

Theodor Herzl meets Wilhelm II in Jerusalem (1898)

Abstract

As the founder of the Zionist movement, Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) sought to create a nation-state for European Jews in the wake of the resurgent antisemitism of the 1890s. Herzl was an Austrian-Hungarian journalist and writer of Jewish faith whose book *Der Judenstaat* [The Jewish State] laid the intellectual foundation for the State of Israel. In this excerpt from his diaries, Herzl describes an encounter with Kaiser Wilhelm II in Jerusalem. Wilhelm II entertained an expansionist vision for German foreign policy, and his support for Herzl's project in the Middle East was part of this vision. Often erratic and self-defeating, Wilhelm's strategy of undermining France and Great Britain led to oscillating German support for Muslims and Jews in the region.

Source

November 2, 1998

[...]

At 1:08 pm.

We have already returned from the audience.

This brief reception will be treasured in the history of the Jews for all times, and it is not impossible that it will also have historical consequences.

But how odd were the details of the entire event.

We finished our cursory lunch at around 11:30. I insisted that my gentlemen keep a strict diet so they would be in good form.

Around 12 we were all dressed. Bodenheimer had a grotesque top hat, and his cuffs were so wide that the shirtsleeves kept sliding out. At the last moment we had to dig up other cuffs for him.

I had put on my shabby Medschidje medal (for the first time).

I did not let anyone take bromine – as Marcou Baruch said in Basel: *je ne le voulais pas pour l'histoire*. [I didn't want it, for the sake of history].

Et j'avais raison! [And I was right!]

Under the burning noonday sun and through white dust we drove to the tents. A few Jews in the streets looked up as we drove by. Ducks in the marsh, when the wild ducks fly overhead.

At the fence enclosing the tents, the Turkish guards hesitated to admit me and Schnirer. Then came a non-commissioned officer who let us pass.

Inside the enclosed room, Count v. Kessel, in colonial uniform, came up to meet us and pointed to a reception tent. We stood there for about ten minutes and inspected the small salon with the colorful rugs and furniture.

Then we were summoned to the emperor's tent. The Kaiser stood there awaiting us, in his gray colonial uniform, a veiled helmet on his head, brown gloves and – oddly enough – a riding crop in his right hand. A few steps before the entrance I stood at attention and bowed. When I entered the Kaiser held out his hand to me in a very friendly way. A little off to the side stood Bülow in a dust-covered gray lounge suit, holding my revised draft in his hand.

My four companions stepped into the spacious tent behind me. I asked if I might introduce them, he nodded, I did so. At the mention of each name, he placed his hand to the visor of his helmet.

Then, after exchanging a glance with Bülow, I took my paper and read, at first in a muted and slightly quavering voice, then slowly *très à mon aise* [very much at ease]. From time to time I looked up from my paper and into his eyes, which he kept firmly fixed on me.

When I had finished, he spoke.

He said roughly the following:

“I thank you for your exposition, which has interested me greatly. The matter, in any case, still requires careful study and further discussion.” He then launched into some observations on the colonization to date. “The land needs water and shade, above all else.” He used some technical terms about agriculture and forestry. His observations had taught him, incidentally, that the soil was cultivable. “The settlements I saw, both those of the Germans and of your people [*Landsleute*], can serve as a model of what one can make of this land. The land has room for all. Just provide water and shade. The work of the colonies will also serve as a stimulating model for the native population. Your movement, which I know very well, contains a sound idea.”

He then assured us of his continued interest, and how he filled the remaining five or six minutes of his answer I no longer remember.

After his official answer was over, he shook my hand, though he did not dismiss us yet; instead, he drew me into a conversation with Bülow: “You know Herr v. Bülow, I presume?”

Did I know him! Bülow, who had read along my entire speech in Brouillon, tracing the words with his index finger, smiled sweetly. We spoke about the journey.

The Kaiser said: “The hottest time has just begun. The day we met was the worst. We took the temperature in Ramleh: 31° C [88° F] in the shade, 41° [106° F] in the sun.”

Bülow said sweetly: “As Your Majesty the Kaiser was kind enough to say, water is the main thing. Herr Herzl will know better than I the words of the Greek poet: “Ἀριστον μὲν ὕδωρ” [Water is best].

“We can supply the land with that. It will cost billions, but it will also earn billions”

“Well, you have plenty of money,” the Kaiser called out jovially and tapped his boot with his riding crop. “More money than the rest of us.”

Bülow *abondait dans ce sens* [echoing this]: “Yes, the money that causes us so much trouble, you have plenty of.”

I pointed out what one could do with the water power of the Jordan and drew Seidener into the conversation as the engineer. Seidener spoke of dams, etc. The Kaiser listened eagerly and carried the idea further. He then spoke of the health conditions, eye diseases, and so on, which occurred especially at the time of the fig harvest. At this point I brought in Schnirer, who spoke briefly about the subject.

I managed to mention my idea about handing the old city over to charitable organizations, cleaning it up, and building a new Jerusalem that one could survey from the Mount of Olives, the way Rome can be surveyed from the Janiculum.

I was not able to get Wolffsohn and Bodenheimer involved in the conversation, since the Kaiser ended the audience by briefly shaking my hand once more.

I went out first, and then gave one more sidelong glance behind me. The emperor stood in profile facing Bülow with whom he was speaking, and he looked like he wanted to give himself a *contenance* [an appearance].

Count v. Kessel asked as we were leaving: “The audience already over?” He was less obliging than he had been in Constantinople, from which I concluded that our prospects were less favorable.

I said to Schnirer as we left: “Il n’a dit ni oui ni non” [He said neither yes nor no].

Once again, they did not wish to let us pass the gate. But outside stood the secret police officer and supposed Zionist Mendel Krämer, who has been accompanying us since Jaffa – by order of the Turkish government, it seems to me – and had them open it for us.

Source of original German text: Theodor Herzl, *Theodor Herzls Tagebücher, 1894–1904*. 3 volumes. Berlin, 1922–23, vol. 2, pp. 222–26. Available online at:

<https://sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/freimann/content/pageview/1147500?query=Kaiserzelt>

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