

## PORTRAIT OF A PERIOD

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In this his last book Stefan Zweig describes a part of the bourgeois world—the world of the *literati*, which had given him renown and protected him from the ordinary trials of life. Concerned only with personal dignity and his art, he had kept himself so completely aloof from politics that in retrospect the catastrophe of the last ten years seemed to him like a sudden monstrous and inconceivable earthquake, in the midst of which he had tried to safeguard his dignity as long as he could. He considered it unbearably humiliating when the hitherto wealthy and respected citizens of Vienna had to go begging for visas to countries which only a few weeks before they would have been unable even to find on the map. That he himself, only yesterday so famous and welcome a guest in foreign countries, should also belong to this miserable host of the homeless and suspect was simply hell on earth to him. But deeply as the events of 1933 had changed his personal existence, they could not touch his standards or his attitudes to the world and to life. He continued to boast of his unpolitical point of view; it never occurred to him that, politically speaking, it might be an honor to stand outside the law when all men were no longer equal before it. On the contrary, he found himself “one rung lower,” he “had slipped down to a lesser ... category.” All he realized was that during the 1930’s the better classes in Germany and elsewhere were steadily yielding to Nazi precepts, and discriminating against those whom the Nazis proscribed and banned: this, in his eyes, meant personal disgrace.

Not one of Stefan Zweig’s reactions during all this period was the result of political convictions; they were all dictated by his supersensitiveness to social humiliation. Instead of hating the Nazis, he just wanted to annoy them. Instead of despising those of his coterie who had been *gleichgeschaltet*, he thanked Richard Strauss for continuing to accept his libretti. Instead of fighting he kept silent, happy that his books had not been immediately banned. And later, though comforted by the thought that his works were removed from German bookstores together with those of equally famous authors, this could not reconcile him to the fact that his name had been pilloried by the Nazis like that of a “criminal,” and that the famous Stefan Zweig had become the Jew Zweig. He failed to perceive that the dignified restraint, which society had so long considered a criterion of true culture, was under such circumstances tantamount to plain cowardice in public life.

40 Before Stefan Zweig took his own life he wrote down what the world had

given him and then done to him—"the fall into the abyss ... [and] the height from which it occurred"—with the pitiless accuracy which springs from the calm of absolute despair. He records the pleasures of fame and the curse of humiliation. He tells of the paradise of cultural enjoyments, of meeting men of equal renown. He describes his endless interest in the dead geniuses of history; penetrating their private lives and gathering their personal relics was the most enjoyable pursuit of an inactive existence. And then he tells how he suddenly found himself facing a reality in which there was nothing left to enjoy, in which those as famous as himself either avoided him or pitied him, and in which cultured curiosity about the past was continually and unbearably disturbed by the tumult of the present, the murderous thunder of bombardment, the infinite humiliations at the hands of authorities.

Gone, destroyed forever, was that other world in which, "*frühgereift und zart und traurig*" (Hofmannsthal), one had established oneself so comfortably; razed was that "reservation" for the chosen few connoisseurs who had devoted their lives to the idolatry of Art; broken were the trellises that barred out the *profanum vulgus* of the uncultured more effectively than a Chinese wall. With that world had passed also its counterpart, the poverty-stricken clique of bohemians. For the young son of a bourgeois household, craving escape from parental protection, bohemians who endured the hardships of ill-success and lack of money became identified with men experienced in the adversities of real life. The "unarrived," dreaming only of large editions of their works, became the symbol of unrecognized genius, and the reflection of the dreadful *dénouement* which destiny might have in store for hopeful and gifted young men.

Naturally, the world which Zweig depicts was anything but *the* world of yesterday; the author of this book lived only on its rim. The gilded trellises of this reservation were very thick, depriving the inmates of every view and every insight that could mar their bliss. Not once does Zweig mention the most ominous manifestation of the postwar period, which struck his native Austria more violently than any other European country—unemployment. But the rare value of his document is nowise lessened by the fact that for us today the trellises behind which these people spent their lives, and to which they owed their extraordinary feeling of security, seem singularly like prison or ghetto walls. It is astounding that there were still men among us whose ignorance was so profound, and whose conscience was so clear, that they could continue to look on the prewar period with the eyes of the nineteenth century. They could regard the impotent pacifism of Geneva and the treacherous lull before the storm, between 1924 and 1933, as a return to normalcy!

It is wryly gratifying that at least one of these men had the courage to re-

cord it all in detail, without hiding or prettifying anything. For Zweig finally realized what "chronic fools" they all had been—though the connection between their tragedy and their folly he hardly recognized.

## II

The same period which Zweig calls "the Golden Age of Security" was described by his contemporary Charles Péguy (shortly before he fell in the first World War) as the era in which political forms that were presumably outmoded lived on with inexplicable monotony—in Russia anachronistic despotism; in Austria the corrupt bureaucracy of the Habsburgs; in Germany the militarist and stupid regime of the Junkers, hated by the liberal middle class and the workers alike; in France the Third Republic, which was to be granted twenty-odd years more despite its chronic crises. The solution of the puzzle lay in the fact that Europe was much too busy expanding its economic radius for any social stratum or nation to take political questions seriously. Everything could go on because nobody cared. For fifty years—before the opposing economic interests burst into national conflicts, sucking the political systems of all Europe into their vortex—political representation had become a kind of theatrical performance, sometimes an operetta, of varying quality. Simultaneously, in Austria and Russia, the theatre became the focus of national life for the upper crust.

During "the Golden Age of Security" a peculiar dislocation of the balance of power occurred. The enormous development of all industrial and economic potentials produced the steady weakening of purely political factors, while at the same time economic forces grew dominant in the international play of power. Power became synonymous with economic potential, which could bring governments to its feet. This was the real reason why governments played ever-narrowing and empty representative roles, which grew more and more obviously theatrical and operetta-like.

The Jewish bourgeoisie, in sharp contrast to their German and Austrian equivalents, were uninterested in power, even of the economic kind. They were content with their accumulated wealth, happy in the security and peace which their wealth seemed to guarantee. An increasing number of sons from well-to-do homes deserted commercial life, since the mere continued collection of wealth was senseless. They crowded into the cultural occupations; and within a few decades both Germany and Austria saw a great part of their cultural enterprises, such as newspapers, publishing and the theatre, in Jewish hands.

Had the Jews of western and central European countries displayed even a modicum of concern for the political realities of their times, they would have had reason enough not to feel secure. In Germany the first antisemitic parties arose during the 1880's. In his own words, Treitschke made antisemitism "fit for good society." The turn of the century brought the Lueger-Schoenerer agitation to Austria, ending with the election of Lueger as Mayor of Vienna. In France the Dreyfus affair dominated both internal and foreign policies for years. Even as late as 1940 Zweig could admire Lueger as an "able leader" and a kindly person whose "official antisemitism never stopped him from being helpful and friendly to his former Jewish friends." Among the Jews of Vienna no one took antisemitism, in the amiable Austrian version Lueger represented, the least bit seriously—with the exception of the "crazy" feuilleton editor of *the Neue Freie Presse*, Theodor Herzl.

At least, so it would appear at first glance. Closer examination changes the picture. After Treitschke had made antisemitism fashionable, conversion ceased to be a ticket of admission to non-Jewish circles in Germany as well as in Austria. Just how antisemitic the better classes were could not be easily ascertained by the Jewish business men of Austria, for they pursued only commercial interests and cared nothing about invitations to non-Jewish groups. But their children discovered soon enough that there was only one way to be accepted into society—they must win fame.

On the Jewish situation in this period no more informative document could be found than the opening chapters of Zweig's book. They provide the most impressive evidence of how fame and the will to fame motivated the youth of his generation. Their ideal was the genius that seemed incarnate in Goethe. Every Jewish youth able to rhyme passably played the young Goethe, as every one able to draw a line was a future Rembrandt and every musical lad an irresistible Beethoven. The more cultured the parental homes of these *Wunderkinder*, the more coddled along were the imitations. Nor did this stop with art itself; it dominated every detail of personal life. They felt as sublime as Goethe, aped his Olympian aloofness from politics; they collected rags and fardels that had once belonged to famous people of other periods; and they strove to come into direct touch with every living person of renown, as if a tiny reflection of fame would thus fall upon them—or as if one could prepare for fame by attending a school of fame.

This idolatry of genius was not restricted to the Jews. It was a Gentile, Gerhart Hauptmann, who carried it so far as to make himself look, if not like Goethe, at least like one of the many cheap busts of the master. And if the parallel enthusiasm which the German petty bourgeoisie showed for Napoleonic splendor did not actually produce Hitler, it did contribute might-

ily to the hysterical raptures with which this "great man" was greeted by many German and Austrian intellectuals.

Although deification of the "great man," without much consideration for what he actually achieved, was a general disease of the era, it assumed a special form among the Jews: it was particularly passionate with regard to the great men of culture. In any case, the school of fame which the Jewish youth of Vienna attended was the theatre; the image of fame which they held before them was that of the actor.

But this passion for the theatre was by no means exclusively Jewish. In no other European city did the theatre ever acquire the same significance that it had in Vienna during the period of political dissolution. Zweig relates how the death of a famous court actress made his family cook, who had never heard or seen her, burst into tears. Simultaneously, as political activity began to resemble theatre or operetta, the theatre itself developed into a kind of national institution, the actor into a national hero. Since the world had undeniably acquired a theatrical air, the theatre could appear as the world of reality. It is hard for us to believe that even Hugo von Hofmannsthal—the only one of his generation who was not only cultured but, as his later work shows, came close to being a genuine poet—even he fell under the spell of this theatre hysteria, and for many years believed that behind the Viennese absorption in the theatre lay something of the Athenian public spirit. He overlooked the fact that Athenians attended the theatre for the sake of the play, its mythological content and the grandeur of its language, through which they hoped to become the masters of their passions and moulders of their national destiny. The Viennese went to the theatre exclusively for the actors; playwrights wrote for this or that performer; critics discussed only the actor or his part; directors accepted or rejected plays purely on the basis of effective roles for their matinee idols. The star system, as the cinema later perfected it, was completely forecast in Vienna. What was in the making there was not a classical renaissance but Hollywood.

Political conditions facilitated this inversion of being and appearance; but Jews put it into motion, supplied the public demand, propagated it. And since the European world, not unjustifiably, considered Austrian backstage culture typical of the whole period, Zweig is not wrong when he asserts that "nineteenths of what the world celebrated as Viennese culture in the nineteenth century was promoted, nourished, or even created by Viennese Jewry."

A culture built around an actor or virtuoso established standards as novel as they were dubious. "Posterity weaves no wreaths for the mime"; hence the mime requires an incredible amount of present fame and applause. His vanity is an occupational disease. For to the degree that every artist dreams of leav-

ing his mark on future generations, of transporting his period into another, the artistic impulses of virtuosi and actors are frustrated. Since the actor must renounce immortality, his criterion of greatness depends altogether on contemporary success. Contemporary success was also the only criterion that remained for the “general geniuses,” detached from their achievements and considered only in the light of their “inherent greatness.” In the field of letters this took the form of biographies describing no more than the appearance, the emotions and the demeanor of great men. This approach not only satisfied vulgar curiosity about the kind of secrets a man’s valet would know; it was also prompted by the belief that such idiotic abstraction would clarify the essence of greatness.

In their respect for “inherent greatness” Jews and Gentiles stood side by side. That was why Jewish organization of most cultural enterprises, and particularly of the theatrical culture of Vienna, could go on without restraint, and even become in a sense the epitome of European culture.

### III

Stefan Zweig’s knowledge of history preserved him from adopting without qualms the worldly yardstick of success. Yet, despite his connoisseurship, he ignored the two great postwar poets in the German language, Franz Kafka and Bert Brecht, neither of whom was ever successful. More than that, Zweig confounded the historical significance of writers with the size of their editions. He avers: “Hofmannsthal, Arthur Schnitzler, Beer-Hofmann and Peter Altenberg gave Viennese literature European standing such as it had not possessed under Grillparzer and Stifter.”

Precisely because Zweig was modest about himself, discreetly glossing over as uninteresting the personal data in his autobiography, the repeated enumerations of famous people he met is especially striking. It seems like proof that even the best of those cultured Jews could not escape the curse of their time—the worship of that great leveler Success. In his guest-book at Salzburg Zweig gathered “eminent contemporaries” as passionately as he had collected the handwriting and relics of dead poets, musicians and scientists. His own success, the renown of his own accomplishments, failed to sate the appetite of a kind of vanity which could hardly have originated in his character. Presumably the character found it repulsive, but the vanity was deeply and indestructibly rooted in attitude. This began with the search for the “born genius” and “the poet in the flesh”; it considered only a life replete with exciting experiences worth living, and

judged an individual by whether or not he belonged to the élite of the chosen few.

Incomplete satisfaction in one’s own success, the attempt rather to transform fame into a social background, to create a social caste of famous people like the social caste of aristocrats, to organize a society of the renowned—these were the traits that distinguished the Jews of the period and differentiated their manner from the general genius-lunacy of the times. That was also why the world of art, literature, music and the theatre played right into their hands. They alone were really more interested in those things than even in their own personal achievements or their own fame.

While the turn of the century brought economic security to the Jews and recognized their civic rights as a matter of course, it also made their social position less tenable and their social attitude uncertain, ambiguous. Socially they were pariahs, except when they used extravagant methods (of which fame was one) to enforce their social possibilities. In regard to a *famous* Jew, society would forget its unwritten laws. “The radiant power of fame” was a very real social force, in whose aura one could move freely and even have antisemites for friends, such as Richard Strauss and Karl Haushofer. Fame and success offered means for the socially homeless to create a home and background for themselves. Since outstanding success transcended national frontiers, famous people could easily become the representatives of a nebulous international society, where national prejudices appeared no longer valid. In any case, a famous Austrian Jew was more apt to be accepted as an Austrian in France than in Austria. The world citizenship of this generation, this remarkable nationality which they claimed as soon as their Jewish origin was mentioned, somewhat resembles those modern passports which grant the bearer the right of sojourn in every country except the one that has issued it.

And fame brought also another privilege which, according to Zweig, was at least equally important—the suspension of anonymity, the possibility of being recognized by unknown people, of being admired by strangers. There is no doubt that Zweig feared nothing more than to sink back into obscurity where, stripped of his fame, he would become again what he had been at the beginning of his life. He would be no more than one of the many unfortunates confronted with the almost insuperable problem of conquering a strange world.

Fate, in the form of a political catastrophe, eventually did almost thrust him into this very anonymity. He knew—better than many of his colleagues—that a writer’s fame flickers out when he becomes “homeless in borrowed languages.” Furthermore, his collections were stolen from him, and with them his intimacy with the famous dead. His house in Salzburg was

seized, and with it his bond with the famous men among the living. Taken finally, too, was the invaluable passport, which had not only enabled him to represent his native land in other countries; it had also helped him evade the dubiety of his civic existence in that native land itself.

But again, as during the first World War, it is to Zweig's credit that he did not yield to hysteria, nor take too seriously his newly acquired British citizenship. He could hardly have represented England in other countries. And since the international society of the famous disappeared completely with the second World War, this homeless man lost the only world in which he had once had the delusion of a home.

#### IV

In a last article, "The Great Silence", written shortly before his death—an article which seems to me to belong with the finest of Stefan Zweig's work—he tried to take a political stand for the first time in his life. But the word Jew still did not occur to him; Zweig strove once more to represent Europe, at least Central Europe, now choked in "the great silence." Had he spoken about the terrible fate of his own people, he would have been closer to all the European peoples who are today, in the battle against their oppressor, struggling against the persecutor of the Jews. The European peoples know, better than did this self-appointed spokesman who had never in his whole lifetime concerned himself with their political destiny, that yesterday is not detached from today "as if a man had been hurled down from a great height as the result of a violent blow." To them yesterday was neither "an age of reason" nor that "century whose progress, whose science, whose arts, whose magnificent inventions were the pride and the faith of us all."

Now, without the protective armor of fame, Stefan Zweig was confronted with the reality all-too-familiar to the Jewish people. There had been various escapes from social pariahdom, including the ivory tower of fame. But only flight around the globe could offer salvation from political outlawry. Thus the Jewish bourgeois man of letters, who had never concerned himself with the affairs of his own people, became nevertheless a victim of their foes—and felt so disgraced that he could bear life no longer. Since he had wanted all his life to live in peace with the political and social standards of his environment, he could put up no fight against a world that brands the Jew. When finally the whole structure of his life, with its aloofness from civic struggle and politics, broke down, and he experienced disgrace, he was unable to discover what honor can mean to men.

For honor never will be won by the cult of success or fame, by cultivation of one's own self, nor even by personal dignity. From the "disgrace" of being a Jew there is but one escape—to fight for the honor of the Jewish people as a whole.

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