

**PROJECT EZRA V: THE STORY OF ISRAEL***Herzl & Political Zionism***Herzl**

Theodor Herzl was born in Budapest in 1860. He attended a Jewish elementary school, had a Bar Mitzvah but, by and large, was raised and educated in the spirit of the German-Jewish “Enlightenment”. Herzl knew very little about the travails and life of Eastern European Jewry. His family was very assimilated and in his home was a Christmas tree in place of a menorah. After the death of his older sister, Pauline, the family moved to Vienna where Herzl studied for a law degree at the University of Vienna. After earning his law degree and briefly working in the courts, he gave up the legal profession and tried his hand at writing essays and philosophical stories. Mostly, he was drawn to the theater and wrote a string of plays which had a moderately successful run on the Austrian stage. Yet, after several of these plays failed in Germany, Herzl began looking for a more steady income. He became a writer for the Vienna *Neue Freie Presse*, at first writing charming travel articles and literary reviews. Later he would become a foreign correspondent.

**The Dreyfus Affair**

Herzl had witnessed and experienced anti-Semitism in Hungary and especially in Austria. Still, he was not prepared for what he witnessed in France. Covering the Dreyfus trial and witnessing the reaction of the French mob, he no longer felt that anti-Semitism was merely a temporary problem which would ultimately disappear. Only a more radical solution could save the Jews. In the aftermath of the Dreyfus affair, Herzl began penning his thoughts advocating the mass exodus of Jews from Europe and re-establishing a national homeland. He sought to gain the support of major Jewish philanthropists such as Baron de Hirsch and the Rothschilds, yet such efforts failed miserably. Meeting with other prominent Jewish leaders also came to no success. Herzl then went ahead, published a book, *Der Judenstaat*, (*The Jewish State*) and now looked for support from the Jewish masses. While other Zionist writings predated Herzl’s, his was unique in that it offered a concrete, practical, diplomatic plan of how this was to be achieved: the creation of an international legal body to represent world Jewry before the world; the creation of a national Jewish bank to control the financial affairs of the movement, diplomatic activity to gain the support of the world powers.

**Herzl & the Arab Problem**

In public Herzl made no explicit reference to the fate of the indigenous Arab population of Palestine, but he was aware of its existence and the problems it posed. In 1899 he wrote the Arab notable Yusuf Zia al-Khalidi of Jerusalem telling him that Zionism did not pose a threat of displacement for the Arab inhabitants of Palestine.

Rather, he said, the arrival of an industrious, talented, well funded Jewish community would materially benefit them. He said much the same in his utopian novel *Altneuland* (Old-New Land) published in 1902 and set in Palestine in 1923. The Jews would bring only progress and prosperity to the country's natives, and this would be the basis of cooperation. Arabs, he said, could become equal citizens in the Jewish commonwealth. In 1903 Herzl reportedly opposed the purchase of the lands of Fula in the Jezreel Valley from a Beirut family, arguing that “*poor Arab tenant farmers should not be driven off their land.*”

### **Opposition to Herzl**

Jewish leaders of the West (British & French) feared that Herzl's loud public advocacy of Jewish national aspirations would undermine their own communities' standing and might reinforce Ottoman antagonism towards the on-going small scale settling process in Palestine. Eastern Europe's *Hovevei Zion* leaders also, at least initially reacted to Herzl with extreme wariness- fearing that his pronouncements would be counter productive to their efforts. Moreover, Herzl was an outsider and seemed to be dismissing all that *Hovevei Zion* had accomplished. He rejected their piecemeal approach to the Zionist dream, and was, in effect, supplanting their leadership of the movement. Eventually, however, the Zionist societies were persuaded that there was no credible alternative, no better program's than Herzl's , and no leader better than the journalist.

### **The Zionist Congresses**

Herzl wasted no time in putting his plan into effect: With the support of the uncle of the German Kaiser William II, Herzl secured an appointment with the office of the Sultan of Turkey and submitted a plan for a charter asking for an autonomous Jewish “*vassal state*” in Palestine under Turkish rule, in exchange for financial support from the world Jewish community. To impress the Turkish government of the feasibility of this proposal and to legitimize his political activities Herzl organized the first **Zionist Congress** held in Basil, Switzerland on August 29-31, 1897. It was attended by 250 delegates from 24 countries with representatives of the *Hovevei Zion* dominating. The work of the Congress was limited: it adopted the program of the Zionist movement outlined in Herzl's book and elected Herzl as president of its body. The ultimate goal that they said they hope to a achieve was a “*Jewish home.*” The final phrasing was only arrived at after bitter quarrels. But in the end, under Herzl's guidance the delegates decided to avoid the term “*Jewish State*” so as not to antagonize the Turks and others. Immediately after the conclusion of the Congress, on September 3, 1897 Herzl wrote in his diary: “*Were I to sum up the Basil Congress in a word.. it would be. At Basil I founded the Jewish State... Perhaps in 5 years and certainly in 50, everyone will know it.*” In fact, only 51 years were to pass before this dream became reality.