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# A dynasty that reached its end

• By TOVA HERZL

Last Friday, May 2, the day after Israel's 77th Independence Day, marked 165 years since the birth of Theodor Herzl. Known as the founder of political Zionism, he also established the Jewish National Fund to buy land; founded the Jewish Colonial Trust, the financial tool that enabled projects to materialize and was the forerunner of Israel's banking system; and initiated other institutions that serve the State of Israel and the Jewish people to this day.

His success in setting up a national infrastructure where none existed exacted a heavy personal price. I recently read Ilse Sternberger's book about the fate of his offspring (*Princes Without a Home*, ISP Publications, San Francisco 1994, translated into Hebrew by Youval Orr, and published by Yedioth Books in 2024).

The hundreds of pages that contain numerous quotes from letters and diaries convey an unbearable tragedy.

Theodor and Julie, rich and good-looking, died young (he at 44, she 39), following a troubled marriage. His heart did not withstand the burden of intense journalistic work together with the demands of promoting his vision. Who knows – had he accepted the Zionist movement's offer to pay him so that he could dedicate all his time and energy only to it, he might not have succumbed so young, and the fate of his children might have been different.

He spent his money and his wife's dowry on Zionism. Upon his death in 1904, the family was left empty-handed. The Zionist movement raised money for his children, who were brought up by guardians.

All three suffered major emotional crises during their short lives. Beautiful and talented Pauline lived a scandalous life and died at 40, probably of typhus, possibly of an overdose. Hans was exceptionally capable but did not find his place professionally and personally. He converted to Christianity, returned to Judaism, committed suicide upon his sister's death, and was buried with her, aged 39.

Trude married a man of her parents' generation. After the Nazis came to power, they sent their son Stephan to England. He served in

the British army, was posted to his country's embassy in Washington, DC, and committed suicide when he learned that his parents had been killed in the Holocaust.

Except for Trude, who shared the fate of most of Europe's Jews, it is impossible to know what caused the demise of her older siblings. It is likely that their father's frequent absences and their mother's mental illness undermined their stability. Possibly, young people from rich homes, especially women, were not trained to cope with life's demands and could not adjust to changing circumstances.

It may have been the gap between their status (many referred to their father as "king of the Jews") and reality, or their confusion regarding both their Jewish identity and Zionism. Regardless, their internal struggles were intolerable.

THE DYNASTY reached its end. Herzl has no direct descendants, only very distant relatives, like me. But the Zionist effort bore fruit – these past 77 years, Jews have had a state.

Alas, Herzl's life work is again disputed. We witness a growing debate about the right of Jews to a national home, and within us, there is widening disagreement about the way forward.

This internal conflict was manifested in elections to the World Zionist Congress, which ended earlier this week. The ultra-Orthodox, who opposed Herzl and remain opposed to Zionism, ran in the elections, along with extremist nationalists whose ideology goes counter to Herzl's principles, including equality, human rights, and a limit on the power of clergy.

These principles guided the Zionist movement, which led to the establishment of the state, at grave personal cost to Herzl, who envisioned it, and to his family. Let us hope that the movement and the state that it birthed will fare better than the fruit of his loins.

*The writer was Israel's first ambassador to the Baltic states after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, ambassador to South Africa, and the congressional liaison officer at the Israeli embassy in Washington. She is a graduate of Israel's National Defense College.*