



Theodor Herzl and American humorist Samuel Clemens crossed paths more than once, with unexpected consequences



From left: The British embassy in Paris, Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honore, and Mark Twain



NEVER THE TWAIN SHALL MEET

By Yaacov Shavit

At the end of October 1897, Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, was the guest of honor of the Concordia Society in Vienna, a distinguished group of intellectuals and literary and artistic figures. Among them was Theodor Herzl, who after returning to Vienna in September 1895 from Paris, had been appointed the literary editor of the newspaper *Neue Freie Presse*.

Herzl does not mention in his diary, and perhaps did not know, that on January 5, 1898 the American writer had attended the premiere of his play "The New Ghetto" (written in 1894) at the Carl Theater in Vienna.

Twain chose the play (along with two other works by Viennese playwrights) for translation into English, but the project never came to fruition. A few weeks later, Twain wrote an article entitled "Concerning the Jews," which dealt with the same subject as Herzl's play but proposed an entirely different solution to anti-Semitism and "the Jewish problem" than the one adduced by Herzl.

The encounter in Vienna was not the first between the two men. A previous encounter – if it can be called that – had taken place about three years earlier, in Paris.

Herzl reported on the meeting in a feuilleton he published in the *Neue Freie*

Presse on April 15, 1894. The feuilleton offered a humorous description, which would not have shamed Twain himself, of a lecture the renowned American writer gave in the British embassy:

"So that is he. A small, lean and somewhat shaky man. Added to artistic gray curls there are under the vigorously bent nose a drooping, bushy gray mustache, an empty look in his eyes, flabby cheeks and a pointed chin. In any case, that is Mr. Clemens (his legal name), but I have imagined Mark Twain differently. I don't remember how any longer, but different. Indeed, it's not his fault. Only the eyebrows stand out in this face. They are magnificent, energetic eyebrows, far apart and twirling upward. They mark quite properly the prickly and good-natured character of Mark Twain. His humor is something enormous, something powerful, something overwhelming. Real blocks of merriment designed for a people that does not smile. If the man who speaks English decides to laugh, he wishes to laugh out loud immediately, all at once, thoroughly; everything must be cracking up. And this little man has been the cause of great laughter wherever in the world English is

spoken. It is spread farthest.

"If one had the choice in what language one would like to write in order to have the most faithful and largest leadership, in order to exert power on minds and to leave a mark, then one would have to settle on English. The sound of French goes far indeed too, but the French have no memory of their literature of yesterday, and anyone who reads French turns out like a Frenchman in that respect. And German? The German gratitude for written works is well known.

"Well, one has to look at Mark Twain's listeners in this fine hall of the embassy of Her Majesty. How they greet Mr. Clemens on his appearance, with what devotion and respect! He is also a peculiar reader – for Mark Twain's tales, his lecture is absolutely unsuitable.

He changes them into something quite different, and there is humor in it so that he spoils his splendid stories by an equally magnificent lecture. An artist in his written work and a masterly performer. One is at first taken aback because one has not imagined his manner in this way, but rather uncouth, dry, surly, with sometimes a twinkle from under his

wild eyebrows. Little Mr. Clemens is much too quick and able, and strangely, it seems, he wishes to draw more from the lecture than from his work. I can explain it only by his being a much sought-after speaker and his having assumed an actor's habits. The longer you listen to him the more suspicious you become. In the end one considers each step of his as painstakingly rehearsed, no matter how freely he moves about. His naturalness is overloaded.

"But even his blunders are captivating. Thus the taste of those people for whom he has assumed his manner can be reconstructed. They want something for their money and when they pay for a lecture there must be something in it. That's why everything is so strongly emphasized, so tangibly described. That's why he makes so many superfluous gestures if he does not by chance put his hand into the pocket of his vest. That's why he acts like a comedian. He staggers backward to indicate dismay. Yes indeed, he jumps about as it were. When he wishes to suggest embarrassment, he rubs his nose, his mouth, the shaved cheeks. In the end he scratches his head, and I regret to say that this created a little ill feeling in the audience who for the most part were Englishmen who object to such liberal (i.e. undisciplined) American attitudes."

A journalist from Minnesota, who had decided he would rather watch a —→



← sporting event, asked Herzl to cover for him. He told Herzl: "Please write for me about Mark Twain and don't forget to give facts. Our readers dislike European digressions. Best wishes. Yours, Hesperus M. Dark, Correspondent of the Minneapolis Bluffs."

Herzl obliged, adding the following to his feuilleton: "A sure Samuel Clemens asserted in front of several Americans in a bar at 7 Montmartre Street that he was willing to be hanged if he did not manage to read out loud the sketches of Mark Twain better than anyone else. These words reached Lord Dufferin, who considered this to be a bet – and he would have been ashamed not to accept a bet. A readily available charitable purpose was used to give Samuel Clemens the opportunity to establish his record."

"I have listened to Samuel Clemens, and I do not wish to conceal my opinion. In fact, I wouldn't know why I should dissemble. Samuel Clemens does not know how to read Mark Twain's sketches. He can convince the drunkards of Montmartre Street of that, but he will never hoax people who know what literature or a lecture is supposed to be."

"This person Samuel Clemens promised to read out loud. However, there is nothing that looks less like a reading. The steel-rimmed glasses on his nose prove nothing. Anyone can put steel-rimmed glasses on his nose. But reading is another thing altogether. Samuel Clemens chose a sketch contained in Mark Twain's book 'The Million Pound Bank Note' – a sketch that describes the misfortunes of a group of American travelers who have lost their way in Switzerland. They have not recruited a courier. They wish to go to Bayreuth. They have no idea where Bayreuth is. One member of the group takes the place of the courier. The sketch has the title 'Playing Courier.' He gets into many embarrassing situations and his friends do as well. He imagines he has lost his letter of credit and is about to be jailed when he claims his letter of credit, etc."

"Nothing can be more depressing for such a companionship that has lost its way in Europe, where only German or French is spoken, than a lack of good humor. Samuel Clemens was unable to reproduce this nuance and if there are really nuances, then this, surely, is undoubtedly a nuance. And how dreadful is it to lose the letter of credit. A person to whom this happens will tear out his hair. Well, Samuel Clemens didn't pluck out his hair. I think that's enough to prove that Samuel Clemens doesn't understand what he claimed to understand on condition that he ought to be hanged if he hadn't spoken truly. If one can manage to remain under assignment for a thousand miles then he stood there."

"As a treat, Samuel Clemens offered two other sketches; one of them referred to the absurdities of the German language and the other concerning the conducting of interviews. Everybody

is familiar with the comical aspects of the German tongue. Many a person has already laughed out loud merely over verbs with detachable prefixes. And how amusing is it that three articles are used: *der*, *die*, *das*. Isn't it so? Mark Twain has the German grammar in sharp focus. Very witty indeed. Other people are so amusing. For Germans 'the' woman ('das' Weib) has a neuter gender and many other things besides."

"I have to end my praise at this point. I am distressed over the sketch about the interviewer. I resent it when they turn up their noses and sneer at my trade, and indeed, many a person who does so isn't able to compose five lines fit to print about a maidservant who while washing a window, fell from the first floor without getting hurt because her dress by good luck got caught on the sign of the grocer, who has his store down below. In any case, Mark Twain may be forgiven for he is a master of our guild who has only preferred to establish his own fame over that of others. Indeed our trade is as enjoyable as one makes it."

"I waited for Samuel Clemens at the door. I spoke to him some well-intentioned words. 'Clemens, old fellow,' I

TWAIN WAS APPALLED BY THE ZIONIST IDEA OF CONCENTRATING THE EUROPEAN JEWS IN PALESTINE.

said. 'I don't wish to hurt your feelings or embarrass you, but you lied miserably when you declared yourself as the best reader of Mark Twain. Such a deception can succeed only in front of ignorant or refined people. Choose another profession. Why don't you become a bootblack? I shall not permit you to read aloud anywhere even one more time. I shall come. Regarding physical injuries which the police medic might observe afterward, I estimate them as the loss of an eye, of various teeth and the fracture of two to three ribs – I must already express to you my condolence and regret."

"Then we shook hands and each of us went his way. I suppose that he will have understood my meaning. (1894)"

Painting fences

The "conversation" was, of course, the fruit of Herzl's imagination; nor do we know whether the two had exchanged words three years later, in Vienna. Herzl was certainly familiar with Twain's work. In an interview with the Grand Duke of Baden, Friedrich I, in April 1896, Herzl raised his proposal for a seven-hour working day. When the

Grand Duke expressed his doubt about the idea's effectiveness, Herzl related how Tom Sawyer is compelled as a punishment to paint his father's fence on Sunday afternoon and finds a way to profit from it. (Herzl's memory misled him here: it was Tom's Aunt Polly's fence, not his father's.)

"Tom does not tell his friends that he must paint the fence but that he is being allowed to paint it; and then they all want to help him," Herzl said. To which the Grand Duke replied, "Very nice."

On the other hand, there is no hint that Herzl read Twain's book "The Innocents Abroad," which was published in 1896. Accordingly, we do not know what he would have made of Twain's description of Palestine as "desolate and unlovely, hopeless, dreary, heart-broken," as the prince of all lands in terms of its "dismal scenery," a land utterly estranged from "this work-day world [but] sacred to poetry and tradition."

Herzl, it needs to be said, was familiar with some American literature but did not cite immigration to the United States as a model for a great plan of immigration of Jews from Europe to the Land of Israel. He also does not mention Jewish

ignorance and envy?

Twain took the letter as an opportunity to set forth – without prejudice of any kind, he declared – the reasons, as he saw them, for the existence of anti-Semitism in Europe. Its roots do not lie in the Christian religion, he wrote, for it precedes Christianity, but in envy of the Jews' distinctive qualities: deep family ties, solidarity, honesty and success in business.

Thus, even though the Jews are good and useful citizens, they are treated as aliens, hated and persecuted, because they are successful beyond competition.

He argued that the Jews were not exploiting the political rights they had obtained in order to organize as a political force; and maintained that sometimes, as in the United States – unlike the Irish – they conceal their identity.

The Jews should organize as a political lobby and not disperse their vote among different parties, he said. With unreserved optimism, he wrote that in most civilized countries convenient conditions exist for a struggle like this. The Jews' contribution to humanity far exceeds their proportion in the population, he noted.

Herzl too sometimes enumerated the Jews' contribution to European society and culture, but was of the opinion that people should not "push their way" and that a Jewish political party stood no chance in Austria or anywhere else.

The Jews' efforts to integrate and assimilate into European society were doomed to fail, he said, because they would always be considered outsiders. In Austria, he wrote in his diary, people "will let themselves be intimidated by the Viennese rabble and deliver up the Jews ... They will chase us out of [the European] countries, and in the countries where we take refuge they will kill us."

In contrast, Mark Twain was genuinely appalled by the Zionist idea of concentrating the Jews of Europe in Palestine, and with their own government. Having heard that this idea had been received very favorably by the delegates of the Zionist Congress, who had gathered from various places, he commented, "I am not the Sultan, and I am not objecting; but if that concentration of the cunningest brains in the world were going to be made in a free country... I think it would be politic to stop it. It will not be well to let the race find out its strength. If the horses knew theirs, we should not ride any more."

If Herzl had read that article, he probably would not have enjoyed Mark Twain's humor and might also have discerned in it an anti-Semitic note disguised as philo-Semitism. Even if he would not have fractured a few of Twain's ribs, he certainly would not have shaken hands with the famous Mr. Clemens.



Theodor Herzl Square in Paris.

immigration to the United States as an alternative, or as competition, to his plan.

On the other hand, we do not know whether Mark Twain read any of Herzl's feuilletons, anything from his "Philosophical Tales" or his book "The Jewish State," which was published in February 1896. In any event, he heard about the First Zionist Congress, which convened in Basel at the end of August 1897 (he mistakenly wrote that it was held in Bern), and he agreed with Herzl's idea that the Jews should be united in a political movement. However, he opposed the idea of transferring the Jews of Europe to Palestine, urging the prevention of such a rash act.

In response to an article Twain wrote in 1898 about political unrest in Austria, an American Jewish lawyer complained that the distinguished author had failed to mention that Austria's Jews had not taken part in the disturbances and that of "the 16 races" living in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, only the Jews were not organized in a political party of their own.

How, he asked, does Mark Twain explain the fact that despite their civil loyalty, the Jews are subject to mockery and persecution? Is it due only to

Herzl's texts translated from the German courtesy of the World Zionist Organization.