

After years of neglect, Jerusalem's Theodor Herzl Museum is about to reopen, with the man's intimate possessions expertly restored

The low desk is made of pine wood. It is glossy black and in its center there is a small drawer. A simple piece of furniture. But on a small metal plaque set into one of its corners is engraved: "On this desk Theodor Herzl wrote his book 'Der Judenstaat' ('The Jewish State')."

If Herzl turned over in his grave because of the fate of his possessions and his heritage, it happened not far from his old desk: It, and the rest of the family's furniture, was brought to Israel years before his bones were brought to Israel, in 1949. The objects were lodged at the Herzl Museum, alongside historical documents, on the mountain that is named after him in Jerusalem. Over the years the table became shabby, lost its gloss and was broken.

The Herzl Museum was a disgrace to the memory of the man, says Shai Hermesh, the treasurer of the World Zionist Organization. This body - which Herzl founded in 1897 - built the museum in the 1960s and neglected it thereafter. Hermesh is right.

The WZO's budget comes from the Jewish Agency and the Jewish National Fund. Were it not for Herzl, these three bodies would not be able to move their money back and forth among themselves - for the glorification of his deeds, of course. Fortunately, he abandoned his earlier ideas about established assimilation and sat down at his simple desk to put his vision in writing.

Despite the groups' debt to the man, the replica of Herzl's dwelling was neglected and finally closed down seven years ago. Hermesh did not limit himself only to accepting blame. A year and a half ago, he took up the post of WZO treasurer and, apparently, during his tenure and that of the organization's chairman, Sallai Meridor, the promises of opening the museum will finally be kept. These promises, too, are not new: They were affirmed from time to time on the occasion of one Zionist event or another.

Anniversary celebration

The plan is that the museum will reopen on the 100th anniversary of Herzl's death at the age of 44, from a heart attack. "On the 20th of Tammuz [July 9] we will go up the mountain and cut the ribbon to dedicate the museum," says Hermesh enthusiastically.

A new building for the museum has now gone up, on the ruins of the old one. Gradually, several dozen items of furniture that belonged to Herzl are being brought back there; they had been taken during the past year for restoration and preservation supervised by the Israel Museum. The overall cost of this is about \$100,000.

Furniture restorer Jeremy Zetland [begin_of_the_skype_highlighting](#) [end_of_the_skype_highlighting](#) feels a deep commitment to his client - and he doesn't mean the Israel Museum, which gave him the job. This week he returned the furniture to Jerusalem, from his studio in Moshav Basra, wonderfully rehabilitated after having devoted nine months to working on it. While doing so, he read a biography of Herzl, "Labyrinth of Exile," by Ernst Pawel (1992). "Herzl is the real client in this job," he says. "I tried to learn as much as I could about him."

In the pages of the book he also found a picture of Herzl. An ordinary reader would not pore over the "marginal" details in this picture, but Zetland saw two bookcases, a desk from the 19th century and a wooden file cabinet. The bookcases and the file cabinet underwent final touches this week at his studio in Moshav Basra, in the Sharon region.

But Herzl, the client, would undoubtedly have posed different demands concerning the refurbishing. Thus, for example, Zetland received instructions to "reconstruct" the bookcases as they were during the years of neglect, remarkably green, although in Herzl's study their color was brown. Over the years someone painted the bookcases green and hammered dozens of nails into the other pretty wooden items of furniture.

Zetland restored them to health. He worked for many months on two classical cupboards, which once stood side by side. They are from Berlin and were made in the 19th century on special order. The paper on which the name of carpentry firm and the destination were noted is still stuck on the back of one of them.

Zetland identified at least four different kinds of wood that went into the two units: The main part is made of pine, with walnut integrated into the exteriors; the backs of the cupboards are of oak and the drawers, which are made of whole oak, have ornamented brass handles. Zetland repaired broken corners, filled holes and cracks, cleaned and reconstructed the delicate wood carvings, took apart pieces that had been affixed with nails and covered the furniture with a delicate polish laquer. The simple and captivating maple wood object was also found in Zetland's studio, containing 26 cubbyholes for papers, over each of which there is a letter of the Latin alphabet.

At the beginning of this week in the studio it was possible to see the black desk on which "The Jewish State" was written, a table for a telephone and a chair made of oak with leather upholstery, made in Vienna.

Prosaic possessions

Herzl's possessions are perhaps historically laden, but they are among the most solidly prosaic in Zetland's studio. An old cupboard stands there, in a style similar to Herzl's furniture. The owners of the cupboard asked the restorer to cover part of it in gold leaf, which Zetland will lay into a hard but flexible layer of rabbit skin glue and gesso in a centuries-old tradition.

In one of the rooms stands a beautiful black chest of drawers made of ebony, into which delicate brass strips have been inset. The chest gleams with brownish-red hues. This is the third element that was used in it: tortoise shell from the 18th century, when the chest was made. Zetland was also asked to repair tiny places where the turtle shell had been broken, but this material is unavailable in Israel. He thus contacted his teacher from Florence, who is a member of the local restorers' guild. There is a shop in that city that exclusively caters for members of the guild: Real treasures can be found there. This week a shipment arrived from there with pieces of tortoise shell.

Zetland, 34, studied social work here in Israel, but upon completing his degree he decided to specialize in furniture design or restoration. He took a trip to Europe and in 1998 went to live in

Florence, with a family of restorers. "I studied during the day and in the evenings I was an apprentice," he says.

A year later he returned to Israel. He joined restorer Igor Wissotzky, who was working at the time on one of Herzl's pieces of furniture. "Wissotzky lived in Gilo. When the intifada broke out, the shooting started," he says. "In the end he got fed up and went back to Russia, after 12 years in Israel. In St. Petersburg he received a senior position in the restoration department."

Zetland opened a private business in Ramat Hashavim. After a few months he moved to Basra. His studio is located in a former chicken coop, near a flourishing citrus grove. He lives in Tel Aviv.

The senior people at the WZO have not visited Zetland's studio. "We are busy raising funds for the project," says Hermesh. "During the past three years about \$600,000 were allocated to it from the coffers of the WZO, but we still need a million dollars."

Before the opening "everything that survived the ruins at Mount Herzl will be restored and shined and polished," he adds.

The main donors to the museum refurbishment project are the WZO and the Jerusalem Foundation. At the 1898 Congress Herzl strove to set up an economic body - Otzar Hityashvut Hayehudim (the Treasury of Jewish Settlement). This body ("the founding nucleus of Bank Leumi," says Hermesh) has promised to donate its share to the project, and Mayor Uri Lupolianski of Jerusalem also hastened several months ago to announce that "the government" would also donate its share. That is, the Austrian government. The explanation given was that "Herzl lived in Vienna for many years." In the meantime no contributions from the government of Austria have come into the WZO offices. It is worth remembering, however, that Herzl may have lived for several years in Vienna, but for many more years he has been dead in Jerusalem.

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