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The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry publishes commentary and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. You are welcome to share your thoughts on our Perspectives with us: cst@tauex.tau.ac.il. We are glad to share with you the thirty-sixth issue of Perspectives.

Herzl's Trees

A journey in Vienna on the 120th anniversary of the great visionary's death

Jakob Brandstätter

One Hundred and Twenty years ago today, on July 3, 1904, Theodor Herzl died. He was just 44.

The death of the founder of the World Zionist Organization, who, within seven years of activism, transformed Zionism into a viable dream, sent shock waves and caused grief across the Jewish world.

It was a catalyst for the second wave of migration that brought to the Land of Israel several of the founding fathers and mothers of the future state.

More than 6,000 people attended the funeral in Vienna, ending at the Döbling Cemetery.

Stephan Zweig wrote: "For suddenly, at every railway station in the city, with every train, day and night, people came from all realms and countries, western, eastern, Russian, Turkish Jews, from all provinces and small towns, they suddenly rushed in,

the shock of the news still in their faces; never did one feel more clearly what earlier the arguing and talking had made invisible, that it was the leader of a great movement who was being carried to his grave here.”

It was a turning point, argued Zweig. One that came too late: “At once Vienna realized that it was not only a writer or mediocre poet who had died here, but one of those shapers of ideas that rise victoriously in a country, in a people, only at immense intervals. A tumult arose at the cemetery; too many suddenly flocked to his coffin, weeping, howling, screaming in a wildly exploding despair; it became a roar, almost a rage; all order was shattered by a kind of elemental and ecstatic grief such as I have never seen before or since at a funeral.”

I am on my way to the square the city of Vienna named after Herzl.

As I walk by my former high school, Akademisches Gymnasium Wien, on Lothringerstraße, I observe the memorial to the victims of the Shoah created by Karl Prantl, the Austrian sculptor.

Three granite slabs, originating from the “Great Street” of the National Socialist Party Rally Grounds, are embedded in the pavement. They were originally created using forced labor.

As a high school student, I passed by here every day for eight years. Although they are a part of the sidewalk, it never felt right walking on them directly.

The history of Jewish life in Vienna is marked by exclusion, assimilation, and incomprehensible suffering, but also by great achievements in literature, philosophy, and science.

No era reflected this reality more than the transition from the 19th to the 20th century.

Economic, scientific, and cultural prosperity was largely led by the intellectual elites of Jewish Vienna. The plays of Arthur Schnitzler, the novels of Zweig, the pioneering psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud. And Herzl, the journalist, the playwright. He made Vienna his home after his parents moved there from Pest when he was 18. At the time, he was fully immersed in German culture.

Jews identified with the multi-ethnic Habsburg Empire and German cultural values. The joke had it that they were the only true Austro-Hungarians. However, the more Jews excelled and shined, the more antisemitism reared its ugly head in political forms.

Every Viennese who wanders through his or her city is constantly confronted with the deep scars and bright spots of the city’s past.

While reminiscing about my high school days, I stop by one of the many commemorative plaques attached to the school building.

It is in memory of the former student Hans Kelsen, the Jewish jurist who wrote the Austrian constitution of 1920, which is still in effect in amended form today.

Kelsen was in the same class with Ludwig von Mises, who later became one of the most important representatives of the Austrian School of Economics.

Von Mises was born into a wealthy Jewish family. His great-grandfather was elevated to hereditary nobility by Emperor Franz Josef I. Deeply attached to his country, he served as an officer in World War I and was decorated several times.

Even after the collapse of the empire, von Mises served Austria in an exemplary manner and, as an economist, was largely responsible for ending hyperinflation. Like some other Austrian Jewish intellectuals, he emigrated to the USA, a minute before it was too late.

I wrestle with the bizarre and sad irony of radical nationalist movements choosing to weaken their own nation by either killing or expelling their own intellectual elite in pursuit of mystical nationhood and racial fanaticism.

Lost in thought, I find myself on Ringstraße, the historic boulevard that belts around the city's historic center.

I walk past Stadtpark, the centrally located beautiful park through which the Vienna River runs, and cross to the other side of Ringstraße. I end up on Stubenring, where the Dr.-Karl-Lueger-Platz is located.

The square next to Ringstraße was named after Karl Lueger, Vienna's mayor and founder of the Christian Social Party (predecessor organization of the Austrian People's Party).

Lueger used vicious antisemitic rhetoric during his campaigns and terms in office in the late 19th century and until his death in 1910.

I stop in front of the Karl Lueger monument and examine it closely.

The monument, and the debate on how to treat Lueger's antisemitic legacy, has been a pervasive topic in Vienna's political and social circles for decades.

In 2009, the University of Applied Arts organized an art competition to redesign the monument.

Klemens Wihlidal won with his creative proposal to tilt the monument 3.5 degrees to the right. The structural implementation is now scheduled to start this year.

In 2016, the City of Vienna added an additional plaque to the memorial. The text on the plaque, written by historian Oliver Rathkolb in collaboration with the Cultural Commission of the First District, attempts to offer a differentiated and contextual classification of Lueger.

The plaque describes the mayor's contributions to the city of Vienna, but also his antisemitic and nationalist rhetoric and legacy.

For some, this was not enough, and they demanded the removal of the monument.

In 2020, activists graffitied the monument with paint and the word “Schande” (shame).

I take a few steps closer and contemplate. Yes, the shameful past must not be forgotten and must be reappraised, but this will not be achieved through graffiti or the removal of monuments.

Canceling would also cancel the opportunity to critically examine the city’s problematic history. Graffiti does not do justice to a complicated issue. This is better achieved through comprehensive historical contextualization and representation through art.

I think about the words of the Dutch historian Maria Grever, who argued in the context of the broader discussions about monument removal: “Destroying statues is no medicine against racism. We need these traces of the past, even if these are hard to stomach.”

As people walk by, it occurs to me that this place symbolizes the torn duality of Vienna’s soul.

The success of Lueger’s antisemitic rhetoric not only influenced the Nazis, but also inspired political Zionism. In addition to the antisemitic hostility Herzl experienced in his academic fraternity Albia and the Dreyfus affair, Lueger’s antisemitic rhetoric and political success also had a significant influence on his abandonment of assimilation and his becoming a committed Zionist.

I reckon I have had enough Lueger for one day and leave him buried in thought.

After only two minutes of walking, I find myself on Theodor-Herzl-Platz.

In 2004, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Herzl’s death, the city of Vienna decided to ceremoniously rename the Gartenbaupromenade to Theodor-Herzl-Platz.

Another location had already been planned for Theodor-Herzl-Platz. However, at the suggestion of the daily newspaper “Die Presse,” then still called the “Die Neue Freie Presse,” the city, together with the Jewish Community of Vienna, decided to choose a location with a deeper connection to Herzl.

Next door, in the office wing of the Marriott Hotel, “Die Neue Freie Presse” had its headquarters at the time.

At a young age, Herzl was already one of the newspaper’s most prominent authors and editors. It was his reputation as a journalist that made the publication of *Der Judenstaat* publicly noticed and debated, launching a journey that ended so quickly.

After being diagnosed with a heart condition, Herzl died in a sanatorium in Edlach an der Rax.

He did not see the completion of his life work, but his courage remained steadfast to the end.

His Anglican clergyman and supporter, William Hechler, visited him in his last hours and relayed his parting words: “They are splendid, good people, my fellow countrymen! You will see, they are moving into their homeland!”

And they did.

Reminiscing about the funeral, Zweig concluded: “In this immense grief, which surged up from the depths of a whole nation of millions, I was able to realize for the first time how much passion and hope this single and lonely man had thrown into the world through the power of his thought.”

In August 1949, Herzl’s coffin was brought to Jerusalem. One-quarter of the Jewish population of the young state of the Jews that had just ended its war of independence participated in the funeral.

Herzl planted trees whose shadow he never enjoyed. But millions of his admirers did.

I sit down on a bench at the square, smiling slightly while enjoying the sun. Joy and sadness lie close together, in Vienna as in Jerusalem.

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