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First World War memoirs of one contemporary

Abstract:

The article deals with the memories of a witness of the First World War. It describes modern youth in peacetime, before the war started. The author talks about his hometown, Vienna. He narrates about the cultural milieu of Vienna and whole pre-war Europe. The article describes the outbreak, the course and the end of the war in the perception of contemporaries.

Key words: Vienna, European, bourgeoisie, culture, memory, the First World War.

The Novel “The World of Yesterday” is Stefan Zweig’s¹ autobiography. It represents a valuable historical source for analysis of events before, during and after World War I, seen from the perspective of a contemporary.

This paper will focus on Zweig’s memories of the years before and during the Great War.²

Stefan Zweig was born in Vienna, on November 28 1881. He was born into a rich Austrian Jewish family, as the second son of a successful industrialist. Zweig’s mother originated from a wealthy family of Jewish bankers. His parents didn’t practice religion and it had no major influence on his education. As Zweig pointed out in an interview: “My mother and father were Jewish only through accident of birth”. He started writing poems and newspaper articles that were published while he was still in school. Upon graduating from high school, Zweig studied Germanic and Romance languages and literature at the Vienna University. He earned a doctoral degree at age of 23, with a thesis on “The Philosophy of Hippolyte Taine”. After that, he successfully wrote poetry and stories, winning one of the most prominent Austrian poetry awards. Verlaine’s best songs were translated by Zweig. Beside poetry, he also wrote popular theatrical plays, while novels and long stories dominated his literature work.

Zweig never renounce his membership in the Jewish community. He had a close relationship with Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, whom he met when Herzl was still literary editor of the Vienna's main newspaper Neue Freie Presse. As editor, Herzl published some of Zweig’s early essays. Zweig believed in internationalism and in Europeanism, so Herzl’s Jewish nationalism couldn’t be

¹ https://sr.wikipedia.org/sr/%D0%A8%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%84%D0%B0%D0%BD_%D0%A6%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%98%D0%B3 accessed 15.01.2017.

² The First World War.

very attractive to him. Lines in his autobiography “The World of Yesterday” strongly corroborates this.

“The World of Yesterday” is certainly one of the richest and most distinctive memoirs. This novel represents a colorful picture of an era, lasting from the end of 19th century to the outbreak of World War II. Author’s exceptional writing talent, Renaissance intellectual and spiritual depth and numerous friendships and contacts with eminent international personalities of public and literature life³, really justified the name of his novel. Zweig’s memoirs truly represent memoirs of a bygone time. They show Austria-Hungary as a peaceful world of moral duties, that would have brought a peaceful resolution to all conflicts, if it had lasted.

In the preface to “The World of Yesterday” Zweig wrote: “I was born in 1881 in a great and mighty empire, in the monarchy of the Habsburgs. But do not look for it on the map; it has been swept away without a trace. I grew up in Vienna, 2000 years old supranational metropolis, and was forced to leave it like a criminal before it was degraded to a German provincial town. My literary work, in the language in which I wrote it, was burnt to ashes in the same land where my books made friends with millions of readers. And so I belong nowhere, and I am a stranger everywhere, a guest at best. Europe, a homeland of my heart’s choice, is lost to me, since it has torn itself apart suicidally the second time in a fratricidal war. Never - and I say this without pride, but rather with shame – has any generation experienced such a moral retrogression of mankind; and each of us feels: it is almost too much! My today and each of my yesterdays, my rises and falls, are so diverse that I can sometimes feel as if I had lived not one, but several existences, each one different from the others.”⁴

Stefan Zweig’s childhood and youth coincided with the golden age of Vienna. He was part of the brilliant Jewish youth. He has been feeling as a citizen of Vienna, but also as a citizen of the world at the same time. Zweig saw the political and social life of Vienna and of the entire Austria-Hungary as a life that has been organized for centuries on the principles of national and social equality. If only that life progressed along the lines set by ethic and established moral and normative laws no conflict between social groups and nations would have arisen. There would be no conflict between workers and the middle classes, and the dramatic conflicts between nations that inhabited the Monarchy. Zweig describes the regulated social life of Vienna, that served as a model of regulation of life in all cities throughout the Monarchy, in the following words: “Vienna, through its centuries-old tradition, was itself a clearly ordered, and – as I once wrote – a wonderfully orchestrated city. The Imperial house still set the tempo. The palace was a center, not only in a spatial sense but also in a cultural sense, of the supranationality of the monarchy. The palaces of the Austrian, the Polish, the Czech and

³ Friends of Stefan Zweig were: Sigmund Freud, Bruno Walter, Rainer Maria Rilke, Romain Rolland, Émil Verhaeren and Jules Romains.

⁴ Штефан Цвајг. Јучерашњи свет [The World of Yesterday] Нови Сад: Будућност, 1962, p. 8.

the Hungarian nobility formed as it were a second enclosure around the Imperial palace. Then came the “good society”, consisting of lesser nobility, the higher officials, industry, and the “old families”, then the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Each of these social strata lived in its own circle, and even in its own district, the nobility in their palaces in the heart of the city, the diplomats in the third district, industry and the merchants in the vicinity of the Ringsstrasse, the petty bourgeoisie in the inner districts – the second to ninth – and the proletariat in the outer circle. But everyone met in the theatre and at the great festivities such as the Flower Parade in the Prater, where hundred thousand people enthusiastically applauded the “upper ten thousand” in their beautifully decorated carriages.”⁵

Zweig pointed out that, considering intellectual life of Vienna, life of both the individual and the community wasn’t dominated by military, political or economic questions, but rather by theatrical and cultural events. Importance of culture and theatre in Vienna was so high, as to be barely imaginable in other cities.

Zweig doesn’t discuss the role of other national groups in the social and cultural life of Vienna, representing thus the entire monarchy. He simply speaks about the role of his own nation – the Jews: “Adapting themselves to the milieu of the people or country where they live is not only an external protection measure for the Jews, but a deep internal desire. Their longing for a homeland, for rest, for security, for friendliness, urges them to attach themselves passionately to the culture of the world around them. And never was such an attachment more effective – except in the Spain of the 15th century – or happier and more fruitful than in Austria. Having resided for more than two hundred years in the Imperial city, the Jews encountered there easy-going people, inclined to conciliation, under whose apparent laxity of form lay buried the identical deep instinct for cultural and aesthetic values, which was so important to the Jews themselves. And in Vienna they met with more: they found a personal task there. In the last century the pursuit of art in Austria had lost its traditional defenders and protectors, the Imperial house and the aristocracy. [...] ... To maintain the Philharmonic on its accustomed level, to enable the painters and sculptors to make a living, it was necessary for the people to jump into the breach, and it was the pride and ambition of the Jewish people to co-operate in the front ranks to carry on the former glory of Viennese culture. [...] ... Thanks to indolence of the court, the aristocracy, and the Christian millionaires, who preferred maintaining racing stables and hunts to fostering art, Vienna would have remained behind Berlin in the realm of art as Austria remained behind the German Reich in political matters. [...] nine tenths of what the world celebrated as the Viennese culture in the 19th century was promoted, nourished or even created by Viennese Jewry”.⁶

⁵ Ibid., p. 28.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 30-32.

Reflecting on Jewish aspiration toward important political positions in Austria-Hungary, Zweig wrote: “In public life they exerted only a meager influence; the glory of the Imperial house overshadowed every private fortune, the leading positions in the administration of the State were held by inheritance, diplomacy was reserved for the aristocracy, the army and higher officialdom for the old families, and the Jews did not even attempt ambitiously to enter into these privileged circles”.⁷

Like his friends of many nations belonging to public and artistic circles, Zweig was a pacifist. They worked for benefit of world peace, peace between all nations and all states.

Based on personal experience from the cinema in Tours, a provincial town in France, Zweig describes the atmosphere that could be felt in the air of European countries just before the outbreak of the Great War. He was in company of friends, and, as usual, cinema played world news before the main movie. Audience, a group of “humble folk, workers, soldiers, market women – the plain people – who chatted comfortably”⁸, watched the news from England and France carefree and in joyful manner. However, when the newsreel showing Kaiser Wilhelm’s visit to Emperor Francis Josef in Vienna hit the movie screen, a drastic change of atmosphere in the movie theater occurred. The moment Wilhelm II appeared on the screen, “a spontaneous wild whistling and stamping of feet began. [...] Everybody booed and whistled, men, women and children, as if they had been personally insulted. The good-natured people of Tours had gone mad at an instant. [...] I was frightened to the depths of my heart. [...] It had only been a second, but one that showed me how easily people anywhere could be aroused in the time of crisis, despite all attempts at understanding, despite all efforts”⁹.

Zweig wanted to believe he was wrong and that the organized world of peace will not be questioned. He spent that summer in a good mood, writing and planning international visits and other life events as if the unpleasant episode never happened.

Since the Emperor Francis Joseph was old, Austro-Hungarian bourgeoisie debated characteristics, politeness and culture of potential heirs to the throne - its favorite and usual topic of discussion. Zweig records a deep, nation-wide sorrow when Emperor’s only son, the heir to the throne, passed away: “...I can recall another day when Crown Prince Rudolph has been found shot dead in Mayerling. Then the whole city was in a tumult of despair and excitement, tremendous crowd thronged to witness his lying-in-state, the expression of shock and sympathy for the Emperor was overwhelming, that his only son and heir, who had been looked upon as an unusually progressive and humane Habsburg of whom much was expected, had passed away at his prime.”¹⁰ General public

⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

⁸ Ibid., p. 203.

⁹ Ibid., p. 204.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 209.

opinion, like Zweig himself, had the least sympathy for Franz Ferdinand, stating that he “lacked everything that counts for real popularity in Austria; amiability, personal charm and easy-going manner [...] He was never seen to smile [...] he had no sense for music and no sense of humor, and his wife was equally unfriendly.”¹¹

Zweig spent the very hours before the outbreak of the Great War in Baden, a spa near Vienna. While in a park, surrounded by many jolly and cheerful guests of the spa, he found out that Franz Ferdinand and his wife had been murdered. Usual atmosphere in the spa was interrupted for a moment by this news, but was soon back to normal, since the archduke wasn't a beloved figure at all. Zweig wrote: “My almost mystic premonition that some misfortune would come from this man with his bulldog neck and his cold, staring eyes, was by no means a personal one but shared by the entire nation; and so the news of his murder aroused no profound sympathy. [...] There were many on that day in Austria who secretly sighed with relief that this heir of the aged Emperor had been removed in favor of the much more beloved young archduke Charles.”¹²

As Zweig recorded, the Imperial house has initially been struck with the question of Franz Ferdinand wife's burial. It has been decided that Countess Chotek, lacking noble origin, was unsuitable for burial in the Imperial vault of the Habsburgs. Thus, it has been decided that the burial should take place in a small Austrian town of Artstetten, supposedly by the choice of the late archduke himself.

From the vantage point of ordinary citizens, nothing suggested that Ferdinand's assassination would be turned into political action against Serbia. No one thought and realized that Monarchy would start the war against a small country, with whom she only had trading conflicts. “Why should we be concerned with these constant skirmishes with Serbia which, as we all knew, originated in some commercial treaties concerned with the export of Serbian pigs?”¹³

Just a few weeks more, the writer and the witness of the epoch said, and the name and the image of Franz Ferdinand will vanish from history forever. He wrote: “My bags were packed so that I could go to Verhaeren in Belgium, my work was in full swing, what did the dead Archduke in his catafalque had to do with my life? The summer was beautiful as never before and promised to become even more beautiful – and we all looked upon the world without care”.¹⁴

However, the will of political factors to transform the existing spheres of influence and change the geographical maps of the world, soon made dramatic turnaround in the lives of ordinary people. Instead of leading an organized and creative life, one was – for some reason – obliged to go to war.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 209.

¹² Ibid., p. 209.

¹³ Ibid., p. 211.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 211.

For many citizens on the both sides of the border the reasons for war didn't have rational bases. "The Serbian government was accused of collusion in the assassination, and there were veiled hints that Austria would not permit the murder of its supposedly beloved heir-apparent to go unavenged. One could not escape the impression that some kind of action was being prepared in the newspapers, but no one thought of war."¹⁵

The newspaper campaign increasingly frequently harangued for sanctions against Serbia. The ultimatum has been sent to Serbia, and she didn't fulfill it completely. At that moment the conflict between the Dual Monarchy and Serbia transcended a local conflict. Rumors started to circulate and soon have been transformed into a loud shouts about the necessity of war. Warmongering centers convinced citizens of the Monarchy and of Germany that the treacherous warmongers stood on the other side of the border.

Being a pacifist, Zweig was horrified. However, as an author and analyst, he was impressed by the transformation of ordinary citizen. "The first shock at the news of the war – the war that no one, people or government, had wanted [...] had suddenly been transformed into enthusiasm [...] young recruits were marching triumphantly, their faces lighting up at a cheering – , they, the John Does and Richard Roes who usually go unnoticed and uncelebrated".¹⁶

Zweig founds an explanation for this behavior and judgment transformation of an ordinary peaceful and working citizen into a warrior who consciously goes to war in Freud's description of "dissatisfaction and fatigue with culture"¹⁷. The war was an opportunity to release the animal nature of human beings, to leave the civilized laws and paragraphs and make way for ancient blood instincts to be lived out.

Zweig has not been recruited, because he was declared unfit by several medical commissions and didn't have any military training. Declared medically unfit, he was able both to keep his pacifist beliefs and to stay clean in front of the Monarchy's laws. Austria-Hungary had very strict punishments for dodging military service. Zweig knew that he still had to do something – with the help of a friend working in the War archives he got a position in a library.¹⁸

Describing the state of spirit among intellectuals, Zweig wrote: "It soon became impossible to converse reasonably with anybody [...] Comrades...accused me rudely of no longer being an Austrian ... and thought I should be brought to the attention of the authorities"¹⁹. He retired to a distant

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 210.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 215.

¹⁷ Freud: Dictionary of Psychoanalysis. Edited by Nandor Fodor and Frank Gaynor. New York: Philosophical Library, 1950, p.p. 120-121.

¹⁸ George Prochnik, *The Impossible Exile: Stefan Zweig at the End of the World*, New York: Other Press, 2015, 408.

¹⁹ Штефан Цвајг, *Јучерашњи свет [The World of Yesterday]* Нови Сад: Будућност, 1962, p. 226.

suburb and opted for internal escapism while all others were raging and raving. Most writers were writing patriotic works and were celebrating the war. Those who didn't, also existed. Zweig was exchanging letters with Romaine Rolland. He and other pacifist authors, originating from various countries mutually at war with each other, were writing texts of the brotherhood of all men. These text were, after censorship interventions, published in the newspapers. That's how the European spiritual elite was sending message that freedom of speech and space for mutual understanding still existed. Such authors and texts were rare and isolated, but they existed after all.

Testimonies about war events made only a small part of Zweig's autobiography. He usually presents war days through the reflections on his literature work at the time, and through description of correspondence with foreign pacifist writers. However, special focus has been reserved for events he witnessed and participated in, while he was stationed near the very frontline.

Zweig spent most of his war days working in the library of the War Archives. The spring of 1915 brought Zweig to Galicia and Poland, territories which have changed masters several times during the war. He was delegated by the War Archives to find and collect all Russian proclamations in the occupied territories, before they were destroyed and lost. Zweig did the job conscientiously, but also witnessed the deep changes war imposed upon cities, buildings and people.

Zweig was sure that he managed to understand the way of thinking of ordinary soldiers. He saw a group of guarded Russian POWs in Tarnow: "The captives did not display the slightest desire to escape, nor the Austrian militia the slightest inclination to be strict about their duties. [...] They exchanged cigarettes and laughed at each other. [...] I could not escape the feeling that these simple, primitive people had understood the war more truly than our university professors and poets: namely, as a disaster that had come over them with which they had nothing to do, and that everyone who had stumbled into this misfortune was somehow a brother."²⁰

Zweig was on the frontline itself, in the territory where, as late as the previous day, war operations had taken place. He saw the scenes of the frontline and witnessed the bestiality of war. He saw dirt, misery, hunger and death. Due to lack of medical staff Zweig helped the doctors on the way. They were exhausted and there wasn't enough blankets, medicines and bandages. Furthermore, there was a great confusion on the spot, caused by Babel of language. No one understood the wounded who spoke Slavic languages. A priest helped the doctors with translation, but he was also complaining of lack of oil needed for Extreme Unction, without which he couldn't fulfill his mission. Zweig wrote down the testimony of the old priest: "In all his long life he had never administered to so many people as during the past month"²¹.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 238.

²¹ Ibid., p. 240.

Zweig's stay near the frontline radically changed his perspective of how writers should behave in war. When he returned from the front, he decided not to hide his antiwar feelings anymore, but to write a drama. "I had recognized the foe I was to fight – false heroism that prefers to send others to suffering and death, the cheap optimism of the conscienceless prophets, both military and political. [...] Whoever voiced a doubt hindered them in their patriotic concerns, whoever uttered a warning was ridiculed as a pessimist, whoever fought against the war in which they themselves did not suffer was branded a traitor. [...] I chose for my symbol the figure of Jeremiah, the man of futile warnings"²². Zweig chose a Biblical figure and returned thus to his roots and experience of his own people. The people who have been always hunted and who have always found the way to survive. Zweig didn't believe his drama would be a success. Still, it has been sold out as a book in a large print run. A call came from Switzerland to stage his drama as a play, and for himself to come to Zurich and help with the play's adaptation. Zweig needed a formal approval from his superiors at the War Archives to leave the job and the country, and got it, in his own words – "unexpectedly easily". He spent the last two years of the Great War in the neutral Switzerland. On his returned to Austria, by-chance, he got to witness the last Habsburg, Emperor Charles, leave the Austrian territory.

Peace, which came after so much destruction, was cheered all over the world. Everyone thought that peace has canceled the war, and there was a strong belief "that the beast which has devastated our world has been tamed and even destroyed". People around Zweig have believed in Wilson's program. They felt that Program like that was their own and plead for its implementation. Zweig, being a witness and participant of the events, wrote: "We were foolish, I know it. But we were not the only ones. Those whose lives spanned that time remember that the streets of every city resounded with cheers to acclaim Wilson as the savior of the world, that the hostile soldiers embraced and kissed each other; never was Europe so filled with faith as in the first days of peace. At last the earth was yielding place to the long-promised empire of justice and brotherhood; now or never was the hour for the united Europe of our dreams. Hell lay behind us; what was there to frighten us after that! Another world was about to begin. We were young, and said to ourselves: it will be the world of our dreams, a better, a more humane world."²³

After some 10 years or so of untainted peace, the new war clouds were above Europe once again. In the neighboring Germany Hitler rose to political power. Daily newspapers have published long lists of "decadent" works in 1933, written by authors whose books were not in "the spirit of German nation". Next to the lists of writers: democrats, socialists, communists and the Jews, an information was published, naming the places where the destruction of books would take place. These

²² Ibid., p. 242.

²³ Ibid., p. 269.

books had to be destroyed, so that the New Germany could be free of that garbage. That same day, on the squares of Berlin and the main squares of 21 other German cities, the books have been burned²⁴.

The one who burns books will later burn humans. This was a clear signal to Zweig that he has to leave his organized life, rich collection of books, manuscripts and letters, and move out in order to save his bare life. Zweig predicted the Anschluss and chose England, which gave him anonymity, obscurity and isolation. He has returned to Austria only to sell his house in Salzburg and visit his mother in Vienna. However, his Austrian life was over.

After the outbreak of World War II, Zweig moved to the USA. He settled in the town of Ossining, New York. This was a dark place, only a mile distant from the notorious Sing-Sing jail. There he started to write his memoirs. USA made him depressive, so he moved to Brazil, where he finished his memoirs. Zweig's perspective of writing was the one of a man who had found peace with world and himself.

Zweig was very dissatisfied with direction the world took at that time: growing intolerance, Nazism and the feeling of helplessness about the future of mankind. His books were banned and burned. He thought that the language in which he wrote, has been polluted, since Hitler was using it. Incapable to cope with such reality, Zweig took his own life²⁵ in February 1942.

Conclusion

“The World of Yesterday” describes the *memories of a European* as the writer calls himself. Zweig's book is interesting and very valuable testimony of a bygone time. European bourgeoisie's life of early 20th century was well organized, ideally fulfilled and appropriate.

Zweig's life was a life of an intellectual, cosmopolite and humanist, who cruised around the world, met important people and made interesting conversations with them. “The World of Yesterday” contains portraits of interesting international personalities, originating from public and artistic (literary) circles, painted from Zweig's intimate perspective. By describing political events, discussing noble and, at the same time, naïve dreams of a united world, Zweig was making an anticipation of a wanted future, which sadly, failed to become reality.

The rich, happy and fulfilled life of European bourgeoisie was interrupted or cut short by Hitler's rise to power in Nazi Germany and by the Anschluss of Austria. Zweig's comfortable life of an Austrian and a Jew became endangered and worthless overnight. As a Jew, he had to abandon everything. His famous writings on English history made him eligible for emigration to England.

²⁴ <http://www.vijesti.me/caffe/velika-lomaca-knjiga-logorske-vatre-nacisticke-buducnosti-127670> accessed 15.01.2017.

²⁵ <http://afirmator.org/stefan-cvajg/> accessed 15.01.2017.

However, his life was not the same, deprived of all the things he had loved and collected for many years.

In his own words, Zweig tried to "provide a mere reflection of a time, before it sunk into darkness".

Summary

Knjiga "Jučerašnji svet" je, pored svoje literarne lepote, i važan istorijski izvor. U njoj Stefan Cvajg piše svoju autobiografiju ali i svojstvom obrazovanog, analitičnog savremenika iznosi svoju percepciju pojava, događaja i okolnosti koje su dovele do izbijanja i toka Prvog svetskog rata. Autor opisuje društvenu atmosferu pre izbijanja Prvog svetskog rata, tok rata, oduševljenje mirom i postignutom ravnotežom između novonastalih država, poretkom i napretkom nastalim u evropskom društvu prvih godina posle rata. On naslućuje opasnost po mir koji donosi ideologija fašizma i nacizma. Autor je osetio sve neprijatne posledice nacizma.

Perspektiva iz koje Cvajg piše je perspektiva čoveka pomirenog sa svetom i sa sobom, uprkos teškim i užasnim nepravdama koje su mu, kao pripadniku jevrejskog naroda, u Drugom svetskom ratu nanesene.

Zusammenfassung

Das Buch „Die Welt von Gestern“ ist, außer seiner literarischen Schönheit, eine wichtige historische Quelle. Stefan Zweig schreibt seine Autobiographie, aber als ein gebildeter, analytischer Zeitgenosse, beschreibt er seine Perzeption der Ereignisse und der Umstände die zum Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkrieges führten. Der Verfasser beschreibt die gesellschaftliche Atmosphäre vor dem Kriegsausbruch, der Gang des Krieges, Begeisterung mit dem Frieden und mit dem Gleichgewicht zwischen den neuentstandenen Staaten, mit der Ordnung und mit dem Vortschritt in der europäischen Gesellschaft in den ersten Jahren nach dem Krieg. Er ahnt die Gefahr für den Frieden die die Ideologien des Faschismus und des Nationalsozialismus mit sich bringen. Der Verfasser bekam zu spüren alle unangenehme Folgen des Nationalsozialismus.

Die Perspektive aus der Zweig schreibt, ist die eines Mannes der sich mit sich selbst und mit der Welt abgefunden hatte, trotz der schweren und furchtbaren Unbill die ihm, als einem Mitglied des jüdischen Volkes zugefügt worden war.