



**29. August 2022 | Stadtcasino
Rede zum 125-Jahre-Jubiläum des ersten Zionistenkongresses**

Es gilt das gesprochene Wort.

Dear Mr. President,

Dear Mr. Federal Councillor,

Dear Mr. Chairman of the World Zionist Organization

Ladies and gentlemen,

As Theodor Herzl was leaving Basel at the beginning of September 1897 to return to Vienna, he wrote in his diary: “Were I to summarize the Basel Congress in a word – which I shall refrain from speaking openly – it would be this: in Basel I founded the Jewish state. If I were to say that out loud today, I would be received with universal laughter. Perhaps in five years – certainly in 50 – everyone will recognize it.”

Herzl’s confident words were proved correct. However, the state’s founding took place only after the monstrous crimes of the National Socialists against the European Jews. In 1947, the UN General Assembly voted for the partition of Palestine and thus the creation of a Jewish state. On May 14, 1948, David Ben Gurion delivered Israel’s declaration of independence.

That the first Zionist Congress in 1897 could be held in Basel was not simply a matter of course. Antisemitism was growing, the Dreyfus affair was ongoing, and just four years before, the Swiss population had voted for an Antisemitic-motivated referendum banning shechita. Nevertheless, the liberally minded government in Basel at that time showed itself to be more open, and made possible what was inconceivable in Vienna, Munich or even Zurich. They were sympathetic to the idea of Zionism and offered the Stadtcasino’s music hall as the conference site for the approximately 200 congress participants. It was at the Stadtcasino that the delegates approved the “Basel Program”, which planned for “the creation of a publicly recognized, legally secured homeland in Palestine” for the Jewish people. As the city proved itself to be a reliable location, nine further congresses were held in Basel, including the last congress before the founding of the state in 1946. One of the most famous photographs of Herzl, which has become truly iconic to Zionism, was also taken in Basel. It depicts Herzl towards the end of 1901 on the balcony of the hotel “Drei Könige” against the backdrop of the Middle Bridge. These milestones have made Basel into an important memorial site for the Jewish community and the history of Zionism.

To act as host for the celebration of the 125th anniversary of the first Zionist congress is another expression of the special connection between Basel and Israel. On behalf of the government and population of Basel, I congratulate the World Zionist Congress, the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities and the Israeli government on this significant anniversary.

Although Basel’s location bordering important cultural areas in France and Germany fosters openness and tolerance, it does not necessarily protect against antisemitism. During the Nazi period, Basel pursued a more humane refugee policy than Switzerland as a whole. However, repatriations and expulsions of Jewish people took place in Basel as well. People were sent to their

deaths due to the indifference of authorities. Facing this past and documenting each individual case is our moral obligation. Towards the future, we stand firmly and publicly in opposition to the reinvigoration of Antisemitism and the disregard for human rights.

Our political neutrality demands that we foster dialogue to achieve peaceful resolutions. Since the first Zionist Congress, Basel has continually attempted to meet this responsibility. In November 1912, shortly before World War I, socialists from around the world made a stand against the impending war at a Peace Congress organized by the Second International in Basel. They gathered in the Münster Cathedral where they adopted a peace manifesto.

Shortly after World War II, Basel hosted many meetings for the Hertenstein program, which conceptualized and promoted the idea of a European federation for a peaceful Europe. In December 2014, Basel hosted the first conference of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe to take place in Switzerland. The conference made great efforts to promote peace and the easing of tensions in eastern Ukraine. For its engagement towards safety and stability in Europe, the conference was awarded the Ewald von Kleist award for "Peace and Dialogue". As we all know, the democratic and peaceful coexistence achieved during this conference could not be permanently secured.

This also goes for Zionism, which could not realize the goals initially set by its principal actors. Peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians remains a remote prospect. Current events in particular have made this clear. Still, setbacks and disappointments should not discourage us and cannot prevent us from continuing to pursue the path of dialogue and the search for peace. Basel will continue to do everything within its power to remain a place for dialogue and exchange, so that transcending all kinds of barriers will become possible.

Thank you very much.