

Excerpts of speeches from the First Zionist Congress
(Basle Switzerland 1897)
And from its Jubilee Celebration
(Jerusalem 1947)

Dr. Karpel Lippe opened up the first session of the Congress:

“This meeting of representatives of Jewish associations and of individual Jews is the first of its kind in the 18 hundred years of the Third Exile. It is the outward expression of an international movement embracing all classes in Israel which is to awaken that national consciousness which, during the long years of this exile, the Exile of Edom, has lain wrapped up in the womb of Judaism, and which has struggled in vain for its realization. This is indeed a great and glorious day in the history of Israel!”

“What we are considering today is nothing less than the return of the Jews to the land of their Fathers, to the Holy Land which our God, the One and Only promised to our forefather Abraham as an inheritance for his sons!”

“When our forefathers came out of Egypt... they were not steadfast enough... and at the first sign of adversity they cried: ‘Let us appoint a chieftain and return to Egypt!’ But we cry: ‘Let us appoint a chieftain and return to Jerusalem!’”

Theodore Herzl (originator and leader of the Congress):

“For Zionism is a home-coming to the Jewish fold even before it becomes a home-coming to the Jewish land. We, the children who have returned, find much redress under the ancestral roof...”

“A popular movement of such vast dimensions will necessarily be attacked from many sides. Therefore the Congress will concern itself

with the spiritual means to be employed for reviving and fostering the national consciousness of the Jews.”

“... The greatest result of the Congress is this: it has been proved that the Jewish national idea has the unifying power to forge into a homogeneous mass people who are different in language and in social, political and religious respects. This has hitherto been denied most vehemently, but precisely this fact has been most magnificently demonstrated at Basle. The rivalry which arises everywhere when different parties come together subsided immediately upon the first appeal to the nation. Brethren have found each other.”

“...We shall henceforward cherish the immortal idea of our people in our hearts with the faithfulness of old. ‘If I forget thee, o Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning.’”

“Were I to sum up the Basle Congress in a word, it would be this: ‘At Basle I founded the Jewish State. If I said this out loud today I would be greeted by universal laughter. In five years perhaps, and certainly in fifty years, everyone will perceive it.’”

Dr. Nathan Birenbaum presenting a report on Jewish national life:

“The question whether any nation exists or does not exist is answered in the affirmative the moment that even one man, who may or may not belong to that people, recognizes the nation concerned.”

“The position... of the European Jews, the emancipated ones

[emancipation: process in various nations in Europe of eliminating Jewish disabilities, e.g. Jewish quotas, to which Jewish people were then subject, and the recognition of Jews as entitled to equality and citizenship rights on a communal, not merely individual, basis. It included efforts within the community to integrate into their societies as citizens. It occurred gradually between the late 18th century and the early 20th century] having nothing with which they can forge for themselves a suitable individual life. They learn much of cultural value, but they create no new cultural values themselves, with their own spirit. On the contrary. Because they see things differently

from the others, because they see them as abstractions, they are led to bitter deceptions and errors. And so we see even among emancipated Jewry which too many naïve souls seems to be an escape from the rigid bonds of the ghetto, their cultural forces become constrained, or even transformed into completely destructive elements.”

“... [This venture] must rest on a solid foundation. This foundation is the law, that is, something spiritual. Only something spiritual can prevail on the spirit. If progress is possible, a law cannot merely provide the basis for a culture; it must do more, much more; it must advance with and within the general spiritual development of the nation.”

Dr. Schnirer:

“... In all Zionist undertaking the basic principle is [to be] observed, that Zionism is not only a social and economic movement, but primarily a national and ethical movement.”

Berthold Feiwel (participant’s observations on the Congress):

“The students represent a very small, but very noticeable group among the participants at the Congress. When you see them or talk to them you know how the Congresses of the future will look. There are students here from [enumerating the various regions and countries]. Each of them has already been active as a Zionist, and a great enthusiasm fills them all. In Basle they work with all their energy... Quickly and gladly they carry out every little service which may be necessary, so that everything should work smoothly... In the Congress, of course, they are all merely modest youngsters who obey... But when they get home they will carry the gospel of the Congress into the towns and villages of their own countries. The students are preparing

themselves wisely for this future publicity of the lessons of the Congress.... We shall soon see how valuable this fraternal meeting of our people was at Basle."

Fifty years later (1947):

Dr. Chaim Weizman (later Israel's first president) – Fifty Years of Zionism:

"There was something Messianic in it [Herzl's publication THE JEWISH STATE], particularly so as it appeared at a moment when the horizon looked black for Russian-Polish Jewry. At times like these there is always a recrudescence of messianic hope. Herzl's brochure did not remain just on paper. Only one year after its appearance it was translated into fact. The message soon passed on to every town, great or small, in Poland and Russia... Delegates went from town to town to explain to the Jews what a congress was, who Herzl was, what a Jewish State meant and how things could be done. The slogan went from mouth to mouth: 'if you will it – it is no legend.'... This was the atmosphere all over the Jewish world."

"I have not yet spoken of Herzl's other achievements. The foundation of the Bank was sponsored by him. Thanks to Herzl the Jewish National Fund was founded and the Zionist Organization and developed and broadened."

"It was essential to create something for the youth in everyday life. The result was the organization of a group of people... who subsequently worked as emissaries for the Zionist movement."

"Then cultural elements made their appearance. Good Zionist and Hebrew literature began to appear; the idea of a Hebrew University emerged..."

“If one has to wait for political foundations, one may have to wait a long time, while... political foundations can be created by facts.”

David Ben Gurion (later Israel’s first prime minister) – On the Threshold of The Jewish State:

“The First Congress did not make a nation of us out of nothing. There had always been a Jewish nation... but we were only a potential nation. That day, fifty years ago, made us; and on that day we turned ourselves into a nation in reality... on that day the Jewish State was indeed founded; for a State is founded first in the hearts of the people.”

“There are many instances in history of probabilities that do not achieve realization. Nevertheless, they are probabilities; and the man of vision recognizes them as probabilities and strives to bring about their realization.”

“...The force that Herzl wished to harness and apply, the utilization of which he rightly saw, by means of his profound intuition, as the beginnings of the Jewish State...”

Isaak Ben-Zvi (later Israel’s second president):

“...The three practical results of the first Zionist Congress... In the first place the unity of the nation was restored by means of a single representative body, a single, worldwide Jewish Parliament. Never before in the history of the Dispersion had Jews from so many different countries come together openly and proclaimed themselves a nation and, indeed, came forward as one nation.... Secondly, the Congress led to the establishment of a permanent organization. The

Zionist Organization was the first Jewish organization on a world scale... Lastly, and by no means least in importance, the first Zionist Congress forged the instrument for the execution of the project.... At Basle the prototype was created which for the first time brought the realization of the Jewish national idea within the range of practical possibilities.”

Reminiscences, observations, and reflections by remaining attendees of the first Congress.

Dr. Isidore Schalit:

“Fifty years have passed. Was it indeed only half a century, and not an eternity? That period cannot, indeed, be measure in years, for what took place in it was outside of time and space... The catastrophe [the Holocaust] that has befallen us is immense. But common sorrows give rise to a feeling of brotherhood; brotherhood leads to realization; and realization produces love. These three sources are flowing into the stream of creativeness.”

Dr. Mayer Ebner:

“The First Zionist Congress was the most powerful and most long-lived experience I have ever had. I have seen many lands and many cities; I have seen grand palaces and been present at the most splendid celebrations and occasions, both Jewish and non-Jewish; but not one of them so indelibly imprinted on my memory as the first Zionist Congress, held in the modest hall of the Casino at Basle.”

“I firmly believe that Zion will be redeemed, not by force or might—which we do not possess—but by justice and righteousness. We have no other way.”

"I say quite unashamedly; fifty years ago I would not have believed that I would live to see the amazing transformation that has taken place here. I, and the others, thought that development would be slower. Reality far exceeds our most daring hopes."

Professor Yosef Klausner:

"...An occasion that calls to mind the grandeur and solemnity of the granting of the Law at Mount Sinai... the regeneration of a people."

"... What happened [to the youth] after the first Zionist Congress? Hundreds and thousands of young people who would otherwise have been lost to Jewry, who would have joined other parties and worked for other nations, returned to Judaism, to Zion and to Palestine."

"... The youngsters [came] with new views and infused new life into Jewry. From their ranks came, later on, the men and women who put the Zionist idea into practice and came out to Palestine with the Second 'Aliya' and subsequent waves of immigration. Because of the great spirit that had been breathed everything soared to a new plane."

"The whole of Jewry altered, and was no longer recognizable."

Leib Jaffe:

"During these fifty years the face of our land has also been changed. Every clod and lump of soil of which the Jewish nation took possession with toil, with love, and with sacrifice has returned to life. A miracle has come about which none expected to see."

“The calamity [referring to the Holocaust] of our nation, the reason for its failure and weakness lay not only in its external dispersion but also, and to an even greater degree, in its internal dispersion.”

“As though by a single wave of his hand Herzl gathered together and united this dust of a nation. At the First Congress the Zionist Organization was established, to comprehend all parts of the Jewish people. The way was marked out for our nation, the way of unity and ingathering, the way that we have been following ever since. Our nation is becoming one single body united and steeled in its pains, its hopes and struggles; and there is no longer a single part of our people that feels itself solitary or forsaken.”

“The sense of national pride has been restored to it. It has learned to respect itself and has taught others to recognize it as a people worthy of respect.”

“Everything that was created in our land by the work of farmer and laborer, by ploughman and by planter, by men removing stones and by those who drain swamps, by those who build houses and by those who revive our language in the schools, in the street and in the home – all these results shine with the light that was kindled at the First Zionist Congress; The Congress which has served us as a pillar of fire in the darkness of our distress and setbacks. We know that there is still a very long way to go, that the hardest part of all still lies before us, that the obstacles and difficulties will continue to increase. We know how deep the gulf is between our aspirations and the realities, between our capacities and our needs, between the possibilities and the power to realize them...”