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BODY:

JERUSALEM — Dressed in a prim cotton dress and a wide-brimmed straw hat, **Henrietta Szold** left her native Baltimore in 1909 on a difficult journey to Palestine.

What the 48-year-old unmarried teacher found when she arrived — severe poverty, rampant disease and poor medical care — inspired her to find a way to combat the problems in the future Jewish homeland.

Two years later, with the help of 14 like-minded women, Szold founded the Hadassah Women's Organization in Baltimore in 1911. Today, Hadassah is the largest women's volunteer organization in the world with more than 300,000 members.

This past week in Israel, Szold's accomplishments were retold through the publication of "**Henrietta Szold: The Saga of an American Woman.**" The book, by the late photojournalist Nachum Tim Gidal, was among 150,000 volumes on display at the Jerusalem International Book Fair, the second largest event of its kind in the world. "Nachum Gidal didn't just want to publish this book," said Ilan Greenfield, co-director of Gefen Publishing House. "He wanted to teach me to appreciate this unique and courageous woman who was ahead of her time."

The 151-page black-and-white compendium lovingly captures the imperturbable will and uncompromising integrity of Szold, who met Gidal when she was 76. Gidal spent nine years photographing Szold in Palestine.

Szold died in 1945, three years before the founding of the state of Israel. But her remarkable legacy lives on here and abroad. Hadassah runs two world-renowned medical centers, has trained physicians from China, sent medical aid to Sarajevo, built a hospital in Zaire and has chapters in 34 countries and throughout America.

"Szold was a gutsy woman who started projects without any money and then looked for their financing later," said Marlin Levin, the author of a coming history on Hadassah. "Indeed, Hadassah has gone far beyond Szold's vision."

Born in Baltimore on Dec. 21, 1860, Szold was the oldest of eight daughters born to Hungarian immigrants, Rabbi and Mrs. Benjamin Szold. Her earliest memories were of the American Civil War and the emancipation of the slaves. Those experiences, she later told Gidal, determined the course of her life.

After graduating first in her class from a Baltimore high school, Szold became a teacher and taught for 15 years. In 1882, she established a one-room evening school for Jewish immigrants. By the light of an oil lamp, she taught the English language, American history and law and the principles of democratic citizenship. More than 5,000 students attended the school during its 11-year tenure.

Szold's work with Russian immigrants convinced her to help organize a movement to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

"I became converted to Zionism," she said, "the very moment I realized that it supplied my bruised, torn, and bloody nation, my distracted nation, with an ideal that is balm to the self-inflicted wounds and to the wounds inflicted by others."

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In 1893 Szold, together with her friends, founded the Women's Zionist Organization of America. That year she also gave up teaching to become the literary secretary of the Jewish Publication Society in Philadelphia, where she spent the next 23 years translating some 20 books.

At the age of 74, Szold decided to retire and return to her family in Baltimore. But with Adolf Hitler's rise to power in Germany, leaders of the Zionist movement realized the need to evacuate the Jews of Europe and asked her to stay.

Szold dedicated the last 12 years of her life to organizing a program to bring 13,000 children to Palestine. She met the children at the dock "and remembered almost every one of their names, even as a woman in her eighties," recalled Levin, author of the forthcoming history of Hadassah. "That's just how she was. She had a personal touch."

Henrietta Szold's one complaint in life was that she never had any children.

"But the truth was she had 13,000 of them," says Pia Gidal, who accompanied her photojournalist husband during his travels with Szold.

Gidal should know. She was one of them.