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Lawrence J. Epstein. *The Dream of Zion: The Story of the First Zionist Congress.* London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016. 172 pp. $36.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4422-5466-4.

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The topic of this book is specific: the First Zionist Congress in 1897 in Basel, Switzerland. The hero of the event is Theodor Herzl, the father of Zionism, who famously announced at the meeting, "In Basel I founded the Jewish state." However, the author make no claims that his work is original, that he has uncovered new documentary evidence, or has a new perspective on the event. So what is the goal?

One purpose of the book is to engage with present-day issues connected with Israel and world Jewry. For example, Mr. Epstein writes about the Arab-Israeli conflict: "So the early Zionists, especially those in 1897, were ideologically stuck. They didn't adequately consider the Palestinian Arabs, who, after all, didn't have a recognizable nationalist movement to consider. But even if they had considered the Arabs, they would have had no alternative but to continue on the path they did" (p. 98). Why, you might ask? Mr. Epstein explains that, were the Arabs already organized as a national movement the conflict would have begun then in 1897 because the Jews had "ein briera" (no choice)--the expression used in 1948, he relates (p. 98). The Jews had to return —"ein briera."

This passage, among others, enables one to situate Mr. Epstein in the political universe of today's scholarship, which spans from anti-Israel rejectionists to blind support for those to the right of Likud, such as the settler movement. Mr. Epstein is somewhere in the center, an American scholar of Judaism and Jewish history who loves Israel, but who would like Zionism to reform, improve, be more open and inclusive especially of converts: "Zionism should continue to engage in political, economic, cultural, and other support for Israel while simultaneously being more vigorous in matters of Israeli policies regarding the welcoming of converts and the establishment of schools and sending to teachers to expand the number of converts" (p. 136). Could converts to Judaism attain such numbers that they would make a difference to the state of Israel? It seems unlikely to me, but I give Mr. Epstein high points for imaginative solutions.

The First Congress is an ideal topic for skirting the kinds of questions that plague Israel today. It was a moment of promise. The Jewish people were weak; Herzl helped strengthen them, organize them politically as they had not been before. Up until 1897, The Lovers of Zion (Hibbat Tsion) was characterized by philanthropy. The Odessa Committee, among other groups, provided bits of money to farmers and artisans in Ottoman Palestine. However, such gestures would never lead to the return to Eretz Israel of the Jewish masses. In contrast, Herzl shunned small deeds. He wanted a

charter from the Ottoman sultan, a legal document that authorized and legalized immigration. Herzl maintained that quiet infiltration put Zionist goals at risk.

Mr. Epstein vividly tells the story of Herzl's efforts to organize the congress. The rabbis in Munich objected to holding the congress there because they did not share Zionism's pessimism regarding integration and feared accusations of "dual loyalty." Herzl moved the venue. When he arrived at the office in Basel he discovered that it had been a tailor shop. He demanded that a cloth be found to cover the shop's sign in order to avoid "jokes about Jewish tailors trying to create a nation" (p. 46). He was staying at the Trois Rois, a hotel on the Rhine river. The hotel was named after the kings who had come with gifts to the infant Jesus. Epstein writes, "Surely, Herzl must have laughed ruefully at the thought that as someone often called a messiah, he would be staying at that hotel" (p. 46). Then he decided that the Burgvogtei, where the congress was supposed to take place, was unimpressive and switched to the concert hall of the Municipal Casino, which was also not large enough, being "36 meters long, 21 meters wide, and 15 meters high" (p. 57).

The 204 delegates, including 14 women, were no mere spectators, but "the cast of the drama," as the author puts it (p. 58). It was Herzl's great strategy to create a media event of the time. He asked all the delegates to wear formal suits and cylinder top hats and invited journalists and observers to come and watch the unexpected spectacle--Jews demanding a country of their own. Max Nordau gave the most famous speech on the anti-Semitism and the condition of Jews in eastern Europe. Nowadays few remember Nordau, but at the time he, number two in the movement, was more famous than Herzl. Herzl himself masterfully conducted, navigating around the dangers of rivals, ridiculers, and skeptics.

Mr. Epstein makes the case convincingly that with this congress, Herzl transformed Jewish history forever. It was indeed the first of many steps that would lead to Jewish statehood, although certainly no one except a prophet could have known that at the time. However, one issue irks me: the author is aware of the difference between myth and history, but his unflagging enthusiasm brings the reader to emotional triumph that precludes analysis and evaluation and leads to cheerleading.

This observation returns us to the question: why was the book written and who is its target audience? The book is not aimed toward research scholars, but toward a general reader interested in the history of Zionism. Likely buyers include advanced high school students, K-12 educators, and Zionist sympathizers worldwide. If this is a book you think you will enjoy, grab it. Having taken off my academic cap, I've enjoyed it, too.

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