

Isador Molk

1893 - 1967



BIOGRAPHY

Born Itzhok Molkho on March 5, 1893 to Abraham and Irla Molkho, the man later known as Isador Molk came from the tiny town of Ponievez in Lithuania, at that time a province of Czarist Russia. In Russia, those of the Jewish race had little chance to succeed, often the object of slurs, jeers and persecution. This was the time of pogroms, such as the Kishinev Massacre of 1903.

Itzale's father spent most of his time in the local synagogue. By keeping a small bake shop in Ponievez, his mother was the bread-earner of the family, a generally accepted responsibility when a girl married a Talmudist.

Itzale (the diminutive form of his name) was known as an "illu", a child prodigy among his people; a reputation that would later follow him to America. Quick, intelligent and hardworking, he left home at age 9 to enter the Slabotky Yeshivah, a school for promising Hebrew scholars. Arriving in Slabotky, the overseer asked him to interpret a passage of the Talmud; upon doing so, he was not only accepted as student – he was assigned a student to tutor, receiving payment to help pay his expenses.

Returning home to visit four years later, he had to deal with his father's unexpected death. Going to the grave to mourn a few days later, a policeman gruffly asked to see his pass, then hit him with a leather club before he could even show it. Itzale later told the local rabbi of his desire to leave the country, saying "I want to have the feeling that I am walking on my own ground."

Learning that the next-door neighbor's family was going to America, he connived to join them. Being too young to get a passport of his own, he traveled as one of their sons. "Freedom was

my destiny. I longed for personal freedom – freedom of body and soul”, he later wrote in his book, “The Making of an Oilman”

Days on the ship were spent learning to speak English from a small dictionary. A shipmate befriending the young boy asked if he had any money, explaining that he would need to show 10 rubles to the officials when the ship arrived in port. When told he did not, the man gave 10 rubles to Isador, who promised to return them after showing them to the officials. To this the man only smiled.

Arriving at Ellis Island and showing his rubles, a member of a benevolent Hebrew organization pinned a tag on Itzale’s jacket, indicating that he was a new arrival. Indignant, Molk ripped the tag off, saying, “Keep your tag. I’ll keep my name,” and he walked away in search of the generous shipmate. Upon finding him, he indeed returned the 10 rubles, which the man reluctantly took back.

Once in America, Itzale changed the spelling of his name to Isador Molk, as it was easier for people to spell.

Wandering the streets of New York, Isador found an Orthodox Yeshivah of the same name as the one he had left in Slabotky. He entered this school, receiving a regular stipend of \$4 a week to teach while continuing his own studies. He spent his free evenings preparing for high school and college. At 16, he was the first to graduate as an ordained rabbi from this school, later known as Yeshivah University. At the same time, he completed his high school education.

Then began a pattern of working at teaching and tutoring jobs long enough to raise funds, attending college until funds ran out, then returning to work for more money. He began college at Ohio State University, where tuition was sufficiently low, in 1911, studying forestry. Later he also attended Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, while teaching at nearby Utica Hebrew School.

During this time, he found time to write articles published in *The American Citizen* and other periodicals. When he secured a position as principal of the Hebrew school in Middletown, Connecticut, he attended Wesleyan University in that city. He also taught Hebrew at Berkley Divinity College and did some private tutoring; one student paid for his lessons by teaching Molk how to play the violin.

Molk did his senior work at Valparaiso University, now becoming interested in structural geology. He expressed a desire to go into business to a fellow rabbi. When asked if he had any money to start with, he answered, “No, all I have to lead me on is fortitude and faith in myself.”

Following graduation from college, Molk borrowed \$10 from a fellow graduate for train fare to New York, to visit his half-sister. This was the only loan he never repaid, owing to losing track of the friend’s location. He was still hoping to find him in later life in order to repay the debt.

His formal education complete, Molk now found himself, by a strange set of circumstances, in the midst of the developing oil fields of El Dorado, KS. Knowing nothing of the ways of petroleum or business procedure, he slowly and persistently overcame all handicaps to succeed in becoming a full-fledged oilman.

In 1924, Molk returned to New York in the hopes of finding a wife. Wishing to find one with the virtues that would please his mother, he agreed to be introduced to the sister of a friend of his half-sister and brother-in-law. An intelligent girl of character, Sophia Berman had emigrated with her family from Lithuania two years earlier than Isador, and now worked as a bookkeeper. Molk delayed his return to El Dorado to spend some time getting to know Sophia. Looking for a girl with true heart and soul, he found Sophia to be that girl. They were married just one week after meeting.

The Molk's had no children of their own; they tried unsuccessfully at various times to help his nephew from New York. Molk first tried to help the young man get an education, and then later tried to set him up in the oil business. But he had resisted their efforts, not realizing that they hoped to make him their heir. He eventually returned to New York.

Throughout his life, Molk was unfailingly honest. Moreover, his mind still retained its native sharpness his entire life. He lived the sacred teachings of his youth. To those who knew him best, he was kind, gracious and forbearing, noted for the excellent care and consideration given to those who worked for him.

Not equating wealth with success, Molk believed that success was its own accomplishment – the attaining of one's goal. His main goal was never money but achievement. Willing to make sacrifices, he also shared profits with others in return for appreciation. In his own words, "Approbation was to me the reward for work well done."

A nervous, high-keyed person, it was said that Molk's hobby was pacing up and down the floor in the evening after a hard day's work, planning for the next day.

After living in several locations in El Dorado, the Molk's made their final home at 141 North Alleghany, built under Molk's close personal supervision. Here, Isador and Sophia settled down to a comfortable life. He had acquired the freedom for which he had long and passionately searched. Preferring to live simply, he spent his declining years in profound study of the works which he loved, and in the writing of scholarly articles.

In 1963 proceedings were begun to move the El Dorado Junior College (now Butler County College) to an 80-acre tract which was at that time the property of Isador Molk. When approached with a proposal that his land be used for the school's purpose, he was reluctant to sell. Longtime friend and business associate Irving Cook said he thought Molk was reluctant to sell because he was not being offered a fair price. He had once been offered twice the amount

offered by a different person. Another factor may have been that the two producing oil wells on the property would have to go along with the deal.

On June 1, 1964, the board of regents began land condemnation proceedings against Molk, an action defined in The Arnold Encyclopedia of Real Estate as “the taking of private property for a public purpose through an exercise of the right of public domain”.

Four long months were spent in court battle. On Oct. 21, 1964, the District Court of Butler County ruled that Molk would turn over his land to the board of regents. The mineral rights were awarded to the Molk’s as long as both were living, then would be reassumed by the college.

Molk became very bitter about being grossly underpaid for this land. According to Cook, if they had come right out and asked him instead of yanking it out from under him, he would have been willing to sell the land. Another advisor, Ernest Sifford, agreed, saying that if the right approach had been made, Isador would have probably donated the land to the college. Sifford believed that these proceedings hurt Molk greatly. He was always a firm believer in education; his objection was to the way it was done.

Isador Molk was an outstanding member of the Hebrew Synagogue in Wichita. He also held membership in Patmos Lodge No. 97, A. F. & A. M. in El Dorado, El Dorado chapter No. 35 of the Royal Arch Masons, the Wichita Consistory, the Midian Shrine, and B’nai Brith Lodge No. 857. In politics he was a Brown-Derby Democrat.

Molk hoped in the future. Abhorring the blood-bath of the two world wars, he saw the atom bomb as the tool that would ultimately abolish war, due to fear of returning the world to chaos if it was ever used. He also believed that further research would convert atomic power into an unlimited source of power, supplying all people’s needs, leaving nothing to fight for.

Isador Molk continued to operate his company until the spring of 1967. He died Sept 17, 1967, after a severe illness. His body was shipped to N.Y., where, by Jewish custom, he was buried in a wooden casket held together with wooden nails.

CONNECTION TO BUTLER COUNTY

Moving to El Dorado in pursuit of learning the oil trade, Isador first became a dealer in junk and supplier of used oil field equipment. Later he bought and sold leases and later began companies of his own, in partnership with others, becoming a full fledged oilman.

Not one to back down from a fight, in 1922 Isador took on the Ku Klux Klan, then at its height in El Dorado. Attending their rally, he jumped up on the platform and confronted the leader then speaking against Jews. He intelligently caught the speaker in his lies and hypocrisies. Concerned friends began to surround him as he spoke. The speaker abruptly changed his subject, and Molk and his friends left.

Mrs. Molk was active in Civic work and served as secretary of the Red Cross Board for 14 years. She also became one of Kansas' outstanding poets, with six published volumes of poetry to her credit. She was an original member of the El Dorado Prairie Quill Club and a life member of the Kansas Author's Club.

COMING TO THE AREA

Isador Molk arrived in El Dorado in 1917, when oil was gushing everywhere and the population had swelled from 4,000 to 25,000. He later wrote that El Dorado still looked like a frontier town, with many people sleeping in barns.

He soon went about meeting the townspeople and getting started in the junk business, dealing in used oil field equipment. One day he walked four miles out of town to a gas station, asking if the owner had any junk to sell. The man had a rotting gasoline pump which he sold to Isador for a dollar. Molk dragged the heavy old pump back to town where he sold it for \$2.50. That marked the beginning for a man who would one day become a millionaire.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Following his college graduation, Molk began thinking of a man he'd met a few years earlier, an oilman from Marietta. His pursuit of connections that would help him learn the oil business led him to El Dorado, KS right in the midst of the oil boom.

Without capital, and knowing nothing about ways of petroleum, he worked persistently with his two hands and brain in the supply business. Oil supplies were at a premium; only the major oil companies could obtain new pipe. Used pipe often sold at higher prices than new. Molk engaged in supplying secondhand pipe and supplies from a rented pipe yard by the tracks, keeping very busy. At the time, he had never written a check, could not drive an automobile, and was without knowledge or experience in business procedure. Yet slowly and persistently, he overcame all these handicaps to achieve a solid success.

Fascinated by the opportunities offered by the oil industry, Molk began buying interests in leases and productive properties. Many of these investments proved profitable. When the oil boom began to cool and drilling supplies became more plentiful, Molk began drilling. Buying leases and drilling wells, experiencing both honest deals and deals that went sour, he became an oil man.

"Money never fired my imagination. My desire was to find comfort and satisfaction in my work, and use my acquisitions for research . . . to the enlightenment of humanity", he wrote. Yet money came to him as his strong and unbending spirit surmounted every obstacle. He gained both personal wealth and widespread respect.

Operating largely as an independent, Molk was connected with several companies which were prominent in the development of the Butler County oil field. One of these, organized in 1930 in partnership with several friends, was known as the Cosmic Oil Company. When asked why he named his new company "Cosmic", he replied, "If Henry Doherty (of Cities Service Co.) could create empires, Isador Molk can create cosmos!"

In July of 1933, with the local oil industry seriously affected by the Depression, Molk sent the following message to President Franklin D. Roosevelt:

"We, a representative group of the independent oil producers of Kansas, while heartily in accord with and anxious to support your lucid and coordinated plan of recovery, are helplessly embedded in the quicksand of ruinous prices for crude. Though our employees have magnanimously taken cut after cut in their wages, and not even considered the depletion of our capital assets, we are still producing at a loss. How can we pay a reasonable wage under unreasonable prices for crude?"

- Isador Molk

A reply was issued from White House official J. H. Ward, of the soon completion of the oil code which would bring about a rise in crude oil prices. Molk was impressed with the wonderful country in which he now lived, where he could write the President of the United States and receive a reply from one of his direct subordinates. In Russia, he would have never dared to contact even a minor official.

Cosmic Oil Co., built in the days of the Depression, led the way in improvements, such as changing over from the obsolete gas and oil engines then used to pump wells to electric motors. Molk was also the first to use acid in the local oil field, a process that dissolved limestone, increasing the porosity for a greater oil yield. The company never operated in the red; bills were always discounted due to early payment.

In Czarist Russia, even inventive genius was stifled among the poor. Molk saw that here in America, everyone was free to develop his abilities. He encouraged the many innovations worked out by his skilled employees.

One such device worked on by Verne Myers, was adding a cat wheel to a small unit that had only a bull wheel for the drilling line. This enabled the worker to screw and unscrew joints of pipe while running or pulling. A company representative who sold the original unit to Molk later

inspected this rig with his engineer. Before long, their firm put out an exact copy of the improved machine.

Another improvement was when Charlie Smith rigged up a threading machine using a Toledo two-inch threader attached to an old Ford engine, saving the workers time.

Due to increased difficulties with his partners, Molk chose to dissolve Cosmic Oil & Gas Co. in Dec. 1936. After Cosmic was dissolved, the Molk Petroleum was organized.

Molk built up properties seen by others as unfavorable, or properties viewed as being condemned for future profitable development. Molk, however, held firm faith in their value; that faith was justified with total production of between 200 and 300 barrels daily.

Isador Molk wrote many profound articles and published two books, in precise and unblemished English, of the type that called for reading and re-reading. His book, "The Making of an Oilman", published in 1958, relates many colorful stories experienced on his path to becoming a full-fledged oil producer. The book attained a wide interest and circulation in sales.

A second book, "Of Man and Psalms and Science", was published in 1965.

AWARDS, RECOGNITION

Through the years, the Molk's contributed large sums to the local junior college. When the nursing department was in jeopardy, money from the Molk's helped greatly. The Molk's provided for more scholarships over the years than any other single contributor to the college.

With the establishment of the Molk Endowment, generations of students are a living testimony recognizing Isador and Sophia Molk. In 1982-1983 alone, their funds were responsible for the higher education of approximately 25 students.

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