



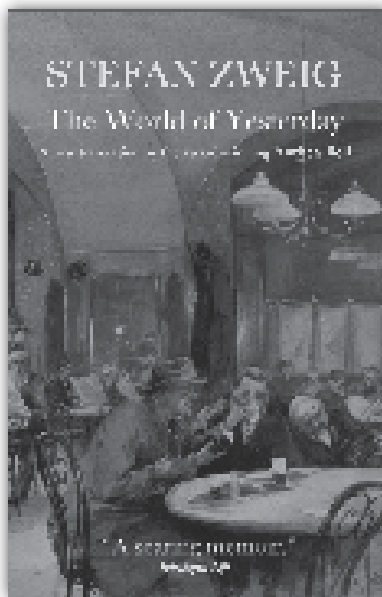
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The World of Yesterday by Stefan Zweig, translated from the German by Anthea Bell £16.99, Pushkin Press (London, 2009)

As a fiftieth birthday present, the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig (1881-1942) received from his publisher, Insel Verlag, a catalogue of all his titles in all their languages of translation. It was a book in itself. Zweig's prolific output included novels, novellas, poetry, plays and biographies, and he became the most translated writer in the world. A great linguist himself, fluent in French, Italian and English, he travelled widely in Europe, as well as Russia, India and the United States. Although his books were translated into English, he felt that they had made the least impression in Britain. Thanks to the reissues by Pushkin Press in excellent translations by Anthea Bell, we now have another chance to discover this wonderful humanist writer.

For what is ostensibly an autobiography, *The World of Yesterday* (*Die Welt von Gestern*) contains surprisingly few details about Zweig's personal life. It is not until page 311 that he mentions having a wife, leaving the reader to find out from the translator's notes that he divorced his first spouse, Frederike, and in 1939 married his secretary, Lotte Altmann. If this can be called an autobiography at all, it is of Zweig as a professional man in search of intellectual freedom, meeting a host of prominent personalities along the way. It is the detailed and personal descriptions of some of the major exponents of European culture, such as Richard Strauss, Rainer Maria Rilke and James Joyce, that make this substantial book (with comprehensive index) an utterly fascinating read.

Yet it is also a portrayal of Vienna at the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Born into a wealthy, middle-class Jewish family in what he nostalgically calls 'The Age of Security' of the Habsburg Monarchy, the young Stefan grows up in a cosmopolitan city with a veritable passion for art and culture, and for music and the theatre in particular. Loathing his austere grammar school education, Stefan eagerly absorbs the latest writers, musicians and thinkers by spending hours in



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Viennese coffee houses, reading, writing and debating with friends. Generously stocked with newspapers and magazines in a variety of languages, it is especially Café Griensteidl – so evocatively featured on the front cover of the first Pushkin Press edition – that becomes in Zweig's own words 'the haunt of the young literary lions'.

In order to have complete freedom to explore his artistic interests, Zweig decides not to attend lectures during his first three years at Berlin University. He uses this time to get his first poems and articles published, and to hang out with a Bohemian crowd from all social classes, some of whom become well-known figures. He also begins to develop his superb networking skills, making cross-border and cross-cultural contacts with natural ease. To hone his writing skills he sets himself the task of translating the work of the French-Belgian poet Emile Verhaeren over a period of two years. After an intense effort in the final year, Zweig graduates and rewards himself with a year in Paris.

Declared unfit for fighting, Zweig spends the First World War working for the War Archive Office. For

someone accustomed to frequenting so many European countries, it is difficult to believe that these nations are now at war with each other. To reach out to his friends abroad he writes pacifist articles in newspapers, and in 1917 publishes his anti-war tragedy, *Jeremiah*. After Austria's post-war poverty and Germany's inflation madness – which he graphically describes – the peaceful years between 1924 and 1933 allow him to become the leading authority on autograph manuscripts, of which he had built up an unrivalled collection, including items by Goethe and Mozart. During the world-famous Salzburg Festival, he plays host to countless luminaries, including Thomas Mann, H.G. Wells, Ravel and Toscanini. They admire the view from his house across the Austrian-German border, not realising that on the mountain opposite, in a place called Berchtesgaden, a man named Adolf Hitler has taken up residence. In trying to trace the major events that shaped his own lifetime, Zweig shows us where the political meets the personal. He had an uncanny knack of being witness to historic moments, which he recounts in the most colourful detail. By bringing history to life in this way, he reveals our common heritage and how to be a true European.

If there is a minor flaw in this work of breathtaking scope, it is the overuse of words such as 'every', 'all' and 'always', which Zweig in his effusiveness has liberally scattered across the pages. But this is easily forgiven if we consider that *The World of Yesterday* was written in exile in Brazil, shortly before he and Lotte were found dead. Their apparent suicide has puzzled many, especially as in 1942 they had no knowledge of the Holocaust. To Zweig, whose ideas had always been European, not nationalist, Nazi ideology was entirely alien. Following the annexation of Austria in 1938, the burning and banning of books by Jewish authors, and the loss of his Austrian nationality, Zweig found refuge in London, where he had one final momentous encounter: with Sigmund Freud. After the horrors of the First World War, however, a second destruction of his beloved Europe was too much to bear. The old world order had gone, and Stefan Zweig decided to go with it.