

his legacy was formed by the confluence of two tributaries, one called *Unterhaltung* and the other called *Ernst*.

Both streams flow through the German literary landscape. The former is extremely wide and of modest depth. The latter is very narrow and quite deep. In America, we pretend that no such rivers exist. There is just a big blurry continuum, we say, although if you get a book deal and make an appearance on Oprah, you are of necessity a writer of great note.

Stefan Zweig's reading public showered him with enormous amounts of love in the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties. His essays, plays, biographies, and short stories were translated into many languages and the sales figures for his works were commensurate with that love. He achieved this reader response effortlessly with nearly all of his works. His sales were remarkable, and those sales never flagged in his lifetime.

Zweig's literary peers showered him with considerable amounts of acid when it came to assessing his oeuvre. When a reviewer asserted that Zweig had conquered all the languages of the world, Karl Kraus (*der Meister des giftigen Spotts*) responded with a withering two word riposte: "Except one!" Hugo von Hofmannsthal, when told that Zweig had received a poetry prize, noted that Zweig had shared the prize with "eight other sixth rate talents..."

It was said that the Mann family, while in exile in California, often spent their evenings debating which was the worst writer: Zweig, Emil Ludwig, Feuchtwanger or Remarque. Brecht allegedly never read a word that Zweig wrote, regarding him always and only as a potential source of funding for Brecht's theater. A standard joke among the literati in the German speaking world, after Zweig had moved to England, was that this was part of the long term German plan to punish England which had begun in 1914.

Perhaps the strongest acid flowed from the pen of Joseph Roth, who supposedly was one of Zweig's best friends. And he poured most of his acid directly on Zweig, in letters to Zweig. Yet Zweig never seemed to mind and he truly valued his relationships with all of the foregoing luminaries. And many of those same individuals also spoke of Zweig's generosity and tireless efforts on behalf of other writers.

Such are the tributaries flowing into Zweig's legacy, one brimming with adulation and the other bubbling with acid. The two currents have never coalesced, but seem to flow alongside each other in an uneasy yet essential tension. Zweig was not an artist of the caliber of Mann or Hofmannsthal or even Roth, and he knew it. Yet Zweig definitely had something that many of his more gifted colleagues did not – an amazing ability to strike a chord with the popular reading public.

So is the writer dead forever? Perhaps we should adopt a Keynesian perspective in this regard and acknowledge that except for a handful of immortals such as Shakespeare and Goethe and Dante, in the long run all writers are dead. As for right now, however, seventy-five years after his death, Zweig the writer is showing surprising signs of life.

## THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

### *Friday Film Fest Series*



## Stefan Zweig: Farewell to Europe

By Maria Schrader

May 19, 2017

• 6:30 PM •

Film, Food & Discussion

The German Society of PA

611 Spring Garden St.

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Support provided in part by the  
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## Stefan Zweig: Farewell to Europe

**Director:** Maria Schrader

**Screenplay:** Maria Schrader, Jan Schomburg

**Producer:** Stefan Arndt, Uwe Schott, Pierre-Olivier Bardet

**Cinematography:** Wolfgang Thaler

**Music:** Cornelius Renz; Tobias Wagner

**Release Date:** June 2016

**Length:** 106 Minutes

**Cast:** Josef Hader (Stefan Zweig); Aenne Schwarz (Lotte Zweig); Barbara Sukowa (Friderike Zweig); Tomas Lemarquis (Lefevre); Lenn Kudrjawizki (Samuel Malamud); Charley Hubner (Emil Ludwig); Nahuel Perez Biscayart (Vitor D'Almeida); Harvey Friedman (Friedman); Valerie Pachner (Alix Stork); Matthias Brandt (Ernst Feder)

**Commentary:** Al Krumm

### *Dead Forever?*

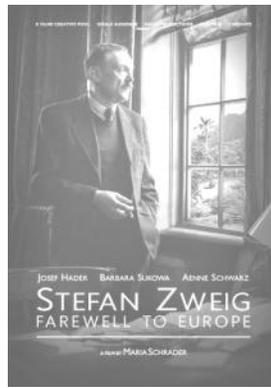
The late thirties and the early forties were vintage years for *littérateur* suicide. Ernst Toller (1939) hanged himself with the cord of his nightgown; Walter Benjamin (1940) swallowed an overdose of morphine; Virginia Woolf (1941) filled her pockets with stones and walked into a nearby river; and L.M. Montgomery (1942) also chose a drug overdose. Each of these writers opted for early severance from their respective leases on life

In the midst of this flurry of self destruction (perhaps there was some sort of empathetic synchronicity at work), Albert Camus finished writing *The Myth of Sisyphus* on February 21st 1941, wherein he declared: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy."

On February 22nd, 1942, Stefan Zweig gave his answer: "*Ich grüße alle meine Freunde. Mögen sie die Morgenröte noch sehen nach der langen Nacht! Ich, allzu Ungeduldiger, gehe ihnen voraus.*" After writing these words, and having made sure all his affairs were in order, Zweig and his second wife Lotte took a massive dose of Veronal and lay down on their bed in their residence in the Brazilian town of Petropolis.

Having answered No, Zweig had permanently liberated himself from answering any more vexing questions. But his abrupt departure only served to provoke vexing questions among those he left behind, whether intimates, enemies, colleagues or acquaintances. The most unsettling question was the Ur-interrogative: Why? There is a primeval power inherent in why, since it summons the questioner to account as much as the dearly departed under posthumous interrogation. In such cases, the heart does the asking as much as the head.

Among those who knew him, the dynamics and mechanics of the Ur-Interrogative essentially divided the reactions to Zweig's suicide into two camps. To those who were sympathetic, it was a simple matter. They noted that as a Jew, he had not only lost his residence and his ability to publish in the German speaking world, but



his homeland and even his very *Muttersprache*. To these sympathizers, the heart respondents as it were, such factors obviously sufficed to answer the Why question.

All of these corrosive deprivations had coalesced into a psychological burden that had simply worn him down. Zweig seemed to be suggesting this possibility in a letter he wrote to a friend in 1938: "*Das Traurigste, lieber Hermann Hesse, ist, dass der ständig aufgezwungene Umgang mit Verzweifelten und Aussichtslosen einen selbst so schwach macht, und das sind doch nur die ersten Wellen einer ungeheuren Flut, die uns schon umreißt.*"

But others, inclined to implement a head response, were bluntly critical. Thomas Mann said: "He should never have granted the Nazis this triumph, and had he had a more powerful hatred and contempt for them, he would never have done it." Hannah Arendt spoke harshly of Zweig's hypersensitivity: "Not one of his reactions during all this period was the result of political convictions; they were all dictated by his hypersensitivity to social humiliation."

Some who knew him (as well as many who only knew of him) were simply baffled. Zweig was wealthy and famous and revered by people all over the world. Why did he do it? Some of the reasons given for dying by those sympathetic to him could also be given as reasons for living by those who were critical. Brecht and Mann and Arendt, among others, considered the mere fact of continuing to live as a form of resistance. Other writers and artists such as Carl Zuckmeyer, Bruno Walter and even Mann himself, went on to build successful new lives in the new world.

Perhaps most instructive in this regard is Vladimir Nabokov. Nabokov was exiled twice, once from Russia because he was a wealthy aristocrat and once from Germany because his wife was Jewish. Nabokov could write: "The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two extremities of darkness." Yet Nabokov obviously answered Camus' question with an emphatic Yes, and he went on to write some of his greatest works in America.

So Why lingers in the memory of Stefan Zweig's suicide. There is no consensus. Was Zweig a victim of impossible circumstances that simply overwhelmed him? Was his suicide his own idiosyncratic gesture of defiance? Or was it the ultimate act of escapism, or even of cowardice? The whys that ensue in the wake of a famous suicide are often indefatigable and sometimes even incessant, but in the end such whys are futile. Zweig's life was an intimate mystery, as is every life, and there is no algorithm or syllogism that will yield an irrefutable answer. That answer always eludes us, because it always departs along with the negative respondent to that most fundamental of all philosophical questions.

Since Zweig was a writer, another question immediately intruded itself. An individual named Zweig was dead, but of Zweig the writer it had to be asked, channeling Proust: Is he dead forever? The response concerning Zweig's literary legacy was as divided after his suicide as it had been during his lifetime. The debate over