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Stefan Zweig's Narratives of Migration and Emigration

ABSTRACT. Stefan Zweig's relation to the phenomenon of migration is indeed a complicated issue, which can be approached from at least three perspectives. Firstly, there is the biographic aspect: as one of the major representatives of the German exile literature (*Exilliteratur*), Zweig has one of the most dramatic biographies among the German authors in the 20th century, including his emigration from Austria to England and New York, then to South America, where (in Petrópolis near Rio de Janeiro) he died in February 1942. Secondly, migration is present in his fictional works, such as the short stories *Schachnovelle* or *Incident on Lake Geneva*. Thirdly, Zweig published, a year before his death, his book *Brazil, Land of the Future*, which, lacking fictitious elements, but including biographic ones, basically summarizes the history (also immigration-history) of Brazil and the main cultural features of his host country. Accordingly, the following paper is a brief analysis of three possible dimensions of migration in Stefan Zweig: biographic migration, including his *voluntary* and, later, his *forced* migration, finally *fictional* migration, i.e. migration as a subject of his works.

1. Zweig: Voluntary and Forced Migration

Zweig's life and work is strongly interrelated with migration. On the one hand, travelling across European and intercontinental borders, which can be called voluntary migration, played a significant part in his life. He was clearly fond of travelling, even fascinated with it, including the stories of great travelers like Ferdinand Magellan, on whom he even published a literary biography in 1938. Also some of his characters are migrants, like those in the *Schachnovelle* (*The Royal Game*), written in Brazilian emigration (and first published in Buenos Aires in 1942, then in English translation in New York, 1944), and told by an Austrian migrant in first person singular, a story which is full of migrants travelling from New York to Buenos Aires. On the other hand, forced migration played an even more important role in his life, also in his death. Although, or rather precisely because we have a pacifist, and friend

of the other famous, French pacifist, Romain Rolland, on whom he also published a book in 1921, he was persecuted by the authorities in 1934, a shocking experience that compelled him to leave Austria immediately, the country he was born in and in which he became a famous writer. Four years later, when Austria joined Nazi Germany (during the so-called *Anschluss*), Stefan Zweig was already in London, possessing British citizenship and divorcing from his first wife. He married again in 1939, his second wife being his faithful companion during his travels and migration, up to the very last: their suicide in Petrópolis. His period of emigration in England was, however, not too long, Zweig being afraid of the British attitude towards the «Enemy Aliens» that recognised no real difference between Germans and Austrians in Britain during the war years. To avoid complications as an immigrant from an enemy land, Zweig and his wife left London in 1940 for New York, travelling further on to Argentina and Paraguay, before definitively settling in Brazil. Here he soon published his book on Brazil's history and culture, past and present, also reflecting his own situation as an immigrant in the South American country. Although the book shows a wholly positive attitude towards Brazil and its people, and also that of the Brazilians towards immigrants in general and him personally, all these positive impressions were apparently not strong enough to prevent him and his wife from committing suicide. On the night of 22-23 February, 1942, Stefan Zweig died of an overdose of Veronal (his wife following him into death) in his house lying 50 km from Rio de Janeiro, known today as the Casa Stefan Zweig, or Stefan Zweig Museum, respectively.

In his suicide note, Zweig emphasizes that he leaves the world out of his own free will and «with clear senses», not before fulfilling his last duty, i.e. to thank Brazil for its kind hospitality: «Day after day I learned to love it more and nowhere else would I have preferred to build a new life now that the world of my language has disappeared for me and that my spiritual land, Europe, is destroying itself»¹. As an explanation for ending his life, Zweig argues that his age

¹ Stefan Zweig: Declaração. In: Donald A. Prater and Volker Michels (eds.): *Stefan Zweig. Leben und Werk im Bild*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel 1981, p. 318.

of sixty years did not leave him enough energy to start a completely new life, as he felt exhausted after the «long years of wandering». Therefore, he decided to end his life «head up high», hoping that his friends «will see the sunrise after the long night», whereas he, «too impatient, [will] go before them».

There is apparently a bundle of reasons why Zweig gave up his life in Brazilian emigration, despite his feeling comfortable in a country that he was very grateful to. Spiritual, psychological and perhaps also physical exhaustion may have been the main reasons, as Zweig had indeed led a restless life, especially after 1934, with repeated migrations and in permanent search for a safe and peaceful home. He seemed to find in Brazil what he had always longed for: a blissful asylum far from the madding crowd of a collapsing European civilization that was once his spiritual homeland, cradle and inspiration, but also far from the war he had always hated and the barbaric destruction that affected the whole continent. It is indeed paradoxical that Zweig chose to die in a country that offered him peace and liberty, including the intellectual and creative freedom he valued so much during his entire life. He enjoyed his Brazilian asylum for no more than two years, a period in which he learned about the history and people of Brazil; moreover, he also learned to love the country that apparently offered him everything he desired.

Nevertheless: however receptive Brazil and its people proved to be, they could not replace Austria, Zweig's homeland, even less the pre-war Austria, the peaceful and hopeful monarchy at the turn of the century – as he saw it and described in his essays –, where the free spirit and arts blossomed, where spiritual life and culture seemed so natural and promising, especially for the well-off *Bürgertum*, to which Stefan Zweig also belonged by his birth. (He was born as the second son of a Jewish textile manufacturer.) What is more: Brazil could not replace Zweig's mother tongue, so important and problematic for every migrant, and even more important for a writer in emigration, whose whole career and each success was linked to the German language – including his «Brazilian» book. Clearly, the problem of the native language affected all (German) authors in emigration, although to varying extent. Thomas Mann, for instance, adapted better to the American conditions of his emigration than his brother Heinrich, who never returned from California, whereas Sándor Márai kept writing in Hungarian even in his exile in San Diego,

before he too committed suicide there. Being torn out of the sphere of one's own language is often traumatic, no matter how sunny the emigration seems to be, and Stefan Zweig may not have been the exception to the rule.

But Zweig's suicide may also have had other reasons, which could be summed up as a kind of pessimism related to the future of Austria and Europe in general. The war events in Europe, including Austria's *Anschluss* in 1938, after which the Nazis gained ground in Austria, reshaping, and even renaming the country, the bombardments in England, then also in Germany, sea battles with civil casualties, the German-Soviet war, and last but not least, the Nazis' new 'Jewish laws', by which Zweig must have felt personally affected. Only a few weeks before Zweig's death, the «Final Solution of the Jewish Question» was declared by the Nazis at their conference in Wannsee, Potsdam, near Berlin, which led to the intensification of the Holocaust. It was practically only bad news the Zweig could receive from Europe, giving him little hope for a better future. In 1942 defeating the Nazis seemed a rather doubtful perspective, whereas the future envisioned and propagated by them appeared monstrous and deeply discouraging. Many German and Austrian authors were forced into emigration, who, in the beginning, might have expected Hitler's rule to be of rather short duration, but with the lengthening of the war they saw less and less hope in returning to their homeland. The Europe of yesterday, so impressively depicted by Stefan Zweig in his memoirs (essays), seemed to be lost forever. The last representatives of the once flourishing *Wiener Moderne* (Hermann Broch, Robert Musil, but also Stefan Zweig) had to face a desperate future, with emigration as an endless damnation. Very few of them managed to return home. Thus, Stefan Zweig's choice of suicide was an act of desperation, caused both by psychological exhaustion after a very active and restless life, and a historical situation that offered little hope for a peaceful return to his former homeland. But, in a sense, it was perhaps also an act of courage, inasmuch as – if we are to believe one of Zweig's friends, the Nobel-Prize-winning writer Hermann Hesse² – choosing his own way and time of death is much more a testimony of courage rather than of any kind of cowardice.

² See Hermann Hesse's novel *The Steppenwolf* (1922), including a chapter called *Treatise on the Steppenwolf*, where Hesse interprets suicide as an act of courage.

Stefan Zweig spent the last, probably most dramatic, eight years of his life in emigration, which is, of course, qualitatively different from his earlier wanderings throughout Europe or other continents. However, there are some similarities between the two periods of his life, such as the openness to other cultures, or the experience of trans-culturality. Zweig was a cosmopolitan intellectual, a *Weltbürger*, whose life and work were exactly the opposite of the Nazi propaganda, a vivid and eloquent refutation of any racist ideology. Although aware of his European identity, he was always open to otherness, which he approached with empathetic sensibility. Even if an «escapist drive»³ might have played a role in his wanderings, he was also led by the desire to learn about other people and cultures, and thereby not giving up, but enriching his own identity, which he conceived as both European and universal at the same time. His diaries⁴, letters, essays and other literary works testify to his interest in otherness and cultural multiplicity. Urged by his friend, the writer and politician Walther Rathenau, Zweig set out in November 1908 for the Far East: India (Calcutta, Benares), Ceylon, Rangoon (Yan-gon), etc. Although shocked by India's poverty and caste system, considering the latter also to be the Europeans' fault, a result of European prejudices, ostracism (*Ächtung*) and racism, Zweig drew his own conclusions from his Indian experience regarding the European culture itself. Racism as part of the then European mentality, which he registered with a certain sense of shame, turned out to be a destructive phenomenon that Zweig hoped would disappear from the world in the decades to follow; it is, of course, a bitter irony of history that matters turned out even worse in Europe and especially in Germany in the Twenties and Thirties, which brought Hitler and his relentless racism to power. Far from regarding his journey to India as a romantic

³ Giorgia Sogos: Ein Europäer in Brasilien zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft: utopische Projektionen des Exilanten Stefan Zweig. In: Lydia Schmuck / Marina Corrêa (eds.): Europa im Spiegel von Migration und Exil. Projektionen – Imaginationen – hybride Identitäten. Berlin: Frank & Timme 2015, p. 115-133, here p. 119.

⁴ For Zweig's cultural narratives in his diaries see Matjaž Birk: «Reisen ist Rast in der Unruhe der Welt». Fremdhermeneutische Einblicke in die Reisetagebücher von Stefan Zweig. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2016.

adventure, Zweig confesses that he learned from the Indian people much more than from any temple, palace or book, discovering those «forces and tensions that move our world», which inspired him to look differently at his own European life and culture: «Many a detail that had formerly occupied me unduly seemed petty after my return, and I ceased to regard our Europe as the eternal axis of the universe»⁵. It was probably in India where Zweig gave up his Eurocentric view and opened his consciousness for the whole world and its different cultures and peoples, registering the destructive forces in man, especially racism and the feeling of superiority, so damaging to Europe and the whole world in the years and decades to follow. Unfortunately, just as Zweig was developing his trans-cultural and pacifist views, Germany and Austria were heading more and more towards a racist, Aryan and nationalist ideology that inevitably led to the two world wars.

However, in 1911 Zweig managed to take a journey to the American continent, including New York, Canada, some Caribbean countries, also Panama, where the Panama Canal was under construction at that time. Although New York did not show the technical and civil progress, that «enchanted night beauty» of later times, Zweig was deeply impressed by the land of freedom and the «piece of the future»⁶ that America represented to him. Overcoming the feeling of European superiority that characterized so many of his European contemporaries, Zweig regarded America⁷ as the guarantee of a democratic future for the world, where freedom of the individual prevailed over the brutality of oppressive ideologies. Still, his enthusiasm for the freedom he experienced and peaceful progress was mixed with the «feeling of extreme solitude»⁸, which might be interpreted as an early sign of the later depression that overwhelmed him in his emigration during WW II. However, at this early stage of his life and wanderings, Zweig managed to overcome his loneliness

⁵ Stefan Zweig: *Die Welt von Gestern. Erinnerungen eines Europäers*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 1981, p. 216.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 221.

⁷ Zweig always uses the denotation *Amerika*, and never *Vereinigte Staaten* (United States).

⁸ Zweig: *Die Welt von Gestern*, p. 221.

by inventing a «game for myself»⁹. Suggesting to himself that he was «a jobless emigrant with my last seven dollars in my pocket»¹⁰, he started strolling along the streets of New York in search of a proper job. After finding in two days of searching several jobs that, imaginatively, suited him, he became excited about «how much opportunity there was in this young country for anyone willing to work»¹¹. Also another, significant incident helped him dispel his loneliness: the discovery of one of his own books in the window of a bookshop: «Something of this self of mine that was being driven through these strange streets unknown and apparently futilely, un-known and observed by none, something of this self had preceded me»¹². This moment of encountering a part of his identity as a writer wandering in a foreign country and coping with deep solitude may have symbolic significance: as the self-definition of an author, who, even while far away from his homeland, understood himself as the bearer of a universal culture and humane responsibility, as an artist who wanted to spread his ideals everywhere in the world, seeking to foil inhumane, hostile and destructive ideologies.

It was this optimism that characterized Stefan Zweig and the modern European (including German and Austrian) society at the beginning of the 20th century, as «there was progress everywhere»¹³. But progress and optimism were suddenly stopped by the First World War, although it was initially approved of and even expected by numerous German intellectuals, such as some members of the expressionist movement, but also more mainstream writers such as Thomas Mann. The voice of the pacifists remained unheard, some of whom (e.g. Herman Hesse) were even harassed by the self-proclaimed German «patriots». Stefan Zweig rejected any kind of loud patriotism and nationalism, even representing in this time a kind of defeatist attitude: not believing in victory, he also considered that «even if it could be achieved

⁹ «Spiel mit mir selbst». Ibidem, p. 222.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Ibidem, p. 223.

¹³ «Überall ging es vorwärts.» Ibidem, p. 226.

by immeasurable sacrifice, it could never justify that sacrifice»¹⁴. After spending the years of war in the military archives of Vienna, he left Austria for Switzerland in 1917, afterwards propagating his pacifist ideas as the correspondent of the Viennese newspaper *Neue Freie Presse*.

2. *Fictitious Migration: the Short Story Incident on Lake Geneva*

Beyond his engagement as a publicist and advocate of peace, Zweig also reflected the effects of war upon the social life in Europe, including the phenomenon of migration, in texts of different kinds. Travel as a voluntary form of migration is an important part both of Zweig's biography and his works, including his essays and reports edited in the volume *Auf Reisen*¹⁵. The biblical Exodus, seen as a complex form of migration, but also interpreted as Jewish destiny, is the subject of the dramatic poem *Jeremias* (1928), but also of his «Jewish» short stories. Zweig's probably most famous short story, the *Chess Story*, set on a ship full of travelers and emigrants, some of whom, like Dr. B., bear heavy memories rooted in the Nazi Era, can also be regarded as an example of fictitious or fictionalized migration, as can the *Incident on Lake Geneva* (*Episode am Genfer See*, 1927), which tells a story of what we would call today «illegal migration», which deserves more attention than it has received so far.

Boris, the protagonist of the short story, is a Russian migrant, who, after deserting the Russian army, involuntarily lands naked at the shore of Lake Geneva (in neutral Switzerland), in the hope of reaching his homeland Russia, where (in Siberia, near Lake Baikal) he had been enlisted in the Tsar's army, then transported by wagon and ship to an extremely warm place, probably Southern France¹⁶. Zweig depicts in a rather grotesque manner the reaction

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 290.

¹⁵ See Stefan Zweig: *Auf Reisen. Feuilletons und Berichte*. Hg. von Knut Beck. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 2004.

¹⁶ In 1915, the French asked for support from Russia in their battle with the Germans. After the approval of Tsar Nicholas II, the first contingent of the Russian Expeditionary Force arrived in Marseille in 1916. See Chris Kempshall: *An Alliance of Competing Identities: Stereotypes and Hierarchies among Entente Expeditionary Forces on the Western Front*. In: Alan Beyerchen / Emre Sencer (eds.): *Expeditionary Forces in the First World War*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2019, p. 177-204, esp. 184-186.

of the village inhabitants at the sight of the unexpected immigrant: laughter is followed by sympathy after his story is revealed by a translator; one of the women gives him some confection, while others speculate on relieving his homesickness with some money. In the different attitudes shown in the debate about Boris's further destiny, Zweig reveals possible and typical reactions of Western society facing the phenomenon of immigration: curiosity piqued by an extraordinary, sensational event, the feeling of superiority, followed by sympathy expressed in small gifts (as a cheap means to ease one's conscience). However, sympathy with the poor, uncultivated father of three children, a naïve Russian soldier who does not even know how far he is from his own country, and is stupefied by the fact that there are several political borders in Europe that cannot be simply crossed before reaching home (he is also shocked by the news that there is no Tsar in Russia any longer), soon succumbs to bureaucratic machinery: a police officer from Montreux (probably an administrative district) cannot decide whether Boris should be treated as a deserter or as a foreigner without documents; a clerk even rejects the idea of giving him refuge in the place, while a Frenchman argues that he should either start working immediately or else be sent back where he came from. Zweig pictures a political debate *en miniature*, with different «political» points of view fiercely contesting each other, with the radical attitude of repudiation being countered by acceptance and willingness to help. The latter stance is represented by a Danish person who even offers to finance Boris's sustenance for eight days. A manager even tries to console him, showing him into a hotel as his temporary accommodation. From the dramatic dialogue between Boris and the manager it turns out that Boris hopes to get back to his family the next day, whereas the latter informs him about the legal and political complications that will postpone the departure of the refugee to an uncertain future.

The end of the story is a tragic one: Boris, not being able to cope with his complex, confusing and hopeless situation, sneaks back to the lake from where he had been «fished out», leaving the borrowed clothes on the shore, and meeting his death in the water. The story ends rather abruptly, with Zweig offering no solutions to questions of migration or integration. However, the very last sentence of the story makes it clear that the «episode» of the Russian refugee and his death in Lake Geneva is only one of thousands of similar destinies in Europe during WW I. Thus the story can be interpreted as a pacifist warning against the inhumanity of wars.

3. «Brazil, Land of the Future»

Some decades later, the dark spirit of National Socialism conquered Germany and Austria, forcing Zweig himself into emigration. His optimism faded visibly, although his «Brazilian» book betrays little of his despair. The book depicts the past and present of a huge country (that he even calls a «continent»: *Erdteil*) in bright colors, radiating respect, admiration and hope for the future. Zweig first visited Brazil in 1936, on the occasion of a P. E.N. Club congress in Buenos Aires, where he also received an invitation to Brazil. At that time, he admits, he shared the prejudices of the Europeans towards South American countries and their economic and political situation, his preconception being challenged soon after landing in Rio de Janeiro (also visiting São Paulo and Campinas). In that very moment, Brazil turned out to be his love at first sight which he wished to visit again as soon as possible. Thus, after his uneasy emigration in England, there was no question for him and his (second) wife, where to go next. He remained grateful to Brazil up to the very last, also expressing his gratitude in his book, which focused, as Zweig explains in the preface, on the question: «what can we do to make it possible for human beings to live peacefully together, despite all differences of race, class, color, religion, and creed?»¹⁷ On closer inspection, the book proves to be a discourse in opposition to National Socialist and racist ideologies of his time, Brazil being shown as an exemplar of peaceful coexistence of all races and nationalities, whether descendants of the Portuguese colonizers, or Indians, «Negroes imported from Africa», Germans, Italians or even Japanese, who had been successfully integrated throughout the centuries and also in the present in a colorful and prospering Brazilian society. Brazil also appeared in Zweig's eyes as a refutation of all European and mainly racist prejudices and ideologies, as a land that rejects all racist and nationalistic ideas:

¹⁷ Stefan Zweig: *Brazil, Land of the Future*. Transl. by Andrew St. James. New York: Viking Press 1941, p. 7. (hereinafter: «BLF») See also: Volker Michels: «Ethnische Vielfalt gegen rassistische Einfalt. Zur Entstehungsgeschichte von Stefan Zweigs Brasilienbuch». In: Stefan Zweig: *Brasilien – Ein Land der Zukunft*. Frankfurt a.M./Leipzig, Insel 1997, p. 285-299.

From one's European experience one might expect each of these groups to be antagonistic toward the other – the earlier arrivals against the later, white against black, American against European, brown against yellow; and that majorities and minorities would fight each other in permanent struggle for their rights and privileges. But to one's great surprise one soon realizes that all these different races – visibly distinct by their color alone – live in fullest harmony with one another. (BLF, 7)

Zweig unfolds the history of Brazil from the period of colonisation to the present, also including the history of immigration in Brazil, regarded as a process of gradual integration of all the immigrants, be they slaves from Africa, or European settlers in the 20th century. He even offers exact historical facts and events, such as the settling of Jesuits and *Cristãos novos* (the newly baptized Jews), the war between the Portuguese and the Dutch, the gold rush of Minas Geraes, the Swiss colony in Nova Friburgo established in 1817, the German colony in Rio Grande do Sul established in 1825, the abolition of slavery in 1888, the increase of immigration in the following decades¹⁸ and so on. Zweig manages to combine historical facts with sociological and economic observations, resulting in a cultural synthesis which involves the idealization of Brazil as the embodiment of the exact opposite of what he had experienced in Europe, especially in the 1930s. Although he does not omit the description of conflicts and contradictions in the history of Brazil, he draws the image of a harmonious and prosperous country, full of possibilities that, in his view, can represent the future of mankind. Zweig had seldom spoken out directly on political issues, keeping a safe distance from all political disputes and ideologies; however, *Brazil, the Land of the Future* can be regarded as a kind of political manifesto, or even his own political necrology, in which he envisioned a future where people can live together peacefully and harmoniously, wherever they have emigrated from or migrated to.

¹⁸ Zweig speaks about an «immigration of about four to five million whites during the last fifty years [having] an enormously vitalizing effect on Brazil, accompanied by considerable cultural and ethnological advantages». (BLF, 121)

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