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Golda Meir, a Russian immigrant to the America, took up the Zionist cause and practiced peace as hard as she waged war to bring about a safe and secure Jewish homeland in Israel.

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MLA
"From the Pogroms to Prime Minister: A Biography of Golda Meir." Floyd Kalber, correspondent. NBC
From the Pogroms to Prime Minister: A Biography of Golda Meir

JOHN CHANCELLOR, anchor:

Millions of people around the world today were mourning the death of Golda Meir, the former prime minister of Israel. Mrs. Meir, who was 80, died today in a Jerusalem hospital. Her doctors said she had been suffering from blood cancer for a long time. She was prime minister from 1969 to 1974, a woman of wit, passion and a tremendous sense of patriotism. She was born in Russia, grew up in the United States and died in an Israel she led for five memorable years. In all, Golda Meir was a remarkable person. Floyd Kalber prepared this report on her life.

FLOYD KALBER (reporting):

Golda Meir was born in Russia in 1898. Her father was a carpenter who barely made a living. Childhood memories were not pleasant.

GOLDA MEIR: The first memories I have are three: hunger, fear of pogroms and death.

KALBER: In 1906, Golda’s father immigrated to the United States. Three years later, his family joined him. They settled in Milwaukee and opened a small grocery store, similar to this one. In 1917, Golda married another Russian immigrant, Maurice Myerson. Unlike Golda, he was not an ardent Zionist but she eventually persuaded him to immigrate to Palestine. Golda went to work for the Israeli Labor Federation. Gradually, she achieved a position of power within the Jewish political establishment and became a close confidante to David Ben-Gurion. In April 1949, Golda became minister of labor in Ben Gurion’s government. Her job was to provide employment and housing to many immigrants. She later said those were the happiest days of her life. For ten years, she was Israel’s foreign minister and supported the government’s policy of swift retaliation against Arab attacks. Golda retired in 1966 but three years later, the ruling labor party asked her to become prime minister.

The Yom Kippur war, October 1973. Israel was unprepared and Golda Meir blamed herself for not mobilizing the army reserves soon enough. The country was in a state of shock. It looked as if Israel was losing the war. Golda fought back the doubters.
MEIR: But this people, small as it is, surrounded as it is by enemies, has decided to live. And if we have to pay the price for living, we have to pay it. This is not a people that can give in.

KALBER: When the war was finally over, Golda was at the airport to welcome home the prisoners of war from Egypt. But the strain of the war and the political recriminations that followed exhausted Golda Meir. “I will never again be the person that I was before the Yom Kippur war”, she said. And so in April 1974, Golda handed in her resignation.

But even in retirement, Golda was not idle. She gave speeches on Israel’s behalf and within her country, remained a political force. And when peace seemed possible, Anwar Sadat sought her out.

MEIR: Let us at least conclude one thing: the beginning that you have made with such courage, and with such hope for peace, let us decide one thing: it must go on, face to face, between us and between you so that even an old lady like I am will live to see the day. You always call me an old lady, Mr. President. We will live to see the day, whoever signs on the part of Israel, I want to live to see that day.

CHANCELLOR: It hasn’t arrived just yet. There were statements of regret from Jews, Christians and Arabs. President Sadat of Egypt described Mrs. Meir as an honest foe and a first class political leader. President Carter said she represented the best in the Israeli spirit. British Prime Minister James Callahan said she was a true champion and an outstanding servant of her people and in Washington there were other reactions from two people who knew her well

HENRY KISSINGER (Former Secretary of State): Well, she was tremendously human. Very stubborn, very sentimental, very passionate, very courageous…she had all these qualities, she sort of acted as the mother of her people. So it was tempestuous to deal with her, but also tremendously rewarding.

SIMCHA DINITZ (Israeli ambassador): She has lived to see a strong, stable, enhanced Israel. She has not lived to see the day of peace. And it seemed that like with Moses, she was allowed to travel with her people for 40 years in the desert but was snatched away just before coming to the promised land. For her, the promised land was this promised peace for which she worked so hard.

CHANCELLOR: Israeli Prime Minister Rabin is in Oslo to get his Nobel Peace Prize. Because this is the Sabbath, he made no public statements about Mrs. Meir’s death.