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C H A P T E R 1

IN IMPERIAL RUSSIA

1898–1905: Kiev, Pinsk, and the Formation of Gendered Identity

Golda Mabovitz was born in 1898 in Kiev, then part of the Russian Empire. With good reason her parents, Bluma and Moshe-Itzhak, treated her as a particularly precious daughter. Child mortality among poor Jews was high, and in the nine years that had passed between the birth of their first daughter Sheyna and Golda's arrival, they had lost five infants to various illnesses. Golda's father was a carpenter, though mostly unemployed, leaving it to her mother, the daughter of a Pinsk pub owner, to provide for the family through a variety of odd jobs.¹

From birth, Golda was marked as an "other," Jewish and female. She learned very quickly that the world was divided between gentiles and Jews, and that Jews were the czar's second-class subjects, unwelcomed by Russian society. The Jews of Pinsk, a small town with muddy streets in the Pale of Settlement, were mostly poor and unemployed. Work was available in the major Russian urban centers, but law banned Jews from these areas. Kiev, for instance, with its proud ancient history and cathedrals glittering in gold, allowed Jews to enter its gates only if they had obtained a work permit. When the czar's government embarked on a project to provide public education, it needed carpenters to build the schools' libraries. Golda's father was among those fortunate to obtain a permit, and the family moved from Pinsk to Kiev. Golda was born the following year.

Life in Kiev did not bring the anticipated prosperity. Moshe was a failing entrepreneur and any business he started soon collapsed, leaving

him frustrated and deeper in debt. The family moved often, penniless, consumed by the anxiety of losing the precious permit, and intimidated by antisemitism. Later in life, Sheyna still remembered the frightening searches by the Kiev police, who arrived unannounced and demanded proof of the permit's validity. Golda, by 1972, could only recall three memories from Kiev: the death of her grandmother who shared their dilapidated one-room home, the gnawing hunger, and the frightening rumor of an impending pogrom.²

Jewish Identity and the Pogrom That Wasn't

Pogroms were a periodic part of Russian Jewish life. Gentiles would violently attack their Jewish neighbors, destroy and loot property, murder, maim, and often rape. If the government did not cooperate with the perpetrators, it turned a blind eye. The most famous pogrom, in the town of Kishinev in 1905, wrought such devastation that it “cemented the feeling that Russia was unsafe for Jews.”³ This fear of antisemitic violence became a cardinal justification for the Zionist movement, which sought to establish a state for the Jewish people where they could rule themselves, free of persecution and abuse.

A single pogrom, one that did not in fact materialize, remained etched in Golda's memory of her childhood. When she was five years old, a rumor spread across town that a pogrom was imminent. She was sent to the neighbors upstairs, while her father secured the main door with wooden boards. Sheyna armed herself with a kitchen knife and their mother with boiling water, although Sheyna would later describe these tools of self-defense as “tragicomic.” In the event of an attack, the family was defenseless.

In the end there was no pogrom—most of the early twentieth-century pogroms erupted later, when Golda was already on her way to America—but Golda's memory is important for two reasons. First, the fear piercing the child's heart as she awaited an invasion by a group of rowdy, drunken thugs must have been staggering, and must have become even more poignant as she told the story over and over again throughout her life. Second, Golda's experience of the pogrom helped

construct her Jewish identity and prepared her embrace of Zionism as the only solution to the Jewish predicament. In Kiev, Sheyna studied in a Jewish socialist school, where she absorbed a theory that fused working-class consciousness with Zionism and in turn instilled it in her young sister. Golda, five or six years old, was captivated by socialist Zionism and turned her concern for the welfare of the Jewish people into her life project.

Golda's recounting of the pogrom scare also captured the Zionist perception of Jewish masculinity in exile. To Golda, "it was typical of father that he made no plans to take his family and hide some place."⁴ The Jewish males in "galut"—exile—were bitterly criticized by Zionists as passive and cowardly, incapable of defending their wives and children. Self-rule, they argued, would revive the heroic spirit of biblical Israel, and transform the Jews of galut into Maccabees. As an Israeli leader, Golda never missed an opportunity to shower praise on brave Israeli "Sabras" (authentic Israeli-born people) defending their land and their people.

What about Golda's identity as a woman? Speaking of the "pogrom that wasn't," Golda did not blame her mother for not seeking appropriate shelter. It was her father's duty to provide defense. During her early childhood, Golda accepted the gendered division of labor as God-given. She was standing at the intersection between antisemitism and sex discrimination, but whereas her exposure to Zionism provided a theory to challenge the Jewish condition, neither Sheyna nor Golda had been exposed to feminist theories that challenged sex-based discrimination. They could not comprehend the double burden Jewish women were carrying.⁵

Gender Identity and the Luxury of Schooling for Little Girls

Golda was born into a traditional patriarchal society. From birth Jewish women were initiated into alterity. In their synagogues—the central institution of their community—they were separated from men and treated as passive observers. They were not counted as a part of the quorum needed for prayer, did not partake in an initiation rite to

become members of the Jewish people (Bar Mitzvah), and were prohibited from saying kaddish (the final prayer at burial) for their loved ones. Stereotyped as dangerously alluring, women were required to cover themselves, shave their heads upon getting married, and wear a homely head cover. They were also expected to marry young—Sheyna, for example, pejoratively described her unmarried aunts as “rotting in their virginity for many years.”⁶

Jewish Russian society was, however, beginning to experience modernity. Girls in previous generations did not even attend cheder (the traditional Jewish school), but by the time Golda reached school-age, parents were sending their daughters to secular schools for young Jews.⁷ In Kiev, Golda’s mother, being practical and focusing on survival, planned to have nine-year-old Sheyna apprentice with a seamstress or a milliner. After several heart-wrenching arguments, however, Sheyna persuaded her mother to let her attend school and even took the initiative to locate a free Jewish school aimed at educating children of the proletariat. She loved school, writing in her memoirs, “If I did not turn into a misanthrope, it is due to that school.”⁸ Golda looked up to Sheyna and internalized the message. She too hoped to be seated in a classroom, but this did not come to pass.

The family’s financial situation soon worsened, and the future looked grim. A third daughter had arrived, Tzipke, and Moshe and Bluma decided that he should join the flood of migrants searching for better luck in America. When Moshe migrated, the family lost its permit to stay in Kiev, so Bluma and her daughters returned to Pinsk. Money was scarce and the option of enrolling in school evaporated. Sheyna, already a teenager, devoted most of her time to a Zionist revolutionary group, determined to topple the czar and improve the lot of her fellow Jews. Young Golda felt abandoned and lonely. Perhaps this is the reason that throughout her adult life she was known to crave company. She found solitude hard to endure.

If Golda were a boy, cheder education would have been mandatory. Either her grandparents or the community would have seen to it that she received basic Jewish learning. But the education of a girl was a luxury, one her mother did not prioritize. Lonely and bored, Golda was

determined to teach herself the basic skills of literacy, an early sign of agency. Occasionally Sheyna would help, but Golda mostly copied the letters of the Hebrew alphabet from the Jewish Prayer Book (probably the only book in her home). Even if Golda was too young to process her experience, she was internalizing her identity as a member of the second sex. Her lot was a woman's lot—based on the traditional gendered division of labor. Her destiny was to become a good “balabusta” (Yiddish for homemaker) and thereby attract a husband who would provide her with a good life. No one expected her to have a life of the mind.

While Bluma never valued education, she did value appearances and encouraged Golda's femininity; maybe she saw her ideal self in the pretty little girl. Bluma focused on Golda's bright, thick and curly hair, often ornamenting her daughter's head with ribbons or even a crown braid that made her look particularly regal. Sheyna recalls Golda basking in her mother's attention and delighting in her own reflection in the mirror. Here was another layer of Golda's alterity, her otherness, as a woman. She was groomed to be an object of desire and attention, not a person of independent mind and will. At the same time, this aspect of her identity probably nurtured in Golda that self-confident, dignified appearance for which she became famous in her later years.

Four Strong Women Who Shaped Young Golda's Gender Identity

Jewish society in czarist Russia accepted patriarchal values as a part of God's will and the natural order. But there were also strong, able women whose energy and resolve made a difference in the lives of their families and community. These women, who defied stereotypes of femininity by exercising power, were also a part of young Golda's environment.

First and foremost, there was her mythical great-grandmother, Bubbe Goldae, after whom Golda was named. Bubbe Goldae, who died before Golda was born, was reputed to be tough, clever, and wise and an authority among the Jews of Pinsk. Family lore had it that men and women from near and far would seek her advice about their business transactions. Golda's mother never tired of telling the story of how Bubbe

Goldae gave the green light to her marriage to Golda's father. Bluma first saw Moshe at Pinsk's public square, where young recruits for the czar's army were assembled: "I saw a handsome young man, a giant, and I said to myself this is the one I want for a husband." It was love at first sight. But in Russia in the 1880s marriage was a family transaction, and love counted for little. Typically, a matchmaker would be hired to bring a couple together, and it was imperative that the father consent to the marriage. Bluma's father, Menachem Neiditch, a pub owner, was not sure that Moshe was a good match for his daughter, as his social status was lower than Bluma's, in virtue of his being merely a carpenter. A yeshiva education could have compensated for his humble origins, and there were hints that he had spent some time in a yeshiva, but not enough to make a mark. It fell to Bubbe Goldae to make the decision. The old woman's analysis shied away from principles and focused instead on practical matters. Rather than suggest that an uneducated carpenter was a good match for her granddaughter, she opined that "even a carpenter may be turned into an entrepreneur," and gave young Bluma the nod of approval.⁹ If there was a silver lining in Golda's upbringing, which was mired in trouble and conflict, it was the genuine affection her parents felt for each other.

From the legend of Bubbe Goldae, Golda harvested the confidence that women could be valued decision makers, that they could be strong and wise, exert authority, and earn respect. She learned that even if women had no access to education, they could still effect change. It stands to reason that, regardless of the deep misogyny surrounding her, little Golda would have intuited that female power was possible. In all likelihood, Golda felt that Bubbe Goldae bestowed a special privilege on her—in later years she came to wear her name like an amulet that armed her with the strength she needed to make a mark in society. Both in the United States and in Israel, the name Golda was considered old-fashioned, a relic of the disparaged Jewish life in exile—galut. While other members of the family Americanized their names upon arrival in Wisconsin, and many of her friends in Palestine Hebraized their names in keeping with Zionist ideology, Golda staunchly resisted changing her name, ultimately making it internationally iconic.

Another role model in Golda's life was Mrs. Janovsky, though Golda did not know her personally. Mrs. Janovsky represented the emerging Jewish middle class. According to Sheyna, Mrs. Janovsky was the only member of the middle class the family had "known." Mrs. Janovsky was educated, spoke Russian in addition to Yiddish, and lived in a comfortable house. Her relationship with Golda's family began when Bluma was hired as a wet nurse to one of Mrs. Janovsky's eleven children.¹⁰ There, for the first time, Bluma learned basic hygiene and the progressive principles of child-rearing—bathing the babies, changing their diapers frequently, letting them move their limbs freely rather than keeping them tightly wrapped like mummies. Whereas Bluma did not bathe Sheyna until she reached the age of one, baby Golda not only enjoyed the pleasure of baths but often delighted in bathing with the neighbor's puppy.

The two women who had the most influence on the life of young Golda undoubtedly were her mother and her sister. Both Bluma and Sheyna had controlling natures, but they were polar opposites in their approaches to the world. Whatever earned the respect of one would soon become the focus of scorn from the other. Golda was always torn between them, and yet each had a decisive influence on her development.

Mother Bluma's Disappointments

The harsh reality of everyday life shattered many of Bluma's hopes and expectations. Bubbe Goldae's speculation that "even a carpenter may be turned into an entrepreneur" failed to materialize. Moshe Mabovitz was unable to find steady work, so the task of providing for the family fell to Bluma, who turned bitter, critical, and quarrelsome. She was particularly hard on Sheyna. As was customary, Bluma used Sheyna as a mother's helper and assigned her chores that the young child was not always capable of performing. Failure was met with mockery and sarcastic comments (today we would call it shaming, perhaps even emotional abuse) that scarred the young child.

Yet Bluma was also an energetic woman who took seriously her responsibility toward her family. When Moshe migrated to America,

Bluma became a single mother who had three mouths to feed and little to no means to do so. She returned to Pinsk with her daughters and frantically searched for work. Mostly, she baked goods to sell in the market or deliver to “rich women’s” homes. On the side, she would peel potatoes at a nearby restaurant in return for a glass of milk with which she made porridge for her daughters. Bluma was an agentive woman. Her family depended on her ability to pull herself up by her bootstraps and, while she did not always succeed, she certainly showed Golda the meaning of self-empowerment.

Sheyna, a Burgeoning Revolutionary

Sheyna, who turned fourteen when the family returned to Pinsk, was opinionated and self-motivated like her mother. When they left Kiev further education became moot. Even if Bluma could have afforded it for her elder daughter—which she could not—Pinsk’s schools did not welcome Jews. So Sheyna turned her attention to political activism. Like many young Jews during this time of political upheaval and social unrest, she joined a social-Zionist revolutionary movement and discovered the basic principles of political organization. She read banned literature, distributed propaganda leaflets, and stood guard during forbidden meetings. If Bluma communicated an unequivocal commitment to family values, Sheyna communicated the excitement of the coming political change, the fight for social justice, and the belief that Jewish redemption lay in a social-Zionist agenda. Young Golda absorbed both.

Originally, Moshe was hoping to make some money in America and return to Russia. But as the social turmoil in Russia intensified, Bluma became increasingly afraid for her family. With the collapse of the 1905 revolution, Pinsk became the site of massive repression. Day and night, Bluma and Golda heard the screams of the tortured prisoners from the neighboring police station and worried that Sheyna was among them. Bluma grew desperate, and her letters to Moshe became more alarmist. She even spent precious money on a family photograph, which captured

herself and the girls as particularly feminine, and mailed it to Moshe. For this occasion, Bluma borrowed a lovely dress for Golda and placed paper ribbons in her hair. She even washed her hair in sugar water to make it curlier and shinier.¹¹ Bluma was probably hoping that the sight of his lovely women would prompt Moshe to take the decisive steps needed to unite them in America.

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