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 moustache, 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, 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 His 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 a twinkle 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 mantle. 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 —
Theodor Herzl Square in Paris.

Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) was an Austrian journalist, political writer, and the founder of modern political Zionism. He is best known for his work in the development of political Zionism and for his role in establishing the modern state of Israel. Herzl’s ideas and writings have had a profound impact on the shaping of Jewish history and identity.

Theodor Herzl Square is located in the 16th arrondissement of Paris, France. It is named after the famous Jewish political leader and founder of modern Zionism, Theodor Herzl. The square is a significant landmark in Paris and a symbol of Jewish heritage and culture in France.

The square is surrounded by a statue of Herzl, which stands as a tribute to his contributions to the establishment of the modern state of Israel. The square also features a garden area and a small park, making it a peaceful and relaxing place for visitors to enjoy.

Theodor Herzl Square is a location of cultural and historical importance, and it attracts many visitors from around the world. It serves as a reminder of the contributions of Jewish leaders like Herzl to the shaping of modern Jewish history and identity.

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