

{MAY 21 2005}

# WAGNER AT THE MEMORIAL

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**W**hat to do on “Herzl Day”, the anniversary of the birth of the founder of the Zionist movement – officially celebrated this week for the first time? How to honor the memory of this strange man, who still has such an enormous impact on our lives?

The day found me in Berlin. I took a look at what was on in the city and discovered the perfect solution: on the same day, the renowned Staatsoper, the State Opera House, was performing Richard Wagner’s Tannhaeuser. What connection can there be between Wagner, the anti-Semitic composer, whose works are not performed in Israel to this very day, and the man who is officially defined as “the Prophet of the State”?

In his autobiography, Theodor Herzl recounts that he wrote “The Jewish State”, the book that changed Jewish (and Arab) history, under the influence of this opera. As he tells it, while writing the book in Paris, he went to this opera evening after evening. If there was no performance, he was unable to continue writing the next day. The opera, so it seems, worked on him like an intoxicating drug.

For four hours I sat among the German audience, some dressed in formal suits and evening gowns, some dressed casually, concentrating on the music and the words (both written by Wagner, of course) and trying to understand what exactly it was that had such a big impact on Herzl, and how it influenced the revolution set in motion by him.

The story is based on several German medieval legends. Tannhaeuser himself was a historical personality: a popular poet who reached the Holy Land with the fifth crusade (1228) and, upon returning to Germany, took part in the song contest that is the center of the plot. In the opera, he is torn between Venus and Jesus, between wordly love and his Christian faith. The opera is far removed from the Germanic-Pagan motifs of some of Wagner’s other works, and is permeated with devout Christian sentiment.

So what attracted Herzl so much? The pathos-drenched music? The dramatic confrontations? The German mysticism that pervades the whole work?

Herzl was a great admirer of Imperial Germany. He was enraptured by German

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order, the German army, the German regime. It must be remembered that this was the authoritarian, power-drunk, colonialist Second German Reich, which was committing genocide at that time in the territory now known as Namibia. Its ruling class was imbued with anti-Semitism (a term invented in the Germany of that period). Kaiser Wilhelm himself exclaimed, after meeting Herzl at the gates of Jerusalem, "Zionism is a great idea, but you can't realize it with Jews."

The psychologist Gustave Le Bon once remarked that the realization of any vision comes three generations too late. The creator of the vision is influenced by his teachers, who belong to the preceding generation, and the people who realize his vision belong to the next generation. In the meantime, the circumstances that gave birth to the vision have changed completely. When the idea at long last becomes reality, it is already obsolete.

Has this happened to Herzl? Have the values of Imperial Germany and Wagner, who died 13 years before Herzl wrote "Der Judenstaat", infected the character of the State of Israel, which was founded 50 years after Herzl wrote this book?

That morning I went to see the new Holocaust Memorial (the German term, Mahnmal, includes the idea of warning future generations) in the center of Berlin. I have heard much about it, some very good and some very bad, and wanted to see for myself. There is something astounding in the very fact that this huge site has been set up in the heart of the capital, next to the national symbols of Imperial Germany: the Brandenburg Gate and the Reichstag building. A few days after its official opening, it has already become a part of the life of the city. Masses of people are drawn to it, walk around the labyrinthine edifice, between the thousands of gray concrete slabs of unequal heights, in the narrow, uneven-floored passages.

I saw many visitors sunk in meditation, aware of the meaning of the site. Others looked as if they had come out of curiosity, took pictures of each other; here and there a couple was kissing in a remote corner. On some of the slabs white flowers were lying, on some others young visitors had put their rucksacks. Children were jumping from slab to slab or playing hide and seek.

Individuals and whole families were standing in line for an hour, waiting patiently to enter the Information Center located beneath the slabs. This is a modest, functional and overwhelming site. Five big rooms. In the first, the rise and crimes of the Nazis in sparse, dry words, accompanied by photos. I was relieved to notice that the description does not omit the mass-murder committed by the Nazis against non-Jews - Roma and Sinti, the mentally ill, homosexuals, Slavic "subhumans", prisoners-of-war and German opponents of the regime.

In another room, film clips about the Jewish communities in Europe run

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continuously, showing the fate of each community in the Holocaust. In another room, the name of individual victims, each with their fate, are spoken and displayed, underlining the fact that reading of the whole list would take weeks and months. In another room, one can use computers to search for murdered relatives (I found my aunt.)

But the most moving and depressing room is the one which shows the photos of individual families. Families from different countries and classes – family photos from the beginning of the last century: family reunions, weddings, co-workers, children in festive dress, grandpa and grandma in the middle, all of them looking solemnly at the camera - and after that, a detailed description of the fate of each of the family members shown in the photos – who was murdered, who disappeared without a trace, who succeeded in emigrating to Palestine or Australia. So close, so personal, so inviting of comparison: this one is my age, this one the age of my father or mother, this one could have been my son or daughter.

If I had been asked, I would have devoted a special room to enlargements of the faces of the Germans – soldiers, policemen, ordinary citizens – who are clearly recognizable in the photos of the annihilation in all its stages, shouting, mistreating, laughing, doing their job, which happened to be murder.

In the rooms, total silence. Even the children were quiet. I looked at the faces of the Germans when they came out of this underground site. They looked shattered, talking in whispers. Some recorded their feelings in the guestbook: “shocking”, “impossible to grasp”, “how could this have happened?”, “we must make sure this cannot happen again”. I wrote some words of appreciation for the initiator of the site, the television-journalist Lea Rosh, who had to move heaven and earth to realize this plan.

These pictures were still before my eyes when I entered, some hours later, the impressive building of the Staatsoper on the “Unter den Linden” boulevard. To what extent was Wagner guilty? To what extent did he influence not only Herzl but also the twisted mind of Adolf Hitler, a fellow-Viennese, who committed suicide in his bunker a few meters from the site of the Warning Memorial? (The film about his last days is now being shown in Israel, too.)

When I returned home, I heard that a fight had broken out between some private initiative to fly young Israelis to Auschwitz and the Ministry of Education. The ministry wants to retain the monopoly on organizing these flights, which serve to indoctrinate youngsters with a hate-filled nationalism, in the spirit of the song “All the World is Against Us”.

For balance and to complete the picture, I would show these young people the Berlin Memorial, too.