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THE TRAGEDY OF THE HERZL FAMILY

by H. D. Leuner

To make it perfectly plain at the very outset, the following remarks and observations are not meant to debunk or denigrate the historical uniqueness of Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism. Whichever way you look at his work it is of epochal importance. Without his wholehearted devotion to the cause of the poor, persecuted masses of Jews in Eastern Europe, Zionism would have remained one of many movements but certainly not the river that swept Jewry to the successful establishment of the State ; the land, in which a Jew can live as a Jew, direct and control his own fate without being dependent on the goodwill of the non-Jewish majority amongst whom he lived and suffered for centuries.

When Theodor Herzl in 1904 prematurely died at the age of 44, after having sacrificed his life, health, money, married happiness to his cause with a singularity of purpose such as unknown in modern history, he left a widow who had never understood him and his work, and three children : Pauline, his first child, Hans, his only son, and Trude, sometimes called Margarete, and everyone of them found a tragic end. One cannot help thinking that some deadly mental streak had poisoned his whole progeny. Pauline proved a complete failure, became a drug addict, had several men who left her soon, went down and was eventually admitted to a hospital in Bordeaux where she died in 1930, mere 40 years old, on an overdose of heroin. Hans, born 1891 but not circumcised before his father's death, was manic-depressive, a condition he sought to overcome by a frantic interest in Christianity. In his search for peace he was first baptised in the Baptist Chapel in Vienna in July 1934, but changed later in rapid succession to other denominations. While he was an Anglican he would attend the Synagogue service on Friday night and the Mass on Sunday morning. Eventually he became an Evangelical Lutheran. His guardian was Herzl's successor, Wolffsohn, who had sent him to an English Boarding School where he was very unhappy. It is an open question whether his circumcision at the age of 15 when other Jewish boys had already had their Barmitzvah, left a trauma he never shook off. He was treated by Freud who diagnosed an extreme Oedipus complex. When Pauline died he went to Bordeaux to attend her funeral and took his own life. One cannot suppress the feeling that he might have found the inner peace

he so feverishly pursued, if he had come across a sympathetic group of Christian believers who would not look upon a baptised Jew as either a museum specimen to be singled out for unjustified adulation, or an associate not to be fully accepted and trusted. He would not have tried to become a priest unless the messianic faith meant more to him than a mere intellectual agreement to certain formulas. His was thus a double tragedy. Trude (Margarete) who married became soon a mental case ; her marriage broke down and, after being detained in various asylums, was sent by the Nazis in 1942 to Theresienstadt where she died the following year.

One question seems to be unavoidable : can so much mental illness be accounted for by sheer coincidence ? There must have been a history of lack of mental balance to say the least, in the preceding generation. And as Herzl's wife, Sophie Naschauer, for all her tantrums and love scenes, for all her playing with the thought of divorce, was mentally normal we simply have to look to the father for an explanation of the facts that played havoc with his children's lives. And though nothing of the following findings can take a way from the dimensionless work Herzl accomplished and left to posterity, facts are unchangeable and have to be accepted.

Herzl was schizoid, not schizophrenic but a case on that borderline that divides genius and madness. Though born of assimilated Jewish parents, he would have preferred the aristocratic cradle of a Prussian peer and showed early that he was a freethinker. At school, Hebrew bored him and he gave it up. Instead of a Barmitzvah at the Synagogue, he had a « Confirmation » at home. He was given to frequent fits of melancholy and depression and entertained several times the thought of suicide. Before he conceived the solution of the Jews' dilemma by a country of their own, he thought of a general move to the baptismal font as the only answer. His heroes were Martin Luther and Bismarck. He was a very mediocre student of law and admired Wagner more than anyone else. Declared unfit for military service for reasons unknown, he joined as freshman the nationalist German student's corps 'Albia' and prided himself on the scar left after an encounter in the fencing room. He broke with the Albia when its rabid antisemitic standpoint could no longer be overlooked. At the age of 23 he designed a mass spectacle in which he would lead Jewry to baptism though himself remaining unbaptised ; St. Peter's in Rome and St. Stephen's in Vienna had their definite places in his scenario. Even when he had drawn up the elementary plans of his « Judenstaat » he was emphatic

in his feeling and being German although the history of his family in Hungary does not contain a single clue in this direction. That he saw his son as his successor is only understandable : he wanted to crown him as Doge of the new state and had already prepared his speech beginning with the words : « Your Highness, my beloved son ». Not earlier than after the First Zionist Congress (Basle 1897) begins Herzl's turning to Judaism. The Christmastree, until then a regular feature of the household, is discarded and the Hanukkah Menorah takes its place. His scheme of a Jewish State and his national ideas were not the result of the agelong Jewish longing for Zion nor the result of his knowledge of Jewish history or national aspirations already brought out by contemporaries like Pinsker and other predecessors. It was rather in analogy to the ideas of Germans and Poles and Hungarians in the border districts of the Habsburg monarchy. Singularly mistaken but dictated by his love for German aristocracy was his misjudgment of the German Emperor Wilhelm II. whom to meet he went to Palestine without getting any satisfaction. Blinded by Wilhelm's carefully calculated appearance and joviality, Herzl built his plan for a Jewish country on the German Emperor's help which never materialised. To reach his goal of a Jewish Homeland he even went to Russia and negotiated with Plehwe, that archenemy and wholesale slaughterer of Jews. Nor is it possible to account rationally for the vast sums of money — much of it from his own pocket — he spent on bribing Turkish officials in order to gain the Sultan's approval of a Jewish settlement in Palestine. It is likewise inexplicable how a well educated and widely read personality of Herzl's calibre could entertain the thought that the Sinai peninsula behind El-Arish would provide fertile ground for a colony of hundred-thousands of Jewish settlers. His singleminded fanaticism on behalf of his fellow Jews explains much as e.g. his readiness to accept an interim solution in Uganda or elsewhere but it does not explain every observation made above.

The tragedy of the Herzl family did not reach its end with the death of his three children. Trude had a son Stephan Theodor Neumann who changed his name to Norman when he grew up in England. Born in 1918, he served as a captain in the British army in World War II and later visited the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Erez Israel in the prestate period. According to reports published at the time he was deeply impressed by what he saw when being shown around, especially on seeing his grand father's study which had been transferred to the homeland. After leaving the army he became

economic adviser to the British mission in Washington but committed suicide in 1946 by jumping from a bridge into the river.

Faced with such a multitude of tragedies one cannot preclude a father's trait that laid the foundation to so much heartbreak. Theodor was neither asocial nor displaying evidence of grave mental disorders ; he was a singleminded genius, introverted, with a great tendency to phantasy and instability. But, to repeat it, he was not a mental case. He was a brilliant writer of those picturesque reports from Paris that established his fame as the principal writer of that genre. But his place in the gallery of the men that formed the history of our century is assured by his determined and successful efforts to provide the Jewish Homeland, and compared with that achievement, his family's tragedy counts but little.