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DIASPORA AFFAIRS
• By ZVIKA KLEIN

The 125th anniversary of the historic First Zionist Congress took place this week, with the participation of President Isaac Herzog and at the initiative of the World Zionist Organization and its chairman Yaakov Hagoel.

Over 1,400 Jewish leaders participated in the events. The participants were members of the different factions of the Zionist Congress, representatives of Jewish communities, entrepreneurs, philanthropists and social activists from around the world.

On August 29, 1897, Theodor Herzl convened in Basel the First Zionist Congress. One hundred and twenty-five years later, from the place where the people of Israel awoke after 2,000 years of exile and united to return home, the WZO chose to commemorate the congress in a series of events, the first of which was in Basel.

The gathering was divided into two parts: the Herzl Leadership Conference, which focused on modern Zionism in light of Herzl's vision, and the Herzl Social Impact Entrepreneurship Summit, which hosted 125 leading entrepreneurs from the hi-tech industry.

Many journalists trashed the gathering, with a *Haaretz* columnist calling it "corrupt," and other news outlets published investigations of where the funds for it came from.

On the contrary, in the 20 years that I've been involved in this movement, there has never been such a big and impactful event. Heads of the Swiss government spoke to the Zionists from around the world and declared their support, the European media followed closely, to understand why so many Jews came as sort of pilgrims to Basel, the third-largest city in Switzerland, a city with a very small Jewish community.

Hundreds of the world's leading Jews approached the WZO and asked to be included in these events; some even begged to take part.

"I THINK that the really important thing that happened at the conference, happened by accident," Michael Eisenberg, American-born Israeli businessman, venture capitalist and author, told *The Jerusalem Post* on Thursday, after returning from Switzerland.

In his opinion this event was successful because there were basically no politicians there, and that enabled an important meeting between civic, technology and business entrepreneurs.

Eisenberg isn't your classic entrepreneur; he writes books about Judaism and is a regular guest at Jewish conferences, yet this was one of his first interactions with the Zionist Congress.

"I saw many participants speak about how technology can help civic organizations," Eisenberg said. "Entrepreneurs are just focused on different changes, and Zionism isn't usually one of them. I'd say it's a conversation that doesn't happen



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In Basel, was there a reclamation of Zionism?



PARTICIPANTS SING 'Hatikvah' at the end of a gala event on occasion of the 125th anniversary of the First Zionist Congress at the original venue, the Stadtcasino Basel, in Basel, Switzerland, on Monday. (Arnd Wiegmann/Reuters)

PRESIDENT ISAAC Herzog addresses the gathering in Basel this week. (Arnd Wiegmann/Reuters)

often, and I think it really happened in Basel.”

Eisenberg thinks that the civilians who participated in the gathering benefited from the absence of senior politicians. “Much of our future can be crafted by civilians, much like Herzl wasn’t a politician; he was a concerned and active civilian.”

“I came back to Israel as a different person, as if I am suddenly a lot more Zionist than I was three days ago,” Yuval Samet, CEO of the RiseUp financial app, which helps Israeli families organize their bank accounts and spend less.

He described himself as “a guy who grew up with a combative father and with the ethos of the State of Israel,” yet, according to Samet, “till I read Herzl’s book *State of the Jews* this year, I didn’t deeply understand Zionism.” He explained that after the Basel gathering, he feels “more connected to the Zionist movement.”

“As a start-up CEO, someone who brings a lot of taxes to Israel, I didn’t look at my work from a Zionist perspective nor as an economic leader. I now understand the connection between impact and Zionism.”

Samet quoted Herzog’s speech at the gala event urging Jews to “reclaim Zionism” and not be ashamed of it. “My interpretation of this term is to build an Israeli business, definitely one with social responsibility.”

In his speech, Herzog said: “I wish to focus on the final pillar: our duty to claim positive and proactive ownership over Zionism, especially now: to reclaim Zionism.” Maybe 10% of the participants actually caught on to Herzog’s new paradigm.

Herzog also said that “if I were to tell you that a major social media company had considered treating the word ‘Zionist’ as a term of abuse, you might tell me that this is a ridiculous thought. But it is true.

“Around a year ago, there was a discussion about whether the word ‘Zionist’ should be censored on social media, for fear that it is being used as a term of antisemitic abuse against Jews and Israelis, or whether, to quote the counterargument, the word ‘Zionist’ is a term of legitimate criticism of Israeli policy. I heard about this discussion, and I was appalled. I was appalled because, inconceivably, at no point did anyone suggest that ‘Zionist’ might actually be a positive term.”

As mentioned, many media outlets and personalities criticized spending millions of dollars on this gathering and that it took place in Basel instead of Jerusalem. Samet has a complex answer to this criticism.

“Was it a good investment?” he asked. “Let’s think of it this way: The more you invest, the more you want to see a significant return. I can tell you that participants like me, who build companies,

whose essence is to make positive changes in society, left Basel motivated to continue intensively [to delve into Zionism]. If the conference was actually a milestone, more activities will follow. I thought about the conference as if it was a TED event, but now we need local TEDx events to take place, in order to think of ideas that will be able to push the economy forward.”

Samet said that “if the conference is planned to be a good investment, there needs to be follow-up and calls for action; otherwise, it will be a failure. In my opinion, there can be a huge return on investment in this case. I hope it actually happens.”

ANOTHER DISCUSSION was regarding how deep Herzl’s connection was with Judaism, rather than the assumption in many Israeli textbooks that he was an assimilated Jew.

Prof. Gil Troy, an advocate for Zionism, published a book for the 125th anniversary, with quotes of Herzl from different parts of his Zionist journey. “A Basel memory” is the title of one of the short texts.

“In deference to religious considerations, I went to the synagogue on Saturday before the congress,” Herzl wrote of the Shabbat before the First Zionist Congress.

“The head of the congregation called me up to the Torah. I had the brother-in-law of

my Paris friend Beer, Mr. Markus of Meran, drill the *bracha* [benediction] into me. And then I climbed the steps to the altar; I was more excited than on all the congress days. The few Hebrew words of the *bracha* caused me more anxiety than my welcoming and closing address and the whole direction of the proceedings,” Herzl wrote.

Another highlight of the event was the understanding that Zionism won: Orthodox and Reform Jews were both against the establishment of the Zionist movement and creating a national Jewish state. Yet in the 1970s the Reform movement decided to support Zionism, and in the past few years many haredi groups have also joined in support, with the establishment of two factions in the congress representing American haredi Jews and Sephardi Jews in Israel and the Diaspora.

The Pittsburgh Platform of Reform Judaism in 1885 said: “We consider ourselves no longer a nation but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine... nor the restoration of any laws concerning a Jewish state.”

There were many Reform Jews at the gathering and not as many haredi Jews; some of them still don’t feel totally welcome in this movement. Let’s hope that they will feel welcome at the 150th anniversary celebrations.