



Henrietta Szold

By

Dale Jones
Making History Connections
August 22, 2016

For The Jewish Museum of Maryland

Characters

Henrietta Szold in her 70s

At several points in the script, actress plays the part of Sophie Szold and provides voices for miscellaneous characters: her father, her Mama, a Russian immigrant, the professor she loved, women at first Hadassah meeting

The action takes place on a stage with a table, two chairs, a lampstand. The table has folders, papers on it. Also a mirror, a plant, photos of her parents, perhaps family.

Throughout the play, small signs indicating time and place are placed on a tripod to assist audience in keeping straight time and place.

The table is set stage center right at an angle, with one chair on each side. The planter is stage left, with plant and a shawl draped over the edge.

SCENE 1: YOUTH ALIYAH and the TOURISTS

HENRIETTA

A single table with two chairs and some files, books, papers, plants on table. It is 1934.

SZOLD ENTERS. MOVES WITH DETERMINATION TOWARD TABLE. GETS SEVERAL STEPS IN, STOPS AND TOSSES A COMMENT OVER HER SHOULDER TO AN UNSEEN PERSON OFFSTAGE.

No, no, no!

I want these German Jewish youth to come here to Palestine as much as, no more, than anyone. But we don't have the organization yet to handle them.

SHE SHAKES HER EXTENDED INDEX FINGER AT HIM

The numbers do not add up! Just because I am 75 years old does not mean I have forgotten how to organize our resources. We just have more applicants now than we are prepared to handle.

SHE MOVES TO TABLE, PUTS HER PAPERS AND FOLDERS DOWN. SHE LOOKS OFFSTAGE AS IF LISTENING.

What? (SHE LISTENS AND REPLIES FIRMLY No. I know what dangers Hitler and the Nazis pose to the Jews, but we cannot make any promises about resettling all the children in Palestine. Not now. Not yet.

SITS AT TABLE. MOVES SOME PAPERS INTO STACKS, READS OVER ONE PAPER, FIDDLES WITH PLANTS

LISTENS AGAIN TO SOMEONE OFF STAGE. What?

PAUSE AS SHE LISTENS. Another visitor? EXASPERATED Will they never stop coming to see me? Who is it this time? SHE LISTENS AGAIN. Hadassah women from the United States? What city? PAUSES TO LISTEN. Boston? I'll be right with them.

SHE TALKS TO HERSELF Now Henrietta, calm down. And remember to be nice to these folks. They have come a long way to see you, just like all the others.

SHE LOOKS IN THE MIRROR ON THE TABLE, STRAIGHTENS HER HAIR AND HER DRESS. There now. I look as good as a 75 year old woman can. SHE TURNS BACK TO MIRROR ONCE MORE. STRAIGHTENS PLANT. Now, remember to be nice.

SHE TURNS, STEPS FORWARD AND SPEAKS TO AUDIENCE, A LITTLE BIT PIQUED AT BEING INTERRUPTED

Good afternoon, I'm Henrietta Szold. What can I do for you? SHE LISTENS Yes, that's right. I did found Hadassah, with the assistance of many other women. SHE SOFTENS AND BECOMES GRACIOUS. I'm so sorry if I was a bit short with you. I've been in just ghastly meetings today, and I was abrupt. But I am so glad you stopped by.

I am curious. Where did you find out about me? SHE LISTENS At the hotel? They recommended that you come here as one of your stops while you're touring Palestine? They use my name as bait when they go fishing for guests. I am considered, it appears, as a good card of recommendation. So the Americans know I shall be on show, and they spot me in the hotel dining room with a little prompting, I fancy, from the waiter.

I am honored that you took the time to visit me here and not at the restaurant.

Who would have ever thought that I – Henrietta Szold – would become a tourist attraction?

SCENE 2: EARLY BALTIMORE

TO AUDIENCE

I suspect you want to hear about my early days and the beginnings of Hadassah. I would be delighted to tell you.

I didn't always live here in Palestine. I once lived in America -- in Baltimore, in Philadelphia, in New York and only dreamed of coming here. Of course, now that I am here in Palestine, I dream of going back to America and seeing my sisters.

Do you know why I dreamed of Palestine those many years ago, when I was much younger?

WITH PRIDE Because I was, and am, a Zionist.

I want to reestablish a homeland for Judaism and Jews here in Palestine. SHE COUNTS THESE OUT ON HER FINGERS A place where Jews can be safe, free from mistreatment, free from banishment, free from death. I want Judaism to be at the core, to be a way of life in this homeland. To make that happen, we need education.

Zionism, Judaism and education-- these are of most significance to me.

SHE SITS, GATHERS HER THOUGHTS, LOOKS IN MIRROR AT TABLE, EXAMINES HER FACE, TURNS TO AUDIENCE.

Do you know, I always thought I was a stepchild because mama had blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and was altogether fresh and fair? I was such a sallow dark little thing. I could not imagine I was her daughter, but now I can see I was, and am, clearly my father's daughter. SHE LOOKS BACK IN MIRROR. Yes, I can see it, but I can also see my mother.

I believe my whole intellectual make-up is my mother's because I am practical, my mind runs to details, and I have a very strong sense of duty. Papa, on the other hand, taught me scholarship, how to think, and perhaps most important, Judaism.

To Papa, Rabbi Benjamin Szold of Oheb Shalom, Judaism was not only a faith or creed but a way of life for all of us on Lombard Street.

On the Sabbath and on holidays we would go to Oheb Shalom and hear Papa speak. SHE PULLS CHAIR OVER AND SITS AS SHE SAYS THIS I would sit with mama and my sisters in the front row of the balcony with the other women and listen to his sermons. I can almost hear him now. SHE LISTENS He could be fiery and eloquent to his congregation but he was such a patient, gentle man otherwise. One of his favorite sermons was about good men and women do noble acts; energetic men and women work and achieve; wise men and wise women think great thoughts

As I got older Papa taught me to help him with his work and to think great thoughts. He raised me to be a Jewish scholar, not something a woman was trained for. He had a brilliant mind ... brilliant. Yet, he spoke to me as an equal and shared his ideas with me. I, in return, was his rabbinical and scholarly assistant. I wrote out his sermons and other writings because his rheumatism and arthritis made it difficult to write.

We always talked about what he had written. And we also had wide-ranging discussions around the dinner table – current affairs as well as theology.

He would often pose questions: **IN PAPA’S VOICE** How scrupulously do we observe the Sabbath in a society that makes Saturday a day of work? What does it mean to be a Jew? What does it mean for a woman to be a Jew? What is our mission, our ultimate destiny as Jews?

The discussions sharpened my mind, sometimes to my detriment. When young men came to the house, they sought me out for discussion, for argument. But not for courtship. That was not to be.

My sisters and other girls played, sang songs with suiters, flirted, and giggled.

I played the piano, and laughed and giggled with my sisters, but with the young men, I argued.

I had ideas, opinions, and I was not going to be quieted. The young men often liked to debate me, since women rarely spoke in that way. But they preferred the songs and giggles of my sisters.

And there was much of that giggling and fun at our house on Lombard Street. We all laughed and joked and sang – our home overflowed with love; I was the oldest daughter and had a fierce protective love for my sisters.

Love and kindness, that’s what I remember.

And the knowledge and advice I received from my father. He said, and I still remember his voice, “You should adopt or take a central idea. Never depart from it, and then relate everything to that idea.”

SHE COUNTS THIS ON HER FINGERS I took three ideas –the value of education, practical Judaism as a way of life, and Zionism.

The education I received from my father, the practical Judaism I got from both my parents– but the Zionism came from reading and from the Russians.

Their appearance in Baltimore opened my eyes in many ways.