: [POST-PUBLICATION CORRECTION: An earlier version of this episode mistakenly stated that the Roman Empire destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in 70BCE. The correct year is 70CE. An earlier version of this episode incorrectly described Ze'ev Jabotinsky as a right-wing settler who helped form the paramilitary organization the Irgun. Jabotinsky was a conservative Zionist thinker whose ideas influenced some of the founders of the Irgun. While Jabotinsky did advocate Jewish settlement in Palestine, he himself lived mostly in Europe and died before Israel's founding.]

RAMTIN ARABLOUEI, HOST:

On August 29, 1897, a meeting of around 200 people was held in a room in a city on the Rhine River.

DEREK PENSLAR: The room was a - kind of a public meeting room in a small city in Switzerland - Basel, Switzerland.

ARABLOUEI: Basel, Switzerland, where, like most days in late August, the weather was perfect.

PENSLAR: It was about 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

ARABLOUEI: People had come from all over the world for this meeting.

MICHAEL BRENNER: ...Including America, including from North Africa. But mainly, they were from Eastern Europe.

ARABLOUEI: The meeting was about a controversial concept, Zionism, or the idea that Jewish people should have a nation in their ancestral homeland, in the biblical land of Zion. And at that time, many Jewish people in Europe didn't want to have anything to do with this idea. Initially, the meeting was to be held in Munich, Germany, a much bigger metropolis, but...

BRENNER: The Jewish community of Munich refused. They didn't want to have anything to do with those Zionists.

PENSLAR: There were all kinds of rabbis who were opposed to Zionism at the time. Either they were Orthodox and they thought that Zionism was blasphemy and that Jews should not return to Eretz Yisrael, the land of Israel, before the Messiah comes, or they were Reform rabbis who said, we're not a nation. We're entirely German. We're entirely, you know, French. We're entirely whatever.

ARABLOUEI: Basel had a small Jewish community and a kosher restaurant, which would help observant Orthodox Jews in town for the gathering feel at home. So on the morning of August 29, after opening remarks, the meeting's organizer stepped up to the podium, a Jewish Austro-Hungarian man named Theodor Herzl.

(APPLAUSE)

PENSLAR: The room goes crazy. There's 15 minutes of applause. Women faint. Men kiss his hand. It's absolute pandemonium.

(APPLAUSE)

RUND ABDELFATAH, HOST:

After the applause died down, Herzl, wearing formal attire - a suit, top hat and white gloves - and sporting a thick beard, stood up in front of the few hundred people in the room and gave a speech.

UNIDENTIFIED ACTOR #1: (As Theodor Herzl) We want to lay the foundation stone for the home that is destined to be a safe haven for the Jewish people.

PENSLAR: And then for the next, you know, 2 1/2 days, there's speeches; there's debates, and out of it emerges this organization called the Zionist organization.

ABDELFATAH: The meeting was called the Zionist Congress. It was the first of its kind.

PENSLAR: They come up with a program of what they want, which is a publicly recognized home for the Jews in Palestine.

ABDELFATAH: A homeland for Jewish people in Palestine, a land where hundreds of thousands of Arabs already lived.

BRENNER: Herzl and everybody, I think, who participated in this movement, they regarded it as a liberation movement. It was there to liberate the Jews from the threat of antisemitism in Europe.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BRENNER: Herzl wrote something quite prophetic in his diary after the first Zionist Congress. He said...

UNIDENTIFIEDACTOR #1: (As Theodor Herzl) At Basel, I founded the Jewish state. If I said this out loud today, I would be greeted by universal laughter.

BRENNER: Everybody will laugh at me. And that was 1897.

UNIDENTIFIEDACTOR #1: (As Theodor Herzl) In five years, perhaps, and certainly in 50 years, everyone will perceive it.

BRENNER: People will take me seriously. So if you think, 50 years from 1897 was 1947, the state of Israel was founded in 1948.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

ABDELFATAH: Since October 7, the term Zionism has been everywhere in the news. It's been used to support Israel in what it calls its war against Hamas, a refrain to remind everyone why Israel exists and why it must be protected. Others have used Zionism to describe what they view as Israel's collective punishment of civilians in Gaza and its appropriation of Palestinian territories, what they often call settler colonialism.

ARABLOUEI: Zionism has been defined and redefined again and again. These definitions are often built on competing historical interpretations. So unsurprisingly, we received many requests from you, our audience, to explore the origins of Zionism. So that's exactly what we're going to do.

ABDELFATAH: I'm Rund Abdelfatah.

ARABLOUEI: And I'm Ramtin Arablouei. On this episode of THROUGHLINE from NPR, we're going to go back to the late 19th century to meet the people who organized the modern Zionist movement.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MADAMELIA CHIDNEL VOPER: Hello, there. My name is Madamelia Chidnel Voper (ph). I'm from Columbia, Mo., and you're listening to THROUGHLINE from NPR.

ANYA STEINBERG, BYLINE: Part 1 - You Couldn't Change Your Blood.

(SOUNDBITE OF FILM, "THE ILLEGALS")

UNIDENTIFIED PEOPLE: (Singing in non-English language).

ARABLOUEI: This is the song "Hatikvah, " or "The Hope."

(SOUNDBITE OF FILM, "THE ILLEGALS")

UNIDENTIFIED PEOPLE: (Singing in non-English language).

ARABLOUEI: It is now the national anthem of Israel. This version is from "The Illegals," a film about Holocaust survivors traveling by boat to Palestine after World War II.

(SOUNDBITE OF FILM, "THE ILLEGALS")

UNIDENTIFIED PEOPLE: (Singing in non-English language).

ARABLOUEI: The lyrics are as long as the Jewish spirit is yearning deep in the heart, with eyes turned towards the east, looking toward Zion, then our hope - the 2,000-year-old hope - will not be lost - to be a free people in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem.

(SOUNDBITE OF FILM, "THE ILLEGALS")

UNIDENTIFIED PEOPLE: (Singing in non-English language).

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BRENNER: For the last 2,000 years, there was an idea among Jews to return to what they call the land of Israel.

ARABLOUEI: A religious idea.

BRENNER: The notion behind it was that you had to wait until the Messiah comes, and in the Messianic time, Jews will be brought back to Israel.

ARABLOUEI: Around 3,000 years ago, a Jewish kingdom existed in what is now Israel and the Palestinian territories. It was conquered by a neighboring empire in 586 B.C.E. As a result, a large number of Jews were displaced and held captive. But then came the Persians, who conquered the land. Cyrus, the Persian king, freed the Jews from bondage. He also helped their effort to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

Then a few hundred years later, the Roman Empire conquered the region. And in 70 B.C.E., they put down a Jewish rebellion and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. This time, most Jews went into exile in many parts of the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia and Europe. A small Jewish population remained. A dream of returning to Israel lived on in the prayers and beliefs of some Jews living in exile. For much of Jewish history, this has remained merely a dream. But...

BRENNER: In the 19th century...

ARABLOUEI: The 1800s.

BRENNER: ...That started to change. There were secular people who later would be called Zionists, who transformed this religious idea into the idea of a secular state.

ARABLOUEI: This is Michael Brenner.

BRENNER: I am a professor at American University in Washington, D.C., and at the University of Munich in Germany.

ARABLOUEI: He's also the author of a book called...

BRENNER: "In Search Of Israel: The History Of An Idea."

ARABLOUEI: Michael says that in Europe in the 1800s, a time where the idea of modern nation-states was becoming more popular, some Jews began coalescing around the idea that there was no reason to wait for a Messiah, that Jews could form their own state in their holy land now by moving back there in large numbers.

BRENNER: Let me distinguish between two major ideas of Zionism. One is a Zionism born out of despair, the reaction that responds to antisemitism. And another one is Zionism born out - let's call it enthusiasm, meaning we want to revive Jewish culture. We want to revive the Hebrew language. We want to create something new on the basis - on the foundation - of a religious idea but transform it into a secular idea.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

ARABLOUEI: Despair, enthusiasm - these terms can also be used to characterize the contradictory situation for European Jews in the 19th century.

BRENNER: The 1800s are a time when we see the integration of Jews into many European societies. So Jews become citizens of Germany, of France, of Italy, of other places.

PENSLAR: There is a Jewish middle class or even upper middle class like there never had been before - Jews attending university. Jews are increasingly prosperous in business and in the professions. More and more Jews are going into law and medicine and some of them into academia. It's a time where Jews can live in fancy neighborhoods, and they can buy nice houses and send their kids to good schools. There's a lot of Jewish mobility and integration.

ARABLOUEI: This is Derek Penslar.

PENSLAR: I am a professor of Jewish history at Harvard University.

ARABLOUEI: He's also the director of Harvard's Center for Jewish Studies.

PENSLAR: And my most recent book, which was published last year, is titled "Zionism: An Emotional State."

ARABLOUEI: Derek says that despite the integration of Jews into Western European culture, the 19th century also saw a sharp rise in antisemitism.

PENSLAR: So you can have a German Jew in their very German home with German furniture, eating German food, going down to eat breakfast and opening up the newspaper - the German newspaper - and reading all about what the antisemites have been saying in parliament about how terrible the Jews are.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

ARABLOUEI: Anti-Jewish hatred had long been a feature of Christian Europe. There are complex reasons for this, but one obvious factor was that many Christians believed that Jews were responsible for killing Jesus Christ. This meant that many rulers would scapegoat their Jewish subjects to distract from their own failings. There was a repeating pattern of religious violence against Jews all over Europe. But in the 19th century...

BRENNER: There was the rise of a new antisemitism, which is no longer based on religion, but it's based on the idea of race.

ANITA SHAPIRA: The Jews were defined as a different race and that it does not matter how much they try to assimilate.

ARABLOUEI: This is Anita Shapira.

SHAPIRA: Retired professor of Jewish history at Tel Aviv University.

ARABLOUEI: She says pseudoscientific theories about race prevalent at the time categorized Jews not just as a religious or ethnic minority but into a completely different race, separate on the genetic level from other Europeans.

SHAPIRA: And as a result, they cannot become part and admitted as equal by the societies in which they live.

BRENNER: Until the mid-19th century, if you really wanted to escape antisemitism, the usual way out was to convert.

ARABLOUEI: To Christianity.

BRENNER: But with this new idea of a race-based antisemitism, it didn't matter if Jews converted to Christianity. They would remain Jews. So there was no way out anymore of that kind of antisemitism 'cause, in their ideas, you couldn't change your blood.

SHAPIRA: And this is the moving force that made Herzl into what he became.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

ARABLOUEI: In 1894, a Jewish army captain in France named Alfred Dreyfus was arrested and charged with treason.

PENSLAR: It became the trial of the century. He was innocent. He'd been framed.

ARABLOUEI: It was major news all over Europe, and it had a deep personal impact on a seasoned journalist covering the trial for a Viennese newspaper.

BRENNER: And he's witness of the so-called Dreyfus Affair.

ARABLOUEI: That journalist was Theodor Herzl.

BRENNER: What Herzl notices in Paris is it's not about the person Officer Dreyfus. The people go on the street and shout against the Jew Dreyfus and then the Jews. And he realizes, if even in Paris, in France, the country where the ideas of liberty and fraternity and egalitarianism started, if even there Jews are victims of antisemitism, they will be safe in no other - in no place in the world.

ARABLOUEI: Dreyfus was wrongly convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment at a penal colony. This shocked Herzl.

PENSLAR: He kind of went into a tailspin.

ARABLOUEI: And started pouring himself into researching and writing to figure out...

PENSLAR: How do we solve the problem of antisemitism? And he comes up with the idea, which is that there has to be a Jewish state.

UNIDENTIFIEDACTOR #1: (As Theodor Herzl) The Jews have dreamt this kingly dream all through the long nights of their history. Next year in Jerusalem is our old phrase. It is now a question of showing that the dream can be converted into a living reality.

PENSLAR: Jews need to have the option to leave wherever they're persecuted into a homeland where they can be free.

UNIDENTIFIEDACTOR #1: (As Theodor Herzl) No one can deny the gravity of the situation of the Jews. Wherever they live in perceptible numbers, they are more or less persecuted.

PENSLAR: So after months of writing...

PENSLAR: In 1896, he publishes a pamphlet called "The Jewish State."

BRENNER: "Der Judenstaat" in German, which means literally the state of the Jews but is usually translated as "The Jewish State."

PENSLAR: And that's the beginning of the Zionist movement as we know it.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

ARABLOUEI: But none of this was inevitable for Theodor Herzl. Up until that point, his life was a prime example of Jewish integration into European society.

PENSLAR: Theodor Herzl embodied the Jewish dream, as it were.

BRENNER: Theodor Herzl was born in 1816, Budapest.

PENSLAR: His father had become a prosperous businessman. Herzl had a nice life. He went to university in Vienna. He studied law. He joined a fraternity - you know, middle-class guy in Vienna who partied, and he dated.

BRENNER: He had actually a Christmas tree in his home. So he was what we would usually call the typical assimilated Jew.

PENSLAR: He finished university. He went to work as a - like, a government attorney.

ARABLOUEI: But eventually he switched careers and became a journalist, playwright and author.

PENSLAR: His plays were produced in Vienna at, you know, the best theaters in the city. He was actually having a pretty good life.

BRENNER: He wanted to be nothing more than a German writer and journalist.

ARABLOUEI: I have to point out the irony here, which is that Herzl really had a veneration for Western European culture. He wanted to be a part of it. But ultimately, it's the European culture that kind of turns its back on him and other Jews. There's a sad irony there, isn't there?

BRENNER: Absolutely. He writes at some point in his diary, if I could choose what I'd be, I would love to be a Prussian aristocrat. And, of course, as often is the case, people who are rejected, who are rejected as what they think they actually are, they react very sensitively, and he did. He thought, why do people not recognize that I am just an Austrian and I write in German? But he realized it doesn't work. I will always be seen as a Jew, and that's what I would call a Zionism out of despair. He became a Zionist not because he wanted to learn Hebrew and revive Jewish culture and go back to the land of Israel. His Zionism was a Zionism of no other possibility of surviving as a Jew.

ARABLOUEI: Herzl began sending his pamphlet, "The Jewish State," to all his friends and colleagues, but the reaction was pretty cold.

BRENNER: Most Jews from his own surrounding in Vienna and German Jews and French Jews whom he sent it to, they weren't very enthusiastic because they thought antisemitism would go away, and he thought, no, it's here to stay.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

ARABLOUEI: Coming up, Herzl shakes off the rejection and finds fellow Jews who believe in his vision in a place he'd never been - the Russian Empire.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MELVA: Hi, this is Melva (ph) in Faceville, Ga., and you are listening to THROUGHLINE from NPR.

ABDELFATAH: We just want to take a moment to shout out our THROUGHLINE+ subscribers. Thank you so much for your support. If you don't already know, subscribing to THROUGHLINE+ means you get to listen to our show without any sponsor breaks, and you also get access to special bonus episodes, where we take you behind the scenes, introduce you to our amazing producers and tell you about how we make the show. To get these awesome benefits and support our work here at NPR, head over to plus.npr.org/throughline.

STEINBERG: Part 2 - Clarion Call.

ABDELFATAH: In 1897, Theodor Herzl began sending out invites to the Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. He sent them everywhere. But at this point, his ideas were still pretty fringe.

PENSLAR: Zionism was a minority movement.

ABDELFATAH: This is Derek Penslar. He teaches Jewish history at Harvard.

PENSLAR: Most Jews in the world were not Zionists.

ABDELFATAH: Derek says that for many Jews in countries like the United States or England or France, the idea of picking up and moving to the Middle East would have seemed extreme.

PENSLAR: We're Americans; we're Germans; we're British. We are not members of a Jewish nationality, and we have no desire to go and live in the land of Israel.

ABDELFATAH: But there was a group that was ready to hear the clarion call of Zionism.

BRENNER: So the people who really followed him were mainly East European Jews.

ABDELFATAH: This is Michael Brenner, professor at American University.

BRENNER: The reason is there were a lot of pogroms, a lot of anti-Jewish violence starting in the 1880s in the Russian Empire.

ABDELFATAH: At that time, Russia was ruled over by a czar, or emperor, and it had returned to a state of almost medieval feudalism. Life was hard for most people there, and especially for Jews, who faced all manner of discrimination.

PENSLAR: That's where most of the Jews in Europe lived, and they were confined legally to a section of western and southern Russia known as the Pale of Settlement.

BRENNER: Which led also to a lot of economic problems.

PENSLAR: Most of them were desperately poor. They had limited choices of occupations. It was really hard for them to get ahead economically. And then, beginning in the 1880s, they began to suffer from overt persecution, as well.

ABDELFATAH: In 1881, Russia's czar was assassinated by a group of attackers in Saint Petersburg. Almost immediately, rumors were spread that the assassinations were planned and carried out by Jewish people.

PENSLAR: Jews as a universal solvent. Whatever it is you think is being destroyed in society, it's the Jews' fault.

ABDELFATAH: Soon after the czar's assassination, violent anti-Jewish riots broke out in the Russian Empire.

PENSLAR: Stores being ransacked, property destroyed. And then, as things get worse and worse, people getting killed, rapes, people getting beaten up and murdered.

ABDELFATAH: These violent riots came to be known as pogroms.

PENSLAR: These pogroms often happened around Easter because people think about the death of Christ, and then they think about the old religious accusations that Jews are responsible for the death of Jesus.

ABDELFATAH: And they continued for decades to come.

PENSLAR: They're quite deadly, and they spread fear among Jews throughout the Russian Empire. And that spawned a massive wave of migration out of the Russian Empire.

ABDELFATAH: It was these disaffected and oppressed Jews from the Russian Empire that made up the core of Theodor Herzl's supporters. More of them attended that first Zionist Congress than from any other country. But this wasn't exactly what Theodor Herzl, a man who viewed himself as a Western European intellectual and elite, wanted.

BRENNER: Herzl kind of jokingly stated that he really wanted to have the wealthy Western European Jews, but they didn't come. He said, I have only an army of beggars behind me from Eastern Europe.

UNIDENTIFIEDACTOR #1: (As Theodor Herzl) I am in command of only boys, beggars and prigs. Some of them exploit me. Others are already jealous and disloyal.

BRENNER: The truth is they weren't really beggars. They were middle class. Many were lawyers, but they weren't the wealthy Rothschilds and people he would have loved to have in his congress.

ABDELFATAH: The Rothschilds were a rich Jewish banking family from Germany.

SHAPIRA: He went to the Rothschilds. He went to the - Baron Hirsch. All these people were willing to donate money, but they did not believe in the idea of Zionism.

ARABLOUEI: He also seems like he has internalized Western European or European attitudes around race. Even though he may recognize that it's hurting Jews, he did seem to have a kind of, I sense, elitism.

BRENNER: He felt himself very much a Western European person - German civilization, German culture. And there was, no doubt, some way of looking down, condescending, paternalizing view on East European Jews. And some of the leading East European Zionists took issue with that and took issue also with his whole view how to transplant what he thought would be the best of Europe and basically build a model society in Palestine. That was his idea.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

ABDELFATAH: At the time of the first Zionist Congress, Palestine was controlled by the Ottoman Empire. Muslim Arabs, as well as Christian Arabs, made up around 90% of the population. Jews were an ethnic minority.

BRENNER: Zionists did realize very well that there were people living there. Maybe they thought the country was sparsely populated, but they knew there were people living there.

PENSLAR: There's a myth that the Zionists were not aware of the Palestinian Arab population. They were very aware of it. The question is, what do you do with that information? Herzl himself only went to Palestine once for 10 days.

BRENNER: He knew very well there were people living there.

PENSLAR: Herzl wrote very little about the Arabs. He wrote some things about, oh, I've seen some neglected houses in Arab fashion. You know, he just kind of dismissed them.

BRENNER: He had a condescending view to Arabs who lived in Palestine.

ABDELFATAH: Herzl wrote in his pamphlet, "The Jewish State"...

UNIDENTIFIEDACTOR #1: (As Herzl) We should there form a portion of a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization, as opposed to barbarism.

ABDELFATAH: In his diary in 1895, this is how Theodore Herzl described his plans for dealing with the Indigenous poor people already living in the future Jewish homeland, wherever it would be.

UNIDENTIFIEDACTOR #1: (As Herzl) We must expropriate gently the private property of the state assigned to us. The property owners will come over to our side. Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discretely and circumspectly. Let the owners of the immovable property believe that they are cheating us, selling us things for more than they're worth, but we are not going to sell them anything back.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

ABDELFATAH: A year after his visit to Jerusalem, Herzl received a letter from a former mayor of the city, a Palestinian Arab dignitary named Youssuf Zia al-Khalidi.

PENSLAR: Who wrote to him and said, I really respect how the Jews have suffered and how they are connected to the land of Israel. But you should know that there's an Arab population there, and they're not going to receive your ideas at all favorably.

UNIDENTIFIEDACTOR #1: (As Herzl) Excellency, let me tell you first of all that the feelings of friendship which you express for the Jewish people inspire in me the deepest appreciation.

PENSLAR: Herzl wrote back and said, don't worry about it.

UNIDENTIFIEDACTOR #1: (As Herzl) The Jews have no belligerent power behind them. Neither are they themselves of a warlike nature. Therefore, there's absolutely nothing to fear from their immigration.

PENSLAR: No Arab will be dislodged. You will benefit from us. We will bring you our Western technology. You will have happier, better lives.

UNIDENTIFIEDACTOR #1: (As Herzl) No one can doubt that the well-being of the entire country would be the happy result.

BRENNER: In his view - out of a European, almost patronizing view - were, how could they reject a movement that brings civilization, that brings electricity, that

brings new, modern forms of agriculture that will develop this country? So Herzl could not imagine, and did not imagine, that they would be rejected.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

ABDELFATAH: After that first Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897, Herzl continued to make Zionism his life's work. He organized more meetings of the Zionist organization, published writings and went around Europe and the Middle East trying to make connections with world leaders.

BRENNER: Well, according to all accounts, Herzl was a very charismatic person, even his look. He had this long beard. It looked almost like one of those old depictions of, like, Assyrian kings. He was a very charismatic speaker, and he was a meticulous organizer. Basically, he organized every single detail of the first congress and of all the other congresses he lived to see.

PENSLAR: He was always in a train going somewhere. There's a phrase in Yiddish. He was always tummling. He was always on the move, on the make, trying to make something work. He was a man of great energy and great vision, and he was willing to essentially stake his life on trying to attain that vision.

SHAPIRA: The difference between a genius and a madman is very delicate. I am sure that there were Jews that were certain that Herzl was a madman, while there were others that adored him.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

ABDELFATAH: By the turn of the 20th century, Herzl had been on the road for years, advocating for the creation of a Jewish state. In 1901, he traveled to Constantinople - the city now called Istanbul - the capital of the Ottoman Empire, the ruler of Palestine.

PENSLAR: Herzl tried to get the Ottoman emperor to grant Jews permission to settle in large numbers in Palestine.

ABDELFATAH: Herzl made an attractive offer to the emperor. If you let Jews settle in Palestine, then we will raise money and help you pay off your empire's debts.

PENSLAR: The emperor, Abdul Hamid, said no. I'm not going to allow that.

UNIDENTIFIED ACTOR #2: (As Hamid) I cannot sell even a foot of land, for it does not belong to me, but to my people. My people have won this empire by fighting for it with their blood and have fertilized it with their blood. We will again cover it with our blood before we allow it to be wrested away from us.

ABDELFATAH: The emperor didn't just decline Herzl's offer, he had implemented a policy to restrict Jewish migration to Palestine because he was wary of welcoming a large religious minority into the empire.

PENSLAR: So Herzl got kind of desperate. And he started thinking, where else can we settle, at least in the short term?

ABDELFATAH: He met with leaders of the British Empire and was able to get an offer. Britain would allow Jews to settle in East Africa, one of the territories the empire controlled.

PENSLAR: And he pitched this to the Zionist Congress saying, well, I've got, you know, some good news. The British government's offering us land. And, no, we won't be in this land forever, and it's not a substitute for Eretz Yisrael, for the Land of Israel. But isn't it great that we've gotten recognized by the British and Jews can escape persecution, and they can, you know, live here?

ABDELFATAH: But the Zionist Congress hated this idea.

SHAPIRA: They felt betrayed because he was willing to accept a territory other than Palestine.

BRENNER: The Land of Israel was a land where there were always a Jewish community, which was always present in the thoughts of Jews, which was always present in their prayers.

SHAPIRA: So at the end, he raised his hand before the congress. And they swore with the words of the prayer - if I forget thee, Jerusalem, let my right arm dry out.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

ABDELFATAH: All of this took a toll on his health.

PENSLAR: He had had fainting spells, palpitations, premonitions of doom for a few years, ever since he was about 40.

ABDELFATAH: In 1904, the stress and years on the road caught up to him. That year, Theodor Herzl died suddenly of heart failure.

PENSLAR: At the age of 44. He was a very young man.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

ABDELFATAH: In the years before he died, Theodor Herzl spent much of his spare time working on a novel. It was called "The Old New Land." The story takes place 20 years into Herzl's future, where...

PENSLAR: The Jews have obtained something. It's not a state. He never talks about borders. And it has no army. It's a kind of a community of Jews who live with each other and with the Middle East in peace and harmony. And one of the major characters of the book is a Palestinian. So he envisions a - what he calls the new society of people who are completely equal.

ABDELFATAH: The book painted a utopian picture of a future Palestine. It was published in 1902, just a few years before Herzl's death. It was not a hit. Very few people actually read it. But a few years after the book was published, the city of Tel Aviv was founded by Jewish settlers in Palestine.

BRENNER: Tel Aviv was the Hebrew translation of Theodor Herzl's novel, "Old New Land."

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

ABDELFATAH: Coming up, when Hitler rises to power, Zionism becomes a means for survival for European Jews.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

JAMIE MCREYNOLDS: Hi. This is Jamie McReynolds (ph) from Blacksburg, Va., and you're listening to THROUGHLINE on NPR.

STEINBERG: Part 3 - What Came With Power.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SHAPIRA: There is a famous book called the "Kuzarian (ph)"...

ARABLOUEI: ...Commonly known as the "Kuzari."

SHAPIRA: ...Written by Rabbi Judah Halevi.

ARABLOUEI: The book was written in the 12th century. It's a work of historical fiction, in which a Central Eurasian king, who wants his people to accept monotheistic religion, calls three scholars - a Muslim, a Christian and a Jewish rabbi - to his court in order to decide which religion he will accept.

SHAPIRA: And the rabbi told him, we Jews, we never use power. We are a peaceful people.

ARABLOUEI: And the king replied...

SHAPIRA: You say that because you are weak. When you are powerful, you will change your opinion. And you will use power as any other people.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

ARABLOUEI: After Theodor Herzl's death at the start of the 20th century, the Zionist movement continued its work. Many Jews did move to Palestine, purchasing land and starting communities. But their numbers were relatively small. Then in 1917, a huge opportunity emerged for the Zionists. The British army captured Jerusalem from the Ottoman Empire. That same year, British foreign secretary Arthur Balfour issued a statement called the Balfour Declaration. World War I would soon be over.

UNIDENTIFIED ACTOR #3: (As Arthur Balfour) His Majesty's government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object.

ABDELFATAH: In the coming years, Britain would take control of Palestine, lift Ottoman restrictions on Jewish migration there and support the creation of a Jewish national home. It's important to note that the British had also promised Arabs estate in exchange for their support during World War I. But advocates for Zionism had lobbied the British government, and it paid off. In the following decade or so, Jewish migration from Europe, especially Russia and Poland, continued. Many of these migrants settled in agricultural communities. And then in the 1930s, everything changed.

BRENNER: In 1933, Hitler comes to power in Germany, and antisemitic laws are issued in Poland and in Hungary. And there are more and more Jews who want to leave.

PENSLAR: They're just looking for a place to go. And there are very few countries that are willing to take them.

BRENNER: And now it becomes harder.

PENSLAR: The United States pretty much shuts down its immigration system to anybody from Eastern or southern Europe after 1924.

ABDELFATAH: This policy came from a combination of growing isolationism in the U.S. and a fear of communism, which was associated with Jews. So as Nazism is rising...

PENSLAR: Jews can't get in. So North America is off the table. What can you do?

ABDELFATAH: Many of these Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazi regime ended up going to Palestine, now run by the British.

PENSLAR: So Palestine is not a place that these refugees go to necessarily because they're idealists. They're just looking for a place to survive.

ABDELFATAH: And this dramatically increased the Jewish population there.

SHAPIRA: At the beginning of the 1930s, the Jewish population in Palestine was about 170,000 people. Between 1932 and 1936, it doubled at least, and even more than that. These were the years of the critical building mass of Jews in Palestine.

ABDELFATAH: Once World War II began, it became even more difficult for Jews to flee Europe, partly because of the lack of countries willing to accept Jewish refugees and partly because of the chaos of war.

PENSLAR: And Jews get trapped. And they're killed by the millions.

ABDELFATAH: The Holocaust was a genocide perpetrated by Germany's Nazi regime against Jews and other minorities. Six million Jewish people were killed, and hundreds of thousands more were displaced.

BRENNER: The Holocaust really changed the whole equation. In a way, it helped Israel to come to existence because that was the final piece that convinced the rest of the world that Jews didn't have a place to go.

ARABLOUEI: Anita Shapira experienced this firsthand. Her parents were killed by Nazis. After the war, she was adopted by other Holocaust survivors.

SHAPIRA: I was about 6 years old when they adopted me.

ARABLOUEI: A year later, in 1947, Anita and her new family moved to Palestine.

SHAPIRA: So why did they choose Palestine? First of all, because of family connections, but also for the simple feeling that after what they went through, they wanted to live among Jews because this was supposed to be a country where they would feel both safe and among their own.

ARABLOUEI: But as Jewish people became nearly a third of the population in Palestine, already-existing tensions with Arab Palestinians grew to a fever pitch.

BRENNER: The Arab states thought, why should we pay the price for what Europeans do to the Jews?

ARABLOUEI: Meanwhile, militancy became more and more prominent among the Zionists in Palestine. They had a quasi-governmental structure and a military wing called the Haganah. The Jewish city of Tel Aviv had grown to 200,000 residents.

SHAPIRA: The Jews wanted, like other people, respect, and they wanted safety. And both things came only with power.

ARABLOUEI: And power meant force, military force.

SHAPIRA: The question of the willingness to use power was a major question in Jewish ideology and in Zionist ideology.

ARABLOUEI: From the very first congress in 1897, there were different views from Zionists about how they should create a home in Palestine. There were some pacifists who believed Jews and Arabs could cooperate, but there was also radical members of the Zionist organization who advocated the forceful displacement of Palestinians. They thought...

SHAPIRA: The Jews, if they want to have land, they have to use power. This was the turning point between the old Jew and the new Jew. The new Jew, as one of the pioneers described him, had a hoe in his hand and a gun in his other hand.

ARABLOUEI: A hoe in his one hand and a gun in the other - farmers and warriors. For the so-called new Jew, wielding power felt essential after the Holocaust.

SHAPIRA: We have to remember that - that this was created out of feelings of shame and humiliation and weakness.

ABDELFATAH: For example, during this time, a right-wing Zionist settler named Ze'ev Jabotinsky helped form a paramilitary organization called the Irgun. The group carried out attacks against British and Palestinian targets, including the King David Hotel attack in Jerusalem that killed 91 people in 1946.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

ABDELFATAH: By 1947, there was near-constant fighting between Jews and Arab Palestinians. Frustrated and unable to get a handle on the situation, the British announced they would relinquish their control over Palestine. They handed off responsibility to the United Nations. The U.N. member nations voted to partition Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab. Jews were granted 55% of the land. The Palestinians and other Middle Eastern states - including Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Iraq - rejected this offer. The Zionists reluctantly accepted it, with many right-wing extremists arguing they should have all of the land. On May 14, 1948, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, declared Israel a state.

SHAPIRA: The feeling was that Ben-Gurion was taking a terrible gamble. Three years after the Holocaust, he was putting the fate of the Jewish people, the remaining survivors, on the ballot.

ABDELFATAH: And the day after that, the neighboring Arab states attacked Israel. In Israel, what came next is remembered as the War of Independence. Palestinians remember it as the Nakba, or catastrophe. During the war, Israel's territory grew significantly. Seven hundred fifty thousand Palestinians fled or were driven from their homes by Israeli forces. These Palestinians have never been allowed to return to those homes, and Palestinians still lack a universally recognized state.

SHAPIRA: I can understand Palestinians' independence was a very captivating idea, and the Jews grabbed it, while the Arabs felt betrayed by it. So that's the tragedy.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

ABDELFATAH: Israel was now the Jewish homeland in Palestine. And in the wake of the 1948 war, hundreds of thousands of Jews from all over the Middle East and North Africa migrated to Israel, escaping newly stoked antisemitism in their nations. Israel's population nearly doubled as a result. Theodor Herzl's vision had come to pass, but it had not happened as he imagined in his novel, "The Old New Land."

It happened through war - a war that cost many Jewish and Palestinian lives, a war that in some ways continues to this day, and a war that today, for many, has redefined the word Zionism. Zionism remains the clarion call for a Jewish homeland and safety, but it is also used by Israel's settler movement to justify expansion and occupation into internationally recognized Palestinian lands, an idea that feels like it's stuck between extremes.

ARABLOUEI: So the name of your book is "Zionism: An Emotional State." What would you say the state - or the emotional state of Zionism is today?

PENSLAR: Anguish. And it didn't start that way. It certainly started with fear. But there was also a kind of optimistic love that is love of the Jewish people, love of the land of Israel, and a very strong optimism that Jews could move there and they could develop their state and that, as in Herzl's novel, eventually, the Arab world would accept and recognize this state and it would become part of the community of nations of the Middle East.

BRENNER: Many of the ideas that Herzl described when he wrote his vision, his utopian novel "Old New Land, " seem very far away today. And maybe they were far away back then, too, but I think we should never give up hope. Israelis and Palestinians have no other choice. They are not disappearing. They're not going anywhere. They both want to have, and they both deserve to have, their sovereignty, their statehood and control their own affairs and, at the same time, respect each other and respect that the other exists, and that is not easy, especially after October 7.

PENSLAR: Anguish is an emotion that suggests a very profound state of unsettlement, of instability, and it's just short of despair. And that's where I think the feelings of so many Jews in the world are - is anguish - not quite despair, but unfortunately getting a little close.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

ABDELFATAH: That's it for this week's show. I'm Rund Abdelfatah.

ARABLOUEI: I'm Ramtin Arablouei, and you've been listening to THROUGHLINE from NPR.

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ABDELFATAH: This episode was produced by me.

ARABLOUEI: And me and...

LAWRENCE WU, BYLINE: Lawrence Wu.

JULIE CAINE, BYLINE: Julie Caine.

STEINBERG: Anya Steinberg.

CASEY MINER, BYLINE: Casey Miner.

CRISTINA KIM, BYLINE: Cristina Kim.

DEVIN KATAYAMA, BYLINE: Devin Katayama.

NIC NEVES, BYLINE: Nic Neves.

SARAH WYMAN, BYLINE: Sarah Wyman.

IRENE NOGUCHI, BYLINE: Irene Noguchi.

ARABLOUEI: Fact-checking for this episode was done by Kevin Volkl. The episode was mixed by Josh Newell.

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ABDELFATAH: Music for this episode was composed by Ramtin and his band Drop Electric which includes...

NAVID MARVI: Navid Marvi.

SHO FUJIWARA: Sho Fujiwara.

ANYA MIZANI: Anya Mizani.

ARABLOUEI: We would love to hear from you. Send us a voicemail to 872-588-8805, and leave your name, where you're from, and say the line, you're listening to THROUGHLINE from NPR. And tell us what you think of the show. We might even feature your voicemail in a future episode. That number again is 872-588-8805.

ABDELFATAH: And finally, if you have an idea or like something you heard on the show, please write us at throughline@npr.org.

ARABLOUEI: Thanks for listening.

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