

1897 Zionist Congress: Basel, Switzerland

The first Zionist Congress was called by Theodor Herzl as a symbolic Parliament for those in sympathy with the implementation of Zionist goals. The Congress took place in the concert hall of the Basel Municipal Casino on August 29, 1897.

There is some dispute as to the exact number of participants at the First Zionist Congress; however, the approximate figure is 200 from seventeen countries, 69 of whom were delegates from various Zionist societies and the remainder was individual invitees. In attendance were also ten non-Jews who were expected to abstain from voting. Following a festive opening, the Congress got down to the business at hand. The main items on the agenda were the presentation of Herzl's plans, the establishment of the World Zionist Organization and the declaration of Zionism's goals-the Basel program.

In the version submitted to the Congress on the second day of its deliberations (August 30) by a committee under the chairmanship of Max Nordau, it was stated: "The aim of Zionism is to create for the Jewish people a home in Eretz-Israel secured by law."

To meet halfway the request of numerous delegates, the most prominent of whom was Leo Motzkin, who sought the inclusion of the phrase "by international law," a compromise formula proposed by Herzl was eventually adopted:

Zionism seeks to establish a home for the Jewish people in Eretz-Israel secured under public law. The Congress contemplates the following means to the attainment of this end:

1. The promotion by appropriate means of the settlement in Eretz-Israel of Jewish farmers, artisans, and manufacturers.
2. The organization and uniting of the whole of Jewry by means of appropriate institutions, both local and international, in accordance with the laws of each country.
3. The strengthening and fostering of Jewish national sentiment and national consciousness.
4. Preparatory steps toward obtaining the consent of governments, where necessary, in order to reach the goals of Zionism.

At the Congress, Herzl was elected President of the Zionist Organization and Max Nordau one of three Vice-Presidents. Thereafter, the Zionist Congress met every year (1897-1901), then every second year (1903-1913, 1921-1939). Since the Second World War, meetings have been held approximately every four years.

Source: Jewish Virtual Library [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Zionism/First Cong & Basel Program.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Zionism/First_Cong_&_Basel_Program.html)

Early Zionist leaders were explicit about the expulsions they would carry out to achieve their goals, Joseph Weitz, the director of the Jewish National Fund, wrote:

"It must be clear that there is no room in the country for both peoples....If the Arabs leave it, the country will become wide and spacious for us.... The only solution is a Land of Israel...without Arabs. There is no room here for compromises...There is no way but to transfer the Arabs from here to the neighboring countries, and to transfer all of them, save perhaps [a few]".

Source: Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestine Refugee Problem, 1947-1949* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 27; As cited in Finkelstein, *Image*, p. 86.

"Were I to sum up the Basle Congress in a word- which I shall guard against pronouncing publicly- it would be this: 'At Basle, I founded the Jewish State. If I said this out loud today, I would be answered by universal laughter. If not in 5 years, certainly in 50, everyone will know it.'" *Theodor Herzl, Diaries, 1897.*

"Spirit the penniless population across the frontier by denying it employment...Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly." *Theodore Herzl, Complete Diaries, June 12, 1985 entry*