

“DOCTOR ESPERANTO”



Dr. Ludwig Zamenhof, drawing courtesy of Tomek Wiesniewski

In 1878 a precocious 19 year old high school student, Ludovic Lazarus Zamenhof, sat in a small room in his family home in Bialystok and single-handedly created the forerunner of what would become the international language known as Esperanto. Nine years later as a senior in medical school, he published his first book using the pseudonym Doctoro Esperanto, meaning “one who hopes.” (Israel’s national anthem *Hatikvah* means “the hope.”)

The idea of an international language can be dated back to Descartes in 1629 and there were other early attempts, but Zamenhof had a more ambitious agenda than merely inventing a language. He believed that if people spoke the same language they would understand each other better and entrenched hatreds between different groups would melt away. Indeed he hoped that his venture would lead to a world movement toward peace, justice and the brotherhood of man.

Zamenhof, the eldest of eight siblings, was born in 1859 in Bialystok in the province of Grodno which in those days was under Russian rule. His father was a gifted linguist and the boy followed his father’s lead. He grew up speaking Russian, Yiddish and Polish, to which he later added German, Hebrew, Latin, French, English, Greek and some Lithuanian, Spanish and Italian.

Bialystok’s population consisted of Poles, Jews, Germans and Russians and although the Jews were the largest group (constituting roughly 63 percent of nearly 14,000 people), there was considerable conflict with the others. Local strife must have made an early impression because at the age of ten, young Ludwig wrote a five-act play based on the Tower of Babel theme, but with the story set in Bialystok. Many years later Zamenhof recalled those early experiences in a letter reproduced in Marjorie Boulton’s biography of him:

In this town, more than anywhere else, an impressionable nature feels the heavy burden of linguistic differences and is convinced at every step, that the diversity of languages is the only, or at least the major cause, that separates the human family and divides it into conflicting groups. I was brought up as an idealist; I was taught that all men were brothers, and, meanwhile in the street, in the square, everything at every step made me feel that men did not exist, only Russians, Poles, Germans, Jews and so on. This was always a great torment to my infant mind, although many people may smile at such an "anguish for the world," in a child. Since at that time it seemed to me that the grown-ups were incompetent, I kept telling myself that when I was grown up I would certainly destroy that evil.

Zamenhof's father was a stern secularist who at the age of twenty had founded a language school in Bialystok which soon failed, requiring him to move the family to Warsaw where he took a job as a censor of Hebrew writing for the Czarist authorities. The son shared his father's linguistic ability but was more concerned with social problems. The two disagreed on many issues, yet Ludovic agreed with his parents that one of the few ways for a young Jew to make his way in the world was through a profession.

From 1879 to 1881 Zamenhof studied medicine in Moscow and then transferred to Warsaw because of financial reasons. At this stage he became a Zionist and wrote a series of articles about how Jews should react to pogroms. In these he favored a national homeland, not necessarily in Palestine. Indeed, he considered Mississippi to be a possible option. However, he became disillusioned with Zionism finding it to be unrealizable and increasingly saw the role of the Jewish people as one of uniting humanity.

When Zamenhof developed the first draft of his projected universal language, he recruited a number of classmates to the cause of universal brotherhood. His father feared that Ludovico's passion would detract from his medical studies and also might brand him as a quack. He made him promise not to pursue the language for the duration of his medical studies and had him hand over his notes, locking them in a closet. When Zamenhof returned home, he found that the papers had been burned and soon was back at work on his favorite project.

Dr. Zamenhof obtained his medical degree in 1885 and became a general practitioner in the small community of Veisiejai in Lithuania. A qualified doctor was free from some of the worst anti-Jewish restrictions and had fair prospects for a tolerable career. Zamenhof soon earned a fine reputation but he was self-sacrificing to a fault and often gave away more money to his impoverished patients than he took in. Of this experience he wrote: "Having practiced there for four months, I became convinced that I was totally unsuited for general medical practice, because I was too impressionable and the sufferings of my patients tormented me too much."

Returning to his studies, he trained briefly as an oculist and opened an office in Warsaw in 1886. He never was a financial success as an oculist and again limited his practice to the poorest clientele, charging low fees. Throughout his career, he would have been destitute were it not for the aid of others. He married a wealthy young woman who was sympathetic to his ideas and her father provided the funds to publish in 1887 a forty page book in which, for the first time, he used the name "Esperanto." The full title was *Dr. Esperanto: International Language - Introduction and Complete Handbook*. It appeared in four languages and attracted a mixed group of idealists, particularly from Jews and Tolstoyans. Esperanto has the advantage of a simple grammar. It is a phonetic language; every letter consistently has the same sound and the words are pronounced as they

are written. The Esperanto movement grew quickly, most notably in France and England. By 1889, 1,000 individuals had passed a basic test in the new language; of these 93% were Russian.



At the first international conference, held in Boulogne, France in 1905, Zamenhof gave the feature speech which was well received and convinced him that “absolute justice, equality and fraternity” between peoples was fully possible. Some advocates venerated Zamenhof with quasi-religious fervor but he was uncomfortable as a public speaker and fearing that the movement would be too closely connected to self, wished to share the

leadership role. Furthermore, he was beginning to develop a broader interest in world religion and in 1901 wrote the following:

In Esperanto-land, rules not only the language Esperanto, but also the inner idea of Esperantist...holds sway; something else rules there as well, something still not precisely formulated up to now, but felt very well by all Esperantists - there rules the green standard.

By the green standard he meant “a neutral basis, on which the different human ethnic groups could communicate peacefully and fraternally, not enforcing on one another their ethnic personalities.” His optimism that a common language could break down walls gave hope to many Jews in the aftermath of pogroms in 1905 and 1906. Although few people learned Esperanto, many Bialystokers internalized his message that the basis of senseless atrocities was not ill will but lack of knowledge. This in an address to the International Esperanto Conference (1906):

We know that the Russian people are not responsible for the bestial butchery in Bialystok and many other towns; for the Russian people have never been cruel or bloodthirsty...It is quite well known that the guilt lies with a group of vile criminals who...by broadcasting lies and slanders have created a hatred between one race and another...

Of course he was naive and there were divisions within the ranks of the utopians, particularly among the French who were still sensitive about the controversial Dreyfuss affair. They wished to conceal the fact that Zamenhof was a Jew since it would have been problematic to suggest that the movement was the by-product of Jewish idealism. Zamenhof called his religious ideas “Hillelism” and often cited the familiar phrase, “What is hateful to you do not do to your fellow: That is the whole Law; all the rest is explanation: go and learn.” He advocated the use of Esperanto among the

Jews, urging that they follow the teaching of Hillel and that Mosaic Law should be interpreted in spirit rather than to the letter.

Ludovic Zamenhof resigned from formal leadership of the movement in 1912 and died of heart disease in Warsaw in 1917. Impressive memorial services were held and H.G. Wells sent a message describing Zamenhof as “one of the finest specimens of that international idealism which is the natural gift of Jewry to mankind.”

By the time of Zamenhof’s death, there were nearly 2,000 Esperanto societies throughout the world. Many classic literary works (eg. the Bible, Homer’s Iliad, Shakespeare) were translated into the new language. In his birthplace of Bialystok, Esperanto became a required language in most schools. However, enthusiasm waned with the advent of the Russian Revolution and World War I. There was a revival of interest in the 1930s which was shattered with the coming of the Nazis. Hitlerism supplanted Hillelism. Two of Dr. Zamenhof’s three children were physicians and were sent from the Warsaw ghetto directly to their deaths at Treblinka.

Today Ludwig Zamenhof’s grave in Warsaw’s old Jewish cemetery is covered by a headstone decorated by a large green star, the symbol of the Esperanto movement. It’s estimated that today there are as many as 1000 native speakers of Esperanto, the international association has affiliates in 71 countries and there are individual members in many more.

SOURCES

A version of this essay originally appeared in my book *Case Reports. Short Stories about Jewish Doctors* that was published in 1997.

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