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: Now available online, the diaries of Theodor Herzl

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## The Central Zionist Archives has digitized the diaries of the father of Zionism, offering a rare glimpse into his thinking

Ofer Aderet

After the First Zionist Congress in 1897, while riding the train home, Theodor Herzl recalled a deeply emotional moment. It was a prayer he recited in Hebrew at the synagogue in Basel before the congress. In his diary, the founder of modern political Zionism wrote: “The few words of the Hebrew blessing choked me with emotion.”

Herzl’s diaries were written in German, and he recorded the word “blessing” as “broche,” using the Ashkenazi pronunciation. He added: “The few Hebrew words of the broche caused me more anxiety than my welcoming and closing address, and the entire direction of the proceedings.”

The diaries provide a rare glimpse into the backstage of Herzl’s political activity. Recently, the staff of the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem completed the Herzl-Online digitization project, which makes his original diaries fully accessible online, including a Hebrew translation and search capabilities. Between the densely packed lines, readers can see hundreds



Images and writings scanned from Herzl’s diary. Herzl did not write in Hebrew, but in German and French.

Ardon Bar-Hama

of words Herzl erased – and through them, the thoughts that passed through his mind before he finalized his letters and other writings.

One example dates from August 1902, when Herzl

wrote to Eduard Crespi, his intermediary at the court of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, ruler of the Ottoman Empire. Shortly before, Herzl had returned from a disappointing visit to Constantinople

(today’s Istanbul), having realized that the sultan would not grant a charter for Jewish settlement in what was then British Mandatory Palestine. As a result, Herzl decided to change course and turned

instead to the option of Jewish settlement in the Sinai Peninsula.

The draft version of the letter to Crespi reveals his agitation. Herzl initially wrote a dry, short and con-

cise draft, which he then erased. He replaced it with a gentler version, filled with compliments and formal courtesies, and signed it with the phrase: “With devotion and friendship.” Numbers also appear throughout the diaries, serving as a code to conceal names he wished to keep secret. For example, Herzl used the number 401 as a code for the Zionist movement.

Herzl’s many and varied attempts to solve the “Jewish question” are scattered throughout the pages. In one entry, he wrote: “I wished to gain access to the Pope and say to him: Help us against the antisemites, and I will start a great movement for the free and honorable conversion of Jews to Christianity.” In another place, he mused: “Perhaps we could irrigate the desert land by means of the Nile!”

The diaries also document the physical toll of his travels. On one occasion, he wrote: “A severe weakness seized me that still persists... it causes me heart pains. Without taking off my clothes, I collapsed onto the bed in the small room I had rented.”

Herzl recorded in detail his visit to Eretz Israel in 1898, during which he met

the German Emperor Wilhelm II. “In dreadful heat we traveled by train to Jerusalem,” he wrote. “Sitting in the narrow, crowded compartment was a true torment. The Emperor said: We have encountered extremely hot weather. The day we met was most difficult. Near Ramla

**‘I wished to gain access to the Pope and say to him: Help us against the antisemites, and I will start a movement for the... conversion of Jews to Christianity.’**

we measured the temperature: 31 degrees in the shade, 41 in the sun.”

Jerusalem left a powerful impression on him. “Even now, in its desolation, it is still a beautiful city,” he wrote, “and if we come here, it can once again become one of the most beautiful cities in the world. ... If we ever receive Jerusalem, and if it will still

be in my power to accomplish something, I will clean it first.”

Herzl himself never wrote in Hebrew, but in his native German and in French as well. His children, however, practiced the language, as one diary entry shows: “The children ran wild as usual... ran to the bath, danced on the way to bed, said the evening prayer, and today I allowed them to say a prayer in Hebrew in addition to the prayer in German.”

Ardon Bar-Hama, who led the digitization project, said: “Herzl, who believed with all his heart in the power of technology to shape an advanced society, envisioned the Jewish state as a beacon of innovation. There is no doubt that he would have been excited by the opportunity to connect the public with his writings in a direct, complete, and more accurate way than ever before.”

Dror Morag, vice chairman of the World Zionist Organization, added: “In turbulent days for Israeli society, it is important that we return to Zionist sources and to the vision of the model society toward which Herzl aspired. Making his writings accessible is a major step in that direction.”