

'Cut off from his people': When Herzl's son converted to Christianity

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The Haaretz headline 102 years ago was hard to swallow: "Hans Herzl is cut off from his people."

It was probably no accident that the headline was surrounded by a black frame like a death notice. Citing "great pain and sorrow," the paper admitted that it had waited several days before reporting that Theodor Herzl's son had converted to Christianity.

"With Hans Herzl severing himself from his people, the cup of sorrows and torments of Benjamin Ze'ev Herzl and ours has been filled," the newspaper wrote, using the Zionist visionary's Hebrew names. "At about the same age as when his father discovered his Judaism, his son left Judaism. ... Herzl has made his last sacrifice on the altar of the Diaspora."

Theodor Herzl, a long-time heart patient, had died 20 years earlier at age 44. "He was the only son, the only heir," Haaretz lamented about Hans, who had two sisters.

The paper asked: "What else is left for Herzl? To be shocked for a moment in his eternal rest and to say Kad-

dish over his only son."

Haaretz's rival in those days, Doar Hayom, was edited by Itamar Ben-Avi, the son of Eliezer Ben Yehuda, the reviver of the Hebrew language. Doar Hayom chose to treat Hans Herzl's conversion humorously, which landed it in trouble with both the local Christian and Muslim communities.

On August 15, Yeshayahu Karniel wrote in his satirical column about a meeting between God and Theodor Herzl in heaven. Herzl is upset about his son's conversion, so God calms him down by saying, "I also had problems with my son – 2,000 years ago," referring to Jesus. Herzl responds, "But yours was a bastard, while my son was completely kosher."

When the column was translated, the word "bastard" – *mamzer* in Hebrew, meaning a child born out of wedlock – became "son of a whore" (*ben zona*), from which it was claimed that Doar Hayom was calling Jesus "the son of bastards," *ben znumim*. The Latin patriarch in Jerusalem filed a complaint with the British Mandate authorities, alleging blasphemy for insulting Jesus.

The Arabic-language Christian newspaper Raqib Sahyun, which was close to the patriarchate, reported that the Jews had become very angry after hearing that the son of the Zionist

Elyada of the University of Haifa; he was writing in the magazine Keshet. Last week, Elyada revisited the affair after Benjamin Netanyahu made remarks about Jesus.



Benjamin Ze'ev Herzl and his children.

The Zionist Archives

leader had converted, so the Jews now sought to "take revenge as a crude and brutal attack on the Christian saints, and on Jesus."

Pressured by the British authorities, Doar Hayom published an apology, but a few days later the government sued it anyway.

The chain of events that followed was reconstructed from archival material a decade ago by Prof. Ouzi

At a press conference, the prime minister paraphrased American historian Will Durant to argue that justice and morality are not enough to overcome evil. "Jesus Christ has no advantage over Genghis Khan," Netanyahu said, denying a day later that he had denigrated Jesus.

Back in 1924, Ben-Avi and Karniel were put in a jail cell and accused of

publishing remarks that mocked the prophets. Haaretz sent a reporter to cover the trial; these articles appeared under a section called "News by Telephone."

In court it was asserted that Jesus was considered the son of God by Christians and a prophet by Muslims, so Doar Hayom had offended two religions. The newspaper admitted this but added that it had only three Christian subscribers. Two of them were called to testify about the insult the article had caused them.

"For the sake of peace between the two communities and races, they must accustom themselves to differences of opinion and worldview," the defense lawyers argued. "God have mercy on this land. ... The communities in this country must learn to be even thicker-skinned than the countries of Europe."

The defense added that antisemitic articles appeared in the Arab press every day and no one took these newspapers to court. This didn't help; the case ended with a conviction and fines.

And what about Hans Herzl? Doar Hayom report-

ed that the younger Herzl converted because "he felt insulted by the fact that he had not been asked to be his father's successor as leader of the Zionists."

According to the paper, "when Hans was confronted about his actions and shown that his actions were desecrating the memory of his father, he replied angrily, 'Conversion to religion is my private affair; my soul has found peace in the Catholic Church.'"

In another article he was quoted as saying: "I'm not an important person to Judaism. The fact that my father was such a person doesn't deny me the right to act according to my views. Judaism never took an interest in me before, so why is it taking an interest now? I want everyone to leave me in peace."

Doar Hayom also reported that it had found no signs of "mental illness." In any case, the Zionist leadership rushed to calm things down, announcing that "Herzl's name will not be defiled by his son's deed, whatever it may be."

Hans Herzl's name was back in the headlines in 1930, when he ended his life by shooting himself after the death of his sister Pau-

line from typhus. Trude, the second sister, was murdered by the Nazis in 1942 at Theresienstadt after she had been sent there from a psychiatric hospital. Her son, Stephan Norman, Herzl's only grandchild, also took his own life – in 1946

by jumping off a bridge.

In 2006, the remains of Pauline and Hans were brought for reburial at Mount Herzl near their father's grave. Next to them is a memorial for Trude. The grandson was buried there a year later.