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HEADLINE: Szold worked tirelessly on Jews' behalf

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BODY:

A recent obituary for Sarah L. Cooper, 95, a retired educator who taught English and journalism at Eastern and Western high schools for years, reported she was the last living niece of **Henrietta Szold**, the West Baltimore intellectual and world-famed humanitarian.

Szold was a writer, scholar, educator and Zionist who founded a night school for Jewish immigrants and Hadassah, the largest women's volunteer organization in America, in 1912.

She was described by David Ben-Gurion, the first premier of Israel, as "the greatest Jewish woman in 400 years."

She was the daughter of Benjamin Szold, a highly respected rabbi, and his wife, Sophie, who had emigrated to Baltimore from Hungary, when he was called to lead the congregation at Oheb Shalom.

They settled in a rowhouse at 702 W. Lombard St., where Henrietta was born in 1860, and later moved to 206 Eutaw St., where she was reared.

After graduating from Western Female High School in 1877 - the first Jewish girl to do so - she worked as her father's assistant. In the early 1890s, she moved to Philadelphia, where she worked as an editor for the Jewish Publication Society.

Returning to Baltimore, she established the city's first night school to teach "Americanization" classes - English, American history and citizenship - to newly arrived Jewish immigrants fleeing Russian and Eastern European oppression in 1899. They proved to be the model for night classes throughout the nation.

"The curriculum consisted of English, English, and again English. All else was treated as collateral and subsidiary," she wrote.

After her father's death in 1902, she moved to New York the next year and became the first woman to enroll in the Jewish Theological Seminary.

It was while studying there that she changed her small study group into a nationwide organization for the "promotion of Jewish institutions and enterprises in Palestine and fostering of Jewish ideals" among American Jewish women.

"Originally called the 'Daughters of Zion, Hadassah Chapter,' the organization gradually became known simply as Hadassah, Hebrew for Easter, a queen in Persia who prevented a massacre of the Jews," reported The Sun.

The initial focus of Hadassah was improving medical care and hygiene in Palestine. Today, the organization supports two hospitals, educational facilities and centers for refugee children.

Henrietta first visited Palestine in 1909 and became passionately involved in the Zionist movement, which sought to create a Jewish state in the traditional Biblical homeland of the Jews. She wrote, "If not Zionism, then nothing - then extinction for the Jew."

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In 1920, when she was 60, she moved to Palestine permanently, and worked full-time with health, educational and social agencies.

When she turned 75, she was honored in New York by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, who said: "If I, the child of poor immigrant parents, am today mayor of New York ... it is because of you. Half a century ago you initiated that instrument of American democracy, the evening school for the immigrant."

In the early 1930s, she became the head of Youth Aliyah, which brought tens of thousands of Jewish children from Hitler's Europe.

"A delicate but indomitable white-haired lady, **Henrietta Szold** personified 'Mother Israel,' to that generation, which completed the work of the earlier pioneers and became the backbone of present-day Israel," observed The Evening Sun.

In 1945, shortly before her death, President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote her a letter.

"Since 1889 when you organized the first English and Americanization classes in your native Baltimore, you have devoted yourself to the best social and educational needs both here and in Palestine."

She was buried in Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives.

"It is about time that we woke up to the fact that one of the world's great humanitarians is our daughter. I do not hesitate to claim that **Henrietta Szold** is one of Baltimore's greatest historical personages," wrote the late Wilbur H. Hunter Jr., who had been director of the Peale Museum.

Today, Szold Drive in Pikesville commemorates her life and work.