

A Tale of Bonnie M., Herzl and ZDF, the second channel of the German TV

Haim Harari

This tale begins with four facts that seems totally unrelated to each other:

1. Theodore (Binyamin Ze'ev) Herzl, the most famous leader of the Zionist movement, was most prominent among those who brought it to the attention of the European public and its leaders, but he certainly was not the first to preach and fight for the return to Zion, not even in his own generation.
2. Boney M. was a popular disco group whose members came from the Caribbean and its producer from Germany. They became famous in Europe, especially in Germany, starting in the mid-1970s, sold over a hundred million records and one of their biggest hits was "Rivers of Babylon".
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGyfxOCYvtM>
3. My grandfather, Haim Harari, immigrated to Israel alone in 1896 at the age of 13 from Latvia and was the last (yes, the last, not the first) of my ancestors to arrive in Israel.
4. One of the scientific projects I helped create was the establishment of the Institute of Science and Technology in Austria, modeled after the Weizmann Institute. It has been a great success story, founded in 2007 and, by 2020, it has about 60 research groups, 800 employees, and, in proportion to its size, won more competitive European research grants than any other European scientific institute.

All of which lead us to a short little story, about the media, about Europe and about me:

In 2010, on the occasion of the 150th birthday of Herzl, the second channel of the German TV, ZDF, decided to produce a comprehensive documentary program about "the founder of Zionism, who did it in Vienna". They knew about my work in Vienna, and their Vienna correspondent, who led the production, asked to interview me. I met her in a Viennese cafe for a background conversation, and her first sentence was: "I wanted to talk to you about Herzl, the man who founded and invented the Zionist movement". I answered, "My dear lady, have you heard of Bonnie M.?" She, of course, nodded. I continued:

"The lyrics of their most famous song says:

By the rivers of Babylon

Where we sat down

And there we wept

When we remembered Zion

Bonnie M. did not invent this idea, it comes from the Bible, from the book of Psalms.

Herzl was a great leader, a prominent politician, a very important asset of the Zionist movement and a fascinating visionary, but he did not invent Zionism. Many generations of Jews have dreamed about it and strived for it, and you are currently talking to someone whose four grandparents immigrated at different times to the land of Israel, believing in Zionism, and arrived there before Herzl convened the first Zionist Congress".

We chatted for a few more minutes and I was then dismissed, quite impatiently. The TV program was aired a few weeks later. It featured interviews with several Arabs and one Israeli: Uri Avneri.