

Patagonian Dreams

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DURING HIS SHORT visit to Israel, Pope Francis laid a wreath on the grave of Theodor Herzl. That was not a usual gesture. Foreign heads of state are obliged to visit Yad Vashem, as did the pope, but not the grave of Herzl. It is not like the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Paris.

So why Herzl's grave? Obviously, this gesture was intended to emphasize the Zionist character of the state.

Herzl was the founder of modern political Zionism. He is officially called "the Visionary of the State". His is the only picture decorating the Knesset plenum hall. If we had saints, he would be St. Theodor.

PROBABLY, FRANCIS did not give another thought to this gesture. If so, it's a pity. The Argentine Pope could have found a lot of interest in this colorful Viennese journalist and playwright.

Because if Herzl had had his way, Francis would have been greeted by President Peres and Prime Minister Netanyahu in Spanish. He would have honored Herzl's grave in the Jewish State somewhere south of Buenos Aires.

If Francis had never heard of this episode, he is not the only one. The vast mass of Israelis has not either. It is not taught in Israeli schools. It is hidden rather shamefully.

Israelis know about "Uganda". Shortly before his early death, Herzl was invited by the British government to implement his ideas in part of British East Africa (actually, it was the Kenyan highlands, a plateau with a mild climate, which later became a part of Kenya.)

By that time, Herzl had despaired of getting Palestine from the Turkish Sultan. The Kenyan project, which could be implemented at once, attracted him and his main supporter, Max Nordau, who advised him to take it at least temporarily, as a "night asylum".

But the Russian Zionists, the bulwark of the movement, rebelled. Palestine or nothing. Herzl was overruled by his admirers and died soon after of a broken heart, it was said.

THIS EPISODE is well known. Much has been written about it. Some would say that if during the 1930s a Jewish Commonwealth had existed in Africa, many European Jews could have been saved from the Nazis.

But the Argentine chapter has been erased. It did not fit the image of the Visionary of the State on the walls.

HERZL'S LONG trek to Zionism started when, as a

Hungarian-born Jewish student in Vienna, he encountered anti-Semitism. His logical mind found the answer. Being a playwright, he described the scene: all Austrian Jews, except himself, would march in an orderly fashion to the Cathedral and convert en masse to Catholicism. The pope would have been enthusiastic.

However, Herzl soon learned that neither would the Jews accept baptism ("*the Jews are afraid of water*," Heinrich Heine once joked), but the nationalist Goyim did not dream of accepting them into their ranks. How could they? Jews were everywhere, in many different countries, so how could they sincerely join any national movement?

That's when Herzl had his historic insight: if the Jews could not join any of the national movements that were mushrooming in Europe, why shouldn't they constitute themselves as a separate, new-old nation?

For Herzl, that was a sober, rational idea. No God involved, no Holy Scriptures, no romantic nonsense. Palestine did not enter his mind. Nor had he any interest in the religious fantasies of Christian Zionists in Britain and the US, like Alfred Balfour.

Herzl's project was fully completed, up to the smallest detail, and written down in the brochure that became the Zionist Bible "Der Judenstaat", before he even started to think seriously about the place where it should be realized.

THE PAMPHLET started as a speech he made to the "family council" of the Rothschilds, the richest Jews on earth. He expected them to finance the project.

The text is immortalized in his Diaries, a very well-written document covering several books. On page 149 of the first book of the original German print, after explaining his plans, he remarks that "I can tell you everything about the 'promised Land' except its location." This will be left to a conference of outstanding Jewish geographers, who will decide where to set up the Jewish state, after examining all the geological, climatic, "in short, the natural circumstances, taking into account the most modern investigations". It is a "purely scientific" decision to make.

In the end, when the pamphlet came out under the title "Der Judenstaat", the location was almost ignored. Less than a page was devoted to it, under the expressive title: "Palestine or Argentina?"

HERZL CLEARLY preferred Argentina. The reason

for this has also been forgotten.

A generation before Herzl, Argentina consisted mainly of the north of the country, around Buenos Aires. The vast south, called Patagonia, was almost empty.

At the time, Argentina started a campaign of conquest, that many today consider genocidal. The indigenous pre-Columbian population, including a tribe of “giants” (two meters tall) was annihilated or pushed out. That was called, almost in Zionist fashion, “the desert campaign”.

Such genocidal campaigns were at the time quite usual. The US ran one against the “red Indians”. The Germans committed genocide in today’s Namibia, and the mass-murderer was feted in the Kaiser’s Germany as a national hero. The King of the Belgians did something similar in the Congo.

What Herzl saw with his mind’s eye was a huge new country more or less empty, just waiting to be turned into a Jewish state. He thought that the Argentine government would give it up for money. The remaining local population could be pushed out or enticed to move somewhere else, but “only after they had exterminated all wild animals.”¹

PATAGONIA IS a very picturesque country, with many different landscapes, from the seashores of both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans to the incredibly beautiful ice-covered mountains of the Andes. The climate is generally cool, even cold. The most southerly town in the world is located on its southern tip.

The rational approach of Herzl was soon swamped by the irrational character of his movement—a mixture of religious fantasies and East European romanticism. The plan to resettle the Jews in a safe environment turned into a Messianic movement. This has happened to the Jews before, and always ended in disaster.

HERZL DETESTED Palestine. Most of all he detested Jerusalem.

Curiously enough for the prophet of Zionism, he long refused to visit Palestine. He crisscrossed Europe from London to St Petersburg, from Istanbul to Rome, in order

to meet the Great of the World, but did not set foot in Jaffa until he was practically compelled by the German Kaiser.

Wilhelm II, a romantic and rather unstable type, insisted on meeting the Leader of the Jews in a tent near the gates of Jerusalem. It was in November, the mildest month in this country, but Herzl suffered terribly from the heat, especially as he would not take off his heavy European suit.

The Kaiser, a born anti-Semite, listened politely, and later remarked: “A *good idea, but impossible to do with Jews.*”

Herzl fled the town and the country as quickly as he could. The Holy City, for which his successors are today ready to shed much blood, looked to him ugly and dirty. He escaped to Jaffa, and there climbed in the middle of the night onto the first available ship going to Alexandria. He claimed to have heard rumors about a plot to kill him.

ALL THIS could have been food for the pope’s reflections, if he had been focused on the past. But Francis lives in the present and held out his arms to the living, especially the Palestinians.

Instead of entering the land through Israel, like everybody else, he loaned a helicopter from King Abdallah II and flew directly from Amman to Bethlehem. This was a kind of recognition of Palestinian statehood. On his way back from Bethlehem to the helicopter, he suddenly asked to stop, went up to the occupation Wall and laid his hands on its ugly concrete, as his predecessors had done at the Western Wall. His prayer there could only be heard by God.

From there the pope flew to Ben-Gurion airport, as if he had just arrived from Rome. He marched on the red carpet between Peres and Netanyahu (since neither of the two would cede the honor to the other).

I don’t know what the pope found to talk about with this shallow duo, but I would surely have enjoyed listening in to a conversation between the two intelligent Argentinians, Francis and Herzl.

¹Anti-Israeli propagandists use this sentence as if it was aimed at the Palestinians. That is quite untrue. Herzl could not possibly have written such a thing about Palestine as long as the Muslim Caliph was the sovereign of the country.