

Hadassah Preludes

Like many figures in history, Henrietta Szold is best remembered for the last phase of her life: She was 52 when she founded Hadassah in 1912. Biographers have written about the full sweep of her well-documented life, but a seminar held April 1 at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York took a new look at Henrietta Szold, viewing the earlier phases of her adult life as the foundations of her later career.

Three scholars delivered papers at the symposium moderated by Jack Wertheimer, professor of Jewish history at the Seminary. Jonathan D. Sarna, professor of Jewish history at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, focused on Szold's years at the Jewish Publication Society. Baila R. Shargel, assistant to the dean of the Seminary graduate school, demonstrated that there were hints of Szold's agenda for the future in her 1907 correspondence with Professor Louis Ginzberg. Mel Scult, professor of Jewish thought at Brooklyn College, focused on Szold's years at the Seminary and argued that she was in essence the first woman rabbi. Following are excerpts from their papers.

After the presentations by the scholars Ruth Cole, Hadassah's national Jewish education chairman, moderated a panel of past Hadassah presidents, each of whom offered a perspective on Henrietta Szold.

Bernice Tannenbaum spoke of Szold's Zionist political activism, noting that it began at a time when Zionism had by no means taken hold in the American Jewish community. "When she saw the mountains and valleys of Palestine," Tannenbaum observed, "she felt she had seen with her own eyes the validity and promise of the dreamers of Zion."

Charlotte Jacobson focused on Henrietta Szold's famous organizational skills, noting that she founded medical institutions and social-welfare programs without benefit of the kind of professional training one would think necessary today. "Where did she get this gift for organization?" Jacobson asked. "Apparently she was born with this inestimable talent."

Miriam Freund-Rosenthal spoke of Henrietta Szold's leadership of Youth Aliyah. Though she never married or

had children of her own, Freund-Rosenthal noted that Henrietta Szold "became a mother to uncounted children at the age of 73."

THE EDITOR

By Jonathan D. Sarna

Henrietta Szold was born in 1860, the eldest daughter of the respected Baltimore rabbi and scholar Benjamin Szold. He had wanted a son, but since Henrietta was brilliant from a young age, he raised her as a disciple. She absorbed it all—German, French, Hebrew, Judaica, the classics, botany and much more. The only Jew at Western Female High School, she graduated at the top of her class. By 18 she was teaching at the Misses Adams's English and French Schools for Girls; a year later she was writing columns in the *Jewish Messenger* under the name Sulamith.

During this period she taught, she studied, she wrote. She sat at her father's hand for hours on end assisting him with his scholarly study of the *Book of Job*. She played an active role in the Botany Club and Women's Literary Club and she participated energetically in efforts to aid Russian Jewish immigrants. When the Jewish Publication Society was being formed in 1888 she was engaged in organizing a night school for teaching Russian immigrants English—an enormously successful undertaking that was widely emulated.

The founders of the JPS turned to Szold almost at once. Most knew her personally and the rest knew her through her writings; she was already one of the leading young Jewish essayists in America. It was quite appropriate that she was appointed that year to the Society's Publication

Committee. She was the only woman on the Committee.

The work Szold did for the Society during its first years—writing, editing and proofreading—was as a volunteer. She and everybody else associated with the Society did what they did to educate and uplift American Jewry to prepare it for the great tasks they believed—correctly as it turned out—lay just ahead.

Her status there changed in 1893. The Society had accumulated some money and decided to hire a full-time assistant. Szold was the obvious candidate for she had already proven herself. But she was ambivalent about taking on the job. For a woman to be a wage earner in late-nineteenth-century America, especially away from home, was a mixed blessing. It implied independence and offered the prestige that accompanies work well done, but it carried with it bleak overtones of needing a job because one could not depend on a husband. In Szold's case, the decision was especially hard because she was close to her parents and had many ties in Baltimore. But the family needed money and her sisters and friends encouraged her not to let this opportunity pass. So she resigned from her school, said good-bye to her friends and prepared to take up her new life in Philadelphia.

The job she had committed herself to was not an easy one. According to the job description, she was supposed to "prepare manuscripts for the press, see them through the press, work over manuscripts, prepare circulars, keep the Society before the public in the papers and otherwise, and do such a reasonable amount of translation from time to time as the Publication Committee may direct." The compensation offered for all this labor was a paltry \$1,000. It is clear from the archives that the Society would actually have gone as high as \$1,200 had Szold bargained, but of course a dignified woman in her position didn't do such things.

Her boss was Mayer Sulzberger; he was once described as the "most eminent Jew in America." Today he is probably the most unjustly neglected of the great figures who shaped American Jewish life. For years the leading Jew in Philadelphia, he was a brilliant lawyer and served for 20 years as a judge on the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas. He owned what was possibly the most impressive private collection of Jewish books and manuscripts in America, now housed in the Jewish Theological Seminary.

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Unfortunately for Szold, Sulzberger was a difficult man to work for. But the position at the Society soon settled into its own routine. There were days when Szold was positively ebullient about what she called her "very ladylike [and] gentle" kind of work; there were days when she would rather have done anything but work. There were even days when she came close to resigning: "The book is not out yet," she wrote to her parents, "and I am afraid it may be delayed another 10 days. I am receiving blame right and left for it. . . . I was on the point of giving up the whole job on Sunday, but I feel better about it now on mature reflection."

No matter how Szold felt, she still found it "a very unpleasant sensation" to be working for her living. She missed her parents in Baltimore, even though she wrote to them

Painting: Rachel Maurer/Photograph: Liora Codor



Prime time: Henrietta Szold is best remembered for the last phase of her life—she was 52 when she founded Hadassah

almost daily and visited them almost weekly. And she found herself working increasingly hard, even long into the night. As she admitted in one letter home, "I never trust anybody's accuracy and I am tortured by doubts every other line." At the same time she took tremendous satisfaction in her achievements. When her translations and indexes won high marks from critics or even when she received an appreciative letter from an author thanking her for her "conscientious work" she felt rewarded.

She felt even more rewarded, and rightly so, in 1898 when she was feted at the Society's tenth anniversary celebration. Morris Newburger, then the Society's president, called her "a secretary whom the good Lord himself seems to have provided."

What were some of Henrietta Szold's achievements? She is probably best known for her work on Heinrich Graetz's *History of the Jews*, one of the great achievements of

nineteenth-century German-Jewish scholarship and the first really great book the Society published. Contrary to popular belief she did not translate Graetz into English; the Society merely purchased the rights to a British translation. But she did improve it enormously. Thanks largely to Szold, the Society's edition was much more readable—

Henrietta Szold's best-known achievement at the Jewish Publication Society is probably her work on Heinrich Graetz's 'History of the Jews.'

its subsequent popularity due in no small measure to its readability—and for this she deserves considerable credit. Second and even more important, she composed a masterful 492-page index—the famous sixth volume of Graetz. It made the entire work much more useful, in some respects the most useful of the many editions of Graetz, and a path-breaking achievement.

Szold did translate 10 books for the Society, some from German, some from French. Among them were works of immense cultural significance: Moritz Lazarus's *The Ethics of Judaism*; Simon Dubnov's influential philosophical essay on Jewish history; Nahum Slouchz's *The Renaissance of Hebrew Literature*, a thinly veiled brief for Zionism that sold over 15,000 copies; and, of course, the first two volumes of Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*.

Another area where Szold made an important impact was in the *American Jewish Year Book*, that great compendium of news, information and statistics that began appearing under the Society's auspices in 1899, and that it still publishes annually. The *Year Book* symbolized the kind of diversity within unity that the Society stood for, and it lent support to the more positive image of American Jewry that the Society was trying to fashion. The idea of a year-book was not new—there had been Jewish yearbooks in America for almost half a century. It was closely modeled on the 1896 *Jewish Year Book* of England initiated by Joseph Jacobs, but thanks to the diligence of Szold and Cyrus Adler the *American Jewish Year Book* became the leading reference book of its type. It included far more information than any other Jewish yearbook ever published.

For Szold the *Year Book* was a mixed blessing. On one hand it gave her a forum: In 1900 she wrote a brilliant narrative summary of the year's Jewish events; in 1916, her book-length study "Recent Jewish Progress in Palestine." On the other hand, compiling all the data proved to be an overwhelming burden, especially once she became coeditor in 1904 and full editor in 1906. Her letters are filled with complaints about the "crazy orgy of work" and the "hated drudgery" involved in the annual labor.

Szold's fourth contribution to the Society and to American Jewish culture generally was the support she gave aspiring authors and her effort to cultivate different kinds of Jewish literature. Writers throughout the world submitted manuscripts and she sent back comments—sometimes

about their literary style, sometimes about their scholarship. Of the 60-odd books published during her years at the Society it can safely be said that she improved every one of them—usually anonymously, and I am afraid she did not always receive appropriate thanks.

One could perhaps sum up Henrietta Szold's 22 years at the Society in two virtues: hard work and high standards. At the Society's twenty-fifth anniversary celebration in 1913 her contribution was set forth at somewhat greater length. A contemporary newspaper wrote: "A noticeable feature [of authors' night] was the unanimity with which scholars whose books have been published by the Society paid tribute to Miss Henrietta Szold for the assistance she had rendered them in preparing their works for publication. . . . Many another author or would-be author owes much to her kindly and wholehearted helpfulness—some, indeed, who do not realize their debt to her, so freely has the service been rendered and so modestly. . . . America has produced no other Jewish woman who has meant so much to Jewish scholarship." ■

Early promise: The young Henrietta clearly showed signs of incipient greatness

