Max Nordau: The Post-Herzl Years

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Max Nordau may not seem to be the best choice of subjects for a chapter in a volume honoring Noam Stillman. In many respects, the two men are poles apart. To obtain a quick glimpse of the distance that separates them, one need only consider their names. The Hungarian-born Nordau was originally known as Simon (in Hebrew, Simcha) Maximillian Südfeld. It was only after the death in 1873 of his father, “an itinerant rabbi and Hebrew teacher who served as a tutor to the household of some of the most famous and pious rabbis of the age,” that our subject adopted the surname by which he is now known.1 Why did he exchange a name that meant “southern field” for one that meant “northern meadow”? In his Nietzsche and Zion, Jacob Golomb has ventured a somewhat tentative answer to this question.

This name change indicated Nordau’s wish to become fully assimilated into German secular society. And though one scholar has warned us against seeing this action too simplistically, as expressing some kind of yearning to attain a status of a pure Aryan, it is quite tempting to speculate that Südfeld symbolizes the southern pole of the young Nordau’s identity—the ancient Israel where his people shaped their original identity before dispersing into the Diaspora—whereas Nordau represents northern Europe, namely Germany and Austria, where Nordau underwent his rapid assimilation.2

If we do indeed succumb to the temptation to accept this uncertain but very plausible explanation, we will understand Nordau to have made a choice diametrically opposed to the one that Long Island-born Norman (“from the north”) Stillman has made in identifying himself, most of the time, as Noam. He didn’t choose this Hebrew name for himself, but, happily enough, it possesses connotations that are just as pleasant as the Hebrew first name that Nordau never reclaimed.

1 Michael Stanislawski, Zionism and the Fin de Siècle: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism from Nordau to Jabotinsky (University of California Press, 2001), 57.
2 Jacob Golomb, Nietzsche and Zion (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 49.
It is not only in their approach to their own personal nomenclature that Nordau and Stillman greatly differ from one another, but in sartorial matters as well. Let us consider, for instance, the way that Nordau conducted himself on the eve of the first Zionist Congress. The most famous person in Europe to adhere to Theodor Herzl’s new Zionist idea, Nordau had by 1897 in many ways demonstrated his readiness to go to great lengths to support the much less celebrated man whom he acknowledged to be his leader. Uncharacteristically, however, he balked when Herzl made a special request of him on the very first day of the congress.

For the festive opening session on Sunday morning, he [Herzl] had decreed formal dress, tails and white tie. The costume was an integral part of the scenery he had designed long before he ever worried about the actual agenda, and he was thus understandably upset when Nordau, his second in command, showed up in a casual redingote instead and flatly refused to go back and change. “I took him aside [Herzl wrote in his diary] and asked him to do it for my sake. I told him: Today the executive committee of the Zionist congress is still an absolute nothing; we have yet to make something of it. People should get used to seeing the congress as a most exalted and solemn authority. He let himself be persuaded, for which I gave him a grateful hug. Fifteen minutes later he was back, in formal dress.3

No one who knows Noam Stillman could imagine for a moment that he, if he had been in Nordau’s shoes, would have presented Herzl, with such a problem. It is far more likely that without any encouragement whatsoever he would have spent his very first moments in Basel eagerly hunting out the local Brooks Brothers store in order to purchase special garments for the opening ceremonies. Herzl might even have had to ask him to go back to his hotel and dress down a bit.

The more one compares Nordau and Stillman, the more unlike one another they seem to be. In very different ways, however, the two men have evinced a strong concern with Zionism. A new look at Nordau’s highly significant stance with regard to the implantation of a Jewish national home within the confines of the Ottoman Empire is not out of place in a volume devoted to man whose scholarly work includes pioneering studies on the Ottoman and other eastern branches of the nascent Zionist movement.