Alex Weiser: *STATE OF THE JEWS*

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Im tirtzu ein zo agada.
(If you will it, it will be no dream.)
—Theodor Herzl

Alex Weiser's 2019 two-act opera, *State of the Jews*, written with librettist Ben Kaplan, is an historical drama about the Hungarian-born Viennese journalist and playwright Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), who, following a more or less epiphanous moment of realization, became the acknowledged founder and "father" of modern political Zionism. Notwithstanding the important role of some leading figures among his early supporters, and although he was not the very first to think along lines of an autonomous modern Jewish homeland or the centrality of Zion to the future flourishing of modern Jewry, he will always be remembered properly as the single-most visible genitor of the eventual sovereign State of Israel.

At the same time, this opera explores the toll that his devotion to the Zionist cause took on his personal life, in particular, on his marriage. In the opera, however, Julie is not only his wife; she also represents symbolically the many counter- and anti-Zionist as well as anti–Jewish-national mindsets of contemporaneous Jews who continued to be convinced of a future for Diaspora Jewry—despite continuing restrictions, outright persecution in many countries, pervading anti-Judaism and anti-Jewishness, and the specter of expanded massacres hovering over millions of Jews in the Russian Empire.

When Weiser began work with Ben Kaplan on *State of the Jews*, he was already enjoying an enviable reputation, particularly in the Greater New York area and soon beyond, for such pieces as his two song cycles—*And All the Days Were Purple*, with chamber ensemble (premiered at Roulette in 2017) and *Three Epitaphs*, with chamber orchestra (premiered at the DiMenna Center for Classical Music in 2016)—both of which appeared on a CD album of his works that was released in 2019 and was later named a Pulitzer Prize finalist, and his *Water Hollows Stone* for four-hand piano; *Shimmer* for eight celli or solo cello with seven prerecorded celli (2015); and *With Gentle Fingers* (2018), for voice and percussion quartet.

A native New Yorker, Weiser began composing in his early teenage years. By 2019 he had an impressive catalogue of more than forty works, which continued to expand. Although he has been particularly attracted to composing vocal music—in Hebrew, English, and Yiddish—out of his love for poetry, his works also include many instrumental pieces. In addition, he is an energetic advocate of new music in general, having cofounded and directed the Kettle Corn New Music Series; and for nearly five years he was a director of the MATA Festival, which was hailed by *The New York Times* as "the city's leading showcase for vital new music by emerging composers." *State of the Jews* was his first opera, followed by three others as of this writing: *The Forest of Secrets*, *The Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language* (also with Ben Kaplan), and *Tevye's Daughters*, to a libretto by Stephanie Fleischmann.

Brooklyn-born and New York City-based librettist Ben Kaplan creates historically-informed dramatic works that chronicle turning points lost to contemporary cultural discourse. *State of the Jews* is his first opera, interweaving the political turmoil of turn-of-the-century Europe — the rise of nationalistic movements, the threats of mass violence, and the struggle for political autonomy — with the true but relatively unknown story of Theodor Herzl's relationship with his wife Julie.

The Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language, Kaplan's second operatic collaboration with Alex Weiser, traces the true story of Yiddish linguist Yudel Mark, who, in 1950s New York City, set out to compose the world's first comprehensive Yiddish dictionary as an effort in linguistic preservation as well as a memorial to the lost Yiddish-speaking Jews and Yiddish culture of Europe. The opera was hailed by *In Geveb* as "an ambitious, larger-than-life spectacle," capturing "the paradoxical nature of postwar Yiddishism… uplifting, tragic and comic, and everything in between."

Kaplan received a BA in English with a concentration in Jewish studies from Williams College, and he studied Hebrew at Middlebury College. As of 2025, with more than a decade of experience in non-profit administration, he is Director of Education at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, designing programs and courses in Jewish history and culture for diverse audiences and for students in several dozen countries.

Both Kaplan and Weiser's operas were developed with support from American Opera Projects and LABA — a laboratory for Jewish culture. As of this writing, Kaplan has several other libretto projects in various stages of progress.

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THEODOR HERZL	Baritone
JULIE HERZL, his wife	Mezzo-Soprano
ALFRED DREYFUS	Tenor*
BEN JACOB	Tenor*
POPE PIOUS X	Tenor*
REVEREND WILLIAM HECHLER	Tenor*
YECHIEL TCHLENOV	Bass**
DOMINIK LIPPAY	Bass**
MENACHEM USSISHKIN	Bass**
CHORUSES:	SSAATTBB

Officers, journalists, observers, young people of Vilna,
Greater Action Committee, Zionist Congress attendees,
Jerusalem crowd.

*All four tenor roles can be sung by a single tenor
**All three bass roles can be sung by a single bass

TIME: 1889–1904 (out of order) in flashbacks;
and Epilogue "out of time."

Chamber ensemble: piano, clarinet, first violin, second violin,
viola, cello, double bass

ALFRED DREYFUS:
A Jewish captain in the French army, he was framed, falsely accused of treason, and tried by a French military court. The charges were based on forged documents intended out of engrained anti-Jewishness to implicate him as a secret agent for the German Army. Found guilty, he was sentenced to life imprisonment on Devil's Island. Judicial appeals failed, and French society became divided between Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards. Even after he was eventually exonerated through the efforts of Emil Zola (*J'accuse!*), that division continued. The entire Dreyfus Affair, as it was called, was a major influence on Theodor Herzl as a catalyst for his Zionist convictions—from the time when, as a reporter for a liberal Viennese newspaper, he covered the ceremonial proceedings in Paris of Dreyfus's dishonorable discharge, elaborately staged public disgrace, and chaining for shipment to Devil's Island.

BEN JACOB:
A wealthy friend and admirer of Herzl's who has an estate a few hours away from Vilna. He was a supporter of the Zionist movement early on.

POPE PIOUS X (1835–1914):
He became pope in 1903 and met with Herzl less than a year later.

REVEREND WILLIAM HECHLER:
An Anglican (Church of England) clergyman, he befriended Herzl in 1896. With his own prophetic predictions, he became a "Christian Zionist," believing in the restoration of the Jews to Palestine according to Christian doctrine.

DR. YECHIEL TCHLENOV:
Born in 1863 in the Russian Empire, he was an early supporter of the Ḥovevei Tziyon Society (Lovers of Zion) there, which was organized not for the advocacy of a Jewish state or even a politically unified homeland, but to purchase and establish colonies in Palestine for settlement by Jewish victims of Tsarist Empire persecution. A small number of Jews in the Russian Empire, other parts of Europe, and even in America as far west as Chicago banded together to purchase land in Palestine for this purpose. But all this became moot with Herzl's establishment of the Zionist movement, of which Tchlenov became an ardent supporter and a leader in its Russian Empire circles. He led the opposition to the British so-called Uganda offer when it was presented at the Sixth Zionist Congress. He died in 1918.

DOMINIK LIPPAY:
Originally from Austria, he was an opportunistic court painter with Vatican connections.

MENACHEM USSISHKIN (1863–1941):
An engineer born in the Russian Empire, he was an early supporter of the Ḥovevei Tziyon Society. Later he participated in many Zionist Congresses and helped lead the walkout at the Sixth Congress over the British "Uganda" offer. From the early 1920s he served as president of the Jewish National Fund.

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THE ACTION

PROLOGUE

Time: January 5, 1895
Place: Courtyard of the École Militaire in Paris

Military drums are heard echoing in the distance. A crowd is gathered outside the gates, murmuring, as a freezing winter wind blows against the stones. A TABLEAU: Dreyfus is marched into the courtyard by fellow French soldiers as officers and journalists observe. In quick succession in pantomime: The marching stops. An officer faces Dreyfus and reads the charges. Dreyfus raises his right hand:

DREYFUS:
Vive La France!

An officer strips him of this insignia, removes his sword, and breaks it over his knee. While officers put Dreyfus in chains, a (divided) chorus breaks into mixed, anguished cries:

CHORUS I
AH! Jewish traitor!
Death to Dreyfus!!

CHORUS II
AH! Let him go!
NO! Dreyfus is innocent!

The crowd rattles the gates as Dreyfus is paraded in chains through the courtyard. Concurrently, a man steps forward from the group inside the courtyard: **THEODOR HERZL**, a reporter from Vienna for the *Neue Freie Presse*. Notebook in hand, he looks among the crowds outside, weighing his thoughts.

ACT I, Scene 1

Time: August 4, 1903
Place: Vienna

The Herzl home, a stylish flat decorated in the style of the 1880s/1890s, with elaborately carved furniture albeit tastefully conservative. Outside, the sounds of the city asleep, Julie finds Theodor at his writing desk, composing a letter.

Julie asks if he has slept, to which Theodor responds that he must finish the letter, even though it's not yet dawn. He urges Julie to go back to bed, but she gently takes his hand and tries to remove the pen. He recoils, protesting that he has to finish the letter first, so as not to miss the train. "To Russia then!" Julie exclaims. And she threatens that when he returns. perhaps "we will already be gone."

ACT I, Scene 2

Time: August 16, 1903
Place: The house of Ben Jacob in Verki [Verkiai, Lithuania; then Werki, Russian Poland], near Vilna, in the dining room surrounded by dinner guests at a banquet table.

Ben Jacob offers a toast to Herzl and regrets that Julie couldn't join them. "Seven years ago," he explains to the dinner guests, "we were a wandering people, hopeless, lost, praying for God's angel to catch the slaying hand. Seven years ago a man emerged to save us, noble, bold, to show the world our pain. His name was Dr. Herzl. He

stands with us today." And he reminds everyone that Herzl wrote a book, *The Jewish State*, which set minds on fire as a vision for the future; that he built the movement, unparalleled in history, "to bring us back to life, to unite us in dignity after centuries of shame."

Ben Jacob turns to Herzl to tell him that when he leaves for Basel the next day for the upcoming Zionist Congress, he should know that he has already saved them: "We follow you wherever you go." As Herzl begins to reply with gratitude for his reception in Russia, he begins to cough (which will have significance later); when he is able to resume, he is interrupted by the sounds of singing outside, increasing in volume. Ben Jacob steps outside, and Herzl joins him. An approaching crowd is heard singing (in the Ashkenazi Hebrew pronunciation then current in Lithuania) what will nonetheless be recognized as *Hatikva*, despite the now unfamiliar, later-altered words of the second part of the song. Originally known as *Tikvatenu* (Our Hope), with the words written by Naphtali Herz Imber in 1877–78, it would go on through various iterations and adjustments, eventually to become the national anthem of the State of Israel.

The anthem is already well-known to Herzl with the words as sung in this scene. It was sung at the Fifth Zionist Congress in 1901—for the first time at any of these annual congresses insofar as can be verified. (There is some evidence that Herzl may have heard it as early as 1896 at a meeting in Vienna. The singing of Imber's poem to the tune of this Rumanian folksong is believed to have begun in 1888). It was sung at every Zionist Congress after 1901.[1] Meanwhile, the crowd's singing from a distance grows louder as it approaches Ben Jacob's home:

Kol od balevav p'nima
nefesh yehudi homiyo,
ulfa'asei mizroḥ kadimo,
ayin l'tziyon tzofiyo.
od lo avdo tikvosenu
hatikvo hanoshono,
loshuv l'eretz avosenu
lo'ir bo dovid hono.

(As long as the heart within
a Jewish soul still yearns,
and onward, toward the ends of the East,
an eye still looks toward Zion;
Our hope is not yet lost,
the ancient hope,
to return to the land of our fathers,
the city where David encamped.)

In 1905, however, according to the most reliable research and resulting chronology, the phrases *hatikva hanoshana* (the ancient hope) and *lashuv l'eretz avotenu la'ir bo david hona* (to return to the land of our fathers, to the city where David dwelt) were amended to read:

hatikva bat sh'not alpayim (the hope of two millennia) and
lih'yot am ḥofshi b'artzenu eretz tziyon
viy'rushalayim (to be a free people in our land, the land of Zion
and Jerusalem), respectively.

At the Eighteenth Zionist Congress in Prague in 1933, the song—by then known as *Hatikva*—was proclaimed the "National Anthem of the Jewish People," and it also became the quasi- or de facto national anthem of the *y'shuv* (the organized Jewish settlement in Palestine under the British Mandate). It thus automatically became the de facto national anthem of the sovereign state, sung at the ceremony surrounding the formal declaration of statehood on May 14, 1948, and from then on, although its official status as such was confirmed by the Knesset only in 2004.

ACT I, Scene 3

Time: February 13, 1896 (seven years earlier)
Place: Vienna, at the Herzl apartment

Julie is in an hysterical rage against Theodor, complaining with the stereotypical contempt of much German-speaking Jewry about the despised, odorous eastern European Jews (*Ostjuden*) who want to join the movement and keep coming to their home to ask for him. She derides him for wasting his time, with no accomplishments to show for it, meeting with possible backers abroad, and all the while leaving his family to "waste away." She urges him to cancel the run of his book, *The Jewish State*, a preliminary copy of which he has just received. What has happened to the man she married, to their former carefree, luxurious Viennese life? He has become instead a political creature. He has abandoned all they once planned for their future for a faraway dream. Yet her heart aches for him, too. Why does he need to be a hero and put their whole family in danger?

Theodor tries in vain to convince her of the real danger awaiting all Jews, possibly including their own children someday, as well as others murdered in Russian pogroms. Julie is unfazed, confident that, at least in Vienna, the Emperor Franz Joseph will protect them, for are not Jews and non-Jews alike all Austrians? (Franz Joseph, even if not perceived as having anti-Jewish attitudes on his own, is hardly a youngster: at age sixty-six.) But Theodor's book will set them apart, Julie fears; it will, she says, come "to haunt us." Theodor remains unmoved, adamant about his mission and the publication of his book.

SOME HISTORICAL BACKDROP TO THE REST OF ACT I

During the year prior to the Sixth Congress, Herzl is said to have nearly reached a point of defeatist frustration. After seven years, he was still unsuccessful in his attempts to deal directly with the Ottoman Turkish Empire over Palestine and in gaining serious practical support from diplomats or other political leaders (even if a few had expressed some sympathy). And he had been turned down by Pope Pious X for any endorsement, let alone assistance. He therefore approached England and its "powers-that-be."

If he had hoped naively to obtain England's intervention with the Ottoman Turks, possibly through supposed diplomatic channels—ideally for a meeting with the sultan, but at least with a representative—he was quickly disabused of any such fantasy. And any hope he might have nurtured for financial support via England's possible influence with European governments was also put to rest.

It happened, however, that the British colonial secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, was unusually sympathetic toward Zionism in principle. He was willing to pursue granting the Zionist movement an alternative to Palestine: a territory that was part of the British Empire's holdings or lands under its control. The most hopeful possibility among those that were suggested was an arid, sparsely populated area on the Mediterranean coast of the Sinai Peninsula near El-Arish—on the British-superintended Egyptian side of the frontier with Ottoman Turkish–held Palestine.

Herzl's most immediate concern at that moment was securing a place of refuge for Russian Empire Jewry. His sense of urgency was heightened after the infamous Kishinev Pogrom, which augured much greater and more deadly pogroms to follow.[2] He was thus inclined to accept the El-Arish offer as an interim measure. There was at least a chance—so he thought or hoped—that the movement's delegates at the Sixth Congress might accept El-Arish under the circumstances and as an eventual springboard to nearby Palestine.

Prior to the summer of 1903, Herzl conferred with Chamberlain in London, and he went so far as to send a fact-finding mission to the Sinai and to travel to Cairo for talks with British authorities there. In the event, the El-Arish possibility fell apart over issues of irrigation, and by the summer of 1903 it was no longer an option. But apparently

Herzl kept its demise under wraps from the rank and file of the movement's delegates, so most of them were not aware of that development as they began gathering in Basel for the congress, traveling from throughout Europe, parts of the British Empire and even America. In fact, the El-Arish scheme was expected to be on the agenda, even though there was already the circulating fear that it could cause a split between two opposing factions: the mostly Western European delegates, who might not object to beginning the Zionist project so close to Palestine for the time being as a first step; and the eastern Europeans, largely from the Russian Empire—the so-called democratic faction (mislabeled inasmuch as the entire movement was democratic), who would settle for nothing less than Palestine. For their sensibilities, even as secularists, return to Zion and Jerusalem had been the object of two millennia of prayers and longing, and they saw Palestine as the only policy that would propel the movement further and gain concrete support from Jews around the world.

With the El-Arish plan dead, fear of adverse reactions to it were moot. That fear, however, would manifest itself in an explosion of a far greater, more threatening danger to the unity of Zionism. In the meantime, the British had made a new, altogether different but far more potentially divisive and combustible offer—one that was more likely to, and nearly did, destroy the solidity of the movement (though that was not the British intention). The offer, also an alternative to Palestine but this time nowhere near it, was an area in East Africa where Jews would be allowed autonomous home rule as a British protectorate—an area in northwest Kenya near Lake Victoria, apparently assumed to be somewhere near the border of the British protectorate of Uganda. The precise borders were apparently still to be worked out if the Zionist movement accepted the idea in principle. But it was not, or not yet, necessarily Uganda per se—a sizable territory between Kenya (the Kenya Colony) on its east and the Belgian Congo on its west. (Uganda had its own interesting geopolitical history. It was divided into several provinces, each ruled by a tribal chief but with a British governor at the head of the overall administration.)

Nonetheless, that offer became known and was presented to the Sixth Congress as the "Uganda plan," with Herzl urging its consideration and the appointment by the delegates of a committee to investigate the situation and report back. Although word—or rumor—of the offer had spread a bit beforehand, Herzl's presentation of it, together with his endorsement and exhortation, came as a shock to most of the 592 delegates.

Whatever his own leanings (or possible ambivalence), Herzl was in any event obliged to relay the new British offer to the congress. But his support of it and his appeal for votes in its favor ignited a conflagration of vehement anger, bitter disputes among opposing factions, and even accusations of betrayal. All this led to a walkout of all or nearly all the eastern European, especially Russian, delegates. On the fourth day of the congress, Herzl had a simple majority of 295 delegates for considering the East Africa plan. Even if not all of them were of one mind at first, they were all apparently persuaded by Herzl's argument vis-à-vis the urgency of a land of refuge for the millions of Russian Empire Jews facing mortal danger from imminent pogroms. These massacres had begun in earnest in 1881, but were now expected to increase in number and intensity, and most potential victims were without the means to emigrate and without a homeland to welcome them en masse without restrictions. Imperial Russian government policies were also a serious threat, notwithstanding the positions of a few liberal-minded officials. Tsar Nicholas II and/or his advisers are said to have proclaimed at some point that the "Jewish problem" will ultimately be solved by one-third of the Jews emigrating, one-third assimilating completely, and one-third being killed.

Moreover, most (or a significant number) of the Western European delegates who voted with Herzl saw the British offer as the first Jewish political victory, which didn't necessarily mean that all of them were ready to give up on Palestine eventually. As has been suggested, however, many of them related to the Zionist idea primarily for present and future Jewish victims of persecution more than as a matter of Jewish national and cultural-national awakening. And in that context a protectorate under the friendly British could be even more desirable, safer, and not worse than Palestine, surrounded as it was by inhospitable, hostile, and possibly belligerent Turkish Moslems.

That interpretation—in which there may be much truth—came from the pen of Odessa-born Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880–1940), a Russian Jewish journalist and playwright who later founded Zionism's Revisionist party and, by

the 1930s, was the leader of Revisionist Zionism. On balance sympathetic with the eastern European delegates ("Zionism leads only to Palestine"), Jabotinsky covered the Sixth Congress as a reporter for the periodical *Odesskaya Novosti* and also included commentary on it in his memoires.

Not originally a Zionist per se during the movement's infancy, since the Kishinev Pogrom, Jabotinsky had been involved actively in the Odessa-based clandestine, armed Jewish self-defense force—the first such defense organization in Russian Jewish history (begun initially and secretly by a Zionist student group). As a more recent newcomer to the Zionist movement directly, he was also a delegate to the Sixth Congress—his first. Despite his ultimate siding with the eastern European delegates, he nonetheless characterized Herzl in one of his journal dispatches as:

> A profile like an Assyrian king's in an old bas relief . . . Many claim to be hypnotized by him . . . a man of mediocre abilities who is nonetheless a great figure—a genius of no particular gifts . . .[3]

Among the 295 delegates who voted with Herzl were most, if not all, eastern European delegates of the "Religious Zionist" faction—the Mizraḥi group. The Religious Zionists were already being excoriated by the vehemently anti-Zionist orthodox establishment for their involvement in the advocacy of a return to Zion, the Land of Israel as part of a secular movement and without God's direction—viz., His ordained coming of the Messiah. By voting for the British offer they could demonstrate that the Mizraḥi faction was driven only by a plan to remove Jews from persecution and slaughter to a place of safety, not by any campaign to take messianic matters into their own, religiously unauthorized hands so to speak.

Apart from the 295 votes with Herzl, 137 delegates voted against considering the British offer—viz., for flat-out rejection—and 143 abstained. Even though Herzl had the simple majority needed to pursue the offer, he could not abide a permanent split in the movement upon the walkout, for, given the magnitude and fervor of the rebellion, a split did not bode well for the future of Zionism. He therefore approached the group of those delegates to try to explain and defend his position, hoping to win them back. According to Jabotinsky's description, the anger was so heightened and the hostility so fierce that even though they were still arguing among themselves about whether to quit the congress—and thus the movement altogether—or to stay and fight from within, most were not willing at first even to hear Herzl out, and some were against admitting him into the room.

Once Herzl calmed them down and had their attention, he began by reassuring them that he had not abandoned Palestine as the ultimate goal. But turning down the British offer now without so much as considering and investigating it would amount to a snub of ingratitude. It would demonstrate that he had neither influence nor command over the congresses and the movement. No country's diplomats or other government officials would ever want to negotiate with him again. If, however, this faction asked him to resign, he would not resist. In that case, his only concern would be that later, it might be said that they had misunderstood him—that out of ingratitude they might not have grasped his intentions. That was of course a powerful "defense" of his position, the more so as it was laden with a "guilt factor"—viz., that they should consider the future possibility of their being blamed for the failure of Zionism. In the event, they returned to the congress.

But the "Uganda plan" was not pursued further at that congress (let slide temporarily, we might assume). Most likely Herzl intended to leave it to the next congress, even though he had already warned that the offer could expire. But of course he had no expectation of his imminent death. He seems to have exercised political wisdom in not pushing the matter at that point, inasmuch as he had succeeded in preventing a split.

In a cynical speculation, Jabotinsky went so far as to wonder whether Herzl might have had a clever stratagem up his sleeve all along: using the British offer as a "ploy" to extract concessions from the Ottoman Turks by letting them know that there were alternatives to Palestine—as if that could have ignited a rivalry between the two empires over the matter. In that case, so Jabotinsky apparently speculated, the Ottoman Turks might

suddenly be open to negotiations. In other words, Herzl might not have had to settle for East Africa had he had the determination to use such machinations. But Jabotinsky's logic eludes us.

After Herzl died, the executive of the movement relocated to Berlin. The "Uganda plan" more or less faded away, coming to an end after the Seventh Congress, when many of those who had supported it separated from the organization to become Territorialists—a movement that advocated for an autonomous Jewish home somewhere other than Palestine. Even if some Territorialists had formerly harbored a hope for Palestine as the ideal, it now proved unrealistic—all the more so after 1908, when the sultan was deposed by the "Young Turk" coup. Locations that came to mind for the Territorialists to explore included areas in South America, parts of the British Empire other than East Africa, and even, fancifully, Alaska. Cyrus Adler, the president of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, thought Mesopotamia (Babylonia) might be a possibility. But in the end of course nothing came of any of those notions.

Outside Russia proper, the international Zionist movement continued to grow, with allied branches, organizations, and federations in North and South America, England, and, by the end of the First World War (then known as the Great War), in such far-flung places as Archangel, Indonesia, Perm, Omsk, Shanghai, Harbin (now in the People's Republic of China), Java, Surinam, Irkutsk, the Dutch Indies; and other East Asian and Pacific communities.

In the years following the Sixth and Seventh Congresses, Jews continued to make *aliya* (immigrating "up to the Land of Israel") as settlers and *ḥalutzim* (pioneers). They established socialist-oriented kibbutzim and some *moshavim* (private collective farming communities or colonies) as well as a smaller number of religious kibbutzim. All these expanded upon the earlier Jewish agricultural colonies and basically replaced them. The settlers also further developed existing cities and towns and established new ones through the creation of *Histadrut*—the socialist-labor–geared trade union movement dating to 1920, which also eventually assembled and trained an armed Jewish defense force: the Haganah. Until the end of the First World War, such settlers were tolerated by the Ottoman Turks in Turkish-held Palestine, but of course not in any imperially granted, politically autonomous homeland there, for which Herzl had sought unsuccessfully to negotiate. Also then and going forward, land was purchased from Turks and regional Arabs through contributions to the Jewish National Fund, which was established in 1901.

After Herzl's death, pogroms and other persecution continued in the Russian Empire as he had warned. And the formality of a "Palestine or nothing" policy was relaxed or set aside for the time being by many of the Russian Zionists—although not necessarily without a lingering hope for Palestine as an ultimate desideratum in all cases. Meanwhile, some alternative internal measures were pursued, such as the Alliance for Full Jewish Rights in Russia in 1905. On the other hand, adapted forms of Zionism remained, and there were even Zionist nominees for the Duma, though none succeeded in electoral victories. Yet the danger to Russian Empire Jewry was ever-present.

Indeed, large numbers of Russian Empire Jews who were so inclined (as many were not, for one reason or another) and who could organize the means—especially since the price of steamship passage had come down—continued the mass emigration that had begun in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, not necessarily always motivated by pogroms or other fears. Their ideal destination often remained America, until immigration quotas began to block new Jewish arrivals; but they also went to England, Canada, Ireland, South America, even Australia, and South Africa (the last largely for Jews from Lithuania, which was then part of Russian Poland). Those waves of emigration still left a proportionately very large Jewish population in the Russian Empire—and then in the USSR. Following the 1905 Revolution, a number of disaffected young Russian Jewish socialists made *aliya* as *ḥalutzim*. But they represented only a small, insignificant number among "Russian Jewry," as did others who also made *aliya* during those years motivated by other factors. Even though Herzl could not have foreseen the 1917 Revolution nor Lenin's Bolshevik coup later that same year (the misnamed "October Revolution"), leading directly to the deadly consequences of the Lenin and Stalin regimes, his warnings to the point of panic for the safety and survival of Russian Jewry turned out to apply aptly to significant numbers of Soviet Jewry. So, though the millions of Tsarist

Empire Jews remaining there as of 1903 were not wiped out by continuing popular and/or government-encouraged massacres as Herzl believed would be the case (though many were indeed killed in post-1903 pogroms), his predictions did resonate later to a great extent during the Soviet years of fluctuating degrees of terror combined with "ideological purges"—albeit under different circumstances, for different types of trumped-up charges, and by different methods. And even later, while the USSR technically endorsed the establishment of the State of Israel with its vote in the United Nations (for which Stalin's motivation was hardly Zionistic but an opportunity to throw a punch at the British Empire), in Stalin's about-face almost immediately afterward, any voiced pro-Zionist or pro-Israel sentiments were automatically linked to the capital crime of (Jewish) nationalism—resulting in very many summary executions. That was all apart from or in addition to Stalin and the complicated Jew hatred of his party hacks (some but not all inherited from tsarist times)—which might well have put an end to the bulk of Soviet Jewry had Stalin not, fortunately, died (or been murdered, directly or indirectly?) when he did. Thus, transcending Herzl's perceptive warnings about the imminent fate of a large part of Tsarist Empire Jewry, along with increasing persecution to be expected elsewhere, his prescience turned out to extend far beyond those prophecies to the deadly developments and events he could not possibly have anticipated in 1904. And when the USSR first allowed Jewish emigration as part of a Reagan-era insistence, it was only to Israel on so-called religious grounds, even though most of the Jewish émigrés at that point were not religious. Outside Russia until the 1917 Revolution, the Zionist movement focused much of its energies on supporting and assisting the Jewish community in Palestine, and on encouraging *aliya*.

By the end of the First World War, once the Ottoman Empire was no more, the course of mainstream Zionism faced a new set of circumstances, obstacles, and challenges that Herzl could not have expected. There was the British mandate of Palestine granted by the League of Nations after Great Britain and France had carved up much of the prewar Arab world for themselves or for their own benefit. Local Arab hostilities to the *y'shuv* erupted in periodic attacks and even massacres. (Strange as it is to imagine now, apparently Herzl never envisioned the need for a Jewish army or navy—nor even politicians—in an autonomous Jewish homeland in Palestine and/or someday in a sovereign indigenous state. It seems that he assumed that the regional indigenous Arabs, subjugated as they had been by the Turks, would actually welcome Zionist settlers almost as partners for the economic, political, and other benefits of modernization they would supposedly bring.)

Then there was Great Britain's unconscionable policy of severe restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine so long as it was a mandate, and its new and unfriendly alliances. When the British were prepared to relinquish their mandate, there was the proposed partition plan, by which Palestine would have been divided into two states: one Jewish and one Arab. The WZO was willing to accept the plan in principle, but the Arabs rejected it out of hand.

Nor could Herzl have predicted Jabotinsky's competing Revisionist Zionism movement, although in the end, on balance, it did not succeed in undermining the mainstream movement. Despite the Revisionist tributary's important role in certain respects—in some views or interpretations, its strategy of belligerent resistance to the British—it did not ultimately prevail in its political, geopolitical, or geographic as well as socioeconomic principles.

We cannot know to what extent Herzl would have felt demoralized immediately after the Sixth Congress, how he would have accommodated to what appears to be the collapse of the East Africa plan by the Seventh Congress even had he still promoted it, or how he would have adjusted to the unavoidable changes in direction of the Zionist movement while he was still leading it. But, leaving aside some of his early naivete about the political nature and defensive requirements of a future state (especially in his writings), Herzl's original epiphany came across as half-baked, absurd, and even offensive to much of the world, including the many Jews of Julie's mindset.[4] And yet, in one of the subsequent years alone, the movement could boast about 800 chapters across Europe, representing about 100,000 Jews. And eventually there were chapters or related federations largely under the umbrella of the World Zionist Organization (WZO) in North and South America, South Africa, Australia, and East Asia.[5]

In the event, Herzl was doubly vindicated—both by the ghastly, savage wholesale slaughter of Jews he had predicted without imagining its extent or time frame of more than a half century (and not only the German program of genocide), and by Zionism's hard-won victory in the reality of a recognized sovereign state.

ACT I, Scene 4

Time: August 21, 1903, two days before the Sixth Congress
Place: Basel.

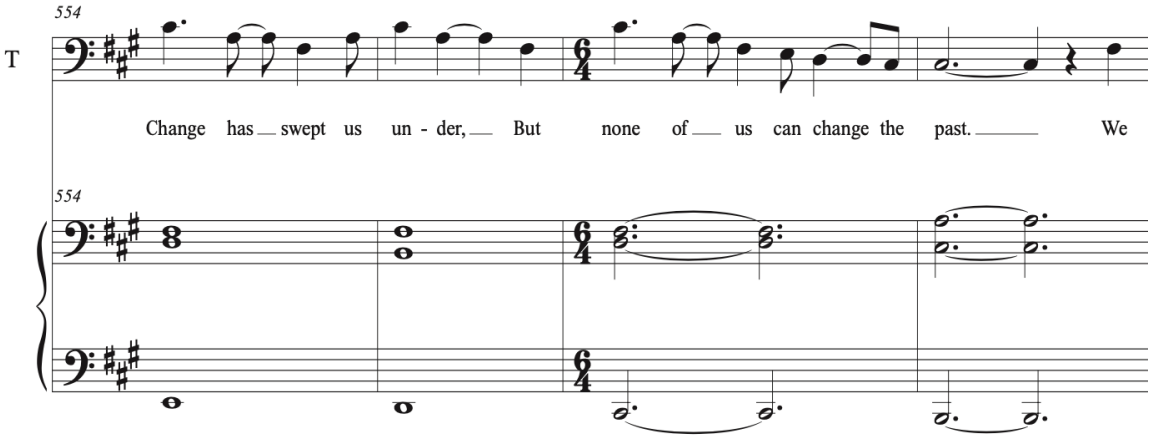
Scene 4 depicts the caucus two days before the opening of the Sixth Congress. Herzl, Tchlenov (representing the Russian delegation), and other members of the Greater Action Committee are gathered around a crowded table, engaging in heated debate about the "Uganda plan." Tchlenov is vehemently opposed, even enraged at the idea. "For two thousand years, our people prayed for Palestine. There is no other land!...This is not an option."

At Herzl's continued insistence that the British offer *is* the only possible "option" in terms of an immediate land of refuge, Tchlenov keeps to his stance that only a return to Palestine "when the moment is right" can even be considered. No one realizes the looming danger to Russian Jewry more than he, he says, but they must wait.[6] They are so close, he is convinced. Herzl warns that the British will not wait—the offer will expire. They must at least first explore the region. Tchlenov swears that his delegation will resist any such "madness" that could risk two thousand years of hope. Herzl, who appears sure enough of himself and of loyalty to him, warns that Tchlenov "wouldn't dare." But Tchlenov is certain that Herzl's pursuit of the British offer will destroy the movement.

ACT I, Scene 5

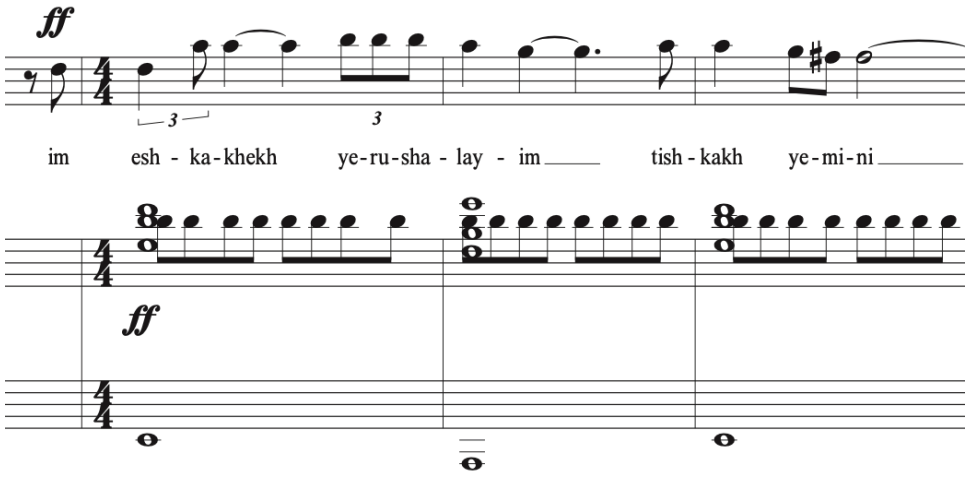
Time: August 23, 1903
Place: Basel, the opening of the Sixth Zionist Congress.

The delegates have gathered. Word of the British offer has spread in advance, lending an air of general restlessness as Herzl rises to the podium to deliver the opening address. "Change has swept us under," he begins (in German of course at the actual Congress, but in English in the opera), "but none of us can change the past."

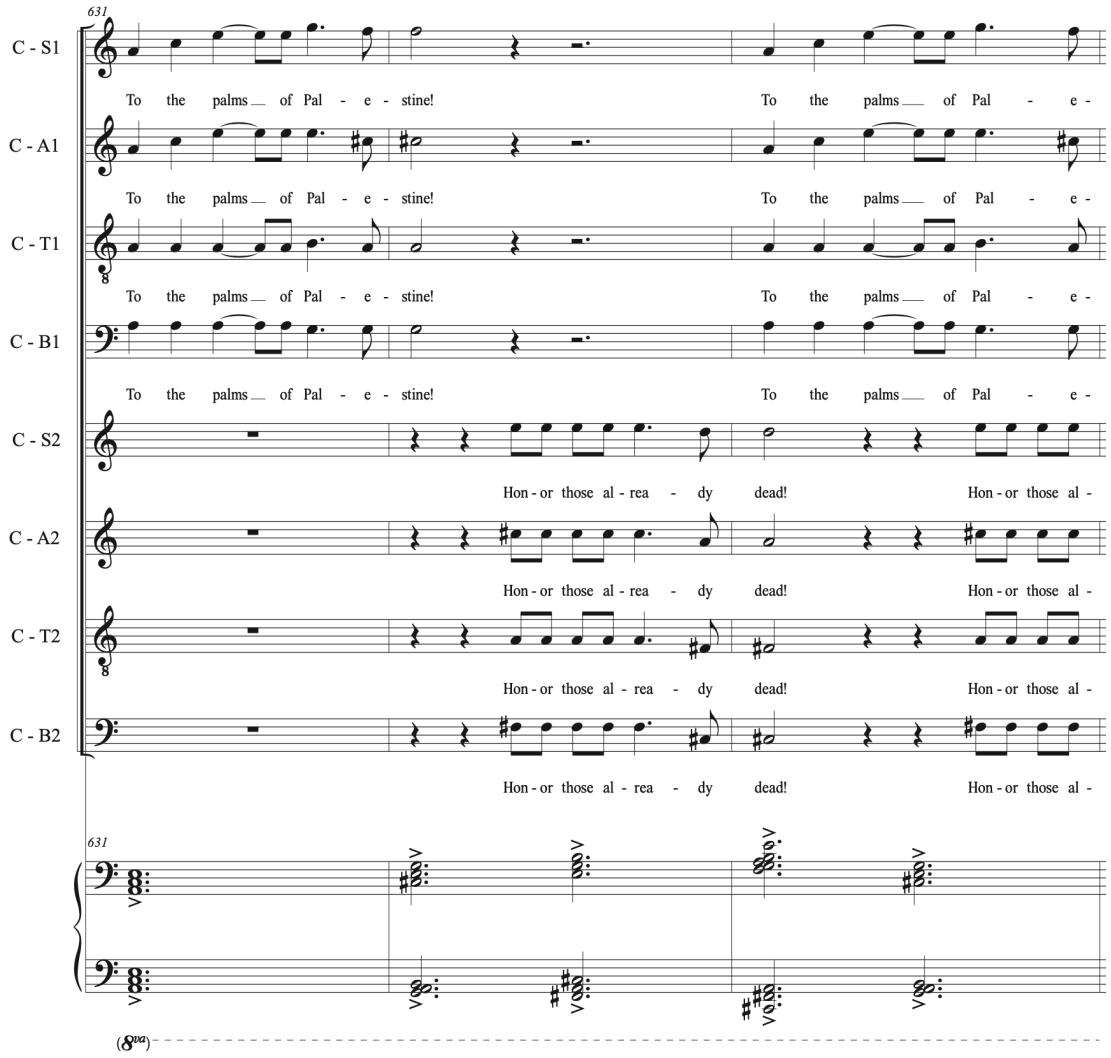


He proceeds to remind everyone of the pogroms in the Russian Empire and to relay the British offer: "Imagine a life in freedom, far away across the sea . . . Fields to till, cities to build under the sun, and orange trees. It could all be . . . a chance to form a new society in East Africa." And yet he reassures that Jerusalem will not be forgotten,

quoting in Hebrew the famous lines from Psalm 137: *Im eshkakhekh y'rushalayim tishkakh y'mini* (If I forget thee, Oh Jerusalem, let my right hand wither.)



Two overlapping choruses represent the vehemently divided congress, one proclaiming that they will not forgo the hope of Zion and the other not about to wait any longer.

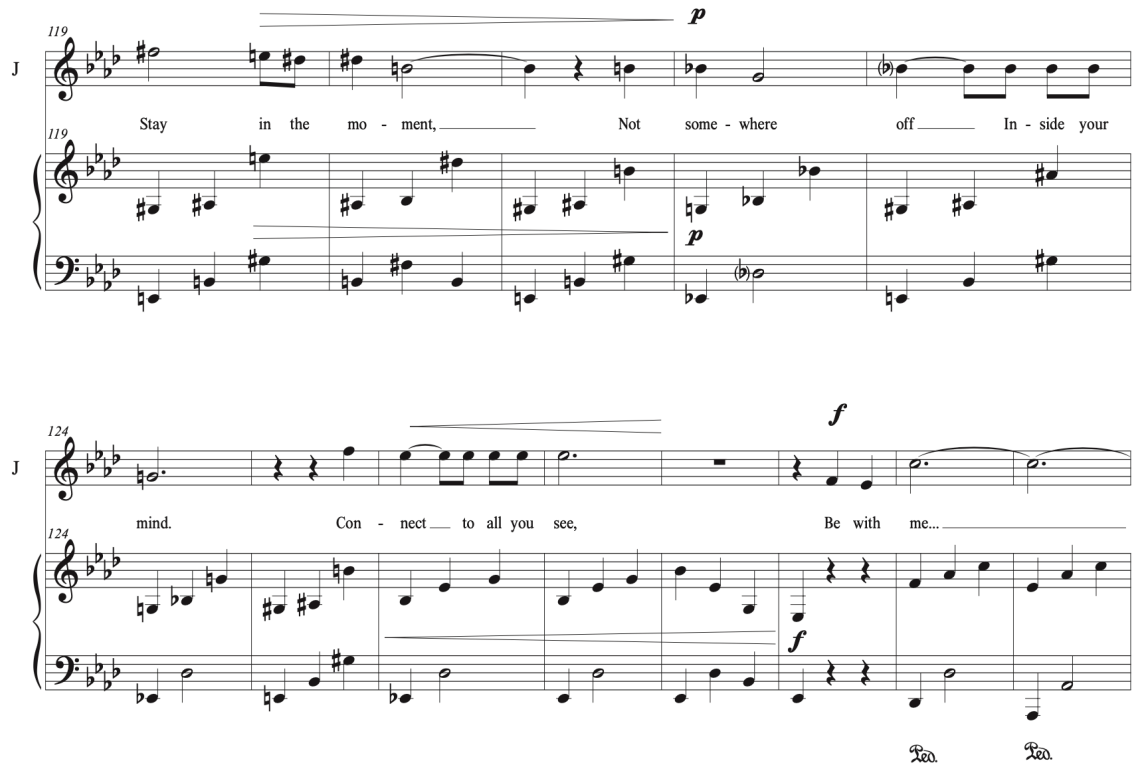


Herzl promises that accepting the British offer out of practicality in no way means he will not continue the campaign for Palestine: "There is no path I won't try . . . to the life we crave." But as he speaks, Tchlenov leads a walkout of Russian and other similar-minded delegates, which concludes Act I.

ACT II, Scene 1

Time: 14 years earlier, summer 1889
Place: Paris, at the World's Fair

Julie and Theodor walk the Paris streets. For the first time in the opera, he looks healthy and fresh, without a beard. Both are dressed fashionably. They are in Paris for their honeymoon. Julie remarks on the Eiffel Tower, which has been built for the World's Fair but which she finds ugly. To her it symbolizes an unacceptable departure from this Romantic era's aesthetics, to which she is accustomed. She is alienated by its homage to modernity, science and technology — a challenge to the way things were and as she expects them to remain: "The world turns faster every day, but we forget ourselves." As a relative modernist drawn to human ingenuity, science and technology, however, Theodor is intrigued by the tower. (It has been said that the famous French author Guy de Maupiassant brought his lunch to eat on the steps of the newly built tower because it was the only spot in Paris where he could be certain to avoid seeing what to him was an abominable structure that ruined the city's skyline.) Julie pleads that her new husband should relish the present and not be absorbed in his movement for the future: "Stay in the moment," she urges, "not somewhere off inside your mind."



Theodor finds Paris exhilarating compared with what he now thinks of Vienna—"a provincial town." Julie strongly disagrees; she is looking forward to a lavish, carefree married life with a family in Vienna. She typifies much of Viennese Jewry's fervent, inextinguishable attachment to Viennese culture and its upper-middle-class lifestyle—one might say an unrequited love affair (a sentiment that also applied to German and German-speaking Jewry in general with respect to its one-sided infatuation with German culture and society). That adoration for the Viennese life to which she had been accustomed and still expects will later manifest itself in her opposition to Zionism.

ACT II, Scene 2

Time: January 25, 1904
Place: Rome at the Vatican

In an anteroom at the Vatican, Herzl stands with Dominik Lippay, who apparently has facilitated an audience with the pope. Herzl wears his Order of the Medjidie medal. Paintings of biblical scenes hang along the walls. Lippay reminds Herzl of the required custom to kiss the pope's ring. But as a Jew, Herzl will refuse, albeit not necessarily for any religious reason.

Observing a painting of the Crucifixion, Herzl remarks on how it must feel to die for a cause, saying, "Was it worth it? Did you do it for your people? Were they grateful?"

After being stricken by a violent heart palpitation, he continues: "Do you feel you died as a Jew? . . . What do you make of all this? All this worship, all this glitz? Was it worth it, Jesus?"

They exit as the walls of the anteroom open to the pope's receiving room. Pope Pious X sits on an armchair with a gold snuffbox on his lap, a red handkerchief in hand. He welcomes Herzl and reaches out his hand, but Herzl merely shakes it. He begins his plea with appropriate humility, referring to the "the suffering of people searching for an exodus from pain"—whose plight he is there to represent. He begs the pope not to oppose the Zionist plan "to join the nations of the globe." He reminds the pope analogously that pagan Rome destroyed Jerusalem and martyred Christian apostles. And now the Jewish people are suffering as did the early Christians:

> "I humbly ask that you look in our hearts and pity the wretched, stateless men living without land or country. Together we can end their wandering. We are brothers in this story; we do not wish to take the holy places . . . With your blessing, Holiness, we only ask for earth."

Not surprisingly, the pope replies that he cannot lend support to people who "deny our Lord." The Jews wait for *their* messiah, while Christians know that the Messiah has already come. And to Herzl's last strategic attempt at persuasion, a reminder that Jerusalem sits in ruins under the Ottoman Turkish sultan, Pope Pious only repeats himself: if the Jewish people had taken Jesus into their hearts, perhaps it could be different. Would he deny the Jewish people kindness after so much persecution? The pope cannot help but be "bound by duty . . . by God."

ACT II, Scene 3

Time: April 11, 1904
Place: Vienna

At a meeting room at the Zionist offices, Herzl and Ussishkin are in the foreground, other members silent, in silhouette. Ussishkin demands no more talk about East Africa; Herzl insists that they must consider all options. Nonetheless he assures them at the same time that he has not abandoned Palestine.

Ussishkin launches into an impassioned rebuttal—there never was any alternative to Palestine. He describes how the earliest Zionist settlements there have already begun their goals of making the desert bloom; how enthusiastic Jewish farming has become; how "this land is our reality," with Hebrew spoken by all Jewish immigrants there.

But Herzl only diminishes that description by noting that the few thousand Zionist immigrants already in Palestine will not change the sultan's mind. And without the permission of the Ottoman Turkish Empire, plus the world's goodwill, the plan to continue building in Palestine is doomed.

Ussishkin becomes increasingly angry and accusatory, disparaging, and contemptuous—even reducing himself to name-calling and *ad hominem* attacks, as if all this has been percolating beneath the surface. Perhaps for the sake

of progress, he suggests, it is time to move on past Herzl altogether. Herzl's thinking, he continues, is outdated and a barrier to the Zionist dream. He even says that Herzl is an outright liar who has manipulated and bullied the delegations—betraying the cause. "This is a democratic movement," Ussishkin admonishes, with "no room for tyranny." (Of course Herzl never questioned the basic principle of democracy simply by attempting to persuade voting delegates, hardly the same thing as tyranny. He never made an attempt to seize power as an autocrat in order to force acceptance of the British offer or anything else.) "Even Moses did not reach the Promised Land!" Ussishkin exclaims. In other words, just who does Herzl think he is? And the final salvo of insult: Herzl doesn't even speak Hebrew—which was basic to cultural Zionism before Herzl's founding of the political-national movement.

As Herzl tries to speak, he begins coughing uncontrollably. And as the scene ends, when he removes the handkerchief from his mouth, it is covered with blood.

ACT II, Scene 4 — An Interlude

Julie enters the bedroom just as Theodor has gotten into bed. No longer able to contain herself, she "lets it all out" in a tirade. She expresses a measure of regret at not having left Theodor at some point—in the absence of a "normal home," proper attention to the children, his participation in their rearing, adequate financial responsibility to maintain the type of household she always envisioned. As a result, they have lost friends. She cannot forgive him; she feels he has ruined her life. "Soon," she concludes, she will "stare down at your grave, wondering where to put my rage, knowing it's too late."

How Julie is perceived will undoubtedly differ among or within audiences, separately from individual attitudes toward Zionism or the State of Israel. Some will identify to one degree or another with her complaints and grouses coming up to a boiling point, even if — as is not unusual with such emotionally tinged altercations — there might be some exaggeration. And yet, this unhappiness could apply in varying ways to many marriages in which only one spouse is devoted not merely to an all-consuming calling, but to a cause as demanding as the type Herzl has taken upon himself. Still, despite Julie's rant, the Herzls are not in dire poverty, although Julie is certain that is the direction they are headed. For now, though, they are — apparently for the first time — without domestic servants ("the help has moved out"). And much of her furious unhappiness will appear to some as centered around her craving for what to her is indispensable: a lavish lifestyle in Vienna, which some will view as blind, superficial materialism ruling the day. She cannot deny the fate awaiting millions of Russian Empire Jews that Herzl predicts — to say nothing of the ramifications of engrained anti-Jewry throughout the rest of Europe (including Vienna), which she chooses to ignore or "pretend away." She knows that Theodor is determined to save Russian Empire Jewry. But she dismisses sarcastically his "noble dream." It has interfered with the good life of Vienna and participation in its wealthy social circles, which are more important to her and which she feels it her right to have expected. Moreover, in other tirades she refers to the *Ostjuden* (eastern European, Yiddish-speaking Jews) as odorous: They smell, these *Ostjuden*," although, unfortunately this reflects a typical attitude of German and Viennese Jewry — not only then, but going back well into the 19th century, and for decades to come. In any case, Theodor's and Julie's conflicting priorities make for a complicated situation. And there will be those (but not all) in the average audience who find her hardly a sympathetic character.

So how then are we to relate to the portrayal of Julie — in her persona, her articulated plight, and how she handles it? Is she on balance here basically an unsympathetic character? Viz., the examples above as implying self-centered values and encapsulating her animosity towards Theodor's admittedly all-consuming pursuit of his monumental mission? I.e., to paraphrase, *Res ipsa loquitur?* — Does it speak for itself?

Or, to the contrary, does Julie not merit at least some empathy, even in some respects actually as a sympathetic character — given her very real disappointments and frustrations from her standpoints, her not unjustified feeling of neglect as well as long stretches of Theodor's absences during his travels for the movement, her having to function during those absences as what today would be called a "single mother," and the dashing of her

anticipations and assumptions of a carefree, family, social and Jewishly apolitical life — only to be replaced by her husband's wholehearted pursuit of a cause, which, in all fairness, cannot be expected to have resonated in Julie? She is, after all, a product of her upbringing, societal influences, prejudices and values of her and her family's social circles. (And not even mentioned is the matter of her normal need for sexual satisfaction.) Then, too, we cannot dismiss the reality that at that time, notwithstanding the growing numerical accumulation of Zionist followers in Central Europe, the Zionist movement per se seemed very much a fringe notion that appeared to hold little rational promise of ultimate success, so that Julie was not alone amongst Viennese Jewry in seeing it as a time-wasting pipe-dream fantasy, part of a concept of Jewish nationalism to which she could not relate.

Either way, whether one finds Julie here more a sympathetic or more an unsympathetic character (or perhaps somewhere in between, with aspects of both in a "composite Julie") is largely dependent on interpretation. In fact, Weiser himself considers Julie's arias to contain the most engaging music of the opera.[7] And he even understands why some among audiences have come away with the impression that Julie, viz., her role, is the "star of the show" — which is of course an interpretation.

In an article Weiser published in the LABA journal (January 17, 2019), however, he referred objectively to, and quoted from, historian Ernst Pawel's assessment of Julie (*The Labyrinth of Exile*[8]):

"... quick-witted, unstable, given to tantrums, a spoiled brat who could not tolerate frustration and would instantly turn any argument into a dramatic life-and-death confrontation, threatening to kill either a child she was bearing or herself."

ACT II, Scene 5

Time: Still summer 1904, a few months later.
Place: Edlach, Austria, a resort town

Herzl is lying in bed while Julie "fusses about." The Reverend William Hechler enters to pay a visit. Theodor jokes to Julie that the Anglican clergyman has come to make him a Christian, a "post-death baptism." Predicting that he will soon be dead but still believing in his cause, Herzl asks Hechler to "greet the Promised Land" for him someday, and tell everyone there that he gave his life for his people. And he assures Julie that even though their money is gone, the children will take care of her.

Theodor sits upright in bed, imagining that he is presiding over the next Zionist Congress—which he will not live to do. He begins his address with "Order! To the Promised Land!"

The scene shifts to an imaginary gathering of the delegates around him, who then step back into darkness as Herzl looks out into the distance, takes a final breath, and expires.

"It's over," Julie realizes. And she reemerges, as if standing before a crowd to pronounce a sort of eulogy. Retracting much of what she has said earlier, she begins with "Fellow Zionists." She feared his work would kill him, she says. And now she claims that his work was always sacred to her—that now that he is gone, she will pour her strength "into the movement."

In fact, after Herzl's death Julie did allow the Zionist movement to publish statements in her name supporting and even lauding its aims. Weiser and Kaplan deliberately left an aura of ambivalence in the score about what that might have meant in practical terms — an ambivalence "communicated in part by the preceding dialogue as well as by the dissonant chords under Julie's monologue."[9] Viz., what were her true motives in permitting publication of those supposed statements in support of Zionism as a rather abrupt turn-around after a known pattern of both resentment and disparagement of the movement on several levels while Herzl was alive? Did she actually come to have an about-face change in attitude, either emotionally or ideologically, or both, or was that "cooperation" primarily a bid for the movement to organize steps to take care of her and her children (which in the event, at least

to some degree, it did)? As Weiser conceded, most historians tend toward the latter explanation.[10] Is it theoretically conceivable, however, that both motivations could have applied in some disproportionate combination? In any case, the operatic intention was to leave room for some ambiguity for the audience to interpret.

Pawel (op.cit.). however, allowed for no ambiguity in his assessment of Julie's implacable (and thus most likely unaltered) sentiments regarding Zionism, as Weiser quoted objectively in his LABA journal article:

> "Intellectually, they [Theodor and Julie] had nothing in common. Julie shared none of her husband's interest to begin with and later came actively to resent his total involvement with Zionism. Julie… did not have the slightest interest in her husband's work… and her embarrassingly outspoken hostility to the movement was widely known."

Perhaps strangest and most misleading of all was the statement ascribed to Julie that was printed in the *Jewish Chronicle* (London), which Weiser also quoted:[11]

> "… [Theodor's] work was, however, and will ever remain sacred to me. I will serve the Zionist movement with all my strength and will do everything possible to initiate my children into the work of their father, and to make them worthy champions in the movement for the deliverance of our people for which he strove…"

Ernst Pawel was certain, however, that those words were not even written by Julie — "obviously for her, rather than by her." Indeed, the *Jewish Chronicle*, which was the most widely circulated weekly Jewish newspaper at the time in England (and as of the 21st century, still flourishing, but came to be read mostly by traditional-leaning British Jewry), is notorious for its misattributions and unsupported "information." From everything we know of Julie's attitude toward Zionism and its raison d'être during Theodor's life, and how she blamed his pursuit of the movement for ruining their lives and even impoverishing their family, Pawel's judgement concerning suspicious authorship would seem to be correct. Moreover, we can imagine at least one probable ulterior motive for a ghost writing and then publication in the *Chronicle* of Julie's supposed statement (keeping in mind that the likelihood that neither the newspaper's staff writers nor its editor knew anything of the truth), or, if they did, they might simply have been anxious to help Julie, which would have been a disguised appeal to upper-middle-class wealthy, pro-Zionist British Jewish readers. Perhaps, it might have been hoped, that published statement might have attracted their sympathy for contributing to a fund for Julie and her children's financial welfare as well as influencing the movement to that end.

Equally either oblivious or disingenuous — or both — was a June 1907 obituary in the Yiddish newspaper, *Yidishes Tageblat*, an image of which Weiser provided. Nothing short of ridiculous in retrospect, it referred to Julie's death as "a great tragedy among Zionists," and went so far as to state mendaciously as fact that she "often assisted her husband in his work… She also had a great interest in Zionism…" But that kind of misleading twaddle can be typical of obituaries, and one wonders if whoever wrote that one (or the editor) actually believed it.

Offsetting that foolishness, Weiser quoted from a letter Theodor wrote to Julie as early as 1891: "We're not suitable for each other: What interests and fulfills me leaves you cold and estranged."

On the other hand, Weiser cited a June 25, 1904 letter from Theodor to his mother, in which — shortly before his death — he reassures her that:

> "Julie has greatly proven herself again in recent weeks. My first days, particularly the nights, were bad. She has devotedly nursed me, as she nursed her children when they were ill. Her effort is beyond all praise and together with my wholehearted thanks, she deserves yours as well."

What prompted that letter, however — and it may not be too difficult to hazard a guess or two ("Me thinks he doth protest too much" comes to mind, to paraphrase one possibility) — it may be a mistake to take it on its own at face value or to accord it much credence in the overall scheme of things. Could that letter have been a rebuttal to a prior communication from his mother? Or, had his mother and Julie had some unpleasant interchange of communications? Then, too, making sense out of that letter could depend at least in part on what we really know of Herzl's mother's general attitude toward Julie all along.

Nonetheless, it is not at all inconceivable in the context of her husband's serious illness and approaching death for Juie to have suspended her anger and resentment in order to tend to his needs and comfort at such a time. For despite whatever faults we can or might find and tabulate in Julie's character, she is not a heartless monster devoid of common decency, compassion or concern. Pawel's description of their marriage seems to have been on the mark, viz., that the two were simply unsuited to each other from the beginning — even before Herzl's Zionist epiphany. And, though little known or remembered today, in his youthful days he had advocated openly for complete assimilation as the solution to Jew-resentment, anti-Jewry and Jew-hatred.

Moreover, all the tribulations, anger and ruction of their marriage, including the ever widening gulf between them and their priorities, do not necessarily preclude some underlying remaining love — perhaps on both sides.

In any case, despite his excoriations of Julie, Pawel came to her rescue in a sense — concluding that neither her background nor her marital life gave her "a chance to develop" her native intelligence or the maturity to adapt. Thus Weiser wrote in his LABA journal article that his and Kaplan's aim was to depict her in "the most vivid and sympathetic rendering we can muster." And in the event — while still at the same time portraying Theodor's colossal, enduring significance in Jewish history — they succeeded admirably.

EPILOGUE

Time: "A time in history."
Place: Jerusalem

As a plain box is carried up a mountain, a chorus sings with wailing and simultaneous exultation: "*Oy, Tziyon, oy! Oy y'rushalayim! Ir shalom, y'rushalayim! Yanukhu b'shalom al mishkavam! Ir shalom!*" (Oh, Zion, oh! Oh Jerusalem! City of peace, Jerusalem! Rest in peace! City of peace! Grant us peace!)[12]

* * * * *

PERFORMANCE HISTORY

During 2018-2019 excerpts of *State of the Jews* were performed in workshops and preview concerts hosted by American Opera Projects, the 14th Street Y, Con Edison Exploring the Metropolis, and Roulette — in New York City. In 2019 a series of four preview performances at the 14th Street Y brought the full opera to the stage. A full production with stage direction by Omer Ben Seadia received its world premiere on January 15, 2025 at the Temple Emanu-El Streicker Cultural Center.

ENDNOTES

1 For a more detailed account of *Hatikva* and its history, see my article in the accompanying booklet to the Milken Archive NAXOS CD, *In Celebration of Israel* (8.559461), access to which can also be had on the Milken Archive of Jewish Music website.

2 There was nothing new about the Kishinev Pogrom, except that it marked a turning point in general awareness of the reality and nature of Russian persecution of Jews. The waves of pogroms began with unprecedented regularity in Russia, the Ukraine, White Russia (Beolorus), and other lands of the empire in 1881, following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, who was ironically a relatively liberalizing emperor; and they lasted well through the reign of Nicholas II—estimated conservatively at 250 pogroms over a period of less than thirty-five years. Although the Kishinev Pogrom—this one in the capital city of Bessarabia—was neither the first nor the last in the empire, nor the most deadly (the number of slain Jews was estimated at about fifty, in addition to many seriously injured and much Jewish property destroyed), it became famous in terms of international recognition as a symbol of pogroms. It broke out on Easter Day in 1903 and went on for three days. Indeed, it was common (though not exclusively so) for pogroms to occur in the weeks preceding Passover as a function of the infamous Blood Libel, according to which—dating to the thirteenth century in England and persisting well past the nineteenth century in much of the world—Jews were "known for a fact" to murder Christian children to use their blood as a required ingredient for the recipe of baking matza. It was hardly only ignorant peasants who subscribed to this calumny, but many educated government officials and clergymen as well. As late as 1893, at the World's Parliament of Religions of the Columbian Exposition (the World's Fair) in Chicago, the Archbishop of Zante—head of the Greek Church—deemed it necessary to extract a sworn pledge from the representative clergy of nearly every religion in the world that they acknowledged the Blood Libel to be false.

Until April 1903, periodic pogroms in the Russian Empire were common knowledge, but not front-page (or any) news in the general press, as if these were an internal Russian matter of little interest to the rest of the world. This time it was different, for the public could see and be aghast at photographs in major newspapers showing enshrouded Jewish corpses lined up in the streets of Kishinev for burial.

The base of support for Zionism began to broaden a bit after news of the Kishinev Pogrom, even among those who considered themselves non-Zionists but were now willing to be more open-minded to the principle. The news pretty much put an end to any trace of legitimacy to the arguments advanced earlier that Russian Jews could and should work out their own problems with the Russian imperial authorities. The pogrom also aroused some with pro-Zionist sentiments out of previous lethargy, for which they had been called out by world Zionist spokesmen. And in America, for example, where the Reform movement was (until 1936) both officially and vehemently anti-Zionist from the top down and had been so since its institutional founding in the 1870s, there was Reform-affiliated presence at public outpourings of rage and protest rallies demanding United States condemnation. Contrary to oversimplified perceptions, the Reform laity (still largely of German-Jewish origins) as well as rabbinic leadership were not lacking in concern for oppressed Jewry, though most of them continued for quite some time to believe in non-Zionist solutions.

Because it alerted North American, English, and other Western Jewries to the fact of undiminishing persecution, because it confirmed predictions that life-threatening Jew hatred could remain a permanent condition in parts of the world, and because of the response it generated, the Kishinev Pogrom is generally viewed as a crossroad in the progress of Zionism. It did not silence opposition from avowedly anti-Zionist quarters. But for some who had had passive Zionist sympathies until then, and even for others who had resisted Zionist sensibilities out of naive optimism for human progress, the Kishinev Pogrom became in a sense what the Dreyfus Affair had been for many in the founding generation of the Zionist movement in

Europe: the ultimate realization that active anti-Jewishness and Jew hatred would never disappear, and that the only antidote resided in a permanent Jewish national and political entity.

Meanwhile, especially in North America and England, the Kishinev Pogrom dealt a jolting blow to many socialist Yiddishists and their labor-oriented organizations who were disillusioned when they learned that non-Jewish Russian workers—assumed to be part of a united, trans-ethnic, trans-religious international proletariat—had participated gleefully in the pogrom. That sober realization played a role for some in intertwining socialist and labor-infused ideals with Zionist sensibilities and visions—organizations such as, in America, the Labor Zionist Farband / *Po'alei Tsiyon*.

For other socialist Yiddishists the shock of the Kishinev Pogrom was short-lived and/or the reports of Russian workers' participation were dismissed. They preferred to persist in their internationalist socialist ideals. The socialist nature of the Zionist movement did not count for them, since it was tied by definition to Jewish nationalism as opposed to "universal humanism." In the year of the Kishinev Pogrom, the leading socialist media organ, the *Forverts* (Jewish Daily Forward)—which throughout its life had the largest circulation of any Yiddish daily newspaper in America—came out in favor of the "Uganda plan." At the same time, the *Forverts* retained its solidly anti-Zionist stance, emphasizing that any such territorial plan must still be informed by *internationally* socialist—not socialist Zionist—principles.

That same year, the *Forverts* addressed the Russian Zionists opposed to the "Uganda plan," saying that their steadfastness to Palestine obscured what should be their more appropriate loyalty to non-Zionist Russian Jews, who should instead be in the vanguard of activities that would—and did—lead to the 1905 Revolution. In yet another editorial the *Forverts* warned that once Jews had their own country—as opposed to being part of an international socialist brotherhood—they would become ardent and intolerant nationalists who would not hesitate to "dispatch police . . . to silence all who dared to be even moderately liberal." Viz., a Jewish state would become ipso facto totalitarian.

In the same time frame, another Yiddish periodical, the *Tagblat*, editorialized that prosperous Jews of the German-Jewish establishment in America who favored the East Africa plan were only so inclined because it would put a damper on Russian-Jewish immigration, which they were finding a burden and an embarrassment. Though there may have been some truth to that assertion in some cases, at the same time those immigrants were supplying cheap labor for many Jewish-owned businesses.

3 Quoted in Hillel Halkin, *Jabotinsky: A Life* (New Haven and London, 2014).

4 Still (as of this writing) technically but barely alive is a Jewish organization known as the American Council for Judaism, which goes further than Julie in its vehement, unalterable opposition to *any* form of Zionism—of course to the State of Israel, but also to the very idea of a Jewish "people." They assert that "Jewishness" is exclusively a religion that can be followed by any actual people, ethnicity, or nationality—and nothing more. This council, which has been under the tent of the Reform movement, was born essentially as a minority walkout in opposition to the Reform movement's revised platform in the 1930s, which acknowledged Zionism in principle as well as the fact of a "Jewish people." (See note 6.) As hard as it is to imagine now, the council—to which various individual Reform congregations belonged as members at least through the 1960s—retained (and continues to retain) its denial of a Jewish people even after the Shoah, which had nothing to do with Judaism as a religion and everything to do with Jewish peoplehood, given that even second- or third-generation Christians whose forebears converted from Judaism were the targets of the German policy of annihilation. Nonetheless, according to the council's convoluted stance, since there are no such polities as Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, or other sovereign states of particular faiths, there can be no justification for the State of Israel—or any other Jewish state.

5 From its official founding, and even earlier in the 1870s, the American Reform movement's policy was famously and belligerently hostile to any form or hint of Zionism—until its "about-face" in the 1930s. The architects of the movement as it took shape and then continued in the early decades of the twentieth century—when the majority of its congregational members still had roots in German and German-speaking Jewry—denied that there was any such thing as a "Jewish people." For them, Jewishness and Jews were exclusively a "religion"—what was called a "religious community" (whatever that meant). And for them, the biblical-historical Land of Israel had no relevance to Judaism "as it had evolved"—and certainly not in America, to which they referred as their Zion.

(That echoed, most likely unknowingly, the Puritan and Pilgrim immigrant settlers of the seventeenth century, who referred to the colonies as "the wilderness Zion.") Traditional references to Zion, Jerusalem, and the Land of Israel were removed from the new Reform liturgy, along with any messianic expectations or hopes.

Isaac Mayer Wise, who emerged ultimately as the acknowledged founder of American Reform Judaism (who insisted on being called "Rabbi-Dr.," although he was neither), devised what became its original de facto liturgy despite rival attempts at a prayer book in German. He denounced Zionism in ferocious terms, even suggesting that it was un-American and would be perceived as political disloyalty. And he claimed that any sympathy for Zionism would only feed antisemitism.

As if his condemnation of Zionism needed further undergirding, Wise disingenuously declared that, since the movement's two most visible figures—Herzl and Max Nordau—were both "known" atheists, there could be no place or toleration for Zionism among American Jews. (Even if Nordau's reputation as an atheist and not merely an agnostic was more or less true, Wise could have known nothing of Herzl's private beliefs.)

Nevertheless, there was a small number of early Zionist advocates in America who began recruitment efforts as early as the 1880s—refusing to be intimidated by Reform policy in their occasionally successful attempts to win over a handful of prosperous members of the German-Jewish American Reform establishment. Swimming against the tide, they lent support to the movement. Within little more than a decade or so after Herzl's death, boosted by the continued arrivals of eastern European Jews, there was a thriving, continually growing American Zionist Federation (later the American Zionist Organization, AZO), with chapters and conventions in major American cities—even if Jews affiliated with the Reform movement remained in the minority. Ironically, a few American Reform rabbis were in the vanguard of the Zionist movement early on, even delegates to the early congresses. To its credit, despite the intensity of its anti-Zionism, neither the Reform rabbinical association, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), nor its lay body, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), instituted any provisions for censure or expulsion for Zionist supporters. And by the 1930s, as the tide began to change, the two most prominent leaders of American Zionism were both Reform rabbis: Rabbis Stephen S. Wise—no relation to Isaac Mayer Wise—and Abba Hillel Silver. Meanwhile, beyond specifically active Zionist circles, Herzl had become for American Jewry overall an historical icon of the struggle for Jewish security, pride, respect, and acceptance. Buildings and institutions were named after him, for example the public Theodore Herzl Elementary School in Chicago's largest Jewish neighborhood, or the Herzilia Institute in New York.

6 A little-known but fascinating episode in the history of Zionism was the Blackstone Memorial—an ambitious proposition in 1891 by William E. Blackstone, a devout if eccentric Evangelical Christian in Chicago. Blackstone devised a plan that went beyond the colonization schemes of the Ḥovavei Tsiyon movement to acquire Palestine as an autonomous, self-governing land for Jews. His proposal called first for obtaining Palestine through the combined efforts of an international consortium. It would become a haven for oppressed Jews of the Tsarist Empire, of whom he was certain the Russian imperial government would be happy to rid itself. To accomplish that goal, he proposed that the United States use its good offices to convene

a summit conference of the major European powers, including both Tsar Alexander III and the Turkish sultan, Abdul Hamid II, who he believed could be induced to "sell" Palestine outright—especially inasmuch as the Ottoman Turkish Empire was known to be impoverished, partly as a result of outstanding imperial debt. Blackstone was convinced that the "unsettled indemnity claimed by Russia against Ottoman Turkey" could be used to gain its cooperation.

Among the petitioning signatories to the Blackstone Memorial were several dozen Christian clergymen representing many diverse Protestant denominations as well as the Roman Catholic Church (including the archbishops of Chicago, Philadelphia, and Baltimore), and many parochial Christian periodicals. Blackstone identified himself in the proposal as "chairman of the Conference of Christians and Jews lately held in Chicago"—an interfaith meeting he had called at a Methodist church there. Additionally, the eclectic list of signatories included the future president of the United States, William McKinley, the chief justice of the United States, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, the governor of Massachusetts, mayors of several cities (including New York), federal and state court judges, nearly one hundred periodicals throughout the country, and many prominent business leaders (non-Jews as well as Jews) such as Cyrus H. McCormick (and family members), the president of the Chicago and North Western Railway, Potter Palmer, J. Pierpont Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, and many others. The proposal was heartily endorsed by the only Hebrew periodical of the time then in America, *Hapisga*. Among rabbinical endorsements and signatories, that of retired Rabbi Bernhard Felsenthal came as no surprise. Rabbi Felsenthal, an American Reform rabbi — who, contrary to the Reform movement's "policy," was an outspoken promoter of Zionism—had served prestigious pulpits, including an important one in Chicago. There were also a few other American rabbis who signed on.

Blackstone managed to meet personally with President Benjamin Harrison and his secretary of state, James Blaine, and he came away with the impression that both were favorably impressed with his plan. Yet it seems to have gone no further. Harrison lost his bid for reelection to Grover Cleveland in 1892, and Blaine had run unsuccessfully in 1884. Until the papers of Blackstone, Harrison, and Blaine (which reside in three separate locations) would be perused with this episode in mind, we cannot be certain whether Blackstone ever approached the succeeding administration—and if not, why not. In any case, the proposal did not require Americans to cover the costs of implementation, only that the United States initiate the calling of an international summit conference—in as yet an undecided location. Otherwise, Blackstone was certain that once the plan was accepted by all important Christian nations, and once autonomy of Jewish government in Palestine was assured, "the Jews of the world would rally to transport their suffering brethren to their time-honored habitation." And he elaborated on that expectation of internal Jewish financial support for the acquisition of the land [Palestine] and for the costs of resettlement.

Despite the cynical polemics engendered by the proposal among some people regarding Blackstone's possible evangelical, apocalyptic motives, which, even if suspected, most Jewish supporters properly dismissed as irrelevant, it seems clear that his concern for saving Russian Empire Jewry was genuine and humanitarian. He appealed in the proposal to the Christian world as a whole: "We believe this is an appropriate time for all nations, and especially the Christian nations of Europe, to show kindness to [the people] Israel . . . Let us now restore them the land of which they were so cruelly despoiled by our Roman ancestors." And he cited the Iberian expulsions of 1492 and 1497 (as well as the massacres that preceded them), predicting a quadrupling of the "agony and horror" and asserting that all Christian nations had an obligation not to "stand by this wreck and launch no life-boat."

Attached to the Blackstone Memorial's resubmission to President Woodrow Wilson in 1916 were, in addition to a host of new signatories, official resolutions of endorsement from the Baptist Ministers Conference, the Methodist ministers meeting, the Presbyterian Ministerial Association, and the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. But by that time—apart from the likelihood that Wilson, whose bigotry against

blacks and other minorities was transparent, was no friend of the Jews just because he appointed Louis Brandeis to the Supreme Court—Europe and the Ottoman Empire were already embroiled in the Great War. Most of the nations or empires from whom Blackstone had envisioned cooperation were now at war with one another, aligned with either the Central Powers or the Allies. Not only had the sultan been deposed by a group of officers before the war, but now—assuming that the Jews of Palestine would sooner or later side with the Allies—the Turkish authorities had issued an expulsion order for all Jews. This was, however, countermanded by Germany, both because of its significant, enthusiastic Jewish participation in its war effort and perhaps also in a typically misguided perception of Jewish influence in Washington at a time when Germany hoped that the United States would remain neutral in all ways or, better yet, that it would decide to ally itself with the Central Powers.

By the time the war was over and after the Versailles Treaty, three empires had ceased to exist (four, if one counted the German pretension to empire), and Palestine would become a British mandate of the League of Nations. So the Blackstone Memorial was no longer applicable or relevant. Still, in 1891, Blackstone's vision did not necessarily lack legitimacy. If nothing else, its diverse list of supporters—crossing Christian denominational and theological boundaries and enlisting major figures among the business world's captains—speaks well of Christian and "corporate" America's humanitarian concerns of that day. The episode also tells us something in that so many people of otherwise different mindsets and worldviews, whatever their motives, thought positively of Herzl's aims—which, given the diversity of signatories, cannot have been exclusively apocalyptic, even if that played a role in some cases. One can only imagine how Jewish history might have played out had the United States gone ahead and initiated the international summit conference, let alone if Blackstone's envisioned cooperation followed. In retrospect, the proposal seems far-fetched. Whether it was impossible is another question.

7 p.c. Alex Weiser, February 2025

8 Ernst Pawel, *The Labyrinth of Exile: A Life of Theodor Herzl*. 1989, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

9 p.c. Alex Weiser, op. Cit.

10 Ibid.

11 LABA Journal, January 17, 2019

12 Herzl's remains were buried initially in Vienna in 1904. He had expressed the hope that someday, whenever possible, his remains would be permanently interred (viz., reburied) in the Land of Israel—unceremoniously, modestly, with no eulogy. Thus, beginning in 1948, a committee was formed to make the necessary arrangements. Naturally, it was decided that this permanent burial site should be in Jerusalem. Among other considerations, that would emphasize the State of Israel's sovereignty over the city. (Had the Arabs accepted the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947, Jerusalem would have been under international jurisdiction, but since the Arabs refused, and—instead of two states that could have existed side by side peacefully—Israel was forced into its War of Independence upon its declaration of statehood in May 1948, which led to a truce in 1949 that left Israel with recognized sovereignty and control over only the western part of Jerusalem for the time being. Jordan occupied the eastern part, building a wall that ran through the city until 1967 and Jordan's foolish, Egyptian-encouraged invasion as part of what became known as the Six Day War. The result was Israel's complete victory and the reunification of its ancient capital.)

Herzl's remains were exhumed from the Vienna grave and transferred to a plain, closed wooden box in

accordance with Judaic law and tradition. Upon its arrival in Jerusalem, it was carried up an obscure hill for permanent interment. The spot became known as Mount Herzl—and when Yad Vashem was built nearby, the area became known jointly as the Mount of Remembrance.