

HISTORY



A sign marking Theodor Herzl Street, written in Serbian in Cyrillic and Latin script. The street was renamed in Herzl's honor in a state ceremony this past July. (Ronen Shnidman)



The tomb of Theodor Herzl's paternal grandmother, Rebecca Herzl, in Zemun's Jewish cemetery. (Ronen Shnidman)

Celebrating Zionism's roots in Serbia

Israelis are increasingly heading to the Balkans for leisure and adventure. But our history with Serbia goes back a lot farther

By **RONEN SHNIDMAN**

President Reuven Rivlin visited Serbia this past July to participate in a ceremony with Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic renaming a street after the Zionist visionary Theodor Herzl in the Belgrade neighborhood of Zemun. This unusual event, which marked the first ever visit by an Israeli president to Serbia, received less coverage than would be expected from most Israeli news outlets.

It begs the question: What was Herzl's connection to Zemun, and why would the Serbian government name a street after him?

The answer may surprise most Jews and even many ardent Zionists. The intellectual roots of political Zionism and the Jewish state did not start with the refined emancipated Jews of fin-de-siècle Vienna or Paris, and they certainly don't begin in Poland. Zionism's journey traces back to a pious Sephardi rabbi in what was then the Serbian border town of Zemun at the edge of the Austrian Empire. It was this rabbi who taught Herzl's grandfather and father and likely planted the seeds of the Jewish state, some 70 years before the First Zionist Congress in Basel and 90 years before the Balfour Declaration.

Moving from Balkan nationalism to Zionism

Historians in the past focused on difficulties secular emancipated Jews like Theodor Herzl had integrating into the rapidly developing European societies of Western and Central Europe at the end of the 19th century. However, Herzl's exposure to the idea of reconstituting the Jewish nation predates his coverage of the Dreyfus Affair as a journalist or even his encounters with elite antisemitism as a law student in Vienna. Instead, it can be traced back to his father's family's roots in Zemun (also known by its old German name Semlin) and the influence of the community's Sephardi rabbi, Judah Ben Shlomo Hai Alkalai.

Alkalai is today acknowledged as a precursor of the

modern Zionist movement, but his ideas are usually mentioned in passing if at all. Likewise, there is very limited scholarship regarding how this Sephardi rabbi on the edge of an empire came to his revolutionary ideas for the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel. Historians and literary experts have pointed to the influence of the radical interpretations of the Bible from the Kabbala as a source of inspiration (as was the case with Rav Abraham Isaac Kook). While it is certainly possible that the rabbi's knowledge of Kabbala played a role, what has been ignored is the influence of the early national revolts in the Balkans against Ottoman rule, in particular by the Serbs, and its possible influence on the ideas of a young Rabbi Alkalai.

Alkalai was born in 1798 in Sarajevo in what was then the Ottoman Empire and which today is Bosnia and Herzegovina. He came from a prominent family of rabbis whose roots trace back to Spain before the Jewish expulsion, and his father moved the family to Sarajevo from the large and well-established Sephardi community in Thessalonica. After spending years acquiring a traditional education, including rabbinical ordination and studying with kabbalists in the Holy Land, at the age of 27 Alkalai became the communal rabbi of the town of Zemun in what was then on the military frontier of the Austrian Empire. He served as rabbi for both the Sephardi and Ashkenazi members of the town's small Jewish community, according to information found in the Jewish Historical Museum's archives in Belgrade.

In his first work, *Shema Yisrael* ("Hear O Israel"), published in Belgrade in 1834, Alkalai provides a radical re-interpretation of the well-known Jewish prayer. In Alkalai's reading, the quote from the Bible, "Hear O Israel" is actually a commandment to gather all of the children of Israel together as one. This singular body, Alkalai says, should be some sort of national congress that will supervise the general return of the Jewish people to the land of their forefathers. He also says that the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel would require the recreation of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem

or the election of a political leader, known from the rabbinical literature as the Messiah son of Joseph.

Taking from Kabbala and Serbian nationalism

After the Damascus Blood Libel in 1840, Alkalai's work acquired a more urgent nature and his writings included a stronger kabbalistic dimension. He declared in his work *Minhat Yehuda* ("The Offering of Judah"), that a 100-year process of redemption of the Jewish people through voluntary means had begun. However, the book also stated that if the Jewish people did not unite and achieve an ingathering of the exiles during these 100 years, the next 100 years (from 1940 to 2040) would witness a terrible involuntary ingathering of the exiles accompanied by the outpouring of God's wrath.

What is interesting is that in Alkalai's earlier writings he places greater emphasis on the need for unity among the Jewish people for the return to the Land of Israel to be achieved. "It is easy to reconcile two states, but [hard to bring together] two Jews!" Alkalai wrote according to a chronicle of the Jewish community in Zemun written by Danilo Fogel.

Alkalai's focus on the importance of unity, as with other aspects of his writing, may have been influenced by his study of Kabbala. However, it is hard to overlook the influence of the Serbian uprisings against the Ottoman Empire that engulfed the region surrounding Zemun in the first two decades of the 19th century. The uprisings led to the founding in 1817 of the semi-independent Principality of Serbia and eventually to de jure independence for the Kingdom of Serbia with its capital, Belgrade, just across the river from Zemun. It was Serbian intellectuals of this era who coined and adopted the rallying cry for Serb nationalists ever since, "Only unity saves the Serbs."

The Serbian uprisings were the first successful national uprising against the Ottoman Empire, which controlled the Land of Israel and predated the emancipation of the Jews by the Habsburgs by 50 years. Perhaps Alkalai sought to emu-

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Rabbi J. Alkalai Street signage in Cyrillic in Zemun's old Jewish neighborhood. The street was renamed in the rabbi's honor in the 1990s. (Ronen Shnidman)



The old Zemun Syngagogue – by turns a rock club and a traditional Serbian restaurant – at 5 Rabina Alkalaja (Rabbi Alkalai) Street. (Wikimedia Commons)



Rabi J. H. Alkalaj sa svojom ženom Esterom.

A photograph of Rabbi Alkalai and his wife, Ester (Jewish Historical Museum of Belgrade)

among several Jewish communities in Serbia's largest cities.

Starting in the 1850s, Alkalai moved to a position that success in re-establishing the Jewish people in the Land of Israel would require the support of prominent Jews in Western Europe and the assistance of the European powers. Alkalai established in 1852 the short-lived Society for the Settlement of Eretz Israel in London. More importantly, he started touring across Europe to raise support for Jewish resettlement in the Land of Israel in the larger Jewish communities outside the Balkans.

Planting 'Der Judenstaat's' seeds

The Herzl family originated in either the Sudetenland (modern-day Czech Republic) or Hungary but moved to Austrian-ruled Serbia in the period immediately following the Treaty of Passarowitz in 1718. While the Herzl family were Hungarian Ashkenazi Jews, they married Jews from local Sephardi families that moved to the region around Belgrade earlier under the rule of the Ottoman Turks. Documents maintained in the Jewish community archives (much of which were destroyed during World War II) note that Simon Leib Herzl, Theodor Herzl's paternal grandfather, was a pious and active member in the Jewish community of Zemun and a well-respected merchant.

Theodor's father, Jacob Herzl, was also born and raised in Zemun before relocating to Budapest around the time of his marriage to Herzl's mother, Jeanette Diamant. However, Theodor Herzl saw his grandfather at regular intervals until the latter's death when Herzl was 19 years old and had moved with his family to Vienna.

Simon Herzl was a shofar blower of the community served by Alkalai, and he and his son Jacob appear to have studied the rabbi's ideas. According to a monograph on Alkalai found in the historical archives, the elder Herzl studied in particular Alkalai's book *Kol Kore* ("A Voice Calling"), which called for Jewish nationalism in 1848, the year of nationalist

revolutions took place in Central Europe and in the Austrian Empire in particular.

However, some later literary scholars, such as McGill professor David Aberbach, suggest that Theodor Herzl and his book *Der Judenstaat* ("The Jewish State") may have been more influenced by Alkalai's *Goral L'Adonai* ("A Lot for the Lord"). The latter book, published in 1857, almost 40 years before *Der Judenstaat*, laid out a political program for uniting the Jewish community and gaining external support from major world powers to re-establishment a Jewish state in the Land of Israel. Like Alkalai before him, Herzl traveled across Europe to enlist the support of prominent Jews and non-Jews alike for the creation of a Jewish state. The major difference is that Herzl succeeded in generating real interest among the non-Jewish political elite in Europe and created a lasting Zionist political infrastructure within the Jewish community.

Interestingly, several descendants of relatives of Theodor Herzl and Rabbi Alkalai who stayed in Zemun would become prominent members of the Zionist movement in Yugoslavia in the 20th century. One, David Alkalai, would represent Serbian Jewry at the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897 and from 1924 would serve as president of the Zionist Alliance of Yugoslavia.

Balkan Zionism's forgotten halcyon days

The Zionist movement would find fertile ground in pre-World War II Yugoslavia, and of the roughly 10% of Jews who survived the Holocaust many were former members of the Zionist youth groups. However, while Serbia's government has demonstrated pride in the illustrious past of its Jewish community, this history is almost entirely unknown, even among educated Serbs today.

"The Zionist movement in Yugoslavia was big and very important, but unfortunately we do not know much about it," says Barbara Panic, the curator at the Belgrade's Jewish Historical Museum.

It's not just an issue of the much-reduced size and importance of Serbia's once-thriving Jewish community, but also an unintended casualty of an educational agenda that sought to de-emphasize ethnic histories and particularism in Communist-era Yugoslavia.

"When I was school-age, we learned about the history of America and of Europe," adds Panic. "Serbs do not know much about Theodor Herzl or about Judah Alkalai. In Serbian primary and secondary school, we do not learn much about our own history."

late the national success of his Serbian neighbors? In fact, his advocacy for the reunification and return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel had a very practical bent as well.

"Although based on the values of Judaism and Kabbala, Alkalai's plans for the future of his people in the Holy Land were very practical," says local Serbian Jewish historian Oliver Klajn. "He envisioned buying land and creating settlements comprised mostly of Jews from the Ottoman Empire, since they would face fewer legal impediments than Jews from elsewhere." According to Klajn, Alkalai even founded in Zemun a society dedicated to the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel, which was active