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Searching for the Next Herzl

By Leonard Fein

The funeral took place in Vienna on July 7, 1904. The stunning announcement had come three days earlier: Theodor Herzl, dead at age 44.

Here is Stefan Zweig's description of the day, as quoted by Ernst Pawel in "The Labyrinth of Exile, A Life of Theodor Herzl": "A strange day it was, a day in July, unforgettable to all who were there to see it. Because suddenly at every railroad station in the city, with every train, night and day, from every country and corner of the world, masses of people kept arriving, Western and Eastern Jews, Russian and Turkish Jews, from every province and every little town they kept streaming in, the shock of the news still marking their faces."

The news, presumably, had traveled by telegraph, and the people, of course, by carriage and by train. No television, no jet planes. What accounts for the numbers — and for the passion, for the "weeping, howling, screaming" at graveside, for "a kind of elemental and ecstatic mourning such as [Zweig had] never seen before or since at a funeral"?

Even Pawel, whose biography of Herzl is mesmerizing, cannot explain how Herzl, less than a decade earlier, had "established himself within a matter of months as the leader, spokesman and standard-bearer of secular Jewish nationalism... known throughout Europe, from the Pale of Settlement to the slums of Whitechapel." Herzl's funeral is scarcely less a mystery.

It is now more than a century since "*Der Judenstaat*" ("The Jewish State"), Herzl's signature document, was published, more than a century since he convened the first World Zionist Congress. Today, Jewish leaders from around the world meet a dozen times a year in far-flung cities, speak weekly by telephone, fax each other documents daily and e-mail each other hourly; the secular media, including television, report in considerable detail on matters of Jewish

interest. Yet for all the revolution in travel and communications, it is simply impossible to imagine the death of any Jew, even if caused by an assassin's bullet and not, as in Herzl's case, by a heart attack, exciting the response that Herzl's death occasioned.

One explanation: The sheer misery of Jewish life in 1894, when "*Der Judenstaat*" was published, and the elegant and simple prescription for the repair of that misery that Herzl proposed, have no contemporary analogues. We were a desperate and rudderless people then, and Theodor Herzl, protected from self-doubt both by his personality and by his ignorance of the details of Jewish life, offered himself as our engine and our rudder. But today, no matter our condition, the very ease of both travel and communication also ensures, as Andy Warhol taught us, that fame is ephemeral; the speed and facility with which words, images and people move ensure both early celebrity and early contempt.

Then there is the explanation specific to Herzl: "Theodore Herzl, A Memorial" was published in 1929, on the 25th anniversary of Herzl's death; it was edited by Meyer Weisgal, who later became president of the Weizmann Institute of Science (and also played the part of David Ben-Gurion in the film "Exodus" in return for a gift of \$1 million to the Weizmann Institute).

The book is mainly a compilation of tributes to Herzl; the array of contributors is stunning, including Chaim Weizmann, Martin Buber, Georges Clemenceau, Stephen S. Wise, Max Brod, Israel Zangwill, Abba Hillel Silver, Ludwig Lewisohn, Mordecai Kaplan and Simon Dubnow. Almost invariably, the contributors who knew Herzl personally find reason to remark on his ignorance of the Jews, of their culture and of their yearnings.

Weizmann describes him as "a leader who knew not of the people he was destined" to lead; Menachem Ussishkin, a Zionist long before Herzl appeared on the Zionist scene, goes further still, describing his reaction to his first meeting with Herzl: "He has one great defect, which, however, will prove very useful under present conditions: He knows absolutely nothing about the Jews, and therefore believes that Zionism is confronted by external obstacles only, and by no internal ones. His eyes must not be opened — then his faith in our cause will be great."

What a rich observation — and what a sad commentary on the Jews, for whom not only Ussishkin but many of the early Zionist activists had a curious mixture of sympathy and

contempt. But if their familiarity bred contempt, then, apparently, Herzl's ignorance enabled obsession.

Herzl was the first president of the World Zionist Congress. Who sits in his chair today? Most of us do not know, nor is there any special reason that we should. Today, it is the functionaries of our communities who take on the principal responsibility for Jewish destiny. In the most unlikely event that any of these should present himself as a hero and seek to grab hold of history as Herzl did, he (or, too rarely, she) would be dismissed as suffering from grandiosity.

Herzl, no stranger to grandiosity, managed in the eight short years of his meteoric career as a Jewish leader to transform Jewish life and Jewish fortune. Man and message were the same, perfectly matched to the needs of the times. It was in so many ways a simpler world back then, although it did not seem so at the time. One cannot imagine a Herzl-like meteor today, nor the message that could overcome all the unremitting noise, penetrate the cynicism that announces itself as sophistication.

Then again, before Herzl, who imagined Herzl?