

Address by Max Nordau at the First Zionist Congress

(August 29, 1897)

Those presenting specialized reports on individual countries will describe for you in detail the condition of our brothers in these different states. I have been able to consult some of these reports but not others. But even with regard to the countries about which I have received no data from my colleagues, I have some knowledge based partly on my own observation and partly on other sources, enough at any rate to permit me, without presumption, to sketch a general picture of the condition of Jewry at the close of the nineteenth century.

Overall, this picture can be painted in a single hue. Wherever Jews are settled in relatively large numbers among the Gentile peoples, we find the Jews in distress. It is not the common kind of distress, which is perhaps the unalterable temporal fate of our species. It is a peculiar kind of distress, which the Jews experience not because they are men but because they are Jews, and of which they would be free if they were not Jews.

Jewish distress takes two forms, one material and one moral. In Eastern Europe, North Africa, and Western Asia—that is, in those regions where the overwhelming majority dwells, probably nine-tenths of all Jews—Jewish distress is to be understood quite literally. It is a daily affliction of the body; anxiety about the next day; an agonizing struggle to maintain a bare existence. In Western Europe, the Jews' struggle for existence has become somewhat easier, although recently a tendency has appeared making this struggle once again more difficult even here. But they are tormented less by issues of food, shelter, and physical security. Here, it is a distress of the spirit. It consists in daily offenses against one's self-esteem and sense of dignity. It consists in the harsh repression of their pursuit of higher satisfactions, the striving toward which no Gentile ever need deny himself.

In Russia, whose Jewish population amounts to more than five million and which is home to more than half of all Jews, our brothers are subject to many legal restrictions. Only a numerically insignificant Jewish sect, the Karaites, enjoy the same rights as the Christian subjects of the Tsar. To the rest of the Jews, residence in much of the country is forbidden. Only certain categories of Jews enjoy freedom of movement (e.g., first-guild merchants, holders of academic titles, etc). But to belong to the first-guild merchants one has to be rich, which only a few Russian Jews are; likewise, not many Jews in Russia are able to acquire academic titles since government secondary schools and colleges admit Jews only in very limited numbers, and foreign diplomas grant no legal rights. It is forbidden to Jews to enter certain occupations that are open to Russian Christians. These unfortunates are penned up together in a few provincial governorates where there is no opportunity for them to exercise their capabilities and good will. The educational resources of the state are hardly available to them, and they cannot develop their own because they are too poor. Whoever is able to emigrate does so, in order to find in a foreign land the light and air that is denied to him in his homeland. But those who are not young enough or brave enough remain in their misery and deteriorate mentally, morally, and physically.

We hear from Romania, with its quarter-million Jews, that our brothers there also have no legal rights. They are permitted to reside only in the cities, subject to every caprice of the authorities and even of lower officials, exposed from time to time to the bloody violence of the rabble, and are in the worst of economic conditions. Our Romanian rapporteur estimates that half of all Romanian Jews are completely destitute.

The conditions our Galician rapporteur discloses to us are dreadful. According to the information supplied by Herr Dr. Salz, of the 772,000 Jews of Galicia, seventy percent are beggars in the literal sense, beggars by trade, asking charity but of course not receiving it in most cases. I do not wish to anticipate the other details of his report. You should not have to feel twice the revulsion this report will arouse in you.

As for the conditions in Western Austria with its approximately four hundred thousand Jews, the declaration of Herr Dr. Mintz is most telling, that out of twenty-five thousand Jewish households in Vienna, fifteen thousand are completely unable to pay their rates to the autonomous Jewish community on account of poverty. Of the ten thousand ratepayers, ninety percent are assessed at the lowest rate. But even out of this category of lowest ratepayers, three-fourths are incapable of discharging their fiscal obligation. The written law in Austria, unlike that of Russia and Romania, does not recognize a distinction between Jews and Christians. But the public authorities treat the law with a cool indifference, as though it were a dead letter, and popular custom has reestablished the interdiction of Jews that the legislator had suppressed. Social ostracism makes earning a living more difficult for the Jews and will make it quite impossible in the near future in many cases.

From Bulgaria we hear the same plaintive cry: a hypocritical law that recognizes no legal distinction between different confessions, which the authorities however ignore; hostility in all social groups which frightens the Jews away; distress and misery without hope of improvement for the overwhelming majority of Jews.

In Hungary the Jews do not complain. They are in full possession of all the rights of citizens; they are able to work, earn a living, and their economic position is improving. Of course, this happy condition has not yet lasted long enough to make it possible for the majority of Jews to work their way up from deepest poverty, and thus most Jews in Hungary as well have not yet even begun to experience prosperity. Moreover, those familiar with conditions there assure us that even in Hungary Jew-hatred smolders below the surface and will break out with devastating effect at the first opportunity.

I must leave aside the one hundred and fifty thousand Jews of Morocco, and the Jews of Persia, whose numbers are unknown to me. The poorest no longer have strength enough to rise up against their misery. They endure it all in dull resignation without complaining, crying out for our attention only when the rabble invades their ghetto to plunder, rape, and murder them.

The lands I have referred to determine the fate of well over seven million Jews. All of them, with the exception of Hungary, have, by means of restrictions on their legal rights and official or social discrimination, degraded the Jews to the rank of proletarians or professional beggars, without giving them even the hope of raising themselves above this economic position by means of a mighty exertion of individual or collective effort.

Certain "practical" people, who refuse to entertain any "futile dreaming" but direct their efforts to what is readily accessible and achievable, are of the opinion that the lifting of the legally enforced restrictions on civil rights would assuage the misery of

Jews in Eastern Europe. Galicia can be summoned as a witness to refute this view. But not just Galicia. The medicine of legal emancipation has been tried in all states at the highest stage of civilization. Let us consider what the experiment teaches.

The Jews of Western Europe are not subject to any restriction on their rights. They can move about and develop themselves in freedom, just like their Christian compatriots. The economic consequences of this freedom of movement have been, without doubt, most favorable. The racial characteristics of Jews—diligence, perseverance, sobriety, thrift—have brought about a rapid shrinking of the Jewish proletariat, which would have disappeared entirely in some lands had it not been replenished by Jewish immigration from the East. The emancipated Jews of the West are attaining relatively quickly a modicum of prosperity. At any rate, the struggle for daily bread does not assume the dreadful forms that are described to us in reports about Russia, Romania, and Galicia. But among these Jews another kind of Jewish distress arises, of a moral kind.

The Jew of the West has bread, but one does not live by bread alone. The Jew of the West is scarcely ever put in jeopardy of life and limb by mob hatred, but wounds of the flesh are not the only ones that cause pain and from which one may bleed to death. The Jew of the West has interpreted emancipation as real liberation and has hastened to draw the ultimate conclusions that flow from this. But the nations advise him that he errs in being so ingenuously logical. The law is magnanimous in establishing a theory of equal rights. But the praxis of government and society makes a mockery of this theory, like the nomination of Sancho Panza to the splendid position of viceroy of the island of Barataria. The Jew says naïvely: “I am a human being and I deem nothing human as alien to me.” The answer comes back to him: “Not so fast! Your humanity must be made use of carefully; you lack the proper conception of honor, sense of duty, morality, love of country, and idealism, and we must therefore exclude you from functions that require these of character.”

No one has ever attempted to substantiate these terrible accusations on the basis of facts. At most, now and again the example of an individual Jew, the dregs of his tribe and of humanity, is triumphantly cited, and, against all principles of correct thought and inference, audaciously generalized. However, this generalizing is strongly substantiated from a psychological point of view. It is the habit of human consciousness to invent post facto justifications that sound reasonable, for the prejudices which emotion has evoked. Folk wisdom recognized this psychological law long ago and captured it in its own perceptive way through vivid formulations. [“Whoever wants to drown a dog,” says the proverb, “first declares him mad.”] People ascribe every vice to the Jews in order to prove to themselves that they are right to detest them. But what takes precedence in reality is that people detest the Jews.

I must make a grievous declaration: the peoples that emancipated the Jews indulged in self-deception with regard to their feelings. In order for it to produce its full effect, the emancipation should have been accomplished in feeling before being enacted in law. But that was not the case. The opposite was the case. The history of Jewish emancipation is one of the most remarkable chapters in the history of European thought. Jewish emancipation is not the result of a realization that a tribe of people had been severely mistreated, that horrors had been inflicted on them and that it was high time to atone for the injustice of a thousand years; rather, it is solely the result of the rectilinear,

geometrical mode of thought of French rationalism in the eighteenth century. Without regard for the emotional life, this rationalism used pure logic to posit principles having the certainty of a mathematical axiom, and then insisted on bringing this structure of pure reason into the world of realities. "Perish the colonies rather than one principle!" as the well-known cry goes, which represents the application of the rationalist method to politics. Jewish emancipation represents another, as it were, automatic application of rationalist method. The philosophy of Rousseau and the Encyclopedists had led to the Declaration of the Rights of Man. From the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the rigid logic of the men of the Great Revolution deduced the notion of Jewish emancipation. They laid out a perfectly proper syllogism: every human being has certain rights by nature; the Jews are human beings; consequently, the Jews have by nature the rights of human beings. And so equality of rights for Jews was proclaimed in France not out of brotherly sentiment toward the Jews but because logic demanded it. Popular emotion may have resisted it, but the philosophy of the revolution commanded that principles be put before feelings. Pardon me the expression, which contains no ingratitude: the men of 1792 emancipated us because of a doctrinaire adherence to principles.

The rest of Western Europe imitated the example of France, likewise not under the pressure of sentiment but rather because civilized peoples felt themselves to be under a kind of moral compulsion to adopt the advances of the Great Revolution. Just as the France of the revolution gave to the world the metric system of weights and measures, so also it created a sort of metric of morality that other countries, whether reluctantly or eagerly, adopted as the standard measure of their position in the scale of civilization. A country that claimed to have an advanced civilization had to possess certain institutions created, endorsed, or developed by the Great Revolution (e.g., popular representation, freedom of the press, trial by jury, division of powers, etc). Now Jewish emancipation was also one of the indispensable institutional furnishings of a highly civilized political household, rather in the way that a piano should not be missing from a proper salon, even if no one in the family could play it. Thus were Jews in Western Europe emancipated, not because of an impulse of the soul but in imitation of a political fashion, not because peoples had decided in their hearts to extend the hand of brotherhood to the Jews, but rather because the leading minds had accepted a certain European ideal of civilization that required among other things that Jewish emancipation should be inscribed in the code of law.

There is only one country to which all of the foregoing does not apply. It is England. The progress made by the English people is not imposed from the outside. It is a development from within. In England, Jewish emancipation is a reality. It is not merely something written, it is something lived. It had been accomplished in sentiment long before it was explicitly confirmed by the legislature. Out of respect for tradition, there was in England a certain reluctance to formally abolish legal restrictions on the rights of nonconformists, while the English had already for a full generation made no social distinction between Christians and Jews. Naturally, a great people with an intensely active intellectual life is not unaffected by intellectual currents of the age, including intellectual aberrations, and thus even in England isolated instances of anti-Semitism are to be observed. But anti-Semitism in England is only the aping of a Continental fashion, a costume put on by silly fools out of foppery and conceit, the latest thing from abroad and something to show off with. Overall, you will find the facts and statistics so richly

compiled in the report of Mr. de Haas about the situation of Jews in England, to be the most consoling of all the reports submitted to you.

Emancipation has altered completely the character of the Jew and made him into a new creature. The Jew without legal rights in the period before emancipation was a stranger among the peoples, yet he did not think even for a moment about rebelling against this condition. He felt himself to be a member of a special tribe that had nothing in common with the country's other inhabitants. He did not like the yellow patch Jews were compelled to wear on their cloak, because it was an official invitation for the mob to commit brutalities approved in advance by the authorities; yet he freely insisted upon his peculiarity more strongly than any yellow patch could have done. Wherever the authorities did not wall him into a ghetto, he erected one for himself. He wanted to dwell with his own people and to have nothing other than business relations with his Christian neighbors. In the word "ghetto" there are now connotations of disgrace and degradation. The racial psychologist and historian of culture recognize however that the ghetto, whatever the peoples might have intended it to be, was felt by the Jews of the past to be not a prison but a place of refuge. Through an irony of history, it was only the ghetto that made it possible for the Jews to survive the appalling persecutions of the Middle Ages. In the ghetto the Jew had his own world; it was a secure homeland for him, the intellectual and moral equivalent of a fatherland; here were the companions by whom one wished to be and could be valued; here there existed a public whose favorable opinion was the goal of those ambitious for honor, and whose deprecation and displeasure was the punishment for disgraceful conduct; here all qualities that were distinctively Jewish were esteemed, and by their specific development one could gain that admiration which is such a powerful spur to action for the human soul. What did it matter if those things that were prized in the ghetto were scorned by the outside world? The opinion of outsiders did not matter, since it was the opinion of ignorant enemies. He strove to oblige his brothers in religion, and the obliging of these brothers gave a genuine meaning to his life. Thus, from a moral standpoint, ghetto Jews lived a holistic life. Their outward situation was insecure and often in grave danger, but inwardly they achieved an integrated development peculiarly their own, and their lives were not at all fragmented. They were persons of inward harmony, to whom none of the elements of a normal social existence was lacking. They understood intuitively the crucial importance of the ghetto for their inner life, and they had but one concern, to protect its existence by erecting an invisible wall around it that was thicker and higher than the actual stone walls that enclosed it. All Jewish usages and customs were directed unconsciously toward the single purpose of preserving Jewry in a separate existence from the Gentile peoples, to nourish Jewish communal solidarity, to make the individual Jew feel at all times that he was lost and would perish if he surrendered his peculiar existence. This tendency toward communal separatism was the origin of most of the ritual laws which, for the average Jew, became identical with his understanding of his faith itself; and similarly, other purely external and often adventitious marks of distinctiveness in dress and conduct, once they had become thoroughly established among the Jews, received religious sanction, in order that they be all the more certainly preserved. Caftans, ringlets, fur caps, and Yiddish, obviously have nothing to do with religion. But Jews of the East look askance at the fellow tribesman who dresses in European clothing and speaks any European language properly, as though it were the first step toward apostasy from the faith. For he has cut the bonds between

himself and his fellow tribesmen, and these latter feel that these bonds alone guarantee that connection to a community without which the individual is unable to sustain himself in the long run, morally, spiritually, and in the final analysis even materially.

This was the psychology of the ghetto Jew. Then came legal emancipation. The law assured Jews that they were full citizens of the countries in which they were born. The law also exercised a certain influence on those who enacted it, and occasioned, during a honeymoon period, heartfelt expressions by Christians, who interpreted the law in a most encouraging way. Delirious with joy, the Jew hurried at once to burn all his bridges behind him. He now had another homeland, he did not need the ghetto anymore; he had another kind of social connection, so he no longer needed to associate only with his coreligionists. His instinct of self-preservation adapted itself immediately and completely to his new condition. Previously this instinct had been directed toward the strictest separation; now it was striving toward the closest possible association and assimilation. An expedient mimicry took the place of an identity-saving contrariety. Depending on the country, this situation lasted for one or two generations, with surprising success. The Jew could believe that he was really just another German, Frenchman, Italian, etc., like all his other countrymen, and was drawing like them from the same deep spring of national community, in a measure essential to the full development of the individual soul.

Then, after a dormancy of thirty to sixty years, about two decades ago, anti-Semitism in Western Europe broke out afresh, issuing from the depths of the national soul, and disclosed to the eyes of the horrified Jew his real situation, which he had not understood. He could still participate like others in voting for deputies representing the Commons, but he witnessed his own exclusion, whether in polite or crude ways, from the associations and assemblies of his Christian compatriots. He still had the right to move about freely, but everywhere he ran into signs enjoining him: "No admittance to Jews." He still had the right to carry out the duties of a citizen of the state, but rights that went beyond the basic right to vote, the nobler rights granted to talent and ability, these rights were brusquely denied him.

Such is the current situation of the emancipated Jew in Western Europe. He has given up his specifically Jewish ethos, but the Gentile peoples declare to him that he has not acquired their ethos. He shuns his fellow tribesmen since anti-Semitism has made them odious even to him, but his countrymen reject him when he seeks their company. He has lost his home in the ghetto, and he is denied a home in his native land. He has no ground beneath his feet and no connection with a greater community of which he is an accepted and legitimate member. He cannot depend on a fair, let alone charitable, judgment of his character and achievements from his Christian countrymen, and with his Jewish countrymen he has lost his connection; he has the sense that the world is hostile toward him, and while seeking and yearning for emotional warmth, he sees no place in which to find it.

This is the moral deprivation of Jews, which is more bitter than the physical, because it afflicts persons who are more sophisticated, prouder, and more sensitive. The emancipated Jew is rootless, insecure in his relationship to his neighbors, fearful in his contact with strangers, distrustful of the secret feelings even of his friends. He dissipates his highest powers in the suppressing and annihilating, or at least in the wearisome concealing, of his true self, since he worries that this self might be recognized as Jewish,

and he never experiences the satisfaction of acknowledging himself to be what he is, to simply be himself in all his thoughts and feelings, in every sound of his voice, blinking of his eyelids, and play of his fingers. He is inwardly crippled and outwardly artificial; he is thus ever an object of ridicule, repugnant to persons of a nobler, aesthetic temperament, as are all things counterfeit.

All the better Jews of Western Europe groan under this distressing burden and seek rescue and relief. They no longer have that faith which gives the patience to endure sorrows, because they are acknowledged as the providence of a chastening but nonetheless loving God. They no longer have the hope that Messiah is coming and will raise them to glory on a day of miracles. Some seek to save themselves by a flight from Judaism. Of course, racial anti-Semitism, which denies baptism's transforming power, is leaving little prospect for this scheme of redemption. Nor is it a course that commends itself to those we have been discussing, those who are mostly without religious faith—I am of course not talking about the minority of sincere believers—that they should enter the Christian community by means of a blasphemous lie. In any case, this way out produces a new breed of Marranos, which is far worse than the old one. The medieval Marranos had an idealistic streak, a secret yearning for authenticity consisting in heartbreaking pangs of conscience and regret, and often enough they sought atonement and purification in premeditated, intentional martyrdom. The new Marranos take leave of Judaism with anger and bitterness, but in their heart of hearts, even if unacknowledged by themselves, they also resent Christendom for their own degradation and dishonesty, and the hatred which has forced them to live a lie. I shudder for the future development of this new race of Marranos, who are without the moral moorings of any tradition, whose spirits are poisoned with enmity toward their own people as well as foreigners, whose self-respect has been destroyed by the ever-present consciousness of a fundamental lie. Others expect salvation from Zionism, which to them is not the fulfillment of a mythical promise of scripture but rather the path to an existence in which the Jew will finally find himself in possession of the most basic and primordial conditions for living, which every Gentile, in both worlds, takes for granted—namely, a secure social position, a sympathetic community, the possibility of using all his creative energies in the development of his true self, instead of abusing these powers in a self-destructive suppressing or falsifying or disguising of his identity. Finally, there are others who rebel against the deception of being a Marrano, but who are so intimately bonded to their fatherland that they feel the renunciation inevitably contained in Zionism to be too harsh and cruel—they give themselves over to the most extreme revolutionary activity, with a vague ulterior notion that, with the destruction of the status quo and the construction of a new world, Jew-hatred may perhaps not be among the artifacts salvaged from the ruins of the old system and brought over into the new.

Such is the portrait of Israel at the close of the nineteenth century. To put it in a word: the Jews are, in their majority, a tribe of ostracized beggars. More industrious and resourceful than the average European, to say nothing of indolent Asiatics and Africans, the Jew is condemned to the worst misery of the proletariat, because he is not permitted to make free use of his energies. [His poverty grinds down his character and destroys his body.] Animated by an overmastering hunger, nay a ravenous appetite for education, he sees himself repulsed from those places where knowledge is to be had—a man like the mythological Tantalus with respect to education, in this unmythological age of ours.

Endowed with a tremendous impulse whose force propels him again and again up from the miry depths into which those around him have sunk him and sought to bury him, he smashes his skull against the thick ice sheet of hatred and contempt that has been spread out over his head. A social being unlike almost any other, a social being whose faith even commends to him as actions most meritorious and pleasing to God, for three to be gathered together in order to eat and ten in order to pray—he is excluded from the normal social existence of his countrymen and condemned to a tragic solitude. He is accused of aggressive self-promotion, but he strives for superiority only because people deny him equality. He is reproached for his emotional solidarity with Jews throughout the world, but his real misfortune is that he uprooted the last trace of Jewish solidarity from his heart at the first positive word about emancipation, to make room for an exclusive love of his compatriots. Stunned by the hail of anti-Semitic accusations, he begins to doubt himself and almost comes round to thinking of himself as the physical and spiritual monster that his mortal enemies make him out to be. He can often be heard muttering, that he must learn from his enemies and try to cure himself of the deficiencies he is upbraided for, not taking into consideration that these anti-Semitic accusations are utterly useless and worthless to him, since they are not the criticism of deficiencies actually observed but rather the effects of a psychological law, according to which children, savages, and malicious fools make certain creatures and things responsible for their troubles and then feel antipathy toward them. At the time of the Black Death, Jews were accused of well-poisoning; today, farmers accuse them of lowering the price of grain; craftsmen accuse them of wiping out small businesses; conservatives charge them with being anarchists. Where there are no Jews, other commonly despised groups within the population are designated as the source of these grievances—usually foreigners, but sometimes indigenous minorities, sects, or societies. The anthropomorphizing of aversions proves nothing against those who are accused, it proves only that their accusers already hated them when they [the accusers] began to suffer and looked around for a scapegoat.

This picture would not be complete without my adding one more feature. A myth in which even serious and educated persons believe, who need not even be anti-Semites, alleges that the Jews have all power and authority, that the Jews possess all the wealth of the earth. These Jews, these sinister manipulators of authority, who do not even have the power to protect their fellow tribesmen against the bloodlust of miserable mobs of Arabs, Moroccans, and Persians! These Jews, the incarnation of Mammon, of whom well above half do not own a stone on which to lay their heads, or rags with which to cover the nakedness of their bodies! This is the scorn that enters in and drips poison into wounds already inflicted by hatred. To be sure, there are several hundred super-rich Jews, whose clamorous millions are noticed far and wide. But what do these people have in common with Israel? Most of them—I readily make exception for a minority—belong to the most vulgar stratum within Jewry, and a process of natural selection has fitted them for occupations in which one can quickly earn millions and sometimes billions—but don't ask me how! In a normal and fully integrated Jewish society such persons would, on account of their inborn character, occupy the very lowest rung in the esteem of the nation, and certainly would never receive the titles of nobility and high honors which Christian society bestows on them. The Judaism of the prophets and Tannaim, the Judaism of Hillel, Philo, Ibn Gabirol, Judah Halevi, Maimonides, Spinoza, Heine, knows nothing of these men, who like to flaunt their money, who devalue what we revere and cherish what

we disdain. These people are the main pretext for the new Jew-hatred, which has more of an economic than a religious basis. For Jewry, which suffers on their account, they have never done anything besides throw to it some charity, which is no sacrifice for them, and they have nourished the continuance of a chronic condition peculiar to the Jews: parasitism. For idealistic causes their assistance has never been available and probably never will be. Many of these types actually leave Judaism behind, so we wish them well on their journey and only lament the fact that they are after all of Jewish blood, albeit of its dregs.

No one can be indifferent to Jewish distress, the Christian nations no less than we Jews. It is a great sin to allow a tribe, whose talents even their worst enemies have not denied, to descend to spiritual and physical distress; it is a sin against the tribe and a sin against the building-up of civilization, in which the Jewish tribe wishes to be, and is able to be, a not insignificant collaborator. And it may turn out to be a great danger to the nations to embitter strong-willed persons by unjust treatment, whose capacity for good as well as evil is above the average, thus making them enemies of the established order. Microbiology teaches us that tiny life-forms that are harmless as long as they live in the open air, turn into frightful agents of disease when deprived of oxygen, when they are, to put it in scientific terms, changed into their anaerobic forms. Governments and peoples should think twice before making the Jew an anaerobic life-form! There might be severe repercussions for themselves and others, no matter what actions they then took in order to eradicate the noxious creature the Jew shall have become by their own fault.

That Jewish distress cries out for remedy we have seen. To find the remedy will be the great task of this Congress. I yield the floor now to my fellow rapporteurs, who will amplify and complete the picture I have sketched in broad outlines, and you will have the feeling, as you hear their presentations, that you are listening to Kinnot. (Passionate, enthusiastic assent.)