GOLDA MEIR (1898–1978)

The story of Golda Meir’s journey to America begins like many other immigrants’ tales: The tribulations of poverty and the dread of pogroms drove the Mabovitch family to try their luck in a new land. In 1906, at the age of eight, Golda and her family left Russia to join her father in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. 63 years later, she became the Prime Minister of Israel.

Golda’s journey to Milwaukee was quite perilous. She left Russia with her mother and two sisters with false papers. They took a train from Pinsk, in Russia across the border to Poland, stopping briefly because their escort was nervous about their illegal documents. They then took another train to Vienna, Austria, and then to Antwerp, Belgium. From there, they boarded a boat. She describes the journey: “It was not a pleasure trip, that fourteen day journey aboard the ship. Crammed into a dark, stuffy cabin with four other people, we spent the nights on sheetless bunks and most of the days standing in line for food that was ladled out to us as though we were cattle. Mother, Sheyna and Zipke were seasick most of the time, but I felt well and can remember staring at the sea for hours, wondering what Milwaukee would be like”

Golda developed a passion for school. She attended the Fourth Street Grade School (now named after her). While there she organized other immigrant girls like herself to raise money to buy textbooks for students who could not afford them. The Milwaukee Sentinel wrote an article about this work, marking the first time she was featured in the newspaper. She entered North Division High School at age 14, despite a conflict with her parents. It was Golda’s dream to become a teacher; her mother urged her to find a husband. Bold and adventurous, Golda ran off to Denver, Colorado, to live with her married sister, Sheyna Korngold. There, she was exposed to Zionism. The ardent belief in creating a Jewish homeland in the historic land of Israel would shape Golda’s life.

Golda returned to North Division High School, joining “Poale Zion” (Workers of Zion). She fulfilled both her and her mother’s dreams: She worked for the library and taught Yiddish briefly, and married Morris Myerson in 1917. Zionism drove Golda’s passions, and she and her husband immigrated to Palestine in 1921. Golda’s political acumen won her various positions in helping develop Israel; she signed the Declaration of Independence in 1948. She became the fourth Prime Minister of Israel in 1969. The Yom Kippur War in 1973 resulted in devastating casualties for Israel and prompted Golda to resign her post in 1974.

Golda Meir’s legacy did not perish with her death in 1978. She is known for her devotion to and passion for her country and her tough yet motherly persona. She remains one of the foremost female leaders of the 20th century.

WHAT’S IN A NAME? FROM MABOVITCH TO MEYERSON TO MEIR
Golda’s maiden name of Mabovitch was spelled differently in different records. In the ship manifest for her family, the name is listed as Mabowehz, but in her autobiography, Golda spells it Mabovitch. According to one story, a sign painter wrote it this way on her mother’s grocery store and that is how the family spelled it. Golda changed her name to Meyerson once she got married. In the 1950s, she changed her name again to Meir, which mean “to illuminate” in Hebrew, to make herself sound more Israeli.

1 Meir, My Life 29.
“OUR GOLDA”

Golda Meir captures a special place in the Milwaukee consciousness. Her accomplishments in Israel drew widespread pride and applause among the Jewish community. Given her hometown roots, some members of the Jewish community right here in Milwaukee had the chance to meet and know her. Read their impressions of “our Golda”:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1) What causes do you feel strongly about? What do you think you could do to make a difference?
2) Think about the descriptions and accomplishments of Golda Meir: If you had the chance, what questions would you want to ask her? Why?

ACTIVITIES

Golda was famous for speaking from the heart—she almost never used notes. Most of us need help when speaking in public. Create a two minute speech about something that you are passionate about. Share your speeches in class.

VOCABULARY AND GLOSSARY

Acumen (noun): ability to make good judgments; insight.

Ardent (adjective): passionate, enthusiastic.

Tribulations (noun, pl.): great hardships.

Yom Kippur War (1973): The war began when Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack on Israel on this most holy of days. The conflict proved to be a military stalemate and resulted in the death of many Israeli soldiers.

Zionism: a political movement begun in the 1880s advocating the return of the Jews to the national homeland of Israel.

RESOURCES

Books

Golda Meir’s account of her life, covering her early childhood, her first experiences in America, her Zionist practices, her roles as wife and mother, and her political activities in Israel.

Web Sites

An account of Golda Meir’s life, from her early childhood to her experience as Prime Minister of Israel, examining her role as a leader and a woman.

Film

This play shows Golda in Milwaukee, in counterpoint to an African American girl in 1968. At the end there is a feature about Golda’s biography. You can find the play here: http://www.mptv.org/video/watch/review.php?id=1772