

THE MOST POLITICALLY SIGNIFICANT MEETING OF ANY GROUP OF JEWS IN THE LAST 1,800 YEARS

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The story of Theodor Herzl and the First Zionist Congress, convened 120 years ago on this date.

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Today, the first day of the Hebrew month of Elul, marks the 120th anniversary of the First Zionist Congress. That three-day gathering, convened by Theodor Herzl in the Swiss city of Basel on August 29, 1897, might well be the most politically significant meeting of any group of Jews during the last 1,800 years, and it was almost certainly the most important step on the road to establishing a modern Jewish state. The event, like the state it helped create, was also the most improbable of success stories; roundly opposed by the majority of opinion leaders in the Jewish world and viewed with skepticism even by many of the prominent Jewish nationalists who chose to attend, it could easily have failed at any point from when it was announced until the end of its final session.



The First Zionist Congress, held in Basel, Switzerland in 1897.

The story of the First Zionist Congress is worth telling today even more than in the past. Nearly seven decades after the birth of Israel, the Congress tends to be taken for granted as the obvious step needed at the time to bring about the founding of a Jewish state. Its success, too, can easily be seen as all-too-obvious. Indeed, as Herzl wrote in his diary on the eve of the gathering: “The whole thing is one of those balancing feats which look just as natural after they are accomplished as they seemed improbable before they were undertaken.” For that very reason, we need to go back to the moment when such a convocation seemed so highly “improbable.” Only by doing so

can we understand why Herzl chose to risk everything on this gambit, what enabled him to beat the towering odds against its success, and what major transformations it brought about in the Jewish national rebirth.

In this essay, I aim to do just that.

In his first diary entry of 1897, Herzl sized up the campaign he had begun nearly a year earlier with the February 1896 publication in German of his short, trenchant book, *Der Judenstaat*—known to English readers as *The Jewish State*. As he frankly acknowledged, the outlook was less than rosy:

I fear the best moment has passed. That came in the months that have gone by since my stay in Constantinople, when . . . I was still able to negotiate with the pashas on the basis of my initial prestige. . . . Meanwhile, unless I am mistaken, Zionism is gradually managing to gain the respect of the general public in all sorts of countries. Little by little people are beginning to take us more seriously. The well-to-do Jews, it is true, behave miserably now as before. And as my loyal [deputy Jacob] de Haas writes from London, “Everybody is waiting to see how the cat will jump.”

Herzl had long believed that there were two keys to bringing a Jewish state into existence, both of them involving top-down politics. Within the Jewish world, he sought the backing of the prominent businessmen-philanthropists who were viewed, by Jews and others, as the natural leaders of the Jewish people. *The Jewish State* began as notes for a conversation with Baron Maurice de Hirsch, was transformed into an address to the Rothschild family after the former dismissed Herzl’s ideas as too “fantastic,” and was published only after Herzl realized the Rothschilds were unlikely to give his proposal serious consideration. Although he still clung to the hope that a positive reception for his book could bring the Jewish plutocrats around, that view became untenable after a series of disappointing meetings with leading English Jewish philanthropists in July 1896, followed by a dialogue of the deaf with Baron Edmond de Rothschild later that month.

Much can be said about the differences in substance and style that prevented a meeting of the minds. But the simplest explanation is that Herzl’s call for establishing a Jewish state through negotiation with the major powers of the day, and settling masses of Jews in it, flew in the face of the century-long project of emancipation, through which the leading figures of Jewry sought to facilitate their people’s assimilation into the European countries in which most of them lived. This they would accomplish by demonstrating Jewish loyalty to these states, reducing anti-Semitism, and securing equal rights.

Some of these philanthropists were willing, on humanitarian grounds, to assist Jews seeking to flee Eastern Europe and settle in modest numbers in Palestine, which was a part of the Ottoman empire. Hence, they were willing to give qualified support to *Ḥovevei Tsiyon* (“Lovers of Zion”), the main organization pursuing this task—but not to the far more radical Herzl.

In parallel, Herzl had sought to use the prestige he gained from *Der Judenstaat*—which within its first year was translated into English, French, Russian, Yiddish, Hebrew, Romanian, and Bulgarian—to negotiate with the Ottoman sultan a deal whereby Herzl would secure from Jewish bankers a loan enabling the Ottomans to refinance their crippling debt in exchange for the sultan’s according to Jews the right to move to Palestine and begin creating a homeland there. Despite some nibbles by prominent members of the sultan’s court in Constantinople during Herzl’s two-week visit there in June 1896, this approach failed to bear fruit. The sultan himself balked at meeting Herzl, let alone acquiescing in handing control to the Jews of a land that had been under Islamic sway for more than a millennium.

Herzl’s Leadership and the Convening of the Congress

It was against this background that Herzl decided, in January 1897, to take the risk of convening a national assembly of the Zionists. In this one stroke, he sought to accomplish several aims: gain support from the Jewish masses by doing an end-run around the Jewish philanthropists; establish an organization that would help achieve his aims; and gain the credibility for himself and for that organization to negotiate with the Ottomans and other powers of the day.

The move, however, was extraordinarily risky. At this stage Herzl had few reliable and effective allies; his opponents were better-recognized, better-funded, and better-organized; and any failure to attract an impressive group of participants and hold a dignified and productive conference would destroy his recently-won prestige and credibility, thus dooming to oblivion both him and those who stood with him.

Yet, in January 1897, Herzl began writing to colleagues and potential allies about his plan to convene a “general assembly of Zionists,” and soon let it be known that it would take place in Zurich. In early March, he met with a group of German Zionists led by Willy Bambus, and agreed to partner with them in calling for a congress, but with the location moved to Munich because, as he explained in his diary, its location was more convenient for eastern—that is, Russian—Jews, who “would not dare to come to Switzerland, which is suspected of nihilism [thus arousing the suspicions of the Russian Tsar’s justly feared secret police], and because there are kosher restaurants in Munich.”

Within a week, Herzl began sending out official notices of the conference, reading:

I am desired to announce that preparations are being made for the holding of a representative Zionist Congress at Munich, on August 25th next. . . . In order to give the conference a thoroughly representative character, delegates will be invited from all Zionist movements, political or philanthropic, local or general, in their aims.

From that point forward, Herzl willed the Congress into being through a remarkable set of traits and actions: single-mindedness, the willingness to invest all his resources, and the rapid making

and acting on decisions. As one of his disciples put it:

We consulted, resolved, decided, and then we each left and went back to our own business. It was Herzl alone who organized the Congress, all by himself, with his own money and his own labor. . . . He saw to every detail, nothing escaped his attention. There were times when he sat up all night with the students, even addressing envelopes.

Alongside his boundless dedication, Herzl demonstrated absolute resolve that the Congress would take place. On March 29, he noted in his diary that he had received a disappointing letter from Colonel Albert Goldsmid of England, one of his first and seemingly most stalwart allies, urging Herzl to unite forces with Hovevei Tsiyon and not run his own congress. Herzl wrote a lengthy response that included the following lines:

The Munich Congress is a settled affair from which I can no longer withdraw. But it is a necessity as well. . . . In August it will be two years since I took the first practical steps in the Jewish cause. I wanted to act without stirring up the masses, through direction from above, in cooperation with the men who had already played a prominent part in Zionism. I have met with no understanding, no support. I have had to go on alone. At the Munich Congress I shall call upon the masses to resort to self-help, since no one else wants to help them.

Other prominent individuals who had previously expressed support were also turning against Herzl and the congress—including the chief rabbi of his home town of Vienna, who wrote an anti-Zionist pamphlet that was snapped up in multiple copies by the Rothschilds, and the chief rabbi of France, where Herzl had written *The Jewish State* and launched his Zionist career. In April, the Berlin group under Bambus withdrew their support in turn, claiming they had never agreed to a public event aimed at establishing a Jewish state. Indeed, the most prominent German Jews increasingly began to suspect the Congress would reflect negatively on their patriotic attachment to their Fatherland.

Herzl refused to be swayed. In his diary entry of April 24, after noting that “Bambus gives as a pretext that the Munich Jews are beside themselves and are protesting against the holding of the Congress in Munich,” he wrote: “If they give us trouble in Munich, I shall take the Congress to Zurich.” As the blows continued to rain down, he continued to act without hesitation, writing on June 17: “Since the Munich Jewish community is protesting against holding the Congress, we decided in the Actions Committee today to transfer the Congress to Basel, possibly to Zurich.”

Yet alongside his steadfast refusal to be moved from his goal, Herzl also demonstrated pragmatism and flexibility. Most significantly, seeing that large numbers of the notable Western Jews on whom he had counted were not responding favorably to his invitation, he turned to the hinterlands of Russian Jewry. To this end, he had official invitations printed in Hebrew and sent to the leading figures in the Russian Hovevei Tsiyon movement. To secure their participation, Herzl promised that nothing would be said at the Congress that would bring about the ire of the

Russian authorities or the Ottoman sultan; nor would anything be said against Baron Rothschild, the leading backer of Hovevei Tsiyon.

This policy paid off. Russian Jews began signing up in large numbers, thus assuring at least the initial appearance of a successful convocation and, in addition, stimulating others to follow suit. On August 14, two weeks before the scheduled opening date, Herzl noted that “The Zionists of business and philanthropy are coming ’round to me again, having realized that they cannot frustrate the Congress.” He specifically noted that Bambus and Goldsmid would be there.

Yet on the eve of the Congress, it was still far from clear it would be a success. Writing from the train to Basel on August 23, Herzl took stock:

Fact is—which I conceal from everyone—that I have only an army of shnorrers. I am in command only of boys, beggars, and prigs. Nevertheless, this army would be entirely sufficient if only success were in sight. Then it would quickly become a well-conditioned, regular army.

During the next week, it was Herzl’s task to conceal the weakness of his “army” while doing everything possible to show that success was in sight.

What Happened in Basel

Herzl arrived in Basel on August 25 and went to the office the city had placed at his disposal. Upon seeing it was “a vacant tailor’s shop,” he immediately had “the name of the firm covered over with a cloth, in order to forestall any bad jokes.” He also discovered that the local organizer tasked with finding an appropriate location for the assembly had chosen a beer hall, “a large but unsuitable place with a music-hall stage.” Herzl quickly rented instead the concert hall of the Basel Municipal Casino. At the entrance, he arranged for a large sign displaying the Star of David and the simple title, “Zionist Congress.” His ally, the traditionalist David Wolffsohn, had designed a flag consisting of a white field and two blue stripes, modeled on the *tallit*, or prayer shawl, and also with a Star of David.

While choreographing the scene—as was only to be expected, given his experience not only as a playwright but also as a keen observer of the high drama of French politics during four years as Paris correspondent for the leading Viennese paper—Herzl saw to it that the participants were appropriately dressed, both to inject them with a heightened sense of decorum and to make the requisite impression on observers. All delegates were informed that they had to wear formal European attire: for the men, black trousers, tails, and white tie. When Max Nordau, the most prominent participant and perhaps Herzl’s closest ally, showed up on the first morning wearing a frock coat, Herzl prevailed on him to return to his room and don proper formal wear.

There were somewhere between 196 and 246 delegates; it is impossible to know the exact number, in part because some delegates had their names removed from the official lists lest the Russian secret police learn they had been there in an official capacity. Moreover, Herzl deliberately blurred the line between delegates and other participants in order to swell the impression of massive participation. By contrast, the founding conference of *Hovevei Tsiyon*, in Kattowitz in 1884, was attended by only 30 representatives.

Of the delegates in Basel, it appears that only 69 represented communities or organizations, while the others were chosen, mostly by Herzl, because of their interest in Zionism. They hailed from 20 countries, ranging from Algeria to the U.S., with the largest group being from Russia (63), followed by Austria and Germany. Jews of Russian origin also predominated in many of the nominally Western delegations, which means that their real numbers were greater than the figures show. Roughly 60 were engaged in business or finance and 38 were students; they were joined by 24 lawyers, 21 writers, 15 physicians, 13 journalists, and 11 rabbis.

As mentioned earlier, the Congress began on Sunday morning, August 29, the first day of the Hebrew month of Elul—which marks the start of the period of repentance leading to the High Holy Days and was therefore a particularly propitious time to hold an event dedicated to national return. At Herzl's request, Karpel Lippe, the oldest delegate present, a long-time veteran of *Hovevei Tsiyon*, and the beneficiary of rabbinic training, opened the Congress and offered the blessing of *shehehiyanu*, thanking God for having “granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this moment.”

When it was time for Herzl to give his welcoming speech, the delegates, evidently overwhelmed by genuine emotion, began cheering. One of them, an author from Odessa who wrote under the pseudonym Ben Ami (“Son of my people”), described the scene:

This was not the Dr. Herzl I had seen hitherto, and with whom I was in discussion as recently as last night. Before us rose a marvelous and exalted figure, kingly in bearing and stature, with deep eyes in which could be read quiet majesty and unuttered sorrow. It is no longer the elegant Dr. Herzl of Vienna; it is a royal scion of the House of David, risen from among the dead, clothed in legend and fantasy and beauty. Everyone sat breathless, as if in the presence of a miracle. And in truth, was it not a miracle which we beheld? And then wild applause broke out; for fifteen minutes the delegates clapped, shouted, and waved their handkerchiefs. The dream of two-thousand years was on the point of realization.

Herzl spoke briefly and quickly got to his central point: “We want to lay the cornerstone for the edifice which is one day to house the Jewish nation.” His speech, much more reserved than his more tendentious writing in *The Jewish State*, was followed by an address by Max Nordau that is generally considered the finest oration at the Congress. Subsequent delegates presented reports on the condition of Jewry around the world, on the economic position of the Jews, on the importance of Jewish national life, and the like. At the end of the first day, Herzl, who had been elected as president of the Congress and elegantly but firmly chaired virtually all of its sessions,

announced that more than 550 congratulatory telegrams had been received, together with petitions of support bearing more than 50,000 signatures.

The most important event on the second day was discussion of the draft of a programmatic statement presented for discussion by Nordau as the head of a seven-man committee. Known subsequently as the Basel Program, it opened with a general declaration that initially read: "Zionism seeks to establish a homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine secured under law." This phrase, although toned down from Herzl's earlier, explicit call for establishing a Jewish state, was attacked by advocates of the *Hovevei Tsiyon* approach who feared it would be too provocative for the sultan. It was also criticized by idealistic supporters of Herzl's vision on the grounds that it was too watered down; they preferred to speak of a Jewish national home secured under international law. In response to the latter, Herzl proposed the term "public law," which hinted at, without explicitly calling for, international involvement of the kind that would likely be needed for bringing about a Jewish state.

The remainder of the Basel Program spelled out the means for bringing about the desired end, and it, too, showed the facility of Herzl and his allies for sticking to principle while being pragmatic enough to build a consensus. Among the chosen means were "fostering the settlement of Palestine with farmers, laborers, and artisans"; "organizing the whole of Jewry in suitable local and general bodies, in accordance with the laws of their respective countries"; "strengthening the national Jewish feeling and national consciousness"; and "taking preparatory steps to attain any governmental consent which may be necessary to reach the aim of Zionism." After a heated debate, the program passed with overwhelming support.

On its final day, the Congress made decisions on the organizational structure for the Zionist movement. Most importantly, it was determined that an annual congress would serve as the highest authority. This was crucial as it meant that ultimate control would not be held, as some participants had hoped, by the chapters of *Hovevei Tsiyon* or by any other elite body not responsible to the broad-tent movement as a whole. At the annual congress, there would be one delegate per one-hundred members, and each had to pay a token amount of one "shekel," meaning one unit of the local currency. In between annual sessions, a 23-member Actions Committee, whose members represented a broad array of countries, would run the affairs of the movement. The five members of the Committee who lived in Vienna, including Herzl, were chosen by the Congress as a whole and were to serve as an executive responsible for day-to-day decision making.

At the end of the Congress, Max Mandelstamm, a Russian who was among the oldest participants, asked for the floor. He concluded by saying:

I plead with our honored president not to be discouraged by the hard work which he has performed and which still lies before him and by the discomforts which he has met and which are still to be met. May he bring to a successful conclusion the difficult work he has done, with the same spirit and the same self-sacrifice. Long live the president of the First Zionist Congress, Dr. Theodor Herzl!

After thunderous applause, Herzl declared: “The First Zionist Congress is now closed.” His loyal lieutenant, Jacob de Haas, described what followed:

The Congress was on its feet, the correspondents mounted the tables, and the audience in the gallery grew equally excited. It was not a question of cheering, but of ventilating hearts full of emotion. I have seen bigger crowds and have heard more vociferous outbursts, but the like of this mass of waving handkerchiefs . . . the like of this I have never seen.

The Consequences of the Congress

What changed as a result of Herzl’s fateful decision in January 1897 to stake everything on the holding of a congress in August of that year, and especially as a result of those three days in Basel?

It was Herzl himself who answered this question best. In his now-famous diary entry of September 3, written after he had returned to Vienna, he asserted:

Were I to sum up the Basel Congress in a word—which I shall be very careful not to do publicly—it would be this: at Basel I founded the Jewish state. If I said this out loud today, I would be answered by universal laughter. Perhaps in five years, and certainly in fifty, everyone will admit it.

He went on to make it clear that he was not speaking metaphorically:

The foundation of a state lies in the will of the people for a state. . . . Territory is only the material basis; the state, even when it possesses territory, is always something abstract. . . . It was at Basel that I created this abstract entity, which, as such, is invisible to the vast majority of people. . . . I gradually worked the people into the mood for a state, and made them feel that they were its National Assembly.

Writing for public consumption a week later in *Die Welt*, a Zionist weekly he had founded in May of that year to serve as a platform for the polemics accompanying the decision to hold the Congress, Herzl spelled out the meaning of the event for the participants’ sense of nationhood:

Anyone who was in Basel during those three days of awakening Jewish history will indignantly reject the carping of malicious men. A number of people did go there to have a good laugh, but they lost their desire to laugh when the Jewish nation—poor, tortured, bleeding from many wounds, presumed and pronounced dead, yet unable and unwilling to die—suddenly arose before them in all the majesty of its suffering and with the gleam of hope in its eye. We are an unfortunate people, but a people, one people. . . .

Perhaps the most important consequence of the Congress was in transforming the sense of the participants that the Jews were a nation, that they were its representatives, and that they could and would attain a state. Israel Zangwill, the prominent English author and Herzl's ally at the Congress, spoke to the depths of this transformation by playing off the words of the Psalmist: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept as we remembered Zion. By the river of Basel we sat down resolved to weep no more."

Within the nascent Zionist movement itself, as Herzl noted in his September 10 piece in *Die Welt*, the Congress had an equally profound impact:

[I]t turned out that the Jewish national idea possesses the unifying power to wield together people with linguistic, social, political, and religious differences into one united whole. . . . The brothers have found each other.

Discounting for possible hyperbole, the fact remains that despite the extraordinary challenges and the numerous and profound disagreements it faced over the next half-century, the Zionist movement did generally succeed in holding together the bulk of the burgeoning numbers of Jews who sought to bring about the renaissance of the Jewish state.

Perhaps the most important element of this unity was the bringing together of Jews from Western Europe, generally considered the natural leaders of the Jewish people, with the more traditional masses of Russian Jews who were widely understood to be the likeliest candidates to move in significant numbers to a Jewish homeland. Hovevei Tsiyon had not managed to forge such a union during its decade-and-a-half of activism, and Herzl likewise did not make significant strides during the initial year-and-a-half after publishing *The Jewish State*. Indeed, he acknowledged in an article published in English in October 1897 that he had failed to appreciate the significance of Russian Jewry:

[A]t the Basel Congress there arose before our eyes a Russian Jewry of a cultural strength that we had not expected. Around 70 people showed up from Russia, and we can say with full certainty that they represented the views and sentiments of the five-million Jews of Russia. . . . They have the inner unity which most European Jews have lost. . . . When we saw them, we understood what it was that gave our forefathers the strength to persevere even in the hardest times.

In the years to come, the Zionist movement succeeded in bringing into its leadership representatives of the Jewish communities of Western and Eastern Europe alike.

Another consequence of the Congress, similarly acknowledged by Herzl in his September essay in *Die Welt*, lay in the realm of diplomacy:

The one point which had been informally recognized as the basis of our movement—the creation of a home safeguarded under public law for those Jews who are unable or unwilling to assimilate elsewhere—has now been given solemn sanction by the Congress. We have submitted this principle to the judgment of the world as the expression of our national will and now patiently await its verdict.

Though it is far-fetched to say that the decisions of the Congress reflected the national will of the Jewish people, the existence of the Congress and its attendant publicity made such an assertion at least plausible. This provided the necessary foundation on which the success of Zionist diplomacy would rest during the two decades leading up to the Balfour Declaration in 1917 and the British Mandate of 1922, which created a Jewish national home in Palestine.

On the internal front, the First Zionist Congress also set up the organizational mechanisms that would undergird the Zionist movement during its half-century effort to create a Jewish state. In his diary entry of September 3, Herzl wrote: “Perhaps the most important episode, from the point of view of principle—although it may have gone completely unnoticed—was my introduction of the representative system, that is, the National Assembly.”

Although Herzl was referring only to the means of selecting delegates to the Congress, this system in turn helped establish the primacy and the legitimacy of the subsequent Zionist Congresses, which made Zionism a mass effort rather than one dominated by elites. Taking this a step further, subsequent Congresses and the various institutions they set up—including the Jewish National Fund, the Zionist bank, and other key components—did much of the heavy lifting in making and implementing the decisions that led to the creation of Israel.

Finally, the First Zionist Congress led to explosive growth within the Zionist movement as a whole, going far beyond anything that had been attained by *Hovevei Tsiyon* or by Herzl acting alone. In Russia, for example, the 23 Zionist societies before the Congress were joined by 350 new ones in its aftermath. Substantial growth occurred as well in Austria, Romania, and Germany. Even in the distant U.S., the number of societies rose from ten to 60.

Of course, for Herzl himself, the Congress was a huge success, transforming him from a playwright and journalist who had written a book arguing for a Jewish state into a political leader possessing the credibility born of having acted decisively, worked tirelessly, refused to bow to pressure to drop the idea of holding a Congress in the first place, combined firm commitment to principle with the ability to compromise on tactical issues, managed the proceedings masterfully, and proceeded immediately in its aftermath to consolidate and build on its gains until the day of his death a mere seven years later.

Today, 120 years after the First Zionist Congress convened in Basel, it is appropriate to remember this extraordinary event and the extraordinary leader who stood behind it.

Note: This essay draws heavily on Theodor Herzl’s published writings, especially the complete edition of his diaries; biographies of Herzl written by Alex Bein, Amos Elon, Ernst Pawel, and Shlomo Avineri; The Jubilee of the First Zionist Congress, 1897-1947; Lawrence Epstein’s The Dream of Zion; David Vital’s The Origins of Zionism; and, most especially, The Jewish State and other writings on Herzl by Yoram Hazony.