

## Yizhar Hess

# If you will it, it is no unicorn

Theodor Herzl was not the first Zionist. Zionism actually made its debut on the stage of history a few years before Herzl became a Zionist. He was captured by the idea a bit after turning 35 or 36, meaning it was only eight or nine years that Herzl was a Zionist before he died, in 1904, at the mere age of 44. The entrepreneur of an imaginative political startup, younger than most of the current Israeli government's cabinet ministers, who succeeded in changing Jewish history.

This month, we are celebrating 125 years since the First Zionist Congress gathered in Basel. President Isaac Herzog will be in attendance; the president of Switzerland will play host; the original hall has been appropriately renovated and the balcony of Hotel Les Trois Rois will feature a parade of many of today's icons standing in Herzl's iconic pose. But, actually, we have forgotten that Herzl never wanted Basel; he had his eyes on Munich. As a senior commentator of Neue Freie Presse, the preeminent intellectual newspaper of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, his geopolitical insights were sharp. He knew what he was talking about when he heartily pursued sophisticated Munich as the appropriate locale for the gathering of the First Zionist Congress.

He soon learned that his insights regarding Jews were apparently not quite as sharp. Munich's rabbis were appalled at the thought that such a radical gathering would take place in their beloved city. At the bottom of the proclamation published against him, in an extraordinary show of unity, were the signatures of Orthodox, Reform and Conservative rabbis. It was paired with a request to prohibit the congress, and was immediately delivered to the authorities in Munich. Later, Herzl would dub them, with a certain measure of sarcasm, "Die Protestrabbiner" (it translates to "the Protest Rabbis," but sounds better in German), yet he was sharp enough to pick his battles and he set his sights on Basel.

Herzl didn't have much time – less than a year – to work on the First Zionist Congress, which convened in 1897. No email, no Excel spreadsheets. Only a typewriter, envelopes and stamps stood at his service. How does one convince 208 Jewish leaders – hailing from Europe, America, North Africa and Israel – to purchase tickets for boats and trains, to travel for weeks and to gather to discuss ideology in a Swiss city that was both small and remote? And why on this specific date? From all possibilities, to pick the end of August – August 29 to be exact – for an international conference? The Eu-

ropean "vacances" hadn't even ended officially. What was he thinking?

It is generally thought that Herzl's frustrated passion was playwriting. Oh, how he tried to conquer the European theaters before surrendering to journalism. But actually, the First Zionist Congress was as successful as a well-written play could be. Herzl proved that few others understood the composition of the dra-

the invitations requesting attendance in an official black "frock" suit (tuxedo) with a white tie. To Max Nordau, Herzl's deputy, this seemed ridiculous. A frock at 10 A.M.?! He showed up in a light suit. Herzl promptly sent him back to the hotel to change.

Herzl went through a transformation of sorts of his own, as well. His walk. His tone. He acted presidentially on stage and off.

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ma as did he. Arriving in Basel a few days before the congress, Herzl knew full well that he had managed to deliver his desired number of delegates, while also having secured unprecedented press coverage (almost 30 journalists were sent to cover the congress from all of Europe's leading papers). But when he took a look at the intended hall, he immediately knew that it wasn't the right venue for the vibe he wanted to create. He canceled it and rented the Stadtcasino, Basel's most magnificent venue. And then on to the decor, the stage, the flag. No detail was left unturned. The opening plenum was set for 10 A.M.,

He was confident. Quiet. Polite. Polished. Assertive. His movements were measured yet natural, not forced. What was it – charisma? majesty?

Only a small fraction of the Jewish people had any sympathy for the Zionist idea. Zionism had no kingdom, yet Herzl acted like a prince, and the magic worked.

Among the delegates were people who had met Herzl before and supported his ideas as well as people who arrived intending to debate him, especially about his book "Der Judenstaat," published a year earlier. And they were all silent with wonder, with awe. Amazed by his powers of

persuasion. Some, even if they found flaws, admitted among themselves that they had never met such a Jew.

Herzl, remember, was not the progenitor of the Zionist idea, but he was the first to establish its organized platform and to understand that politics was its engine. He politicized the Zionist idea. An active board was elected, committees established, regulations made and a constitution ratified. The delegates of the First Zionist Congress were sent home with a mission – to establish a Zionist organization in their home countries. For the Second Zionist Congress, to be a delegate one had to be elected democratically by their Zionist organization. From self-selected individuals they became official public representatives.

Herzl died at the age of 44, and 44 years after his death the State of Israel was established. There are many reasons to admire Israel. There are no fewer reasons to criticize Israel. Yet one cannot help but be moved by that unique moment, 125 years ago back there in Basel. That gathering of Jews, from across the world, led by a visionary, a dreamer, who was able not only to challenge Jewish history but to change it.

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