

Book Reviews



Derek Penslar, *Theodor Herzl: The Charismatic Leader* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 256 pp. Hardback, \$26.00.

Derek Penslar's *Theodor Herzl: The Charismatic Leader* is the latest and one of the best in a long line of biographical treatments of the foundational Zionist leader. From Reuven Brainin's Hebrew account in 1919 to Alex Bein's standard German version in 1934 to Ernst Pawel's and Jacques Kornberg's English books in 1989 and 1993, the erstwhile assimilated Jew turned nationalist leader has captured the attention of scholars and journalists across time and space. This dramatic life turn, together with Herzl's striking physical appearance and the subsequent success of the Zionist movement in birthing the State of Israel, helps us understand why he has had a much longer afterlife than the truncated 44 years he lived.

At the end of his book, Derek Penslar, the William Lee Frost Professor of Jewish History at Harvard University, explores the latest chapter in Herzl's reception, examining the manifold and curious ways in which Herzl is remembered in Israel, from a major memorial site (Mount Herzl) to theatrical productions, rap lyrics, and T-shirts. And yet this compact volume, which is part of the prestigious "Jewish Lives" series (Yale University Press), is not, in the main, a history of reception. Its first task, in the crowded marketplace of Herzl biographies, is to explore its hero's interiority. Drawing on a vast trove of published diaries and letters and unpublished archival sources, Penslar skillfully probes Herzl's turbulent inner life.

Here, too, Penslar has had predecessors in this work. Pawel, for his part, made extensive use of the diaries and letters to get at Herzl's multi-layered complexity. Meanwhile, in a novel and controversial move, Peter Loewenberg (1985: 101) trained a 'psychohistorical' lens on Herzl, uncovering what he identified as "a detached dream world" in which Herzl proved "quite unable and unwilling to relate to his surroundings." Penslar acknowledges he is not trained in psychiatry or psychoanalysis, but he spends a great deal of time unpacking Herzl's "psychological instability" (p. 3) as reflected in



his dependence on his parents, his unhappy marriage, and his distant relationship with his children.

Penslar is not a literary scholar either, but he devotes ample attention to the vast corpus of novels, plays, and especially essays that Herzl produced. Herzl specialized in a lost genre, the *feuilleton*, a long essay devoted to cultural or political affairs of the day, which he deployed as a correspondent for the well-known Viennese liberal newspaper, the *Neue Freie Presse* (NFP). Penslar is nuanced in parsing these essays, as well as in surfacing key themes in Herzl's many fictional forays. Above all, he is expert in situating Herzl in a variety of distinct historical contexts: his birthplace, Budapest; his transplanted hometown, Vienna; Paris, where he was posted by the NFP during *l'affaire Dreyfus*; Constantinople, where he went to visit the Ottoman Sultan; and Jerusalem, which left him cold.

This kind of locale-hopping comes naturally to Penslar as a scholar at home in European Jewish, Zionist, and Israeli history. He is a generalist in the best sense, expert in multiple domains but not fixed to any single border. He eschews methodological exclusivity, illuminating a diverse array of political, social, cultural, economic, psychological, and literary features of Herzl's life and milieu. And he is temperamentally opposed to polemic, preferring to deliver textured synthesis rather than stinging criticism.

What Penslar does convey clearly is that Herzl was a man of great charisma, a quality without which he would have failed in his mission to promote a vision of "Jewish national liberation, enunciated with mesmerizing oratory or couched in finely polished prose" (p. 7). This charisma, Penslar points out, was borne of Herzl's turbulent inner world, in which he developed a mix of often competing emotional sentiments, including bravado, lack of confidence, and fantasy. This mix of qualities emboldened Herzl to believe it possible that he could transition from his position as a well-known, if often discontented, journalist to that of a bold political leader who arguably altered the course of history, at least for his people. Penslar grasps the audacity, originating at a primal personal level, that propelled Herzl to the status of a statesman of world-historical significance, certainly in his own mind but also in the minds of many thousands of Jews, especially Eastern European.

This charisma fueled a relentless drive, a boundless appetite for work, and a brilliant capacity to formulate lucid proposals, possessed of both operational specificity and lofty aspirations—as clearly evidenced by *Der Judenstaat* (The Jewish State), published in 1896. But Herzl's charisma also exacerbated his mania, depression, and recurring difficulty in connecting to people. This raises the question of how Herzl could be—and can be seen as—an "organizational genius" (p. 86), as Penslar titles the third chapter of the book. Yes, he was able to inspire with his rhetoric, imposing

comportment, and unrestrained passion. But his audacity, combined with his erratic behavior and inattention to logistical detail, turned many off. The prominent Zionist Nachum Sokolow regarded him as a “Viennese *feuilletonist* who is playing at diplomacy” (p. 96). Eventually, Penslar persuades the reader that there was genius in Herzl and that it helped drive the success of Zionism, but that genius does not seem to lie in the realm of organizational management.

This is a relatively minor point. Of greater moment are larger questions that Penslar, one of the leading scholars of Israeli history, might have addressed. For example, given Herzl’s seminal role in devising statist Zionism, what role can we ascribe to him in the foundation of the State of Israel? What would he think of Israel today, in its early-twenty-first-century guise? Would it seem a fulfillment or bastardization of his vision? And was his opacity to the presence of a large Arab majority in Palestine in 1898—a characteristically colonialist perspective of his time—a factor of any note in Zionism’s later conflictual attitude toward Arabs and Israel’s unresolved conflict with Palestinians?

Although I, for one, would have welcomed Penslar’s insights, these questions may be unanswerable. In any event, they belong to the mythic book that the reviewer would have liked to have written himself. The book before us is different. It sheds new light on the dark inner world of Theodor Herzl, as well as on the manifold historical contexts in which he moved in the consequential European *fin-de-siècle*. Most significantly, it unfolds the life story of a man whose given name—meaning ‘God’s gift’—became, in all likelihood, an ingrained part of his sense of life mission. Derek Penslar succeeds in giving us a portrait of Theodor Herzl whose conceptual boldness, physical appearance, and intentionally preserved writings reflect a charisma at once cultivated and captivating.

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REFERENCE

Loewenberg, Peter. 1985. *Decoding the Past: The Psychohistorical Approach*. Berkeley: University of California Press.