

Theodor Herzl
Dionysis Theodorou
History 320: Modern Jewish History
May 3rd 2002

Theodor Herzl was born in Budapest on May 2nd 1860 into a wealthy assimilated Jewish family. His parents did not teach him Jewish ways or customs; so he knew little about Jewish thought and Jewish writings. Herzl's mother was educated in a secular institution; and his father had given up religious life, although Herzl's grandfather was a religious Jew who knew some of the earlier pioneers of Zionism.

A native of Budapest whose prosperous family was German in its culture, with a grandfather who had known early proto-Zionist leaders, Herzl grew up in a conventionally liberal Jewish atmosphere with little Judaic knowledge.¹

Herzl's mother encouraged him to study German literature, and Herzl became an avid reader. When he was just a young boy, he formed a small literary group with his classmates called 'We', in which they would study, and further their understanding of German culture. Even though he experienced anti-Semitism whilst growing up in Budapest, he never, until his conversion to the Zionist cause, ceased to be an ardent assimilationist. "Even as experience consumed his hopes, his central concern still remained to save gentile society, in which case the Jewish problem would take care of itself."²

In 1878 after the death of his sister, the Herzl family moved to Vienna. In Vienna, Theodor Herzl studied law, and was a member of a fraternity until the day when the fraternity decided that it would no longer accept Jews as members. Those who were already members were permitted to remain; but Herzl decided that he would move on. He graduated in 1884 as Doctor of Laws. He found work in Salzburg; and faced again with the limited prospects of promotion in that city, he began to travel and write plays. "I would have liked to remain in that beautiful city, but as a Jew I would never have been promoted to a judgeship. For that reason I said farewell both to Salzburg and to legal learning."³

In the interim, he got married and had three children; and in 1891, he was offered a post in Paris as the foreign correspondent for the *Neue Freie Presse*, a Vienna newspaper, although up until that moment he had no interest in politics. It is evident that these four years as a political journalist, equipped him with the knowledge, and instilled in him the compulsion to write his own thoughts on the solution to the Jewish question. Two months before he left Paris, in 1895, he wrote his monumental work, *Der Judenstaat*, *The Jewish State*. It was truly a prophetic work, and an objective solution to the Jewish problem, penetrating the Jewish Community from the outside, and stirring up emotions and hopes that had not been felt since Simon Bar Kochba led his military rebellion against the Roman Empire in 132-135 C.E.

It is interesting to note how his little prior involvement with the Jewish people, became to him a valuable asset in promoting political Zionism. He was not proposing a Jewish solution to the Jewish problem. He was not envisioning a Jewish state, but a state for the Jews. “‘A nation has the right to a state’ was defined by Herzl not in terms of culture, language, folklore and history, but in terms of universal rights.”⁴ Herzl understood that the Jews could not live a liberated life in Europe, or anywhere in the world, because where the Jews go the Jews are persecuted.

The Jewish question exists wherever Jews live in perceptible numbers. Where it does not exist, it is carried by Jews in the course of their migrations. We naturally move to those places where we are not persecuted, and there our presence produces persecution.⁵

Herzl is interested in the Jews having the opportunity to conduct their own political affairs, in a land that is their own, in a land in which they may raise their children in freedom, without discrimination or persecution; where they may reach the highest heights of their heart’s desire, because their state offers them the unhindered opportunity to do so. “The Jewish people are at present prevented by the Diaspora from conducting their political affairs themselves. Besides, they are in a condition of more or less severe disability in many parts of the world.”⁶

Herzl’s disassociation from the Jewish people-which until that point were a religious group with no substantial independent political voice-and his involvement and understanding of gentile politics, gave him a platform from which to preach a political message to the Jews: it was a gentile solution for a Jewish problem. “This pamphlet is intended to open a general discussion on the Jewish Question. Friends and foes will take part in it; but it will no longer, I hope, take the form of violent abuse of sentimental vindication, but of a debate, practical, large, earnest and political.”⁷

Herzl is calling for change. He himself experienced a change; and he is calling on his people to change. “In 1895, Theodor Herzl underwent a dramatic conversion from Austro-German assimilationist to Zionist.”⁸ Herzl had his own conception of Jewishness; and it seems that he thought very little of the current Jewish capacity for successful political action. He criticizes the Jews for crying “We depend for sustenance on the nations who are our hosts, and if we had no hosts to support us we would die of starvation.”⁹ After speaking of the lack of resourcefulness of the Jews, he says “But I do not want to take up the cudgels for the Jews in this pamphlet.”¹⁰ Herzl wishes to arouse the people to a new and progressive way of thinking: A way of thinking that will provide the impetus for action that will open up for them a door out of the ghetto, and into their own place. “The ghetto subsists still, though its walls are broken down.”¹¹

Herzl had never concerned himself directly with the Jewish problem until his conversion to Political Zionism, because he truly believed that the enlightened gentile society, of which he was a part, would gradually fully accept the Jews. Full emancipation, to Jews in Austria, was granted in 1887; but emancipation did not mean acceptance, and assimilation.

The Dreyfus trial in 1894 served as a catalyst that would drive home the now undeniable realities and results of anti-Semitism in Europe, and the possibility of such outcomes due to anti-Semitism in any land where the Jews were merely guests.

In Austria, with the failure of Liberalism, and the ascendance to power of anti-Semite delegates in the municipal assembly-such as Karl Lueger of the Christian Social Party who was elected to mayor of Vienna in 1895-anti-Semitism acquired a political representation. This was a clear indication that the very existence of the Jews in Austria was at risk. “For Herzl this was a clear sign of the collapse of political stability in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in general and the undermining of the status of the Jews in particular.”¹²

Lichtenstein-co-founder with Karl Lueger of the Austrian Christian Social Party-declared that anti-Semitism was an integral part of his ideology and politics. He cited the antagonism towards the Jews, created by their domination of the Austrian credit business, as the main reason for the success of his party.¹³

In France, in 1884, Captain Alfred Dreyfus was convicted in a court martial of selling French military secrets to the Germans. Although the evidence pointed to his innocence, false witnesses fabricated evidence that led to his conviction. When a new trial was held in 1898, and the accuser who was found to be with false testimony committed suicide, huge support arose from the masses to support his widow, and to cry out against the Jews.

Herzl maintained that Dreyfus could not have been guilty of the crime of which he had been accused, because when a Jew reaches the desirable and honorable position of power and authority in gentile society-when one is accepted and thus assimilated-he will not risk losing this much-valued acquired status. The anti-Semitism that was stirred up in the masses during the Dreyfus Affair led Herzl to seriously consider a solution to the Jewish Question. All these elements combined necessitated the founding of a Jewish state.

In September 1899 in an article he wrote called “Zionism”, he wrote, “You see, what made me a Zionist was the Dreyfus trial.”¹⁴

No human being is wealthy or powerful enough to transplant a nation from one habitation to another. An idea alone can compass that: and this idea of a state may

have the requisite power to do so. The Jews have dreamt this kingly dream all through the long nights of their history. 'Next year in Jerusalem' is our old phrase. It is now a question of showing that the dream can be converted into a living reality.¹⁵

Herzl is acknowledging that throughout all the centuries in the galut, the Jews have always had a desire in their hearts to return to the land of their forefathers. There has always been a connection between the Jewish nation, and the land of Israel. He says though, that the Jews have been dreaming about it throughout the centuries, without any action towards the realization of that dream.

He is the one who is putting forward the idea; and he is the one who is laying the groundwork, the foundation, for its materialization. He is the sublime figure that encapsulates this idea: he is the personification of this idea that has the requisite power to rise up a nation oppressed, to the military victories we see just forty two years after his death.

He made a journal entry in 1896, which suggests that he was aware of the magnetism that he held over the people:

As I sat on the platform of the workmen's stage on Sunday I experienced strange sensations. I saw and heard my legend being born. The people are sentimental; the masses do not see clearly. I believe that even now they no longer have a clear image of me. A light fog is beginning to rise around me and it may perhaps become the cloud in which I shall walk.¹⁶

The first Zionist Congress took place in Basle, Switzerland, on August 29th 1897. The man responsible for organizing the congress and the central figure of the congress was Theodor Herzl. It was attended by nationalist Jewish leaders from all over the world. The aim of Zionism is to create a national home for the Jewish people. It is to bring the Jewish people from the Four Corners of the earth, to an internationally recognized and secure border in the land of Palestine. Herzl wrote in his diary on September 3rd 1897:

If I were to sum up the Congress in a word-which I shall take care not to publish-it would be this: At Basle I founded the Jewish State. If I said this out loud today I would be greeted by universal laughter. In five years perhaps, and certainly in fifty years, everyone will perceive it.¹⁷

Just over fifty years after this diary entry, this prediction is fulfilled.

Theodor Herzl was not the first to consider the foundation of a Jewish state as a valid solution to the Jewish problem; but he is the first to propose a tangible plan of action for the realization of such a cause. His objectivity due to his ignorance with regards to Jewish matters, may have been his greatest asset. "Herzl decided that the only

solution was for the Jews to have a state of their own. He was so unlearned in Jewish affairs that he did not know that many other Jews had proposed such a solution before him. Working only from his own thoughts, Herzl went home and wrote a book, *The Jewish State*, in which he outlined his proposal.”¹⁸

Herzl even claimed at a later time, that “Had he known Pinsker’s writings, he would not have written *The Jewish State*.”¹⁹

“Innovative leadership is usually a function of the leaders’ freedom of maneuver. When he began, Herzl was free of any cultural conditioning. Unaffected by tradition, national images and historical precedents, he burst boldly into a flight of imagination.”²⁰

The writings of Leon Pinsker and of Moses Hess and of Nathan Binbaum scan back almost three decades before Herzl ever considered political Zionism. Hovevi Zion, and other Zionist groups, existed and proposed the slow migration to, and settlement of the Jews in Palestine. Herzl viewed this method as a slow one; and as one that was not politically sound, because it did not involve or have the open support of the political powers of the time.

Herzl wanted Zionism to be supported by at least one world power: he wanted the establishment of the Jewish State to be the product of the combined efforts of the Jewish people and the gentile powers. He wants to recruit gentiles to his camp, who will help with the fulfillment of his plan. “I have already mentioned that honest anti-Semites, whilst preserving their independence, will combine with our officials in controlling the transfer of our estates.”²¹

Although there are differences and disagreements between Herzl, and the already existing Zionist groups, Herzl’s shrewd diplomacy, dispels any clouds that obscure the clarity of his vision. He thus consolidates the efforts and the support of practically all groups, and gets the ball of Political Zionism rolling.

In his opening address at the First Zionist Congress, Herzl declared that ‘Zionism constitutes a return to Judaism even before a return to the land of the Jews.’ This sentence has been subjected to considerable interpretation; there were even some Orthodox who saw it as an expression of Herzl’s return to traditional Judaism. Yet there can be no doubt that this was not the meaning intended by Herzl. It was nothing more than a romantic call for return to the ‘ancient home; to the Jewish past and the sense of national togetherness, before the physical return to the land.’²²

Herzl believed that the establishment of a Jewish State would see the end of anti-Semitism and therefore the end to the Jewish problem. “If we only begin to carry out the plans, Anti-Semitism would stop at once and for ever. For it is the conclusion of peace.”²³ He failed to see how much the world would shrink due to technology, the mass media,

and communications. “In order to assess the status of Israel in the international community, it may be useful to look at the Middle East’s only democracy as ‘the Jew among the nations.’”²⁴

The nation of Israel is in the land; but it is surrounded by hostile nations. “... No other civilized nation in the history of the world-including totalitarian and authoritarian regimes-has ever been as repeatedly, unfairly and hypocritically condemned and criticized by the international community as Israel has been over the years.”²⁵

Herzl saw that the Jews could not achieve national actualization while they were living as foreigners in foreign lands where they were not welcome, and where they were fiercely persecuted and denied the rights to live as citizens of the state. He recognized that the Jews were a nation without a home, and that they needed a home in which they may grow and conduct their own affairs in the way that they saw fit.

Herzl did not see that eventually, the same international community in which they were suffering for almost two thousand years would bereave them of their freedom to conduct their political affairs in the way that they see fit. Israel: The Jew among the nations is right!

For I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem for war: The city shall be captured, the houses plundered, and the women violated; and a part of the city shall go into exile. But the rest of the population shall not be uprooted from the city. Then the LORD will come forth and make war on a day of battle. On that day, He will set His feet on the Mount of Olives, near Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall split across from east to west, and one part of the Mount shall shift to the north and the other to the south, a huge gorge. And the Valley in the Hills shall be stopped up as it was stopped up as a result of the earthquake in the days of King Uzziah of Judah.-And the LORD my God, with all the holy beings, will come to you. And the LORD shall be king over all the earth; in that day there shall be one LORD with one name.²⁶ Hear, O Israel! The LORD our God, the LORD is One.²⁷

Theodor Herzl died in 1906, forty-two years before the declaration of the Jewish State by David Ben-Gurion on May 14th 1948. His work and his vision were truly prophetic and miraculous; and his leadership was of epic proportion. His words ring in our ears today, “Therefore I believe that a wondrous generation of Jews will spring into existence. The Maccabeans will arise once again. Let me repeat once more my opening words: The Jews who wish will have their State.”²⁸

¹ Lloyd P. Gartner, *History of the Jews in Modern Times* (Oxford, 2001), 251

² Carl E. Schorski, *The Journal Of Modern History* (1967), 373

³ Essays and Addresses by Theodor Herzl, translated from the German by Harry Zohn, *Zionist Writings, Volume One: January, 1896-June, 1898*, (Herzl Press, New York, 1973), 16-17

⁴ Edited by Gideon Shimoni and Robert S. Wistrich, *Theodor Herzl: Visionary of the Jewish State* (Jerusalem, 1999), 162

⁵ Theodor Herzl; Foreword by Chaim Weizman, *The Jewish State* (New York, 1943), 19

⁶ *Ibid.*, 92

⁷ *Ibid.*, 94

⁸ Edited by Gideon Shimoni and Robert S. Wistrich, *Theodor Herzl: Visionary of the Jewish State* (Jerusalem, 1999), 15

⁹ Theodor Herzl; Foreword by Chaim Weizman, *The Jewish State* (New York, 1943), 17

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 76

¹² Edited by Gideon Shimoni and Robert S. Wistrich, *Theodor Herzl: Visionary of the Jewish State* (Jerusalem, 1999), 140

¹³ *Ibid.*, 87

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 122

¹⁵ Theodor Herzl; Foreword by Chaim Weizman, *The Jewish State* (New York, 1943), 27

¹⁶ Essays and Addresses by Theodor Herzl, translated from the German by Harry Zohn, *Zionist Writings, Volume One: January, 1896-June, 1898*, (Herzl Press, New York, 1973), 13

¹⁷ Edited by Gideon Shimoni and Robert S. Wistrich, *Theodor Herzl: Visionary of the Jewish State* (Jerusalem, 1999), 322

¹⁸ Stephen M. Wylen, *Settings of Silver* (New York, 2000), 390

¹⁹ Edited by Gideon Shimoni and Robert S. Wistrich, *Theodor Herzl: Visionary of the Jewish State* (Jerusalem, 1999), 172-173

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 161-162

²¹ Theodor Herzl; Foreword by Chaim Weizman, *The Jewish State* (New York, 1943), 63

²² Edited by Gideon Shimoni and Robert S. Wistrich, *Theodor Herzl: Visionary of the Jewish State* (Jerusalem, 1999), 304

²³ Theodor Herzl; Foreword by Chaim Weizman, *The Jewish State* (New York, 1943), 110

²⁴ Alan M. Dershowitz, *Israel: The Jew among the Nations* (2002). Nativ is a publication of the Ariel Center for Policy Research (ACPR). ‘The doors of Nativ are open to diverse subjects and authors, on the understanding that all texts published will serve as stimuli for high-level debate on issues of vital interest to Israel.’

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Jewish Publication Society) Zechariah 14:1-5;9

²⁷ *The Holy Bible* (King James Version) Deuteronomy 6:4

²⁸ Theodor Herzl; Foreword by Chaim Weizman, *The Jewish State* (New York, 1943), 111

Bibliography

Theodor Herzl; Foreword by Chaim Weizman, *The Jewish State* (New York, 1943)

Zionist Writings, Volume One: January, 1896-June, 1898, (Herzl Press, New York, 1973)

Theodor Herzl: Visionary of the Jewish State (Jerusalem, 1999)

Lloyd P. Gartner, *History of the Jews in Modern Times* (Oxford, 2001)

Stephen M. Wylen, *Settings of Silver* (New York, 2000)