

HERZL IN TEL AVIV

A Commemorative Journey

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At the end of August 1897 the first Zionist Congress convened in Basel, Switzerland, chaired by Theodor Herzl. The congress adopted the Basel program that stated in its first paragraph: “Zionism seeks to establish a home for the Jewish people in *Palestine* under public law”.¹ In a prophetic entry in his diary (September 3, 1897), Herzl wrote:

If I had to sum up the Basel Congress in a word – which I shall guard against pronouncing publicly – it would be this: At Basel I founded the Jewish State. If I said this out loud today I would be greeted by universal laughter. In five years perhaps, and certainly in fifty years, everyone will perceive.²

In 1904 Herzl died in Vienna, and was buried there. In May 1948, almost 51 years after the first Zionist Congress in Basel, the State of Israel was proclaimed at a festive event in Tel Aviv. Herzl never visited Tel Aviv, which was founded in 1909, five years after his death. Yet from the start, Herzl’s memory was woven into the symbolic fabric of Tel Aviv. Celebrated since the early 1920s as “The First Hebrew City”, Tel Aviv became an epitome of Jewish self-rule in British Mandate Palestine and a vibrant hub of Hebrew cultural revival. As a Zionist city, Tel Aviv was committed from its inception to the legacy and memory of the founder of modern Zionism. This was clearly demonstrated in an array of commemorative acts and honorific gestures, some of which became permanent features of the city.

Focused on the early history of Tel Aviv, when its celebration as “The First Hebrew City” was pre-eminent in the city’s public discourse, this essay explores assorted commemorations of Herzl in Tel Aviv. The underlying aim is to shed light on various commemorative measures that integrated the memory of Herzl into the symbolic infrastructure of Tel Aviv. The analysis draws on archival materials and newspaper reports that yield background information concerning decision-making

1 Bein, Alex: *Theodore Herzl: A Biography*. Translated by Maurice Samuel, London 1957, p. 239.

2 Herzl, Theodor: *The Diaries of Theodor Herzl*. Edited and translated by Marwin Loewenthal, New York 1956, p. 224.

procedures and offer the opinions of pundits regarding proposed commemorations, respectively.

Toponymic commemorations

When Herzl visited the Land of Israel in 1898 on his way to meet the German emperor Wilhelm II there, he stayed in the port city of Jaffa. In 1906 the *Ahuzat Bayit* building company was founded in Jaffa with the aim of building a modern Jewish neighborhood to the north of Jaffa. In 1909, five years after Herzl's death, the idea became reality, and the construction of houses in the new neighborhood began.

The founders were committed to the Zionist vision espoused by Herzl. The link between the new Jewish neighborhood in Jaffa and the Zionist project of national revival was also manifested in the relocation of the Hebrew high school (in Hebrew: *Gymnasia*) there. The Hebrew high school had been established in Jaffa in 1905 and its relocation to the newly founded Jewish neighborhood in 1909 was an unequivocal statement about the importance assigned to Hebrew revival. As the main public building in the new neighborhood, the *Gymnasia* would figure as a visual icon introducing the revival of Hebrew culture into the local landscape.

At its meeting in January 1909, a few months before the plots had been allocated to the families that had purchased land in the new project, the *Ahuzat Bayit* committee, which represented the founders decided to call the main street of the neighborhood



1 Herzl St., Tel Aviv.

leading to the *Gymnasia* after Herzl.³ The commemoration of Herzl in the name of the neighborhood's main street represented a consensus among the founders and its use in documents had already begun in 1909. It was only in February 1910 that the general assembly of residents deliberated to give names to the other five streets of the neighborhood.

The symbolic linkage between Herzl and the new neighborhood was augmented by naming the *Gymnasia* after the visionary of political Zionism. The ceremonial laying of the cornerstone of the *Gymnasia* in the new neighborhood took place in summer 1909. In his address, the founder of the *Gymnasia* proclaimed that the *Gymnasia* “[i]s named ‘Herzliya’ after the late Zionist leader Dr. Binyamin Ze’ev Herzl.”⁴

The name chosen by its founders for the new neighborhood was an issue with much symbolic resonance. The general assembly of the founders discussed this issue in May 1910. The Ahuzat Bayit committee proposed the name “Tel Aviv”: “with this name our leader Herzl expressed the hope of our future in the Land of Israel: A *tell* [archeological mound] where the buds of spring blossom.”⁵ Sheinkin mentioned that Tel Aviv was the Hebrew translation of Herzl's utopian novel *Altneuland* which had been published in 1902. Herzl's novel sketched his vision for a future Jewish state. Sokolov's translation of the novel into Hebrew appeared in the same year as the German original. An innovative and poetic translation of *Altneuland*, Tel Aviv was not, however, a neologism for it was also a place name in ancient Babylonia, mentioned in Ezekiel 3:15.

Among other options deliberated were Herzliya, an explicit commemoration of the Zionist visionary, and New Jaffa. The name Herzliya was rejected since it was not a Hebrew name, and it had already been given to the *Gymnasia*. The name Tel Aviv gained 20 votes, followed by Neve Yafo (Jaffa Haven) with 15 votes, with Herzliya only receiving six votes. As a place name, Tel Aviv is an implicit and poetic commemoration of both Herzl and his vision for a new Jewish nationhood. The name Herzliya was eventually used in 1924 for a new settlement founded north of Tel Aviv.

3 Meeting of the Ahuzat Bayit Committee, 28 January 1909, Tel Aviv – Yafo Historical Archive, 279-31.

4 Ben-Yehuda, Baruch: The story of the Herzliya Gymnasium, Ramat Gan 1970.

5 Protocol, meeting of the general assembly on 21 May 1910, in: Droyanov, Alter: Sefer Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv 1936, pp. 125–126.

Herzl: Institute and Monument

The mortal remains of Herzl were buried in Vienna. In his will, Herzl requested that he should be reinterred in the Land of Israel without specifying the exact location. In 1925, the Zionist leader Nahum Sokolov raised the issue at the 14th Zionist Congress that convened in Vienna. A committee was elected to execute Herzl's will, yet no progress was made. The issue was raised again at the 17th Zionist Congress that convened in 1929. Following the anti-Jewish riots in Palestine, the issue was postponed only to be raised again at the 18th Congress, which convened in 1933 in Prague.

An issue of much significance was that there was lack of agreement among Zionist leaders as to where Herzl should be interred in the Land of Israel. Some maintained that Herzl expressed a wish to be buried on Mt. Carmel, in the vicinity of Haifa, which he envisioned as the "city of the future". Others claimed that Herzl did not express this wish explicitly, and should therefore be buried in Jerusalem, the ancient Jewish capital. However, as long as the British ruled the country, Jerusalem was a remote possibility. Meir Dizengoff, the mayor of Tel Aviv, suggested interring Herzl in the first Hebrew city, intending this as only a temporary solution. Dizengoff's idea was that Herzl should not be reinterred in an ordinary municipal cemetery, but on top of a low hill overlooking the Mediterranean. This proposal was rejected by the Viennese 'Herzl Committee', which was in charge of managing Herzl's estate.

Meir Dizengoff was committed to making Tel Aviv a Zionist metropolis and he prioritized the burial of Zionist leaders there. In 1926 the mayor arranged for the reinterment of Max Nordau, a renowned author and a close associate of Herzl, in Tel Aviv. This was the first reinterment of a major Zionist leader in the Land of Israel and as such, a precedent. Whereas the idea of reintering Herzl in Tel Aviv had been rejected, another initiative was gaining Dizengoff's support: building the Herzl monument and the Herzl Institute in the first Hebrew city.

At the Zionist Congress in Prague in 1933 it became clear that the transfer of Herzl's mortal remains for reburial in Tel Aviv was not feasible. Simultaneously another idea was raised: building a 'Herzl House' in Tel Aviv as a memorial complex with two complementary elements: a Herzl monument and a Herzl institute. Also prompted by the impending 30th anniversary of Herzl's death in summer 1934,⁶ this memorial project was at the conjunction of two independent initiatives. First was the idea of Felix Weiss, a young Viennese sculptor, to build a Herzl monument in Tel Aviv. The sculptor later

6 Tilo Nussenblatt to Meir Dizengoff, 25 Mai 1934, Tel Aviv – Yafo Historical Archive, 04-3761.



2 A model of Herzl Institute and statue.

met Tilo Nussenblatt, an historian and authority on Herzl, and together they decided to create a memorial complex comprising both a Herzl monument and a Herzl institute where Herzl's archive and the writings and correspondence of his associates and confidants would be housed to form a 'literary pantheon' of the Zionist movement.⁷ The design also included a spacious reading room for the public and a large convention hall with the intention of boosting the study of Herzl's life and ideas. The 'Herzl Archive Committee' in Vienna supported the idea of transferring the archive from Vienna to Tel Aviv. Interested in promoting the memorialization of Herzl in Tel Aviv, Dizengoff supported the project, in particular after it became evident that the reinterment of Herzl in Tel Aviv was not a feasible option. In a letter in February 1933 he wrote: "Was aber zweifellos sicher ist – dass das Herzl-Institut nur in Tel Aviv errichtet werden kann."⁸

According to Tilo Nussbaum, the edifice was meant to cast Herzl's ideas in a fitting architectural mold with its underlying concept being that the complex, a symbol of liberty and tolerance, should be built in the vicinity of the seashore and that the building together with the statue would form an unit.⁹ A fundamental element of the design by

7 Tilo Nussenblatt to Meir Dizengoff, 10 January 1933, Tel Aviv – Yafo Historical Archive, 04-3761.

8 Meir Dizengoff to Tilo Nussenblatt, 6 February 1934, Tel Aviv – Yafo Historical Archive, 04-3761.

9 Tilo Nussenblatt, 'Herzl Institute', Do'ar Hayom, 8 June 1934, p. 6.

the Viennese architect Jonas Mond was an open portico with columns allowing a view of the sea from the city. The terraces in front of the structure were intended to incorporate the near surroundings into the general architectural effect. Lighted by a skylight, the Hall of Honor was to accommodate 500 people. The design anticipated balconies and a tower the spiral ascent of which was meant to symbolize the ascent of the people of Israel in the Land of Israel. To the right of the statue, on the flat terrace covering the pillared hall, receptacles for nine lights were provided, eight “Channukah lights” and one “servant light” (*Shamash*). These lights were also meant as “lights of joy, which, on special occasions send their rays over land and sea”.¹⁰

The Herzl monument was to be 18 meters high: a landmark visible from afar, welcoming Jews returning to Zion. The conceptual model was the Statue of Liberty at the entrance to New York, welcoming immigrants on their entry to the United States. Herzl's statue was to be a full-size likeness of the visionary, with his right hand pointing towards the ‘chosen land’, showing the direction to Zion, while his left hand behind him is directed toward the diaspora.

Dizengoff proposed setting up a Tel Aviv committee consisting of leading public figures.¹¹ The expenditure was estimated to be 30,000 British pounds. The municipal government of Tel Aviv was willing to allocate the plot where the Herzl Institute would be built. However, Dizengoff was aware that “the official Zionism”, namely the Zionist organizations centered in Jerusalem, would not approve of building the Herzl Institute in Tel Aviv: “Today we have a united front against anything that we would like to do in Tel Aviv and not in Jerusalem”.¹² Dizengoff was reluctant to continue the project without the approval of the Jewish Agency. As he related in June 1934, as long as he did not have clearance, he could only be in ‘reserve’, since the municipality could not promote a project that was not entirely under its jurisdiction.¹³

In July 1934 the municipal government approved the composite project of the Herzl Institute and the issue was discussed briefly by the municipal council. Zvi Pinkas, the head of the Mizrahi (national-religious) faction expressed doubt about the statue, noting that as a figurative statue it was contrary to an explicit Biblical prohibition.¹⁴ In his response, deputy mayor Israel Rokach (who succeeded Dizengoff in September 1936) evaded the sensitive issue and explained that it was about the reburial of Herzl,

10 The Composition and Structure of the Herzl Institute, Tel Aviv – Yafo Historical Archive, 04-3761.

11 Meir Dizengoff to Tilo Nussenblatt, 6 March 1934, Tel Aviv – Yafo Historical Archive, 04-3761.

12 Meir Dizengoff to Tilo Nussenblatt, 9 April 1934, Tel Aviv – Yafo Historical Archive, 04-3761.

13 Meir Dizengoff to Tilo Nussenblatt, 17 June 1934, Tel Aviv – Yafo Historical Archive, 04-3761.

14 Davar, 20 July 1934, p. 4

and that yet no decision had been made by the Zionist leadership. Nemirovsky, a member of the Labor faction and a future mayor, was of the opinion that national issues such as this were not the business of the municipal government. The municipal council expressed its support for the Herzl Institute.¹⁵

In September 1934, in the course of a large-scale naming of new streets in Tel Aviv, a major thoroughfare in the north of the city was named Basel St. as a commemoration of the first Zionist Congress that Herzl convened in 1897.¹⁶ In the matter of the Herzl Institute the municipal government of Tel Aviv could not proceed on its own. In response to a direct inquiry the Jewish Agency related its objections to relocating the Herzl archive from Vienna to Tel Aviv and stressed its insistence on Jerusalem as the right place for the archive. At this stage Dizengoff was not enthusiastic “to conduct this war alone”, and urged the Vienna activists to travel to Palestine to negotiate the location of the project.¹⁷ With the Herzl Institute shelved, the Herzl monument was also off the municipal agenda. Whereas in October 1934 it still seemed as if there was some hope, should pressure be exerted, the verdict passed in December 1934 was: “there is no chance to realize it for the time being”.¹⁸

On the Road to Jerusalem

The issue of reintering Herzl in the Land of Israel was raised again at the 19th Zionist Congress convened in Luzern in 1935. The decision was to put the Zionist Executive in charge of formulating an official policy in this regard. The majority of members of the ad-hoc-committee set up by the Executive supported the reburial of Herzl in Jerusalem.¹⁹ Yet the worsening political situation in British Mandate Palestine and Europe rendered the reburial of the Zionist visionary in the Land of Israel impractical.

In the late afternoon of 14 May 1948 at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the creation of the Jewish state, the State of Israel. The venue was the former residence of Meir Dizengoff. Behind the podium where the dignitaries assembled two Zionist flags were draped, and in the middle hung a large portrait of Herzl.

15 Resolution #564/8, meeting of the municipal council, session on 18 July 1934.

16 Do'ar Hayom, 4 September 1934, p. 4.

17 Yehuda Nedivi to Tilo Nussenblatt, 22 October 1934, Tel Aviv – Yafo Historical Archive, 04-3761.

18 On behalf of Mr. Dizengoff to Dr. Yehuda Leibe, 10 December 1934, Tel Aviv – Yafo Historical Archive, 04-3761.

19 Circular, the Executive of the Zionist organization to the Zionist federations, 29 July 1949, Tel Aviv – Yafo Historical Archive, a 04-3333.



3 Independence Hall, Tel Aviv. Herzl's iconic portrait at the center.

This portrait acknowledged and honored Herzl as the visionary of the Jewish state. It also entailed a vow of loyalty on behalf of those assembled there and the nation at large to Herzl's vision. The ceremonial event taking place in Tel Aviv turned the First Hebrew City named after Herzl's utopian novel into the cradle of the Jewish state.

With Jerusalem under siege, the newly formed political institutions of the new state – the provisional government and the *Knesset*, the parliament, were located in Tel Aviv. The Knesset was housed at the Opera Hall, near the seashore. Yet the special place accorded to Jerusalem within the symbolic structures of Israel's nationhood became apparent in December 1948, when the issue of reintering Herzl in the newly founded Israel became feasible. In an internal memorandum of the Tel Aviv Municipality, the idea of reintering Herzl in Tel Aviv was raised again:

The place most suitable for reintering Herzl is a hill near the seashore, near the Yona Camp (later: Independence Park), which is the highest spot in Tel Aviv. On the grave of Herzl it is possible to build a magnificent edifice and a lighthouse for the ships of new immigrants approaching the port of Tel Aviv. We should reconsider the design of the sculptor Felix Weiss. There is no more appropriate place for the burial of Herzl than this hill by the sea, which over-



4 Herzl's casket in Tel Aviv, 16 August 1949.

looks the port and is not far from the residence of Israel's government, and it is in an area where street names symbolize the entire Jewish history and its revival.²⁰

Despite this attempt to recommend Tel Aviv as a candidate for the final resting place of Herzl, the eventual destination of the visionary, as agreed upon by those in charge of his reinterment, was Jerusalem. The plane carrying Herzl's coffin landed in Lod (Lydda) Airport, whereupon the casket was transported to Herbert Samuel Square in Tel Aviv near to the Knesset's temporary location, where the coffin lay in state for over twelve hours on a black draped catafalque, with the sea in the background.²¹

The setting was designed by the architect Arie Elhanani, who had designed the Levant Fair in Tel Aviv in the 1930s and the Jewish Palestine Pavilion at the New York World Fair 1939. At the rear of the coffin seven tall pillars symbolizing Herzl's idea of a seven-hour work day with amber lights adorned the tops of the pillars. The steps to the platform upon which the blue and white draped casket was placed were covered with a green mat. On the platform stood two guards of honor in uniform with

20 Aharon-Zeev Ben-Yishai to the mayor of Tel Aviv, 21 December 1948, Tel Aviv – Yafo Historical Archive, a 04-3333.

21 The description is based on: Brilliant, Moshe: Victory of Vision that became Real, in: The Palestine Post, 17 August 1949, p. 1.

swords. The street leading to the catafalque was adorned with Israeli flags hanging from polls.

A special session of the Knesset marked the arrival of the remains of Theodor Herzl to Israel. The Prime Minister and the Speaker of the Knesset delivered short speeches. The casket arrived at its Tel Aviv destination at 4 p.m. First to pay tribute to the visionary were national leaders, with Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and Speaker Sprinzak heading the procession of dignitaries. Following the dignitaries were ordinary people who came to pay respect to Herzl. According to estimates, the number of people passing the casket was 200,000 — a quarter of the Jewish population of Israel. Around 10 p.m. people stood in line more than an hour for the opportunity to pay tribute to Herzl. The Hebrew newspapers related emotional stories about old people crying at the scene. At 4 a.m. the casket began its journey to Jerusalem, the final destination being the designated burial site on Mount Herzl.²²

Final Remarks

In reality, Herzl spent only 12 hours in Tel Aviv. His was a brief, albeit emotional first and only “visit” to the first Hebrew city. Indeed, Tel Aviv was the center of the Jewish *Yishuv* in the pre-state era, and the city – as Mayor Dizengoff was proud to claim – was a model for the future Jewish state. Yet Dizengoff’s efforts to make Tel Aviv a center of Herzl remembrance failed. The symbolic primacy of Jerusalem was a factor. Notably, Herzl’s famous oath of loyalty to the idea of Zion: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning” (Psalms 137:5, King James Version) epitomized his Zionist legacy for future generations. In the realm of symbolic politics, a Zionist obligation to Zion was definitive, and the ancient city shrouded with national memories was chosen as Herzl’s final burial place.

Aharon-Zeev Ben-Yishai, the editor of *Yediot Iryat Tel Aviv*, the official organ of the municipality, described the ceaseless passage of people in front of the casket as “Tel Aviv’s farewell to Herzl”.²³ In the title Ben-Yishai reminded readers that Herzl not only envisioned the Jewish state, but also anticipated Tel Aviv. Significantly, “Tel Aviv’s farewell to Herzl” also implied a farewell to the vision of Tel Aviv as a national center of

22 See Azaryahu, Maoz: Mount Herzl. The Creation of Israel’s National Cemetery, *Israel Studies* 1/2 (1996), pp. 46–74.

23 Ben-Yishai, Aharon-Zeev: The casket of the visionary of “Tel Aviv”, in: *Yediot Iryat Tel Aviv* 19/3-4 (1949), p. 42.

Herzl's remembrance. However, as Ben-Yishai noted, Herzl had been embedded into the experience of Tel Aviv through various commemorative references. Tel Aviv, the First Hebrew City owed its name to the visionary; even if people are unaware of it, every time the name Tel Aviv is mentioned, Herzl's vision of an Old-New Homeland is evoked. A fact unbeknown to most is that the city's emblem, designed in 1926 by the painter Nahum Gutman, depicts the seven stars, symbolizing the seven-hour work day which Herzl foresaw for the socially progressive future Jewish state.

Indeed, as the city expanded northward, Herzl St. lost its significance in the urban fabric. In 1959 the iconic building of the *Gymnasia* was demolished, and the high school named after Herzl was relocated to a new and modern building in the north of the city. The demolition of the old building was later mourned as a senseless destruction of Zionist heritage and historical memories, and prompted the emergence of an acute awareness to historical preservation in Israel. Ironically, the story of the building of the *Gymnasia* belongs to the dialectic of "old" and "new" which underlay Herzl's vision and found its powerful expression in the name Tel Aviv.