

Book Reviews

Theodor Herzl: The Charismatic Leader. By *Derek Penslar*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020. 239 pages. \$26.00 (cloth).

Theodor Herzl is about as close as it comes to the “great man” example in modern Jewish history. Herzl wrote the foundational text of Zionism, *Der Judenstaat*, and he almost single-handedly set up the institutions that gave Zionism its organizational form. His frenetic diplomatic campaign for international support to establish a Jewish “home” in Palestine seemed to be a failure while he was alive and probably contributed to his early death at only 44 years of age. Yet it was Herzl’s contacts with the British government that eventually led to the Balfour Declaration and the foundation of Israel. The “great man” theory has its limitations, but it is not entirely absurd to argue that without Herzl there would be no modern state of Israel.

Nonetheless, it is strange that it was Herzl who became the “father of the state of Israel,” because he was not very Jewish. Raised with only superficial instruction in the Jewish religion, Herzl took the path of maximum integration—assimilation—into German-speaking Central European society, first in Budapest and then in Vienna. Arguably, the path chosen for him by his parents

and the one he followed for himself was in itself a “Jewish trajectory” of a very Central European kind, but for more traditional Jews, especially those in Eastern Europe, Herzl was remarkable for what he did *not* know about Jewish religion, culture, and tradition. It appeared bizarre that someone so ignorant of Judaism and Jewish culture should lead the Zionist movement for restoration of the Jewish people. Because of the tangential nature of his Jewishness, Herzl’s place in the Zionist revival of the Jewish nation remains controversial. Through his role in Zionism, Herzl was central to bringing about a revolution in Jewish history, shifting Jewish identity from representing the archetypal diasporic people to a new Jewish identity increasingly centered on Israel. And yet, how can what it means to be Jewish have been so fundamentally changed by someone who, in so many ways, was hardly Jewish at all?

There have been many attempts to tackle such issues in recent years, including, for the record, one by myself. Most have been admiring of Herzl’s remarkable personality and of his achievement, while many have been nonetheless quite critical of certain aspects of that achievement, and of the thought and assumptions that were behind it. Even those studies that have concentrated on Herzl’s thought, such as mine in a “Jewish thinkers” series, tend to be distracted by the extraordinary and sometimes bizarre aspects of his life. Penslar turns the fact that he is writing about Herzl in a “Jewish lives” series very much to his advantage. A book about a “Jewish life” avoids many of the problems related to defining Jewishness because all lives of Jews, whatever their level of knowledge or practice, are inherently Jewish lives.

Penslar does a very good job delineating the connections between Herzl’s cultural background, set within the context of the ideology of Jewish emancipation, and his social and political experiences as a German-aculturated Jewish writer, journalist, and eventual political activist. He effectively connects Herzl’s private, familial experience, including a not particularly happy marriage, with his artistic frustrations, and his socio-political frustrations as an assimilatory Jew in an increasingly antisemitic context. For Penslar, these are the grounds that produced Herzl’s Zionist inspiration.

The irony, as Penslar points out, is that it was in many ways Herzl's very distance from traditional Judaism, and his own psychological frustrations and problems, that made him into such an ideal charismatic leader of Zionism. That, and his great "Oriental" beauty: the noble visage, with his "Assyrian" beard, and his relatively tall, elegant stature. Penslar is insightful on how much his impressive physical form and nobly elegant habitus enabled Herzl to appeal to both Jews and non-Jews—from traditional shtetl dwellers all the way to monarchs.

In its form this is a quite conventional biographical work. Herzl's early years growing up in the booming Hungarian capital of Budapest, and then moving with his parents to the Habsburg capital of Vienna, a period when he was anything but a *Jewish* nationalist, are analyzed for future clues to the man's character with an emphasis on his personal, psychological, familial, and professional frustrations. Although objectively quite successful by 1891, Herzl was clearly not successful enough for his own liking, or that comfortable with himself or the situation in which he found himself. As a playwright and feuilletonist he had achieved success, he had married into a wealthy Jewish family, but this brought neither happiness nor self-respect. There follows a chapter on the critical period from 1891 to 1895 when Herzl was the *Neue Freie Presse* correspondent in Paris. He became increasingly obsessed with "solving" the Jewish Question that had been brought about by the rise of political antisemitism, more so in his Central European homeland than in the Paris about which he reported. Although here too antisemitic attacks on Jewish financiers sharpened Herzl's sensitivity to the problematic nature of his Jewishness; it was in Paris that Herzl had his Zionist revelation.

Herzl's subsequent creation of the Zionist Organization, a remarkable achievement in institution building, is then described in some detail. Penslar's recounting of the famous 1897 Congress in Basel is particularly effective. There follows an account of Herzl's all-out campaign to build support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine in both the Jewish and international communities, with a concluding chapter that relates both Herzl's ultimate failure in creating that

Jewish homeland and his immense success at putting that goal on the map of international public and internal Jewish debate. Penslar emphasizes, rightly in my view, the significance of Herzl's second blueprint for that homeland: the futuristic novel *Altneuland* with its famous slogan "If you will it, it is no fairytale." He concludes with an epilogue on where Herzl now resides in the modern Jewish landscape: on Mount Herzl in western Jerusalem, the secular centre of Israeli national identity that is being superseded by the Western Wall, a religious and biblical-historical site that offers a quite different source of Israeli and Jewish identity—one with which Herzl did not have much connection. Herzl is seen by Penslar as a national father-figure, still iconic, but who is nonetheless being forgotten and misunderstood in the modern Jewish state he did so much to help establish.

This is a fine, thoughtful, and nicely balanced book that can serve as an excellent introduction to a fascinating and still important figure. Elegantly written, Penslar nevertheless manages to pack a remarkable amount of detail and thought into a mere 210 pages of text. Inevitably, it has points where it is less than perfect. Penslar, citing Herzl, mentions a decision by "the Austrian liberal student union" to deny "Jews the right to satisfaction in duels" as being a cause of the increased concern about antisemitism that led to his Zionism (60). Yet no such measure was passed by an "Austrian liberal student union," at least not by 1895. Such a measure was, notoriously, passed in 1896, the "Waidhofen Principle," but by German nationalist students already known for their extreme antisemitism. For arcane reasons, German nationalist students were categorized as part of the left wing of Austrian (German) liberalism, so Penslar can be forgiven for misinterpreting Herzl's language on this, although earlier in the book he provides quite a good explanation of this strange constellation (25).

Another slight misinterpretation of either Herzl's German or his sense of humour, or both, is when Penslar translates "Geschlechtstheile" as genitals and thinks this is a "puckish" joke about his circumcised penis as the symbol of the Jewish identity Herzl wishes to hide (66). It was actually quite a sophisticated, if somewhat

smutty, *double entendre* for “Geschlechtstheile” which literally means “parts connoting race” so this can also refer to the “nose and beard” by which Herzl had sensed himself identified as a Jew by Austrian officer cadets in an episode related a couple of pages earlier (64).

There could also have been more details provided on the discussion of Herzl’s interview with Baron Hirsch in June 1895, or rather on the set of notes which he wrote out for the meeting. Flustered during the interview, Herzl never addressed most of the notes, which perhaps explains Penslar’s neglect of them. But this is unfortunate as the notes—printed in the new comprehensive German version of Herzl’s letters and Zionist diaries—show the seamless transition in Herzl’s thinking between demanding Jews better themselves and integrate themselves *within* European society and thinking that the best way of realizing the *same goal* of becoming real “humans” was via exodus, founding a new Jewish homeland somewhere outside of Europe. This was all *before* he had his manic period of Zionist inspiration.

These relatively small details should not detract from the general excellence of the book. Penslar gets most of the story right, especially concerning the most significant areas of previous controversy. It might surprise readers, for instance, that Penslar concludes that the Dreyfus Affair played no discernible role at all in Herzl’s conversion to Zionism. The interpretation of Herzl’s Zionism as a reaction to an injustice that showed the triumph of antisemitism and the hopelessness of assimilation, even in liberal France, has become a central part of popular perceptions about Herzl. Yet none of it is true, according to Penslar, and he is almost certainly right. The source of the interpretation that Herzl was shocked by the Dreyfus case and knew the captain was innocent was Herzl himself. However, the statement was made in 1899 in the middle of the actual Dreyfus Affair when many realized Dreyfus was actually innocent. At the time of the initial spy scandal during Dreyfus’s first trial, Herzl displayed no doubts about the verdict and Dreyfus is not mentioned by name in the Zionist diary of 1895. Penslar’s work reinforces the idea that the connection to the Dreyfus Affair in the Herzl narrative should really be abandoned.

Another highlight of this work is Penslar's intelligent discussion of the German word *Judentum*, which can mean Judaism, Jewry, or Jewishness, and has caused immense interpretative mischief. It is a great service that Penslar at least broaches this topic. Herzl was not very convinced by the idea of racial or metaphysical Jewishness and tended to define what was Jewish as an aggregate of what individual Jews did and thought. Hence his *Judenstaat* is mistranslated as *The Jewish State* because there is no clear-cut Jewish national character or ethnonational culture for Herzl. Instead, his meaning is far closer to "The State of the Jews" or even "The State for the Jews," interpreted as a mere collectivity rather than a collectivist entity.

What Penslar does best of all in this book is to foreground the role that antisemitism played in Herzl's Zionism. Obviously, one might think Zionism was a reaction to antisemitism: if antisemitism made Jewish integration into modern European society impossible, the only way to rescue Jews from a terrible fate was to allow them to create their own state in their historical homeland. Yet there is nothing obvious at all about Herzl's actual attitude toward antisemitism and its relationship to Zionism. The truth is that Herzl's Zionism was based on an acceptance of the antisemitic critique of the Jewish presence in Central European society. It was what Jews had become as a persecuted minority that made them a pernicious factor in modern European society. They held too much financial power and were too numerous and prominent in commerce and the liberal professions, such as law, medicine, and journalism for the host societies to be comfortable with them, or for the Jews to be comfortable with themselves. As a typical product of the Jewish ideology of emancipation, Herzl first thought that Jews could reform themselves and integrate with the host populations. The emancipatory tradition taught that Jews could still remain identifiably Jewish by religion, but Herzl began to think a more radical integration was necessary—at one point he talks of "submerging into the people," effectively disappearing. Yet he concluded, partly because of his own personal, social, and professional problems, that the only way that Jews such as himself could correct the problems with *themselves*

that antisemites had highlighted was to leave Europe and form their own state. Only then, in their own national community, could Jews effect a true emancipation, a true self-reform, and achieve the inner freedom that could realize their full humanity. As his notes for the Hirsch interview put it, they could become *Menschen*.

Much of Herzl's thought on Jews, Zionism, the relationship to nationalism, the Social Question, and the wider world, is difficult to read today. The way in which he accepts so much of the antisemitic diagnosis of the Jewish Question, of the socially and culturally destructive role of Jews as an alien presence within European nations, would qualify him as an antisemite today according to the IHRA definition (or at least some of its examples). His optimism about "Western civilization," despite antisemitism, and his view of colonialism as a most progressive factor in world affairs, civilizing what he clearly thought were inferior races, especially Africans, is deeply ironic given the Holocaust (which he did not predict) and very hard to stomach. He was also quite prepared to remove any local population that would stand in the way of the new Jewish colonial state, although it should be said that he wanted to do it peacefully, by agreement and guile rather than by violence. Moreover, the context in which he was discussing this was not Palestine but rather some out of the way place in South America (for him), in the colonies in other words, where such policies were par for the course for Europeans in the nineteenth century. One of the people Herzl was most keen on meeting was Cecil Rhodes, and Herzl's mindset makes it entirely understandable that the Zionist bank was founded as the Jewish *Colonial* Trust.

It might at first surprise readers that Herzl was quite well-received by many of the prominent figures he lobbied to support his Zionist project including Wilhelm II of Germany, several members of the British establishment including Joseph Chamberlain, several prominent antisemitic French writers such as Alphonse Daudet, and even the Russian Interior Minister Vyacheslav von Plehve. But then Herzl shared many of their racist prejudices and claimed to "understand" their antisemitic attitudes and arguments. He really thought Zionism would be a complete solution to the rise of antisemitism

in Europe because it would remove the Jews who were the problem. His Zionism *depends* on agreeing with the antisemitic diagnosis and saying that it is the presence of *too many* over-educated and over-ambitious Jews in European societies that creates antisemitism. With too many Jews present, the central idea of liberal democracy in which everyone is treated equally regardless of their religion or ethnicity will not work because they cause *justified* resentment in the national populace as a too-prominent and too-successful group of alien outsiders. Herzl left room for some Jews to assimilate but thought the idea of Jews successfully integrating in large numbers would never happen in any society. In any case, it was not his preferred solution, which was Jewish self-realization in their own nation-state.

Herzl was a nationalist, a liberal nationalist, but still a nationalist. He started off as a liberal German nationalist and became a Jewish nationalist (with Germanophile prejudices) who thought Jews did not really belong as individual citizens in other nations. Yet this is the basis of the huge success of Jews in the Western world, especially in North America. There is little doubt that, unlike many antisemites, he meant well. It is also true that he could not live outside his own time. His Zionism might have relied for much of its logic on antisemitic arguments, but he himself was not antisemitic. Anything but, in fact. His whole later life was dedicated to saving Jews from antisemitism, if also from their lesser selves. His aim was not to oppose emancipation, but rather to complete it elsewhere, which would be good for civilization and for Jews. Evidence of his good intentions is contained in his Zionist novel *Altneuland*. Herzl's second book, a science-fictional blueprint for the Zionist project, is a lovely Utopia. It includes a heartfelt and moving discussion of why the Jewish New Society must be liberal and inclusive, not ethnonationalist, bigoted and exclusivist, which is the central argument of the book. Yet reading such arguments in the current context of today's ever-ongoing conflict in the Middle East puts Herzl in a tragic light.

His legacy has been manipulated in ways he would not have imagined, to make him seem like a figure of the hard Israeli Right

when he was much closer in his liberality to being a figure of the Israeli Left. Penslar is honest about this, and one can certainly read between the lines of this book about the darker side of Theodor Herzl. He lacked a realistic view about the antagonistic effect a Jewish “colony” in Palestine would have on the local Arab population. This was remarked on at the time by figures such as Ahad Ha’am. Herzl also proved to be entirely wrong about the nature of Jewish integration in Western society, missing, or at least misinterpreting, the immensely positive participation of Jews in modern (Western) culture and thought. His dismissal of Jewish integration as Jews in liberal pluralist societies like the United States and Canada as an impossibility was not only a mistake, but also a tragic mistake. The way in which authoritarian illiberal nationalists can today be pro-Israel in foreign policy and antisemitic at home, while successfully accusing the Left of being antisemitic because of its support for the Palestinian struggle for national justice, all at the same time, is implicitly enabled by the logic of Herzl’s Zionism. To address Penslar’s implicit message: sadly, Herzl may be on his way to being forgotten in the country he helped establish, but while his immense achievement should indeed remain in our memory, we must not ignore the fact that many of the consequences of that achievement have been tragic and are with us still.

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