



Recording a journey to Jerusalem

The incredible story of how the Central Zionist Archives and the Theodor Herzl Archive were saved from Europe

By SUZANNE BERNIS

Silent witnesses of the whole Zionist past gathered in a dark stone basement, illuminated by a series of electric lamps. At first glance, the basement appears to be a catacomb. Thousands of Jewish newspapers in different languages, excerpts from the non-Jewish press with articles featuring Zionism, a collection of assorted books, brochures and pamphlets on the Zionist movement and the Jewish land; and, last but not least, a colossal organized archive of the files and documents of the Zionist organizations, the treasure of our past."

These are the words of Dr. Hindos, an enthusiastic Zionist from New York, as he described his visit in 1924 to the Central Zionist Archives in the newspaper *Dos Yiddishe Folk*.

Last summer, I visited Berlin for the dedication of a memorial plaque honoring the CZA centennial celebrations. During my visit, I stepped down the same low flight of stairs to the catacomb-like basement described by Hindos many years before.

Dr. Georg Herlitz founded the Zionisches Archiv (Zionist Archives) on June 1, 1919, at Sächsischestrass 8, in a room that had previously served as a bathroom of a private apartment. However, at that time, it housed the offices of the Zionisches Zentralbüro Berlin (Central Zionist Office Berlin). The CZA started with only a few dozen folders and a large stack of papers.

It then moved in 1924 to a more spacious building, bequeathed to the Zionist movement by the Jewish surgeon Dr. Friedrich Kabersky, on Meinekestrasse, with many other Zionist organizations. Also housed in this building was the Jewish Agency, which issued the very sought-after Palestine certificates.

The Zionist Archives in Berlin (1919-1933) included three sections: library, Zionist journals (including a photograph collection), and archival material of the Zionist institutions, including various Zionist offices, the Jewish National Fund, the agency and the Keren Hayesod.

Due to the instability in Germany in December 1931, Herlitz contacted Dr. Leo Lauterbach, the head of the Organization Department in the World Zionist Organization, and warned him of the impending danger of either the Communists or alternatively Hitler's Nazis coming into power. He wrote: "There is no need to explain the ramifications of such a move. We believe that if this scenario comes to pass, then Zionist activities will no longer be possible here."

As a cautionary measure, Herlitz used a code to convey this message. He later disclosed the code in an interview on the 80th birthday of journalist Avraham Elhanani: "The climate in our country is not good for the goods I handle. Perhaps it is better to move it to a warmer country" (*Davar*, March 11, 1965).

On February 1, 1933, the day after the Nazis seized power, Herlitz directed a request to the executive branch of the Zionist organization to move the archives to Palestine.

Once again, Herlitz used precautionary measures to make sure the letter would arrive at its destination. As letter censorship existed from the first day of National Socialist rule, Herlitz was convinced that the censor would read any message with the logo of a Zionist institution. Consequently, he used a plain envelope and addressed the letter to Lauterbach's home address.

Six months later, the Zionist executive informed Herlitz to take all steps needed to transfer the archives to Jerusalem.

Faced with the challenge of relocating a Jewish archive out of Nazi Germany, Herlitz's wife suggested: "The Prussians certainly remained the strict officials they have always been, even after the rule passed to the National Socialists...."

Surprisingly, his request was accepted, although a few days later a Gestapo officer appeared at the archives and took an interest in its contents. Overwhelmed by the amount of the documents and their languages, he demanded that Herlitz write the report in his place, which he would sign afterward.

Fortunately, everything worked out, and in the fall of 1933, with the help of the WZO, the archives, packed in 154 crates, arrived in Jerusalem and moved to the National Institutions Building.

Twenty-three years later, the 24th Zionist Congress confirmed the CZA to be the "historical archives of the Zionist movement and organization and the Jewish Agency" with the following resolution: "All the offices and institutions of the World Zionist Organization Executive and the Jewish Agency in Israel and the Diaspora are obliged to make all files, no longer necessary for ongoing work, accessible to the archives."

The small archive, with its original limited material content, grew into the CZA of today. In 1987, it moved to its own building adjacent to the Jerusalem International Convention Center complex. A century later, with over 90 million documents, photographs, private archives, maps and plans, the CZA is considered the largest and most important archive of the history of the Zionist enterprise as well as one of the most extensive public archives in Israel.

Herlitz was not only the founder of the CZA but was also very involved in the Zionist enterprise as a Zionist official over the years at the various Zionist Congresses.

Herlitz met Moritz Reichenfeld at the 19th Zionist Congress in Lucerne in 1935. Reichenfeld, the last surviving executor of Theodor Herzl's last will, was also a cousin of Herzl's wife, Julie. After Herzl's death, his private archive was preserved in the house of Johann Kremenetzky, founder of the JNF and Herzl's close friend and adviser. A year after Kremenetzky's death, Reichenfeld was looking for a new home for Herzl's archive and understood the urgency to transfer the archive out of Austria.

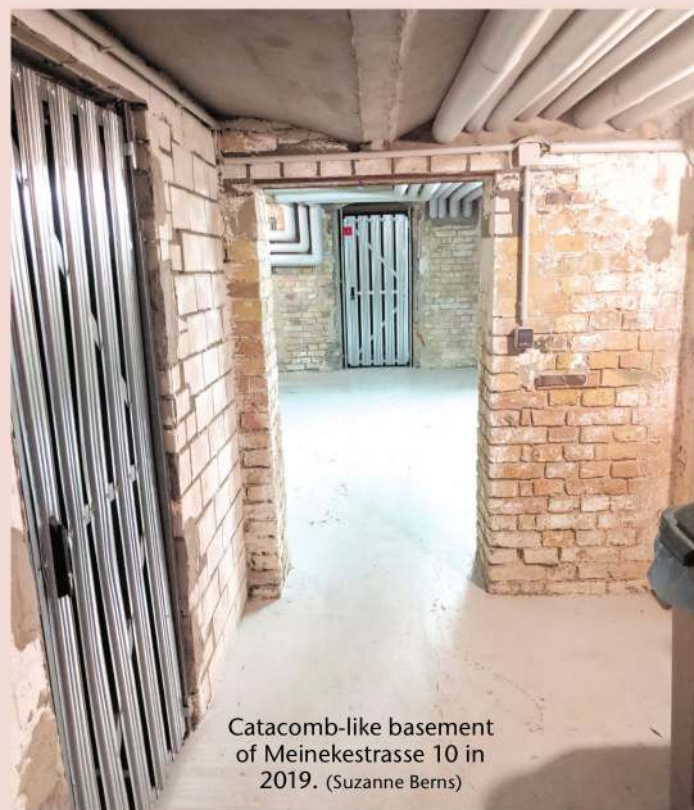
To receive Herzl's collection was a dream come true for Herlitz, as he had been trying for years to add it to the CZA's collections. After a follow-up visit in Vienna, Herlitz succeeded in obtaining the approval to bring the Herzl Archive to Jerusalem. However, Reichenfeld had placed a condition in the agreement, stipulating that the Zionist Archives would have to appoint a special curator for the Herzl Archive.

MEANWHILE, IN Austria, as the National Socialist movement grew stronger, an official declaration for moving the Herzl Archive seemed problematic. Therefore, they decided to send the archive as the "household goods" of the pioneer Josef Kastein.

A year and a half later, two large crates arrived at Haifa Port. A few days afterward, the CZA received a summons to carry out customs clearance for the shipment in the harbor.



Dr. Georg Herlitz at the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem, 1947. (Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem)

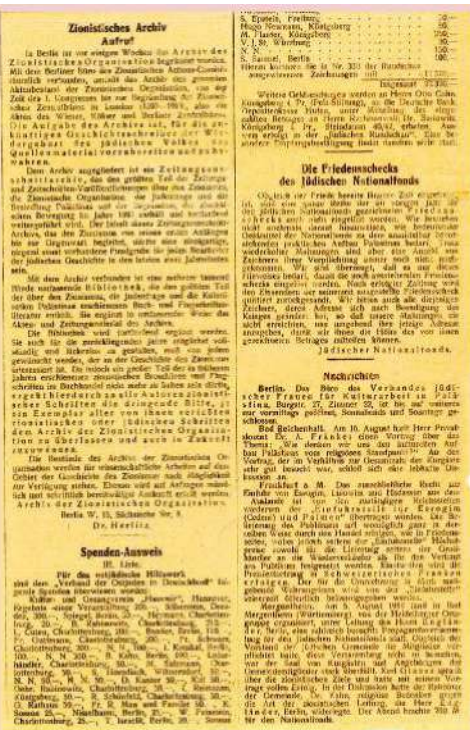


Catacomb-like basement of Meinekestrasse 10 in 2019. (Suzanne Bernis)



25.74x29.95	2/2	עמוד 23	the jerusalem post int	04/2020	72783230-2
בנימין זאב הרצל - בהקשר לציונו - 80790					

Fifth diary of Theodor Herzl. On the bottom right, on September 3rd, 1897, Herzl notes: "In Basel habe ich den Judenstaat gegründet" (In Basel I created the Jewish State). (Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem)

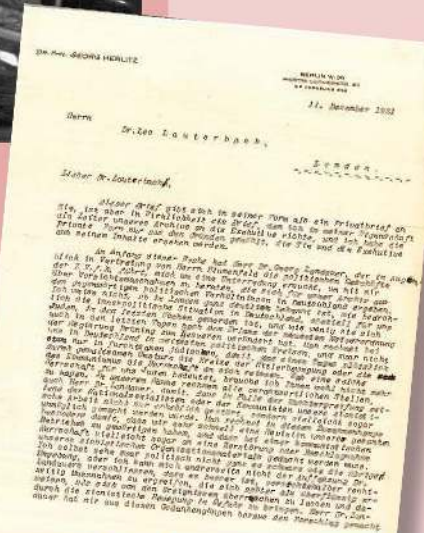


Left: First newspaper announcement (1919) of the CZA founding. (Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem)



Reading room of the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem, in the 1950s. (Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem)

Below: Letter from Dr. Georg Herlitz to Dr. Leo Lauterbach, communicating the political situation of 1931 Germany. (Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem)



The writer is the curator of the Theodor Herzl Archive at the Central Zionist Archives: suzanneb@wzo.org.il

But before the representative of the CZA, Dr. Alex Bein, was able to comply with this request, an incident occurred that almost destroyed the Herzl Archive. An arsonist set fire to the customs warehouses of the Haifa Harbor, destroying several buildings and their contents. By a miracle, the flames came to a stop next to the wall by which the Herzl Archive was stored.

With the arrival in Jerusalem, the travails of Herzl's archive were yet to be over.

On June 29, 1946, on the Sabbath known as the "Black Shabbat," at 6 a.m. the general secretary of the Zionist Executive (the Jewish Agency) woke Herlitz up and informed him that British police and military were searching the offices of the National Institutions Building, including the CZA. He asked him to hand over the keys of the archive's safe.

As the keys were in the archives, Herlitz dressed quickly and went with the police car waiting for him to the archives.

A British police officer, already expecting him, inquired about the safe's contents.

Herlitz responded: "Only historical material from the early days of Zionism, which will certainly not be of any interest to you," to which the officer replied: "You are mistaken, exactly this is of great interest to us."

Left with no choice, Herlitz opened the archives' safe. After about half an hour, in which the officer browsed through various documents, a loud alarm sounded announcing the breakfast break of the British. Immediately, all the police and military personnel left the building.

Though surprised by the event, with the building empty, Herlitz quickly used the opportunity and hid relevant documents, including circulars and pamphlets, from the Jewish underground movement.

After the break, all the contents of the safe were loaded in 10 black boxes and transported away. Fortunately, Herlitz's concerns that the Herzl Archive was lost were unfounded. After four weeks, everything returned with a red note saying "On his Majesty's Service, Room 20" on each file and box. Each of Herzl's 18 diaries' end pages, between the cover and the first page, were carefully separated to see whether any "hostile to the state" material was hidden in it.

HERZL WAS a prolific writer. He wrote most of his time, be it for his work or in his private life, on small pieces of paper, at the corners of newspapers or in his diaries. Thankfully, he had the foresight to safeguard most of it.

After Herzl's death, the Inner Action Committee (Engeres Actions Comité) launched an outreach program to collect Herzl's letters. In the 1950s, the CZA also pursued a collection of letters, with the hope that if people find letters, maybe from their parents or grandparents, they will donate them to the CZA.

Both campaigns turned out to be successful. Today, although there

are still various institutions and private collectors holding letters and documents of Herzl, the CZA, with its extensive collection of over 30,000 documents, preserves the official archive of Theodor Herzl. It consists of personal and family records, his diaries, letters, his literary works, artifacts, Zionist writings and documents of his political activities.

Throughout time, Herzl's insightful writings have been the basis of various books, articles and studies. Researchers, students, and the general public enjoy Herzl's thoughts and visions for the Jewish state through visits to our reading room, lectures, or group visits to the Herzl Archive itself.

To see Herzl's original diaries, manuscripts and letters is a very emotional experience, which inspires young and old alike.