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Zionism through Herzl's footsteps

In a visit to Budapest, Vienna and Basel, 21 Israelis relive the life of one of the most famous Zionist visionaries

• By ELIANA SCHREIBER

After Mevaseret Zion resident Gusti Yehoshua-Braverman watched her son go on a Masa tour of Poland in his final year of high school, she realized no comparable program existed for adults.

She also found that while many Jewish European trips tour Holocaust sites, none visit key places in the life of Zionist visionary Theodor Herzl.

Yehoshua-Braverman, a member of the Public Council to Commemorate Theodor Herzl, thus decided to use her position as head of the department of Diaspora activities in the World Zionist Organization to create a four-and-a-half-day tour tracing the roots of Zionism in Budapest – where Herzl was born in 1860, Vienna – where he lived, and Basel – where he convened his seminal World Zionist Congress in 1897.

The trip, she hoped, would serve both educate Israelis about the founding of the Zionist movement in the 19th century, and connect them with Jews in the Diaspora today.

Yehoshua-Braverman selected 21 participants between the ages of 30 to 40 for the three-country tour that took place earlier this month.

Tour members, who included actors, athletes and journalists, came from across the political spectrum.

One was an Orthodox settler, another the former CEO of Peace Now and a third Tel Aviv deputy Mayor Mehereta Baruch-Ron.

“I chose those who can bring with them an interesting story,” Yehoshua-Braverman said. “My desire and my commitment is to create a dialogue around Zionism that is not necessarily agreeing on different issues in Israeli society.”

Baruch-Ron said it was exciting for her to experience the history by exploring the sites on foot.

“We followed Theodor Herzl’s footsteps from the moment he was born, where he began in Budapest and continued to Vienna and then to Basel, where the first Zionist Congress happened,” she said.

Baruch-Ron, who was born in Seramle, Ethiopia in 1974 and came to Israel when she was 10, said the trip reminded her of the importance of Zionism when she was growing up in Africa.

She was struck by sculptor Gyula Pauer’s memorial The Shoes on the Danube Bank in Budapest.

The sculpture memorializes the 3,500 people, 800 of them Jews, who in December 1944 and January 1945 were ordered by fascist Arrow Cross militiamen to take off their shoes, and then shot at the riverbank so that their bodies fell into the water and were carried downstream.

“I couldn’t stop thinking that a lot of people were witnessing that. And I guess the people who swam or sailed in the Danube saw the evidence,” she said.

“If we had a country, a Jewish state, maybe many lives would have been saved, but we didn’t.”

At the end of the trip, the group visited the Basel casino and the balcony of room 117 at the city’s Hotel Les Trois Rois where Herzl posed for a famous photograph before convening the Zionist Congress.

David Borowich-Yaari, the Lexington, Kentucky-born chairman of A.B. Yaari Holdings Ltd., said the group felt special when it posed to recreate the famous picture.

“It showed that even the cynical people... everybody was a believer in that

moment,” Borowich Yaari said.

The trip helped him reconnect with his Zionism, which he felt became dormant after moving to Israel to serve in the IDF three decades ago.

“I want to re-engage, as well, in helping make Zionism relevant to Jews outside of Israel,” Borowich Yaari said.

After visiting the three cities, the group read Israel’s declaration of independence, and were asked to create their own vision – for

Zionism inside Israel and for Jews of the Diaspora.

Notwithstanding the participants’ different viewpoints and personalities, Baruch-Ron said the group got along well.

“It was moving to see everybody helping each other and talking to each other, even though we are different.”

She said she hopes that Herzl’s story can be told more widely, so people understand his vision and the price he paid for the cre-

ation of a Jewish state.

Similarly, Yehoshua Braverman hopes that in the future the Ministry of Education will put more funding toward trips like this.

“This can in a way ensure that there will be a linkage between being a Jew, being a Zionist and being a part of a Jewish people,” she said.

Baruch-Ron said Herzl’s success is proof that dreams can be accomplished.

“I truly believe that like Herzl, if you dream it, you can make it,” she said.



PARALYMPIC TENNIS PLAYER Noam Gershony poses on the balcony of room 117 at Basel’s Hotel Les Trois Rois to recreate the iconic photograph of Theodor Herzl. (fat Shomrony and Eyal Ben Zeev Communications)