

Theodor Herzl's Influence on the First Zionist Congress

There were many events in the course of history that led to the First Zionist Congress. There were several leaders that wanted an end to Anti-Semitism. They believed that all of the hatred directed towards the Jewish people had to be put to an end and the world wasn't going to stop persecuting them unless someone presented the struggles and sufferings that the Jews were experiencing. Someone or something had to show all the nations that the Jews were not happy with the way they were been treated. The Jewish people were in constant danger and Anti-Semitism was growing stronger and stronger as time passed by. Acts of hatred towards Jews influenced Theodor Herzl to start Zionist movements and spread the word that life for Jews didn't have to be unpleasant. The world would soon hear about a new and innovating idea that could put a stop to the unjust treatment of Jews all over the world. However, this idea would take lots of courage, time, thought, and determination. Luckily, Herzl was well educated and strong-minded. These great qualities would help him start a new revolution that would change the views and ideas that many people had about the importance about Jews and what should be done with them. One of his biggest contributions towards Zionism would be the organization of the First Zionist Congress. Although it would not be a complete success, it would not be a complete failure.

Theodore Herzl was a Hungarian Jew born in Budapest in 1860. He was a visionary of Zionism and in fact, he was considered to be its founder. He was

educated in the spirit of the German-Jewish Enlightenment and learned to appreciate secular culture. In 1878 his family moved to Vienna and in 1884 Herzl was awarded a doctorate of law from the University of Vienna. He became a writer, a playwright, and a journalist. The Paris correspondent of the influential liberal Vienna newspaper *Neue Freie Presse* was none other than Theodor Herzl himself.

Herzl first encountered the anti-Semitism that would shape his life and the fate of the Jews in the twentieth century while he studied at the University of Vienna in 1882. Later, during his stay in Paris as a journalist, he was brought face-to-face with the problem. At the time, he considered the Jewish problem as being just a social issue. However, his whole view on the Jews would soon change. He then wrote a drama, *The Ghetto* in 1894, in which assimilation and conversion were rejected as solutions. He hoped that *The Ghetto* would lead to debate and ultimately to a solution, based on mutual tolerance and respect between Christians and Jews.

In 1894 an event occurred that further encouraged Herzl to start and support the Zionist movement. He observed and learned of the Dreyfus Affair, which was just an act of anti-Semitism. It ended up being one of the most controversial trials at the end of the nineteenth century. Dreyfus was a captain on the French general staff, an extraordinarily high position even for an assimilated Jew. In 1894 a document sent by the French Major Ferdinand Esterhazy, who was working for the Germans, was intercepted. Dreyfus was accused of the crime because he was a

Jew. The prosecution went as far as forging documents to frame him and to prove him guilty of treason. As a result, in a closed court-martial, Dreyfus was found guilty and condemned to life imprisonment on Devil's Island. Herzl witnessed mobs shouting "Death to the Jews" and his heart was deeply touched. Even when the frame-up was proven, the French army refused to change its verdict. The incident caused an international scandal because France, the European birthplace of liberty, justice, and liberalism had sunk to such depths of anti-Semitism. On January 13, 1898, Emile Zola wrote an outraged article, "J'accuse!" which accused Dreyfus's opponents of malicious libel. Despite world horror, it wasn't until 1906 that the French Court of Appeal admitted that there had never been a case against Dreyfus, and he was completely exonerated. This event put and exploded a spark in Herzl's mind. He could not stand to see the continuous mistreatment of the Jewish people. He was greatly disturbed and his idea that anti-Semitism occurred because Jews looked and acted differently quickly changed.

His view on the hatred that the French showed surprised him. The French were supposed to be the most sophisticated, cultured people in the world. Therefore, their anti-Semitic responses couldn't spring from ignorance. As a result, Herzl concluded that the only solution for anti-Semitism was the exodus of Jews from hostile lands and their resettlement onto their own land. Anti-Semitism would cease, he believed, only when Jews had their own country.

Zionism was not a completely new idea to the Jewish solution. Moses Hess and Leon Pinsker had both thought of the idea many years ago, but they didn't

have any support or success. They both wrote books to try to inspire people and to gain public acceptance. They both failed. Herzl, however, was determined to succeed. He had seen too much already and was ready to change the lives of the Jewish people. He was a man of incredible energy who would devote his life after the Dreyfus Trial to creating the necessary political framework to achieve his goal of an independent Jewish state. He knew that the first step to creating a Jewish homeland had to be an international Jewish institution responsible for funding and organizing the new nation.

After two years of being turned down by major Jewish philanthropists who viewed him as a zealous madman, Herzl presented his plan to the Jewish people. In 1896 he wrote a pamphlet, "The Jewish State," which described his goal of creating a separate nation for the Jews. Herzl believed that the non-Jewish countries would recognize the benefits of ridding their territories of anti-Semitism and would help him get an internationally recognized charter. This, however, failed.

Herzl's pamphlet was not a complete failure, though. He was able to excite thoughtful European Jews about his plan to convene a World Zionist Congress with the intention of creating a Jewish nation. As a result, the First World Zionist Congress met in Basel, Switzerland in 1897. It was the first time that Jews from different nations had ever met with a political agenda. Although the philosophical differences among the representatives were tremendous, all of them agreed that the purpose of the World Zionist Congress would be to represent

the needs of all Jews in their goal of establishing an independent Jewish nation. It was understood that their major function was to create the political organizations needed to found a new country. They elected Herzl president of the organization, set the dues rate, approved the design of the Jewish national flag, which is now the flag of Israel, and agreed to meet once a year. Thus, the First Zionist Congress set the foundation for what was to come and for the movement of creating a Jewish State.

The First Zionist Congress could not have been formed without Theodor Herzl. It was the first step toward the elimination of Jewish mistreatment and it will be remembered by people around the world for decades to come. It might not have fulfilled its purpose right away, but with time, it *did* help to create the Jewish State of Israel in 1948. Without the First Zionist Congress, Israel would probably not even exist right now, anti-Semitism would still subsist as before and the Jewish people would still be suffering dreadfully.