Ladies Home Journal* took note of Henrietta's talents in 1892, and the following year she was invited to deliver a paper on Jewish women in Chicago at the Women's Parliament of the World's Congress of Religions held at the World's Fair.

Somehow, Miss Szold managed to find time for her interest in science and became an active member of the Botany Club of Baltimore, delivering papers as well as organizing meetings. Contributions to the Women's Literary Club of Baltimore guaranteed her reputation as essayist and speaker, and she began to receive invitations to speak to groups in other cities, concentrating on Jewish themes in those talks. Alexandra Levin, biographer of the Szold family, suggests that Henrietta "was a connecting link between Baltimore's Jewish and non-Jewish communities at a time when social intercourse was practically nonexistent."

Before attaining that unusual reputation in the non-Jewish world, Henrietta Szold was busy making her first significant contribution to Jewish life. The 1880's were years of heavy immigration from eastern and southern Europe. Many of those fleeing Europe were Jews driven by the repressive anti-Semitic policies of the Russian Czars. Most of the émigrés lacked the skills necessary for urban life or citizenship in a democratic society and thus were despised by the older, more substantial, Americanized Jewish community of German background who viewed these immigrants as a threat to their newly acquired social status. Henrietta Szold, however, saw the ignorance and poverty as facades that could be stripped away with a good dose of education. She argued that when these immigrants learned to speak and read English, their true social worth would become evident.

Calling on the recently organized Isaac Bar Levison Hebrew Literary So-

ciety to take on the task of sponsoring a pioneer program to teach English to the immigrants, Henrietta initiated the first evening adult classes in Baltimore. At the time there were no programs geared to immigrants in the public schools, even in the day schools. Henrietta Szold's perspicacious idea to provide education for foreign-born adults became the germ of the adult education program in the Baltimore public schools and later was to be copied by other cities.

Guided by Miss Szold, the Hebrew Literary Society rented a room on Gay Street near Front, cleaned it and outfitted it with necessary implements: benches, slates, chalk and a few books. On opening night in November of 1889, thirty people appeared; the next night so many arrived that a second class had to be formed, and then a third. Whole families attended together, although only children, unable to be in the public schools during the day because they worked in factories, were permitted to attend. Within a few months an entire building, 132 Front Street, was utilized to satisfy the demand for more classes. Within ten years more than 5,000 immigrants had become "Americanized" in that school, some of whom were not Jewish. Miss Szold reported that occasionally American citizens of English stock took advantage of the after-work educational facilities. It was the success of that school that convinced Baltimore City to open night schools in 1907. What began as an attempt to vindicate her fellow Jews, to satisfy their intellectual needs and make them useful citizens, became one of the most important means of integrating white ethnics into the mainstream of American society—the Americanization class.

In 1893 Henrietta Szold shifted her major interest from teaching and expanding educational opportunities for Jews to more scholarly literary work when she became the editor for the Jewish Publication Society. She moved to Philadelphia that year never again to live in Baltimore, although she returned many times to deliver lectures or visit her family. Then for twenty-two years she concentrated on the arduous duties of translator, proof-reader, and editor, revising manuscripts for publication, compiling statistics for the unique *Jewish Yearbook* and taking part in the writing of the monumental twelve-volume *Jewish Encyclopedia*. Her sixteen contributions to the *Encyclopedia* included short biographies of prominent Jewish women, an article on the Cohn family of Baltimore, and an account of the Jewish Publication Society of America.

By 1909 the incessant work had begun to take its toll of her health. Because she had become very nervous and suffered eye strain, the Board of Trustees of the Jewish Publication Society granted her a six-month leave of absence. Her father, meanwhile, had died and her mother had moved with Henrietta to New York. The two women decided on a tour of Europe and Palestine for rest and intellectual stimulus. The visit to Palestine was the high point of the trip and an experience that changed the direction of her activities.

At the time of that first visit to Palestine, Henrietta Szold was already a

Zionist, a philosophical movement started in the late nineteenth century by dissatisfied Eastern European Jews to justify the creation of a Jewish state in the Biblical homeland then called Palestine. When she first became interested in Zionism is not known. Such leanings would have run counter to the trend of Baltimore's German Jewish population and many of her own family. She might have caught that ideological infection from the argumentative and intellectually stimulating Russian Jews who attended her night classes. Her close contact with them would have introduced her to the current Zionist and anti-Zionist arguments that often raged between the German Jews who advocated assimilation and the East Europeans who, with more recent memories of suffering persecution at the hands of their Christian neighbors, pinned their hopes on a separate state. In 1893, she had joined Hebros Zion of Baltimore, the first Zionist organization in America. A public statement of that commitment came in a prepared speech delivered in Baltimore in 1902 in which she analyzed the religious, philanthropical and political ramifications of Zionism.

Her Zionism was reinforced by an early preoccupation with the idea of a Jewish return to the land. In the 1890's she had visited the Woodbine colony of Russian Jewish farmers in the northern part of Cape May County, New Jersey, and was impressed by the adaptation to the new but yet ancestral occupation of farming. Aided by her knowledge of botany, she could appreciate their attempts at scientific agriculture. This same scientific interest was a factor in her concentrating a good part of her visit to Palestine on colonies established by small groups of dedicated, idealistic Jews who had emigrated from Poland and Russia to Palestine motivated by the structures of Zionist belief. The differences between their agricultural techniques and those of the less productive farmers supported her hopes for a Jewish return to the land.

The 1909 trip also shifted her focus to the practical problems of creating a Jewish society in the Middle East. She may have been impressed by the vigor of Jewish farmers, but she was also appalled by the health conditions in the Palestinian cities. On her return she joined with a small group of New York women concerned, like herself, with Zionist ideas, and made them aware of the health problems in the urban areas. The group called itself the Daughters of Zion, Hadassah chapter, but with only one chapter in existence they dropped the first part of the name, calling the organization Hadassah, and taking as their motto the injunction from Jeremiah (8:22), "The Healing of the Daughter of my People." Their first successful project was to send two nurses to Jerusalem.

By 1915, Miss Szold's Zionist activities had begun to absorb most of her time, and she was forced to resign from her position with the Jewish Publication Society. As Secretary of the Federation of American Zionists, Secretary of the Jewish Experiment Station near Haifa, Palestine, and President of Hadassah, her energies were directed toward urging women to organize

Hadassah chapters and convincing them of the need for Palestine health work. She traveled throughout the country lecturing and organizing.

Following World War I, she began to work directly with the Palestinian Jews, supervising Hadassah medical units in the field, furnishing each camp of immigrants with medical personnel and supplies, establishing a school hygiene program and founding a Nurses' Training School. At the same time she continued to coordinate Zionist activities in America, shuttling back and forth across the ocean as needs dictated. She was finally induced to concentrate all her energies on the problem of health and education in Palestine. In 1926 she resigned her top positions in the United States and subsequently became a member of the Palestine Zionist Executive. In 1931 Miss Szold was appointed to the Executive Committee of the National Assembly, a position tantamount to that of a Cabinet member.

Hitler's plans to exterminate the Jews of Europe led to increased activity. She conceived of the idea of transporting German Jewish youth to Palestine and settling them in rural communities where they could be trained in farming. From 1935-1943 she was the Director of the Department of Youth Immigration. In her seventies Miss Szold personally met each group of Youth Aliyah children, as the young immigrants were called, as they arrived at the Haifa dock. This activity was reminiscent of the days when she and her father had greeted the Russian Jewish refugees in Baltimore a half-century earlier. In both cases her object was to provide friendly assistance to her oppressed co-religionists, fostering one of the highest expressions of Jewish spiritual life, a commitment to communal philanthropy. By the time of her death in 1945, Miss Szold was credited with saving the lives of 13,000 Jewish children from extermination. She spent the war years in Palestine continuing her work and died in Jerusalem in February 1945 in the medical center she had established on Mount Scopus. She is buried in the Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives, an honored and honorable woman in Israel.

Miss Szold's enormous contribution to Jewish survival has received only minimal recognition in her native country. In 1930 the Jewish Institute of Religion, a rabbinical seminary, awarded her a Doctor of Hebrew Letters degree, the first woman to be so honored. The year before her death, in 1944, Boston University conferred on her the honorary degree of Doctor of Humanities in absentia. She listened to the citation in Jerusalem on a special international radio hookup. To celebrate the centennial of her birth in 1960, the Israeli government sponsored a committee to organize a series of events in her honor. Golda Meir, the Foreign Minister at the time, was appointed to head the committee. In the United States, Eleanor Roosevelt traveled to Baltimore to be the guest speaker for that city's part of the celebration. The State of Israel honored Henrietta Szold further March of 1975 by putting her picture on the new five-pound note, the first American and the first woman portrayed on Israeli money. A Baltimore *Sun* editorial of February 6, 1975 characterized her as exhibiting a "lifetime of selfless devotion to humanistic Judaic principles."

*BriefBibliography*

There are several biographies of Miss Szold: Irving Fineman, *Woman of Valor* (1961); Rose Zeitlin, *Henrietta Szold: A Record of a Life* (1952); and Alexandra Lee Levin, *The Szolds of Lombard Street, a Baltimore Family, 1859-1909* (1960) which deals only with her early life in Maryland. Her own autobiography, *Dare to be Different* (1972), is important as a source for her life. Also of interest are the articles by Mrs. Levin: "Henrietta Szold as Essayist," *Jewish Heritage* (Winter 1961-62); "Henrietta Szold and the Jewish Publication Society," *The JPS Bookmark*, 8 (June, 1961); "Henrietta Szold and the Russian Immigrant School," *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 57 (March, 1962); an article by Kathleen McLaughlin, "Grand Old Lady of Palestine," *New York Times Magazine*, December 15, 1940; and the selection in *Notable American Women*, written by Arthur Hertzberg. Some other papers have been published in Marvin Lowenthal, *Henrietta Szold: Life and Letters* (1942), but most of them are scattered in various institutions: Hadasah headquarters in New York City, the Zionist Archives in Jerusalem. Her personal correspondence is in the hands of the family.

Edited by WINIFRED G. HELMES, Ph.D.

# Notable Maryland Women



Published in conjunction with the  
Maryland Bicentennial Commission

TIDEWATER PUBLISHERS/Cambridge, Maryland  
1977