

Herzl's Vision

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As Jews began arriving in Basel for the first Zionist Congress in August, 1897, they carried with them the fears and hopes of Jewish communities from all over Eastern and Western Europe, from Rumania, Bulgaria, Galicia, Bukovinia, Russia, Germany, France, England. Yet their greatest apprehension centered on the meeting itself. No one knew what to expect, and the dominant mood was one of uncertainty. Who would be in attendance? How was the conference to be organized? Would observant Jews from tiny villages in Eastern Europe have anything in common with Western Jewish intellectuals? What really could the meeting accomplish? Could one speak on the floor in Russian? How should one dress? Up until the opening of the Congress no one knew the answers to these questions—no one except Theodore Herzl.

Theodore Herzl, the visionary European playwright and journalist, author of *Der Judenstaat*, lecturer, frustrated Jewish diplomat to the Ottoman court, Western, secularized Jew—Herzl, against the clamor of opposition and criticism, was the only man with the will and bravado to bring off the Congress in the face of the real possibility of disaster. For several years he had been traveling extensively across Europe and corresponding with many of the people heading toward Basel. He alone knew what was on their minds. Few of the delegates had ever taken part in a conference in another country, and Herzl realized that much would be lost on the first day if they were bewildered and confused by the strange surroundings and circumstances. So Herzl's staff had worked out all the details: living arrangements, agenda, interpreters, badges in blue with a red border and the inscription "The establishment of a Jewish state is the only possible solution to the Jewish question." Herzl even decreed that the Congress convene in formal dress with tails and white tie. At the very last moment one of the keynote speakers, Max Nordau, appeared in a frock coat, and Herzl urged him to return to his hotel to change into formal dress. "Today," said Herzl, "the presidium of the Zionist Congress is nothing at all, we still have to establish everything. People should get used to seeing the Congress as a most exalted and solemn thing."

It was Herzl's congress, as everyone recognized, but the first day was a triumph for Max Nordau, a German-speaking Hungarian Jew, as well as for Herzl. After the

opening blessing by an elderly Jew from Jassy, Herzl walked slowly to the podium, looking, in the words of one observer, "not as the elegant Herzl of Vienna, but a man of the house of David risen all of a sudden from his grave in all his legendary glory." He delivered a brief statement of the rationale of the Congress, and then turned the podium over to Nordau. Echoing Herzl's words "that with few exceptions: the condition [of the Jews] is not a happy one," he went on to show that the present lot of the Jews could be pictured "only in one color," that of continuing misery. This misery was not the misery common to all men, but the peculiar misery of the Jews. In the East it took the form of poverty, hunger, repressive laws, the want of the necessities of life. In lands where nine-tenths of the Jews live—Eastern Europe, North Africa, western Asia—there is "daily distress of the body, anxiety for every day that follows, a tortured fight for bare existence." For the Jews in Western Europe the misery was moral and spiritual, the "perpetual injury to self-respect and honor," and "brutal suppression of the striving for spiritual satisfactions which no non-Jew is obliged to deny himself."

When Nordau stepped down the assembly sensed that he had spoken what was in everyone's mind and heart. Though the hard political struggles of the Congress still lay before the delegates, the Congress began on a note of unity, of common experience, with the "national answer" to the Jewish problem as the symbol of that unity. As recently as 1882 the most eminent rabbi in Vienna, Adolf Jelinek, had said, speaking of Jewish immigration: "If I were to agree...I would have to deny my past and all I had ever preached and published in the course of over thirty years....We are at home in Europe and we feel that we are the sons of the country in which we were born and brought up....We are Germans, Frenchmen, Englishmen, Magyars, Italians, and so on, down to the marrow of our bones....We have lost the sense of Hebrew nationality."

The question, then, posed for Jews since the Emancipation, was whether the Jews were

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to seek a modus vivendi in society as a "religion," as Moses Mendelssohn, the great eighteenth-century Jewish thinker, had proposed, or whether the Jews should think of themselves as a people, a nation, and seek the appropriate means to realize and express this national unity. Nordau spoke for enlightened, successful, emancipated Jews who had once thought they could find a way to exist as Jews in Western society but now knew better. Emancipation had not worked. "The Jew," said Nordau, "has no ground under his feet and he has no community to which he belongs as a full member." He is torn, divided, an "inner cripple, an exile from his former home but excluded from the world he hoped to claim."

It was hardly apparent to most Jews that Herzl's proposal for a Jewish state was "the" answer—as Herzl called it in a letter to Bismarck in 1895—but events in both the West and the East in the 1880's and 1890's disposed many to the new idea. In the East the Russian pogroms of 1881-84, and equally harsh measures in Rumania, convinced many Jews that immigration (though not necessarily to Israel) was the only solution. In the West, where overt anti-Semitism was showing itself in enlightened nations such as France, Jewish thinkers realized that Emancipation had not altered in any fundamental way the character of society in the West.

Responses varied in East and West, and from community to community: Some organized clubs, "Lovers of Zion," and encouraged immediate immigration to Eretz Israel. Others called for "autoemancipation" of the Jews, issued pamphlets, and began publishing journals calling for a new sense of Jewish identity. Yet others suggested that Jews negotiate with a foreign country to grant them a place to which they might emigrate. No matter what the particular program or idea, and there were many, the great achievement of the Jewish clubs and pamphleteers was to raise up the "national answer," the idea that survival of the Jews required that they see themselves as a nation. The problem of the Jew could not be solved within the nations in which Jews were born and lived.

A more drastic solution was necessary. In this context Herzl published *Der Judenstaat*, proposing a "very old idea," the "restoration of the Jewish state." Though Herzl did not link his program specifically to Eretz Israel, the dreams of many to emigrate to Israel, as well as the religious tradition of the land, led many to see the Jewish state and Eretz Israel as necessarily bound together.

Like any great idea, Zionism grew slowly and did not spring full-blown from the mind of one man, but it is the particular virtue of David Vital's *The Origins of Zionism* (The Clarendon Press: 412 pp.; \$22.00) to show how Zionism took hold within the consciousness of Jews over the space of a few decades. He meticulously chronicles the various stages of thinking that eventually found expression in the First Jewish Congress and the specific language of its final resolutions. In some ways the book is too closely

preoccupied with internal Jewish affairs to appreciate the larger social and intellectual context of nineteenth-century nationalism. Vital ignores the nationalistic movements of other peoples and nations. But his purpose is to show very concretely how Zionism came to be "the" answer to the situation of Jews in the nineteenth century.

Zionism was an attempt to reshape Jewish social, economic, and ultimately political life, but it was first and foremost a movement for survival. It is this characteristic that gave (and gives) Zionism its fervor and passion, its transcendent strength, its impatience with its critics, and which sets it apart from most other social and political movements of modern times. Vital's work will be compared with Laqueur's industrious *History of Zionism* published several years ago, but the works are different in conception and execution. Vital is interested in the inception and development of the idea, the persons and events that gave it form, and its success in meeting the challenge facing Jews. Laqueur dwells only briefly on such matters and traces the history of the movement up to the present time. Vital's is the richer work, though it covers much less ground than Laqueur's *History*.

In large historical terms Zionism must be seen as the most compelling and successful Jewish response to the Emancipation. For many Jews political Zionism was the only feasible solution to the problems faced by Jews in the enlightened nations of the West as well as the repressive regimes of the East. It was an idea developed by Western Jewish intellectuals, but its success lay in the capacity of such men to interpret it to the radically different experiences of Eastern Jews. Zionism created the Jews as "nation," thereby preparing the way for the modern state of Israel and transforming the history of modern Jewry.

But in another sense, which Vital recognizes, the Zionist movement must be seen as a minority movement among the Jews, even to this day. It was not "the" solution Herzl thought it was. That is not to say that most Jews are unsympathetic to Zionism or that the establishment of the State of Israel has not transformed Jewish existence, but that many Jews still believe, despite the experiences of the past, that their best hope lies not in immigration to Eretz Israel but in working out a modus vivendi in the societies in which they live. In this sense Zionism, while it has captured the hearts and imagination of many Jews, has not won the allegiance of all Jews. It has given Jews a new sense of national identity, and in this way it has altered irrevocably the relation of Jews to other peoples and nations. In the early nineteenth century many Jews believed they could find a place for themselves as a religious group within the larger society. But the history of Zionism has shown that this idea was not only socially naive but finally failed to touch the deepest well-springs of Jewish identity. The extraordinary success of Zionism is a dramatic reminder that for the modern Jew the most fundamental reality of his life is not that he is a member of a religious community but that he is part of a people and a "nation," no matter where he lives.