

WASHINGTON DATELINE

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Golda Meir Remembered - On Her 85th Birthday

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- "My birthday is not important. Israel's anniversary is what counts, for Israel will live many more years than I will...."

These were Golda Meir's sentiments during an interview prior to her 80th birthday -- five years ago -- and eleven days before Israel's 30th anniversary. She died seven months later.

The remarks were typical of Golda Meir, one of the pioneers who helped turn a dream of Zionism into statehood and then served the nation as prime minister during the most trying days of its history -- the Yom Kippur War of 1973, which brought Israel to the brink of destruction.

A no-nonsense, blunt-speaking woman, she had few illusions about herself. She wasn't afraid to admit her political mistakes. She even said she would never forgive herself for failing to call up Israeli reserves early enough to repulse the surprise attack that touched off the Yom Kippur War.

She cared little for fashion and her idea of a smart frock was a simple black or blue dress. During one of our conversations in Washington, I told her about hair designer Laurae Comeau who offered to come from her salon at the Washington Hilton to Blair House (U.S. Government guest house) to style her hair for a White House State dinner in her honor. "If I thought going to a beauty shop would make me beautiful, maybe I would go," she quipped. "But one has to be realistic."

Mrs. Meir was always realistic -- about her colleagues as well as herself. Most of her life she had worked among men and with men. "I've enjoyed working with men," she told me once, "and I was fortunate in working with men strong enough to accept my opinion if it had merit. If a man's ideas were better than mine, I would accept them. I didn't ask for special treatment because I am a woman. If the majority was against me, I gave in, even if I knew it was a man's idea."

One of the men she dealt with during a crucial period in the Middle East history was Henry Kissinger, former National Security Adviser to President Nixon and former Secretary of State. Dr. Kissinger regards Golda as "an extraordinary woman who led her people with wisdom and courage in their hour of need."

"Her life was testimony not only of the history of an individual but of the destiny of a people," Dr. Kissinger told me. "It was marked by a faith that made idealists of ordinary men and women and drove them to a wasteland to fulfill an historic vision."

"In a world so obsessed with practical problems, Israel is a spiritual necessity, and Golda Meir epitomizes the spirit that created the State of Israel."

No wonder that Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, once said that Golda was America's nicest gift to Israel.

Born Golda Mabovitch on May 3, 1898, in Kiev, Russia, she came, as an 8-year-old, to the U.S. with her family, which settled in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There, her father earned his living as a railroad carpenter and cabinet-maker. Her mother operated a small grocery behind their apartment. Golda helped in the grocery store, and with other household chores. She was valedictorian of her graduating class at 'P.S. One' in Milwaukee, and went to high school where the year book of her graduating class said, "Those about her from her shall read the perfect ways of honor."

At age 23, Golda left the security of the U.S., sailed to Palestine and settled in a kibbutz. "I couldn't reconcile wanting a Jewish state, yet living in Milwaukee," she said. "It wasn't that the U.S. wasn't good to us, but I had that particular streak in me that if you believe in something, you should at least try to accomplish it..."

Eleven days after Golda's 50th birthday, in 1948, Israel was proclaimed a state and she was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. That same year, she was assigned as the country's first ambassador to the Soviet Union. Her arrival in Moscow as the first Israeli envoy to the USSR caused an emotional outburst among ten of thousands of Russian Jews who came to greet her, an incident she said she would never forget. Subsequently, she also served as Israel's Minister of Labor, Secretary General of the Labor Party and Foreign Minister.

At age 71, on March 17, 1969, she succeeded the late Levi Eshkol as Israel's fourth prime minister, the first woman to hold the position. To that job, she brought a strength of character, a power and simplicity of expression and a fundamental dignity that gave her a kind of mother-earth.

She was a ferocious negotiator and a woman of powerful convictions. When she gave her word, it could be counted on; and once she made up her mind to do something, even if it was difficult and painful, she followed through -- with courage and ability.

A fierce opponent in debate, tough-minded and determined in negotiations, Golda Meir was unafraid of the cut and thrust of politics at the highest level. She was also unafraid to cry. She wept openly at the funeral for Israeli vic-

tims of Arab terrorism at the Munich Olympics. Two years later, overwhelmed at a prolonged standing ovation she let tears stream down her face when Yeshiva University awarded her an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters Degree.

"I feel sorry for anyone who is afraid to cry when he feels like it," she said, "because if he can't feel strong enough to cry, then he doesn't feel anything enough to laugh either..."

Golda Meir was Israel's prime minister when Richard Nixon was in the White House. Once, when I asked President Nixon how negotiations were going with Mrs. Meir, he responded: "She makes quite a case for her country. The Milwaukee Braves could use her as a pinch-hitter when they need to win."

And when I asked Golda Meir what the U.S. should do to help settle some of the problems in the Mideast, she told me: "A great country must pay a price for that greatness and carry the kind of responsibility which greatness demands. This is particularly true of America, which sees its obligation to keep the peace by helping freedom-loving countries to protect themselves against aggression."

But from Golda Meir's countless quotes and remarks, my favorite is one she uttered in 1969:"When peace finally comes, we will perhaps in time be able to forgive the Arabs for killing our sons, but it will be harder for us to forgive them for having forced us to kill their sons..."

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