

## Die Welt von Gestern

*Erinnerungen eines Europäers*

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Zweig is a European. Thus he wants to be a Native of none but a citizen of all. His circle of friends is thus an international lot, in addition to the expected Austrians and German, also French and Italian, but few if any English (Wells does visit him once). Thus the times he has lived through, and which he in fact did not have the courage and stamina to see to its end, have perhaps been the most momentous humans have ever encountered. During the sixty years or so of his life, the world changed drastically from the 1880's to the 1940's. The world of his childhood and youth was indeed a world of yesterday.

Zweig was born in 1881 into a wealthy Jewish home. The generation of his parents was one which strove more than anything else for security. Financial and emotional. The Jews who had recently been accepted into society strove for total assimilation. This does not mean getting rich, although getting rich was seen as a prerequisite for getting an education and thus to participate in the cultural life. What greater prestige in a Jewish family to have a son who had received a doctorate or better still who had become a professor? The ultimate ambition of the Jews was not to preserve their ancient identity but to merge with the surrounding population, and in that achieve personal security. The contribution of the Jews to Germanic culture was tremendous. Zweig reminds his readers. His own Jewish identity was something he rather forget, but his times would not allow him.

Zweig went to school. He did not like it at all. This is not an unusual reaction to school, especially not among those who are gifted. Zweig claims that he cannot recall a single teacher, certainly none who inspired him. But he, along with his schoolmates did not lack inspiration. Cultural life in Vienna at the end of the 19th century was exuberant. Especially the opera thrived, fed on the most enthusiastic and discriminant of audiences. But also the theaters were flourishing and actresses were celebrated as movie stars are today. Zweig and his schoolfellows were regular habitues of the Opera and the theaters, but they also had a passion for literature, especially poetry at which they all tried their hands. What was the source of such inspiration, what caused such unbridled enthusiasm? Obviously school was not able to stifle it, and that alone counts in its favor. Maybe it even contributed to the literary passion. This is hard to prove. What did they learn? A lot obviously. Maybe by themselves, but of course all learning is ultimately through your own effort. School only contributes a social setting to the endeavor, and some structure. Basically it is a matter of tradition. One may point out though that the education Zweig and his school mates acquired was exclusively humanistic, to the sciences they seem to have had little exposure.

There are two poets who particular stand out to Zweig and his immediate generation, namely Hugo von Hofmannstahl and Rilke. Of the two, the first was the true exceptional, already as a schoolboy in shorts he made his mark. The level of precocious accomplishment

he was able to achieve, could have had nothing but an inhibiting effect on his potential rivals. Who could seriously compete with him? Rilke was different, his rise had been slower and more tentative, impressing on his audience that modest beginnings were no proof against future development and success. You did not always spring fully accomplished into the world, like Pallas Athenas out of the brow of Zeus.

At an early age Zweig was able to have some poems published. Poems of which he would later feel ashamed and refuse to have such juvenilia included in his collected works. More portentous may have been his achievement to have accepted an essay for the cultural section of Vienna's major newspaper. The editor in chief was Herzl, the prophet of Zionism. Zweig was fascinated by him, in fact it must have been the first powerful personality he ever encountered in the flesh. But of course Zionism, to someone of Zweig's cosmopolitan temperament, was not something that he could take to.

Finishing school meant freedom from prison. Spirits rose and the world was open to him. If school can create such a transition, again much can be said for it. Zweig decided to register for philosophy. In this way he would not have to study hard, he could avoid regular instructions and just pass exams. He thereby bought himself three years of intellectual freedom. His ambition was clear, he wanted to become a writer. Hardly surprising as most of the 'Bildungsromanen' we read are about writers trying to find their voices and subsequent recognition. Those books are usually read by people who read a lot, and those are already naturally inclined to literary endeavors, which can only be further confirmed by such inevitable identifications, those readings will result in. Obviously it leads to a skewed view of the world, so much for literature being a faithful reflection of it,

It was not only Zweig who felt liberated at the turn of the century, the liberation was far more universal and concerned more basic things. It was namely the time of the break-up of so called Victorian repressed sexual morals, which was nothing but cynical hypocrisy. Prostitution was rampant, and the main initiation rite for young adult males to experience sexual relations. As a result many young women, of good upbringing, were totally innocent as to the so called facts of life being up for rude awakenings at bridal nights, something Zweig exemplifies as occasionally taking on comical proportions. But to Zweig and his contemporaries, natural relations between the sexes were theirs to enjoy. He describes it as a sexual revolution, and that it was he and his friends who were the first to benefit. One wonders how many sexual revolutions the 20th century has seen. It is in the nature of youth, to see its plight as universal, thus to ascribe to almost everything around them, feelings of rejoicing characteristic of their own age and station in life.

Zweig passed his examination and got his degree, and the world was once again open to him. He was an apprentice and his task was to travel around Europe, to learn, to meet people, to go beyond the German region and venture into Belgium (where he met his idol Verheeren) and to Paris, where he befriended not only Rilke but more significantly Rolland Romain. It was an auspicious time to travel, not only in Europe but around the world. Passports were not needed, and who had ever heard about visas? It was, in short, a wonderful time to be young and alive and see the world. He arranged a cheap  *pied a terre*  for himself in Vienna, so as not to be inhibited in his travels. All he needed were a few books, possessions only weighed you down.

Zweig was to become a very successful writer. All he did, even as a beginner, turned

into gold. Even his first attempt to break into the stage promised to be a resounding success. The most celebrated German actor had personally taken on the leading role of his first drama, only to die shortly thereafter. A renewed attempt involving the most celebrated Austrian actor ended in the same way. Was he cursed?<sup>1</sup> Eventually he would have his triumphs on the stage, and in retrospect he was rather grateful that his first attempts had not worked out, had they, the sweetness of it all, might have gone to his head, as all early and effortless successes tend to do.

As he got more accomplished and financially independent he bought himself a house in Salzburg. It was a small town, but strategically situated, close to the German border, within easy railroad distance to northern Italy and Paris. Here he could be alone and undisturbed from the bustle of the Imperial capital, yet within the easy reach of culture and excitement. His literary career has taken off ground and everything looks very rosy indeed. But a catastrophe is approaching. The summer of 1914 was the most beautiful in memory. The harvest was excellent, the weather as well, who cared about distant and peripheral political tremors? But nevertheless the political elite drifted into a war which no one really wanted, yet one which met with widespread popular approval once it had been declared. (At that time wars were still politely declared, not entered on in stealth). Why was the war so popular, not only among the rabble, but also among people who should know better? There had been peace in Europe for forty years, the last major engagement being between the emerging Prussia, guided by Bismarck and the comical French empire headed by the farcial Napoleon<sup>2</sup>. War was after all a glorious affair, and an opportunity for heroism, or at least to transcend the hum-drum quality of everyday life. Life at the turn of the century had been a very prosperous one, at least compared to previous times, (what other appropriate comparisons are there to be made?). In fact the time was bringing about the first globalization, which would have to wait for the end of the century to be renewed, a process interrupted by two hot wars and one cold. No wonder people were up for some excitement. And the war was of course only last a few months, by Christmas it would be all over. History would decide otherwise.

The crowds were cheering, but also the intellectuals. Zweig found himself in a minority. His views were not really censored, except through social conformist pressure, so called political correctness (although the term had not been invented at the time), the most effective of all censorship. Zweig was a European, a cosmopolitan by temperament and habit, and for him it was an unmitigated catastrophe. Hatred was rampant. Everyone believed to be in the right and the enemy in the wrong. To suggest within the German lands that the French writers were not to be rejected as mere enemy scribes was more or less tantamount to high-treason. Needless to say, the same attitudes were prevalent in France and England as well. As is well-known Bertrand Russell had to go to jail due to his championship of the enemy Germany, or at least his refusal to be part of the prevalent enthusiasm for the war and encourage conscientious objectors. According to Orwell, anti-German feelings were far more virulent at the onset of the First World War than at the Second. And as Zweig confirms, enthusiasm for the Second was much more muted than

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<sup>1</sup> To this can be added a third attempt in the 1930's coming to grief in a similar way.

<sup>2</sup> We all recall Marx quip, what starts in tragedy ends in farce, having in particular the two Napoleons in mind.

for the first. People had learned and become more cynical. But not learned and cynical enough to prevent war.

As we all know the war quickly came to a halt and brought about a stalemate which was not broken until the very end and with the support of fresh American troops. Why was that? The quick engagement of classical wars had become obsolete due to the improvement of weapon technology which greatly favored defense over attack. The Russo-Japanese war of 1905 may have given some indication. This was also a war that brought about extended trench warfare.

Romain Rolland, in voluntary exile in Switzerland, provided moral support for Zweig, who soon joined his friend, the excuse being that a play of his were to be staged in that country. The belligerents were anxious to prove their cultural (and hence moral?) superiority and were very willing to support cultural spectacles, including theater productions, in non-allied countries. For Zweig to escape to Switzerland was a momentous experience for him. To escape both the privations and squalor of the war, with which he was familiar with due to a trip to The Russo-German border, (which later would territorially support the new Poland), and the atmosphere of censure and hostility, with which he had to put up for many years, was momentous. In Switzerland he stayed on until the end of the war. When that end came he decided to return to his native Austria, a decision which may not have been entirely rational, but was based on the principle of loyalty he and his generation had imbued with during the pre-war years.

Austria was just a disembodied fragment after Versailles. It had been abandoned by its previous clients. The Czechs, the Hungarians, the Balkan states were eager to leave the empire and become independent entities<sup>3</sup>, and desperately wanting to join Germany, it was prevented from doing that by the Allies who did not want a strengthened Germany to rise after its defeat<sup>4</sup>. Zweig leaving prosperous Switzerland for the poverty and squalor of post-war Austria was a veritable descent into Hell. Fortuitously he became witness to the last emperor of Austria, the last Hapsburg monarch Karl, leaving the country for permanent exile in an imperial train slowly passing the small border station. This was a historic moment, he mused, and he was correspondingly touched.

His return to Austria belongs to the most evocative passages of the book, and actually the one which most vividly remains in my memory from my first reading of the book back in 1983. I particularly remember the leather straps which have been stripped off from the train windows (although in my memory those had belonged to the streetcars in Vienna, rather than to the trains). It was cold, it was dark, it was crowded and dirty, and what normally would just have taken a few hours now took a dozen, Why did he

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<sup>3</sup> although the Hungarians suffered greatly, a large part of the Hungarian population was added to the Romanian, a country that had not participated during the war, but nevertheless benefited from the peace treaty more than any other country. This acquisition of Hungarian territory obviously violated one of the leading principles of drawing borders respecting ethnic presence, but of course principles must be bent at times.

<sup>4</sup> Germany actually suffered only marginal territorial losses, Alsace-Lorraine of course, the spoils of their campaign of 1870-71, and some minor concessions to the newly emerging Poland, most notably having Eastern Prussia physically disconnected from the rest. The most onerous obligation being the huge re-partitions, which as Keynes pointed out, were counterproductive and eventually were renegotiated.

return? Once again out of loyalty and duty, this being the only explanation he can think of. We were brought up this way he feebly explains. Returning to his house high up on a hill at Salzburg he would encounter further problems. The roof was leaking, but could not be fixed due to a lack of material. There was no coal to be had, and the wood in the garden was too soaked to give any warmth when fired. Zweig ended up in his bed, writing with stiff blue fingers. The country was falling freely, yet not crashing. There was rampant inflation, Germans crossed the nearby border buying up for almost nothing Austrian goods. The world was turned upside down. People who had saved during a lifetime had their savings wiped out, while those who had borrowed had their debts canceled. Any amount of cash you happened to have must be spent within hours before it would simply evaporate. Life was surreal, yet in spite of all this, the country survived, the trains kept on running and eventually things got on an even keel. Why is that? One wonders whether in a truly liberal economy there would have been authority enough to break the natural spiral, could it be that the authority of the state was still strong enough to interfere? After the Austrian experience of hyper-inflation it was the turn of the Germans. While the Austrian had been astronomical the German went beyond that. Society was disrupted as the trust in money totally eroded. The generation that came to age was characterized by nihilism. Everything was permissible. The generation of '68 prided itself on its radicalism, maybe every new generation does so, but what was that compared to the desperation of the Weimar generation? It was a time of rebelling against everything. Authority, discipline, work, morals, you name it. One can well understand the level of decadence and moral decline, which were to pervade during the Weimar years, and to which Nazism professed to offer an anti-dote. Zweig had cultivated relations with the German industrialist and politician Rathenau. He wrote during a time when writers mattered. During the initial stages of the inflation Rathenau held the position of Foreign Minister, and as such he skillfully negotiated German terms and brought the country out of its pariah status. Shortly after the successful meeting at Rapallo, accused of betrayal he was assassinated. Zweig had met him just before, musing that he might have had been present at the event. After the death of Rathenau, inflation took off in earnest, but was miraculously checked by the introduction of the Rentenmark. This once again shows the existence of hard facts in economical theory. Over and over again a government seems to know, at least in certain extreme circumstances, what to do and then do it. Why does it take so long? To figure out the right measures, or just to overcome natural inertia and implement the right policies. But I am digressing.

The early interwar years were successful for Zweig. He became one of the most read writers in the world. How come? His reputation plunged after the war, and one wonders why. Was he just a best-selling writer, the kind which is scorned by the less fortunate? Whatever his literary merits he must have possessed definite skills? On one hand he was very disciplined as every serious writer has to be, especially those who want to make a living out of their craft. He was writing all the time, and in addition to that brought about a certain pensum each day. He discusses in his memoirs the reasons for his success, and decides it has to do with his economy of expression. Never to be self-indulgent and write for sheer pleasure. Writing means essentially writing out not writing down. You start with your first draft, from then on you subtract much more than you add. Darlings are

killed unsentimentally. Redundant words are mercilessly purged. The text is pruned of anything that is not absolutely essential. There should be nothing extraneous. The effect on the reader is that he or she expectantly turns the pages. Every sentence brings the plot forward. Never a dull moment. This is an art of course, but also a skill, and a mark of the professional, regardless of ephemeral literary worth<sup>5</sup>.

Zweig wrote a few novels, a few dramas, some actually staged in spite of early misfortunes already referred to. He wrote a fair amount of short stories, almost all set in Vienna. But above all he specialized in biographies, mostly of fellow writers, but also of some historical personages,

The advent of Hitler was a disaster. Zweig living in Austria was of course not directly affected, but his books were banned in Germany, and for an author whose main public, in spite of extensive translations, was German this was a very serious setback. As he noted, no matter how good a translation, it is just a pale image of the real thing. Yet there was one exception to this. A temporary and incidental, yet illustrative. Richard Strauss had been courted by the Nazis. He was the most celebrated German composer, and in the Teutonic realm, music was considered the most prestigious within the cultural and spiritual sphere<sup>6</sup>. Strauss lets himself be courted, much to the detriment of his subsequent reputation. After the death of von Hoffmanstahl, this composer of opera lacked a writer of librettos. He invited Zweig to step in. The co-operation was very cordial and successful, but when the opera was to be staged, the authorities objected to Zweig's name being posted. Strauss overruled the objections, but shortly thereafter he fell out of favor, and planned future projects had to be scrapped.

With Mussolini he actually had some relation (one infers that the Italian Generalissimo must have read some of his books, or at least been aware of them), in fact he was able to intervene on the behalf of a woman whose husband had been imprisoned and use his influence on 'Il Duce' to have it commuted to exile. It would have been unthinkable that he might have wielded similar influences with the Nazi top brass. In Italy he was able to see close-up the rise of fascism. How well organized the violence was conducted. How much could be achieved by a small group of well disciplined and trained youths. Later on in the thirties he would see the same thing in Salzburg. German youth spilling over into Austria. The late thirties was unruly times in Austria. A strong Socialist party was a bulwark against extreme nationalist movements. But for how long? he was in the middle of street-fights in Vienna, and noticed nothing about it, until he was alerted by foreign friends and newspapers. This is another part from the book that has stuck in memory for thirty years. Eventually the Germans forcefully adjoined the country to the 'Reich', and the same anti-semitic laws prevalent in Germany were imposed in Austria, a country which had successfully curbed anti-semitic movements through its legislature approved from the

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<sup>5</sup> As to true artistic endeavor, Zweig was once being privy to Rodin touching a work of his in his studio. He was deeply and unforgettably impressed by the total concentration and the oblivion to the outside world. When Rodin came to his own again, he looked puzzled at his young visitor, whose presence he had completely blotted out.

<sup>6</sup> The Prussian writer and journalist - Fontane, remarks during his sojourn in London in the 1850's, that the English lack all serious sense of music.

very top<sup>7</sup>. Luckily Zweig was out of the country at the time, but his mother lived on as a widow in the old apartment. During the last months of her life she was subjected to constant and pointless humiliations serving no rational purpose at all, as he remarks. Zweig was in exile in Britain. Divorced from his wife, separated from his library, he was returning to his status as a student of no means. For someone who had tasted the convenience of money and the freedom it makes possible, the return to youthful frugality was not sweet and romantic but bitter. Nevertheless he continued writing, having in England become intrigued by the fate of Maria Stuart, what better way of getting to the bottom of it than to write a book? His presence in England as a stateless citizen, yet an alien from a hostile country, was becoming precarious as the war was approaching. He was actually still in London when war broke out in September 1939. He shortly thereafter migrated to South America, married his secretary and settled in Brazil. But he found his position untenable, he was after all a European, and his exile was not a happy one. The world he had known and cherished, the world of yesterday, was crashing down. Everything he had lived for and believed in was being extinguished. He ended his life through a suicide pact with his young secretary-wife. This desperate finale of his life is of course not covered in his memoirs, which however were written, entirely out of memory with no written documents to assist, on the verge of it. He was survived by his older brother of two years, who lived on until 1977. In the 80's the last remainders of the generation that had experienced the time of Zweig's youth were gone, I consequently read the book at its literal death-bed. So far into the future did it project until it faded into the shadows of history, inaccessible to any living memory. Now it can only be reconstructed out of documents and evoked through literature.

December 13, (16-17) 2013 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se ■

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<sup>7</sup> In the beginning of his memoirs Zweig relates how the Emperor tried to stop the elected mayor of Vienna - Karl Lueger, from taking office. This man had risen to prominence on an anti-semitic platform. However, according to Zweig, he was perfectly decent. Having many Jewish friends, and during his mayoralship, the Jewish population could continue life as usual. One is tempted to interpret his anti-semitism as an opportunistic ruse. Yet of course, its success inspired others, who took political tactics literally. No doubt someone like Hitler must have been influenced by him.