

## GOLDA MEIR

### The 1948 U.J.A. Campaign

*Golda Meir, who was to become Israel's fourth prime minister, was head of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem, 1946-48. She was interviewed in Tel Aviv in 1975 by Shulamit Nardi, Dr. Menahem Kaufman and Jeff Hodes in the framework of the Oral History of the U.J.A. Mrs. Meir died in 1978.*

My relationship with the U.J.A. (United Jewish Appeal) started in 1948. Until then, my visits to the United States were on behalf of the Histadrut (Trades Union Federation) or the Moetzet haPoalot (Working Women's Council). That is why I hadn't met any of the people responsible for the U.J.A. I had not even met Montor.<sup>1</sup> Of course, I knew he was a great power and did great things.

My first contact with the U.J.A. was rather dramatic. Eliezer Kaplan, then treasurer of the Jewish Agency, had just returned from a visit to the United States and Canada. He reported before a Jewish Agency meeting in January 1948 that he had succeeded in getting a loan of, I think, seven million dollars, which was to carry us through till the new fiscal

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Montor, at that time chief executive of the United Jewish Appeal.

year in April. Here we were, practically in the war, which began openly the moment the U.N. decided on the partitioning of Palestine. I remember sitting at this meeting of the executives of the Agency, and watching my good friend Ben-Gurion<sup>2</sup> boil while Kaplan was reporting. I thought, my God, this building will explode in another minute. Finally, I proposed that Kaplan and I should go immediately to the United States to get the necessary funds. Jerusalem needed a lot of money then, and we were already thinking of the development of our new State and the absorption of immigrants. I also said that Ben-Gurion had to remain in Israel since what he was doing, nobody else could do. He was really preparing the Haganah (Defense Forces) and making plans for the war that we knew would break out. I said, "I think that I can do what you want to do in the United States." But he felt that he had to go. I said, "Okay, but first we'll put it to a vote." That was the only time I won against Ben-Gurion, because everybody in the Agency realized that Ben-Gurion could not possibly leave the country just then.

I can't say that I was very courageous; I was terribly afraid of going to these people who didn't know me from Adam. Before I went, I asked Kaplan to write Montor that the Agency had decided upon my visit, and that he should be helpful. I came to New York on a Friday night, toward the end of January, during one of the worst blizzards that New York ever

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<sup>2</sup> David Ben-Gurion, at that time chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive.

knew. New York was cut off - there were no planes, no trains, nothing! Both my sisters - one who lives in the U.S. and the other who was there for surgery - met me at the airport. The sister who lives in the States was at that time the head of the Bridgeport Federation Council. When I told her what I had come for, she said: "Look, there's a Federation meeting going on now in Chicago; I think you should go to it." Up to that point, I had no planned itinerary.

As I had requested, Kaplan had notified Montor that I was coming. However, Montor was in Chicago at the time, so his second-in-command had come to meet me at the airport. He said "No" to my sister's suggestion. Since there were no Zionists at the Federation, he did not think it was the place for me to go. I stayed overnight at my niece's house in Brooklyn and when I got up in the morning, I decided that maybe the Chicago meeting was a good idea. So this man called Montor, who said: "Look, I'm not directing this thing. They have an agenda, but I'll talk to them." When he called back, he said: "Alright, they're prepared to let you speak, but how do you propose to get to Chicago?"

There were no trains, nothing. All this occurred on Saturday. Montor had said they were prepared to have me speak at lunch Saturday, or on Saturday night. When I told him I couldn't get there, he said they were prepared to let me speak Sunday noon. Luckily, there was a breakthrough and a plane did leave for Chicago. I think I was the only one who left

with that plane. In Chicago, I met Montor for the first time, Harold Goldenberg,<sup>3</sup> Bill Rosenwald,<sup>4</sup> and Eddie Warburg.<sup>5</sup> I admit I was shaking. This was an audience I didn't know. All I knew were the men's names. I had no idea what was going to happen. When I spoke, I told them that I wanted to get twenty-five million dollars, in cash, within two or three weeks. I didn't say I knew only one way we could get the cash: leaders in the various communities would have to take loans in the bank, to be paid off afterwards from income of the campaign. Interestingly enough, the Dallas delegation immediately had a caucus among themselves at which time they announced they were going to take loans.

Now, when I returned to New York, a very serious question arose. The J.D.C. (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) people said to me, "Look, if these men get loans from the bank, that'll have to be paid from the U.J.A. collections. Then, with all this money going to Israel, what about the share of the J.D.C.?" The J.D.C. needed money also to carry on their work in the Diaspora.

At that time, someone very important in the J.D.C. from New York, and who later went to work in the government, came to know what was going to

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. business executive and communal leader, chairman of U.J.A., national cabinet, 1948-49.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. business executive and communal leader, national chairman of U.J.A. 1942-63.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. communal leader, chairman Joint Distribution Committee 1941-65.

The J.D.C. people thought that was crazy anyhow, that I wouldn't even get twenty-five million dollars. But I felt, what's the difference, we might as well ask for fifty million. And, as a matter of fact, we got it - and divided the money fifty-fifty.

*After the Chicago meeting, which was the breakthrough, how did Montor proceed? Were there personal meetings?*

Yes, we went from city to city and would meet with the leadership who had to decide if they were prepared to go to the bank for loans. We would have dinners for the U.J.A. where people would give their contributions.

*Did Montor think the fifty million dollar goal was possible?*

Not really, but he worked hard. He thought maybe they would get ten or twelve million. The only difficulty was that as I went from coast to coast, every day in a different city, these men had to change off. They couldn't take the schedule. I must say, as I traveled from place to place, I got to see how wonderful the Jews were.

*Did you have any private, personal solicitations?*

No, that I never did. Miami is a good example of what we did. For instance,

happen to J.D.C. So I told him the following story: There were, in small towns, Jews who made a living by going to another town and speaking in the *shul* (synagogue) on Saturday. There he would get a few rubles which his family would live on for a week. The next Saturday, he would go to another town. Once, when he came to a town, he stayed overnight in a little inn where he had his Friday night meal. On Saturday, he went to the *shul*, but there he met Jews who didn't give him anything. So, on Sunday morning, as he took his bundle and was preparing to go, the innkeeper asked him why he was leaving without paying. The Jew said, "You are right, but I didn't get a cent here." Then he said, "I have a suggestion. I'll go from house to house now, and everything they give me, I'll give to you. But," he continued, "maybe you don't trust me, so let's go together from house to house and ask for something. But maybe you think it's not becoming for you to go with me, so you go, and whatever you collect among the Jews in the city will be yours."

After telling this story, I said to the man, "I don't want to upset anything. I want to do this within the framework of the U.J.A., so either we do it together, or you do it alone and give me my twenty-five million dollars as that's what I need; or I'll go out and cry to our Jews that we need this money." We evolved a compromise: instead of asking for twenty-five million dollars, we decided, on my suggestion, to ask for fifty million.

there we started off with a breakfast meeting; then there was a luncheon in a nightclub, and in the evening we flew from Miami to Miami Beach for another meeting in the big hotel there. Morgenthau<sup>6</sup> was with us that time. Bill Rosenwald and Eddie Warburg also traveled with me, on an alternating basis. There were others, and people in New York like Sonnenborn and Paul Baerwald, who was fantastic.

*Did you feel they were already Zionists emotionally, or was it just your personal Jewish appeal?*

Not all of them were Zionists, but they all realized what was at stake. Morgenthau said this was his first trip to Miami. The breakfast meeting was for the local community while the luncheon was arranged for Jews who were spending their vacation in Miami. At both we did very, very well. Then, in the evening, we flew to a hotel. At that hotel, although it was owned by a Jew, fund-raising was forbidden. I remember coming down to the patio, which was so beautiful, and thinking that this I couldn't take. Morgenthau was conducting the meeting; Montor, Sam Rothberg<sup>7</sup> and Goldenberg were there. As I looked at the audience, I was sure they couldn't

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<sup>6</sup> Henry Morgenthau Jr., U.S. Secretary of the Treasury 1934-45; General Chairman of U.J.A. 1947-50.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. business executive and communal leader; national campaign chairman of Israel Bonds Organization from 1955.

care less. I didn't eat a thing. I drank black coffee and smoked my cigarettes with tears in my eyes. I thought, "How can I, in this beautiful atmosphere, speak about what's happening at home." I said to Montor I was sure that when I got up to talk, they would all walk out. Morgenthau said to me, "Look, I understand perfectly how you feel. Never mind what the manager of the hotel said about not having fund-raising here; I'll say: 'Friends, you're here on a vacation, which you deserve. Nobody has the right to trouble you, and since I don't want to keep you here under false pretenses I have to tell you that we intend to do business tonight. Anybody who wants can just get up and walk out.'" But nobody walked out, and that evening we raised about one and a half million dollars, in cash. In fact, I think we ended that day in Miami with about four or five million dollars.