

## Enemy alien

Stefan Zweig was a highly successful poet, dramatist and novelist. But it is his autobiography of a life overturned by war that best captures the spirit of his age.

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**Saturday February 2, 2008**

### Guardian

A few years ago, at a conference in Istanbul, I heard a speaker raise loud cheers by denouncing the invasion of Iraq with the words "the Enlightenment with bombs". I felt I understood his fury, but I was disconcerted by the contempt with which he pronounced the word "Enlightenment". There were, to be sure, many flaws in the Enlightenment ideal. Yet, whether the dismissal comes from an enraged Turkish artist or from critics such as Camille Paglia or John Gray, it should be asked just what it is that is being flushed away.

The Enlightenment ideas that emerged in the arguments of Voltaire, Kant, Hume and others in the 18th century were resurgent in the period extending from the end of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 to the outbreak of the first world war in 1914. In these decades, Europe's imperial nations appeared finally to have overcome their habit of making war against one another, and many dreamed of new forms of international cooperation and a world governed by reason, democracy and scientific progress. One of the best critical testimonies to the spirit of this time is to be found in the autobiography, *The World of Yesterday*, of the Austrian Jewish writer Stefan Zweig.

Born in 1881, Zweig grew up in Vienna, the son of a wealthy Jewish family with international connections. An outstanding member of a brilliant class at school, he was multilingual and immersed in the great works of philosophy and culture from an early age. He became a highly successful poet, dramatist, novelist and biographer. Zweig lived in beautiful homes and accumulated a magnificent collection of literary manuscripts. He travelled widely and became a well-known exponent of literary cosmopolitanism. But the time came when his "roaming through the world" became "a flight from the hounds". His life was to be wrecked by the catastrophic events of the 20th century, and he ended up wandering the world as a displaced person: an "enemy alien" worrying about the threat of internment, if not actually queuing, suitcase in hand, for a residence permit.

In 1934, he left Salzburg for London and then Bath. Eventually, he withdrew further, to the US, where he completed *The World of Yesterday* in 1942, writing fast and entirely out of his head, since his library and archives were by then lost to him. Zweig describes the late 19th century of his childhood as the "world of security". Its values were established and largely beyond question. Its members were confident in their monarchy and parliament. As for the possibility of violent disruption, scarcity, war and the intervention of life-changing fate, all such thoughts were swept under the carpets of a society devoted to bourgeois comfort.

What did they see, asks Zweig of that world in which everything had its norm, its definite measure and weight? Each of them lived his life in uniformity. A single life from beginning to end, without ascent, without decline, without disturbance or danger, a life of slight anxieties, hardly noticeable transitions. In even rhythm, leisurely and quietly, the wave of time bore them from the cradle to the grave . . . What took place out in the world occurred only in the newspapers and never knocked at their door.

Should he decide to travel, the well-off European of this age might journey as far as India without a passport: the frontiers which, with their customs officers, police and militia, have become wire barriers thanks to the pathological suspicion of everybody against everybody else, were nothing but symbolic lines which one crossed with as little thought as one crosses the Meridian of Greenwich.

Formed in this atmosphere, but also torn out of it, Zweig was both the creature of his time and the roughly awakened judge of its illusions. He condemns the desiccated rigidity of its school curriculum, its confining customs of women's dress and its sexual hypocrisy. The people of this era were naively settled in their optimism and "touching liberalism". They had no idea that life could also consist of "tension, and profusion, and being lifted up from all sides", or that "each succeeding day that dawns outside our window can smash

our life". They refused to heed the warnings of Sigmund Freud, who had argued that their optimistic idea of reason as the force of the future was a chimera floating over turbulent complexes and drives.

At the end of June 1914, Zweig was sitting in a park in the German town of Baden reading a study of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky when the concert band suddenly put down its instruments and people started to gather around a newly posted placard announcing that Franz Ferdinand had been assassinated.

Shortly afterwards, Zweig was at Le Coq, a seaside resort in Flanders, enjoying a short holiday and making his annual visit to the home of the poet Émile Verhaeren. Europe's vacationists were "peaceably assembled" in their mixed nationalities. They splashed about, flew kites in the sun, and tried to ignore the newspapers, which were full of dire prophecies of war. Zweig would be shocked by the fervour with which the German and Austrian peoples embraced the fighting, their minds dominated by state propaganda and its "organisation of lies". He found it impossible to "converse reasonably" with anybody in the aroused atmosphere, when even apparently benign people would end their conversations with a "stupid phrase" such as "He who cannot hate cannot really love".

The "world of security" was exposed in its inadequacies, and nowhere more thoroughly than in its naive liberal idealism. Zweig knew this well, yet far from embarking on a denunciation of its ideas of Enlightenment and internationalism, he strengthened his commitment to them. He affronted the superpatriots in both Austria and Germany by writing in the Berlin press about his determination not to betray his friends overseas, and he made the most of the contact this brought him with internationalist objectors in other countries.

Having lived in Salzburg during the postwar years of hunger and inflation, Zweig provides a memorable account of Austria in its moment of defeat, when prices spiralled chaotically and "whatever was not nailed down, disappeared". The situation was so crazy that the first-rate Hotel de l'Europe in Salzburg, where Zweig then lived, was "occupied for a period by English unemployed . . . able to live more cheaply at that distinguished hostelry than in their slums at home". Meanwhile, "a veritable pandemonium of drunken, bawling, belching humanity" crowded Salzburg railway station. People poured back and forth across the nearby frontier to get drunk cheaply, their direction determined by which of the two inflations, German or Austrian, was worse at the time.

Against this background, Zweig was not initially inclined to worry when the postwar generation "emancipated itself with a violent wrench from the established order and revolted against every tradition". He felt some sympathy with the young Wandervogel, walking in the mountains, determined to break with the repressive culture that had dominated their parents' lives. But tracing this youthful breach as it extended from hiking to art and revolutionary politics, he soon saw the discredited "world of security" being replaced not by a new spirit of reason, but by an iconoclastic impulse that would come to resemble nothing so much as a reckless smash-and-grab raid on the future.

Having peered around the cabarets of Berlin, Zweig recoils, describing the 1920s as an "orgiastic" and, indeed, "perverted" time in which "the comprehensible element in everything was proscribed, melody in music, resemblance in portraits, intelligibility in language". Unwilling to pretend "ape-like adherence" to the new tendency, he kept his head down through this artificial age of drugs, polymorphous perversity and Hamlet performed in modern evening dress. He travelled widely, lecturing in France, Italy, America and Soviet Russia, as well as in Germany and Austria, on the central theme of his life: "the intellectual unification of Europe".

Writing in the early 1940s, however, he had to admit the failure of all attempts to establish a new "intellectual internationalism". Zweig had become a highly successful writer in the "comparatively peaceful" years from 1924-33. His novels sold in the hundreds of thousands. They were dramatised, filmed and adopted by schools. By the time he was 50, in 1931, he had much to feel grateful for. Yet living in Salzburg, not far from Munich, he had also been well placed to note the arrival of a disconcerting new force on the Bavarian scene. At first, the Nazi newspaper looked like a local village initiative, and it seemed unlikely that Hitler would add up to much, even though he was said to be making Munich restless in the years immediately after the armistice. Zweig hardly felt challenged when small squads of men wearing brown shirts and displaying swastikas started to appear in towns such as Reichenhall and Berchtesgaden near the frontier. Before long, however, he noticed that these "storm-troops" had new uniforms, and the use of motorcycles and lorries, which suggested that larger interests were funding Hitler's advance through Bavaria's beer cellars.

Zweig's own troubles began after the Reichstag fire of 1933, when he had his first intimations that his books would be banned ("for the protection of the German people"). He had written a libretto for Richard Strauss's opera based on Ben Jonson's play *The Silent Woman*. Torn between his antisemitism and his reverence for Strauss, Hitler permitted the opening performances but prohibited the opera and its intended successor soon

afterwards. Zweig's friends started making excuses to stay away, finding it increasingly inconvenient to visit a Jew. In 1934, police searched his house - a shocking affront at that time - and he left for London, where he took British citizenship and stayed until 1940.

He noted the popularity among the British of Chamberlain's policy of appeasement, but did not feel able to speak out against it: "Hitler only had to utter the word 'peace' in a speech to arouse the newspapers to enthusiasm, to make them forget all his past deeds, and desist from asking why, after all, Germany was arming so madly." He also attended weekly meetings with Sigmund Freud, "the most revered of my friends", after the psychoanalyst moved to London from Vienna. With the outbreak of the second world war in 1939, Zweig found himself an enemy alien: "By the stroke of a pen the meaning of a whole life had been transformed into a paradox."

He wrote *The World of Yesterday* in the summer of 1941, while staying in New York City and New Haven. Published in 1943, it could scarcely be less like the popular confessional autobiographies of our time, which tend to be soft-centred victimologies in which the self is presented as an innocent, childlike entity, while history comes across as a form of abuse. Zweig tells his story without vanity or self-pity. He tends to keep a tightly closed lid on personal feelings, preferring to articulate his life as affected by larger events. He is severe about the shortcomings of the "optimistic liberal" outlook he had known as a youth.

Not long after finishing this memoir, Zweig and his second wife Charlotte Altmann, about whom he tells us next to nothing, sailed from New York for Brazil. The liner provided him with the setting for his last novella, a brilliant story entitled *The Royal Game*, in which a brutally competent world chess champion is challenged by an "amateur" who has learned chess as an accidental survival strategy while enduring Nazi interrogation in Vienna. Not long after arriving in Brazil, in 1942, Zweig and his wife took their own lives in what is believed to have been a shared act of suicide.

In his last message, he expressed gentlemanly thanks to this latest country prepared to accommodate him, while also explaining that he had found himself unable, as a man in his 60s, to "make another wholly new beginning".