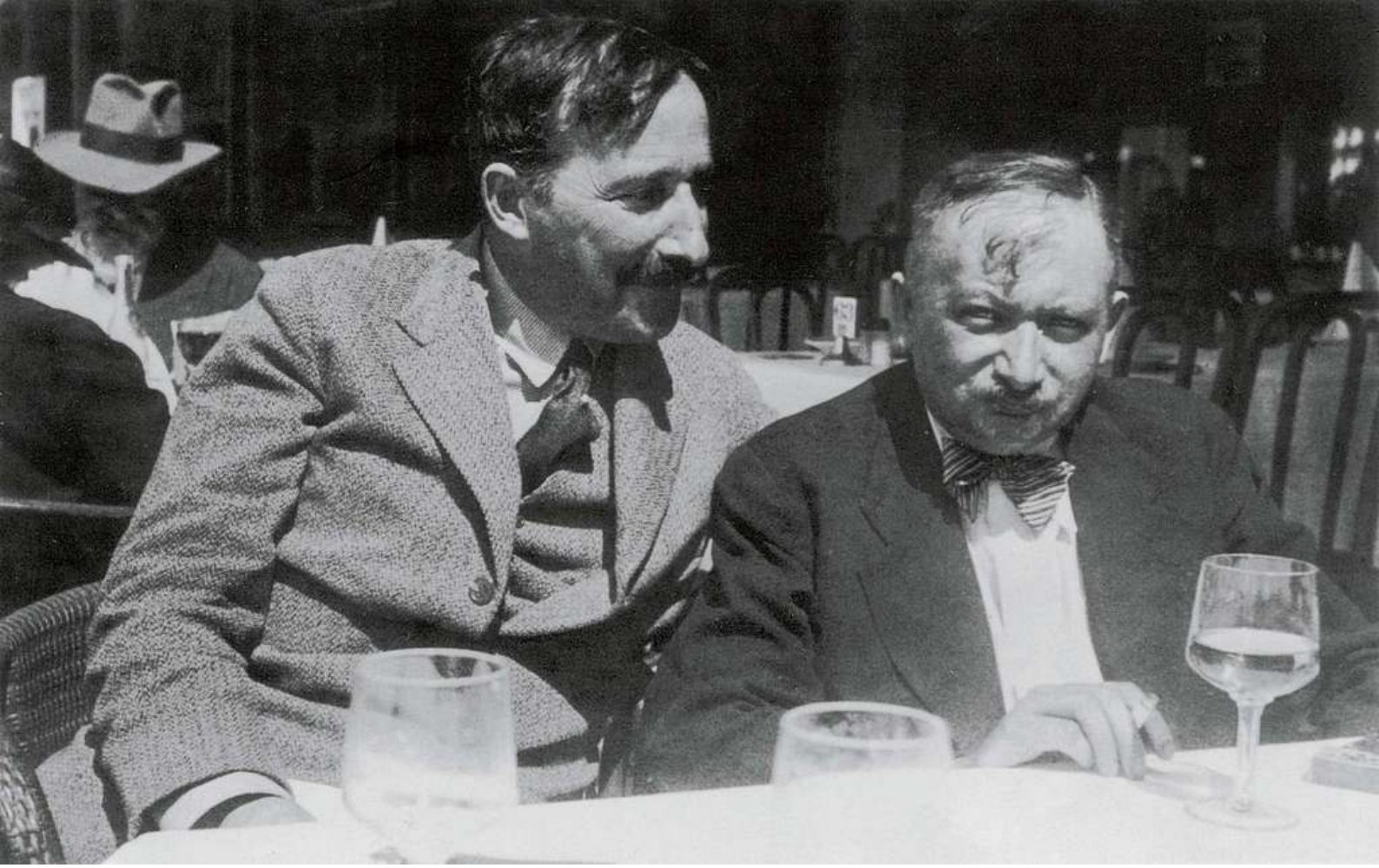

Literature & Books

Stefan Zweig's European utopia

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Stefan Zweig's vision of a united, peaceful Europe lives on as a powerful antidote to the rise of nationalism and populism. Through his memoirs and literary works, the Austrian author articulated an ethical-political project that continues to resonate in the 21st century.

Photograph of Stefan Zweig and Joseph Roth in Ostend, summer 1936, likely taken by Zweig's secretary, Lotte Altmann. Wikimedia Commons

David Fontanals, Universitat de Barcelona

The works and thoughts of Jewish-Austrian author Stefan Zweig are inseparable from his "idea of Europe". His vision encompasses a nostalgic lament for a world that has been lost (along with a way of seeing and inhabiting it), the longing for a dream yet to be realised, and the construction of utopian spaces through experience and memory.

Both dimensions of Zweig's Europe – past and future, nostalgia and utopia – come alive and intertwine in his 1942 autobiography The World of Yesterday. Its subtitle, "Memoirs of a European", gives more than a hint as to the importance of Europe in understanding the author's life, work and spiritual legacy.

Nostalgia for what has been left behind

From its very beginning, the autobiography of Zweig – the "Great European" in the words of the French poet Jules Romains – is framed and defined by the experience and witnessing of "almost constant volcanic shocks suffered by our native continent of Europe".

Zweig wrote these lines after fleeing to America because of the

Nazi persecution of European Jews. He writes from that cruel and painful exile marked by the loss of his home, his readers and, above all, what he calls the “true home of my heart’s desire, Europe”.

Zweig endeavoured to retrieve the essence of his idea of Europe from the abyss of memory. His recreation of Vienna in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – depicted as something of a golden age for humanity – immortalised his vision with emotion and poetic brilliance.

However, to anchor Zweig’s Europe to the past – to that which will not return, and which is therefore pointless at best and conservative or even reactionary at worst – is to minimise the potential of his vision of the continent. But if we dare to read it through the prism of the alternative, of the frustrated, of the unrealised, Zweig’s world of yesterday emerges as the story of a failed utopia, a future-oriented narrative that centres on the ethical and political project of a united Europe without borders.

The European dream

In the “Zweigian” European project we will not find the practical proposals of an economic or political nature that monopolise our debates today. Rather, we will find an ethical programme that invites us to rethink what Europe means, along with the nature of our commitment to and responsibility for the spaces and institutions that define our shared existence. From this perspective, what would it mean to recapture Stefan Zweig’s European dream?

First and foremost, Zweig’s Europe is based on an immersion in the past as a space for reflection and understanding of the present. It can therefore be understood as a humanist project that shines new light on renowned thinkers – he penned biographies of, among others, Erasmus, Castellio, and Montaigne. Their struggle for tolerance and mutual understanding in a Europe ravaged by religious wars inspired the Austrian author to articulate his own plea for peace and mutual respect.

Their works also invited him to expose and challenge the discourses – political, economic, scientific and technological – that standardise the landscape and dehumanise the individual in the 20th century. In his fiction, we see how chess automatons, bibliophilic dinosaurs and many others fall victim to this intellectual isolation and blinkered thought.

His works are also populated by conscientious objectors,

mothers desperate to save their children from the horrors of war , and refugees who will never return home. Through their stories, as well as those of the prophet Jeremiah and the German revolutionary Adam Lux, Zweig explores and expands the idea of Europe as a pacifist project built on a rhetoric of non-violence.

Following the outbreak of the First World War, Europe ceased to promise the tangible horizon of progress that Zweig had cherished. It became instead an object of longing and duty that he allegorically depicted as the Tower of Babel: an abandoned monument, a testament to the Europe that could have been, and an image of the efforts made to combat the forces of separation, isolation and conflict.

A voice that stands the test of time

Zweig's works, in particular his memoirs, stand as a testament to his struggle to neutralise the effects of "that ultimate pestilence [...] nationalism", the main source of discord between the peoples and nations of Europe.

Viewed in this way, both the Vienna of his youth and the Brazil of his final exile become paradises of multiculturalism and peaceful coexistence. Both places, although somewhat deformed as historical realities, perfectly embody the essence of Zweig's European utopia as a space of "moral detoxification". They also embody a form of cosmopolitan and transnational thought that resonates strongly in this century, and which is becoming all the more necessary as scepticism and populism rise once again.

In the end, Zweig's Europe is an undeniable, immutable hymn to freedom. Together with peace, humanism and the fight against toxic yet normalised nationalism, his vision of the continent forms the basis of an ethical-political current that runs through his work.

Reading his memoirs as a future-oriented narrative, a spiritual testament as well as a warning to the generations to come, we embark on a journey from the world of yesterday to the Europe of tomorrow. This not only adds a relevant voice to our debates on the identity of Europe, but can also help to define the contours of the spaces we share, and the values that shape our collective existence. Zweig encourages us to remember, so we do not fall prey to "the tragic death of memory".

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