

HERZL MAGIC

David Matlow is the world's leading private collector of Herzl memorabilia **By Renee Ghert-Zand** *Toronto*

WHEN TORONTO attorney David Matlow was 12 years old, he and his good friend, Barry Simon, wrote a play for their seventh grade class in Jewish day school. They called it "The Hall of Zionists," modeling it after "The Hall of Presidents" attraction at Disney World. Matlow remembers being Ze'ev Jabotinsky and his friend playing Theodor Herzl.

For most people, such a school assignment would be something forgotten years later, or if it were recalled at all, it would just be a fond childhood memory to look back on. But for Matlow, it is the moment he points to as the beginning of his lifelong fascination with anything and everything to do with Theodor Herzl, the father of modern political Zionism and the visionary of the State of Israel.

Over the last 41 years, Matlow has gone from being a middle-school student playacting a Zionist leader to becoming the world's leading private collector of Herzl memorabilia. He owns between 2,500 and 3,000 Herzl-related items. He is not sure of the exact number, but people in the business tell him that of the handful of private Herzl collections in the world, his is the largest.

"It's honestly hard to keep counting," Matlow, 53, explains to *The Jerusalem Report* about the fact that he isn't sure precisely how many Herzl items he has.

Keeping count is a difficulty he has faced before. He also has large collections of Israeli stamps, coins, bank notes, company share notes and Coca-Cola memorabilia – though none of them come close to measuring up to his vast Herzl collection.

"I've been collecting since age 10. My

character is one of extremes," Matlow admits.

At this point, his Toronto home, which he shares with his cognitive behavioral therapist wife, Leanne, and their three daughters, has become a de facto Herzl archive and museum. Memorabilia, on display or boxed up, fills room after room, save for the basement.

"I don't keep anything down there for fear of flooding," he explains. "And our youngest daughter, Yael, who is a senior in high school, has declared her bedroom a Herzl-free zone."

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While Matlow may have become hooked on Herzl as a student growing up in Jewish day schools and as the son of an intensely Zionist family, he didn't actually begin collecting Herzl memorabilia until 1990. That was the year his grandmother died and he inherited a portrait of Herzl that hung in her villa in Ramat Gan. (Matlow's grandparents immigrated to Israel from Canada in 1954.)

Matlow's collecting nature kicked in, and before long, he was amassing huge amounts

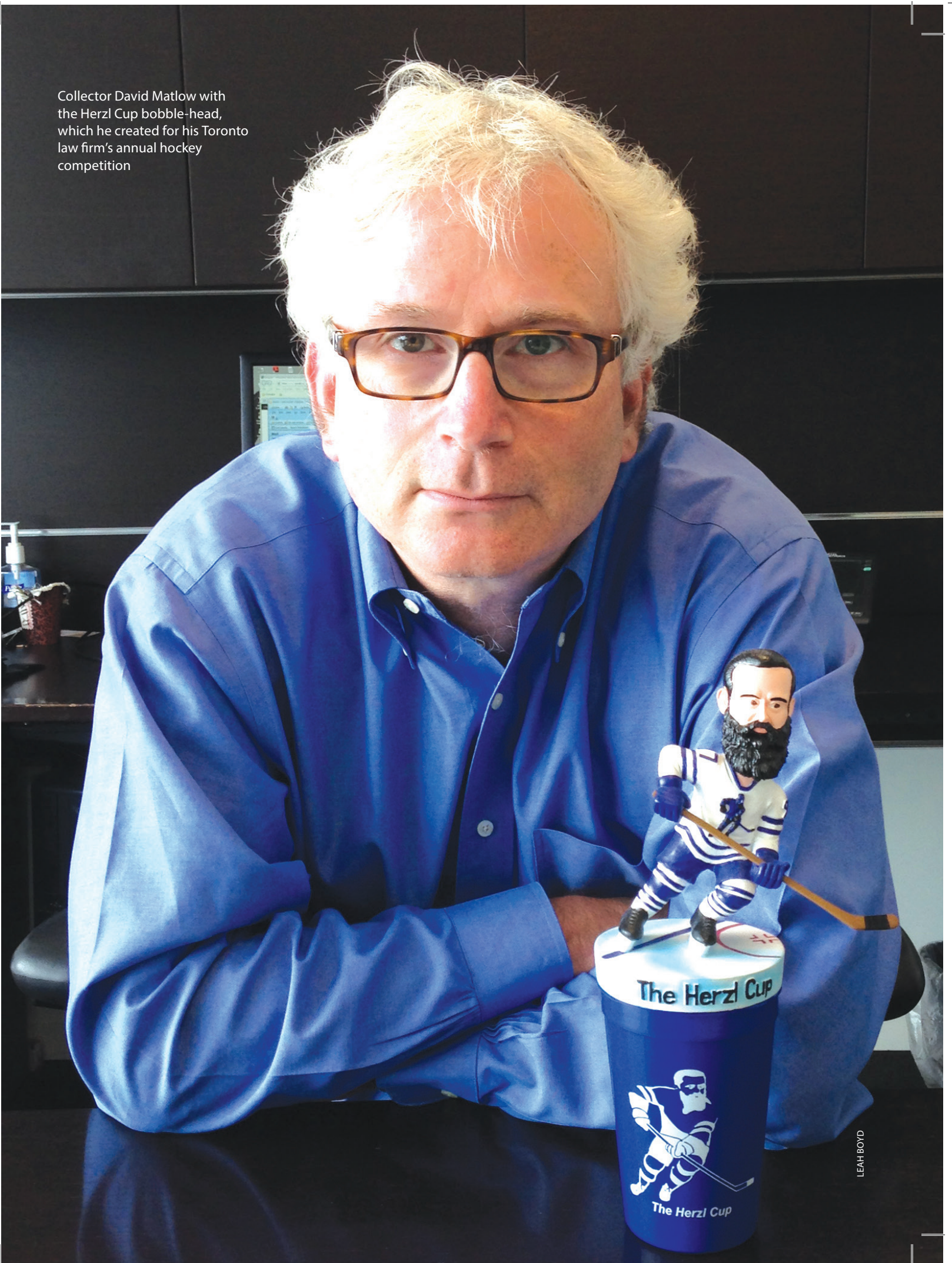
of Herzl-related material, both vintage and contemporary – from postcards to plates to pen knives. Early on, he discovered that Israeli philatelic auction houses list Herzl collectables in their catalogues. Then, came the advent of eBay.

"I started on eBay five years ago. At any given time, you can find about 400 or 500 Herzl items on the site," Matlow says. It has not been hard for him to come by items to add to his collection. "One thing begets another. It's like dominoes falling," he explains.

For instance, Matlow bought a little cutout of Herzl from 1906 on eBay. He let the seller know that he would be interested in anything else Herzl-related he might have. The seller turned out to be a Judaica dealer in Brooklyn, who responded that he could procure for Matlow pieces from the large Herzl collection that had been amassed by Manfred Anson, a German Jewish immigrant who died in 2012. The majority of Anson's Herzl collection was donated to the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem. Later, however, a stash of Herzl memorabilia was found to have remained in his home, and these were the items the dealer offered Matlow.

Matlow knows of only a very small number of Herzl collectors other than himself and Anson. He has visited two of them in Israel: Motti Friedman, academic director of the Zionist Archives, and Dr. Shaul Ladany, the Ben-Gurion University industrial engineering and management professor and accomplished race walker, who survived the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre. According to Matlow, there is

Collector David Matlow with the Herzl Cup bobble-head, which he created for his Toronto law firm's annual hockey competition



LEAH BOYD

PHOTOS BY DAVID CALLAGHAN

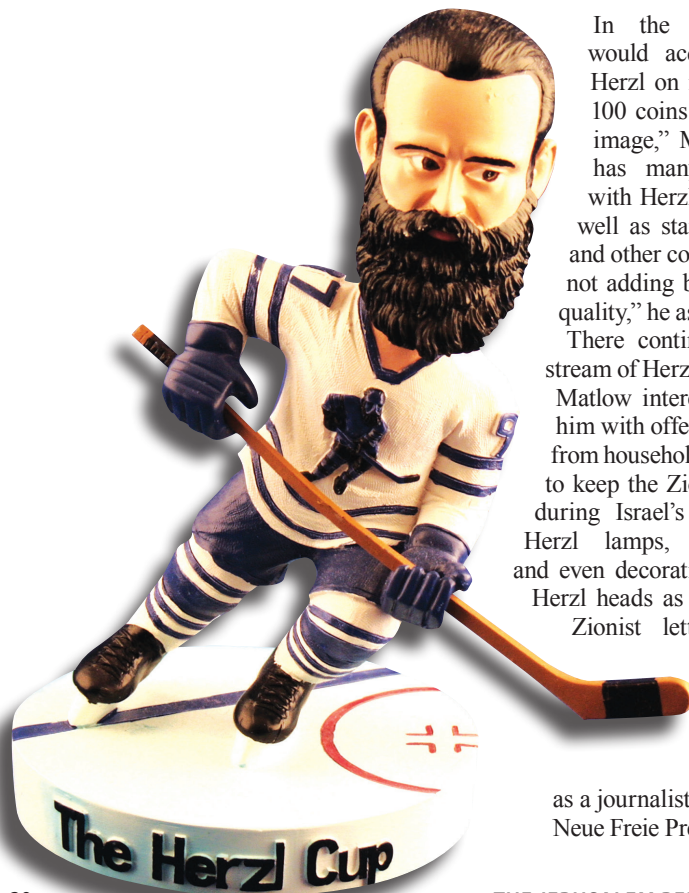


one collector in the US and another in Switzerland.

The Herzl collectors may occasionally communicate with one another, but they have never held any organized meeting or conference. As far as Matlow is aware, he is the only one to have organized an exhibition of his collection. In recent years, he has shown selections from his collection at Jewish venues in Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton and Ottawa.



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In the beginning, Matlow would acquire anything with Herzl on it. "I have more than 100 coins and medals with his image," Matlow says. He also has many Israeli banknotes with Herzl's image on them, as well as stamps issued by Israel and other countries. "But now I'm not adding bulk. I'm focusing on quality," he asserts.

There continues to be a steady stream of Herzl memorabilia to keep Matlow interested. People contact him with offers of pieces that range from household items manufactured to keep the Zionist movement alive during Israel's early decades (like Herzl lamps, Hanukka menorahs, and even decorative ship models with Herzl heads as their prows) to early Zionist letters and books of great historical importance, to Herzl's business card from when he worked in Paris as a journalist for the Vienna-based *Neue Freie Presse* newspaper.

"There has also been a resurgence in Herzl nostalgia lately, with artists using Herzl as a motif," Matlow notes. The collector himself invented a Herzl collectible. He named his law firm's hockey tournament The Herzl Cup, and created a plastic bobble-head trophy to be awarded to the winning team.

While Matlow suggests that he could use the help of a museum studies graduate student to help him organize his huge collection, he maintains that he knows what he has and where everything is. "The catalogue and filing system are in my head," he says.

He knows exactly where in his house to go to retrieve his most prized possession in his Herzl collection. It's a carnet de bal that belonged to Fanny Wolfssohn, wife of David Wolfssohn, the second president of the Zionist Congress.

The carnet de bal is a sort of little autograph book a woman would carry at a ball. It listed the dances to be played that evening, with spaces for partners to sign their name next to the dance they wished to dance with the woman. Fanny Wolfssohn's carnet de bal was from a ball held at one of the Zionist congresses and contains the signatures of Herzl and other early Zionist leaders. It came to Matlow as one of 900 Herzl and Zionist Congress-related pieces he bought as a single lot.

MATLOW IS circumspect about how he finances the purchase of so many pieces of memorabilia. "People give me small things, but I am financing this program. And it's a pleasure. I have a pile of receipts, but I don't keep tabs on the finances involved," he says.

He hints at the expense involved by saying, "A handwritten letter by Herzl has value. They're not making more of these." But he doesn't go any further on the issue. He also does not divulge the total value of his collection, but shares that the most he has spent on a single item is \$6,000. (A rare note written by Herzl in 1903 was sold at a Tel Aviv auction for \$100,000, *Haaretz* reported on March 22.)

Matlow may be driven in part by his collecting gene, but the way he sees it, his fascination with all things relating to Herzl is really a proxy for a fascination with the establishment of the State of Israel. In particular, it is very important for him that people know that the modern Zionist narrative began in the 1880s. "The state didn't land from the sky on the heads of the



indigenous population in 1948," he says.

Matlow is dedicated to ensuring that Herzl's "If you will it, it is not a dream" attitude is not lost on young people today. He is also a proponent of the educational power of objects and artifacts. He has personally learned a great deal about European Jewish life before World War II and the Holocaust from researching the historical backgrounds of the items he has acquired.

"I recently bought a student's file from the Herzl School in Berlin, which was open until the war," Matlow recounts. "This object made me very sad. The boy's record goes up to seventh grade. What happened to the student? Did he live, or did he die? This is precisely what Herzl was worried about. He saw the storm coming."

Matlow considers himself merely the custodian of this huge treasure trove of Herzl collectables, and he would be pleased to hand it over to an institution for cataloguing, permanent storage and exhibition, should the conditions and timing be right. "I would be thrilled for the collection to ultimately find a place where it would be accessible to scholars," he says.

In the meantime, he continues to share Herzl with the world through the traveling exhibition he has put together. He has also partnered with his filmmaker brother-in-law, Eli Tal-El, in producing "My Herzl," a documentary film (distributed by Ruth Diskin Films) that uncovers the man behind the Zionist icon.

The jumping-off point of the film is Matlow's 50th birthday celebration in

August 2010 in Basel, Switzerland, the site of the first Zionist Congress in 1897. He invited 27 friends (including old friend Barry Simon who played Herzl back in middle school) and family members to join him in staying at the Three Kings Hotel, where Herzl himself had slept. Matlow was photographed on the balcony, gazing out over the Rhine River, striking the same iconic contemplative pose as Herzl.

It is clear at the beginning of the film that Tal-El lacks appreciation for his brother-in-law's Herzl obsession. However, with the help of educators, experts and artists interviewed on camera, he comes to an understanding of what excites Matlow about Zionism's founder.

"I wanted to do a film. The story told through the exhibit was not on a broad enough canvas," Matlow explains about his foray into movie producing.

He hopes that viewers will come away with the more nuanced sense of Herzl that he has gained over his years of collecting Herzl memorabilia. The film deals at length with the tragic personal consequences of the leader's tireless efforts on behalf of the Jewish people before he died at 44 in 1904.

"Herzl had a major impact on Jewish history, but he had many human frailties. He was not superhuman," Matlow reflects. ■

