TRANSLATOR’S AFTERWORD

THIS NOVELLA BY STEFAN ZWEIG has an interesting and indeed complex publishing history. For a number of the details below I am indebted to the preface by the French translator Baptiste Touvere to the recent French edition, published in 2008 by Editions Grasset, and in particular to Professor Rüdiger Görner of Queen Mary, University of London, who has most kindly shared his comprehensive knowledge of Zweig and his works with me.

In France, the novella has aroused much interest as being previously unpublished, which is strictly true of its being previously unpublished in French, and indeed to the best of my knowledge in English. Although it was published in German after its full text came to light in the 1970s, and was then included in the standard German editions of the complete works of Zweig, that was at a time when, after
Zweig’s death thirty years earlier, interest in his works had waned in the English-speaking countries.

However, he had begun to write the story in the 1920s, probably around 1924 while he was also working on an essay on the poet Hölderlin. The Hölderlin essay was later included, with similar studies of Friedrich Nietzsche and Heinrich von Kleist, in a book entitled *Der Kampf mit dem Dämon* [Battle with the Demon], and dedicated to Sigmund Freud. All three of Zweig’s subjects in this work, notable literary figures in the late eighteenth century and the nineteenth century in Germany, suffered from some degree of mental disturbance (severe in the first two, sufficient in Kleist’s case to drive him to kill himself in a suicide pact). Zweig took a great interest in what was, in his day, the comparatively new field of psychology, so the dedication to Freud comes as no surprise. Some of the writers working in the Vienna of Freud’s prime themselves had a medical training—Arthur Schnitzler, for instance, whose literary works Freud himself praised for their psychological insight, and Kafka’s friend Ernst Weiss. Stefan Zweig was not one of these
literary physicians, but his psychological insight as mirrored in his fiction is in no way inferior to Schnitzler’s. An interest in exploring the interaction of mind, heart and body seems to have been in the literary air of Vienna at the time.

As a prolific writer in a number of genres, including fiction, novellas, plays, biography and literary criticism, Zweig often worked on more than one project at the same time. The date of 1924 for his embarking on the present novella would mean that he was not looking back very far in time for the latter part of his story, which concludes three years after the end of the First World War. Although Zweig was not a writer to include elements of his own life story in his fiction—it is otherwise with his ideas, for instance his strongly held pacifist views, which are to the fore here and in several of his other novellas—it is possible to imagine a slight, although not close, reflection of his personal situation in the plot of the novella. Zweig and the writer Friederike von Winternitz, who was to be his first wife, met in 1912 when she was married with children, and it was not until the end of the Great War.
that she finally divorced her husband and, in 1920, married Zweig. They were not, however, divided like the couple in this story by oceans and continents for the duration of the war. Although they ultimately divorced in 1938, they continued to correspond on friendly terms until Zweig’s death in 1942.

Zweig went on with the story in the summer of 1925, while he was also working on two other novellas, *Twenty-Four Hours in the Life of a Woman* and *Downfall of a Heart*, and a part of it was published in Vienna in 1929 under the title *Fragment of a Novella*, in an anthology of works by the Austrian National Association of Creative Artists. He must have continued working on it in the 1930s—Rüdiger Görner surmises that he was not entirely happy with the fragment published in 1929—and later Knut Beck, editor at S Fischer Verlag, the publisher of the standard editions of Zweig’s work in German, found a typescript of the complete novella in the archives of Atrium Press, London, with handwritten corrections and changes by Zweig himself. He had written in a title corresponding to that used in the new French edition, *Le Voyage dans le passé* [Journey
into the Past], and although he then crossed it out, the French publisher and translator decided to retain it. We have settled on a similar phrasing in English, one that tells the reader a little more about the content of the novella than its now standard German title, Widerstand der Wirklichkeit [Resistance to Reality].

To me it is fascinating to know that this novella stems originally from the same period as Zweig’s Twenty-Four Hours in the Life of a Woman, because in translation one comes to know a work, or in this case two works, very well indeed. The same highly charged emotional atmosphere and delicately perceptive understanding of psychological nuances pervade both novellas, with the difference that Twenty-Four Hours, by definition, covers the short period of time specified in the title, whereas Journey into the Past has a narrative stretching over nine years, because of the disruption to the lives of the story’s protagonists by the Great War of 1914–18 and subsequent events. The time span could scarcely be more different, yet the sense of strong emotional tension is strikingly similar in both novellas. Incidentally, Zweig’s meticulous but at the same time condensed style makes him a challenge to
translate, although an enjoyable challenge. You read him in the original, and on the surface everything is limpid, lucid; then you start translating him, and you have to think hard about what exactly lies below the wording of every sentence.

Short as the final version of the novella is, the Great War looms very large in it, and not just as a plot device. Zweig was a pacifist, and his fiction of this period reflects his strong feelings—another novella to which the subject is central is his *Compulsion*. For much of the Great War, having been declared unfit for military service anyway, Zweig worked in the archives of the Austrian War Office, but his anti-war opinions became ever more pronounced—he was a close friend of the French writer Romain Rolland, also a pacifist—and in 1917 he took the opportunity of moving to neutral Switzerland until the war was over. *Journey into the Past* expresses the sense of horrified helplessness felt by people who feel no bellicose patriotism whatsoever, but are overtaken by armed conflict. The personal lives of the protagonist Ludwig and other European expatriates in Mexico, where he finds himself when war breaks out in 1914, are cast into
turmoil when they are cut off from their homes, unable even to communicate in letters any more. Zweig describes the moment when news of the declaration of war reaches him as “the disastrous day that pitilessly tore up not only my calendar but, with total indifference, the lives and thoughts of millions, leaving them in shreds”. As an added illustration of the sudden reversal of ordinary circumstances, Ludwig finds that “the British consul, a friend of his … indicated with a cautious note of warning in his voice that he personally was obliged to keep an eye on all his movements from now on”.

And not only does the First World War figure prominently, so at the very end does the looming shadow of the Second World War. Ludwig has persuaded his former lover to spend a night in Heidelberg with him, but when they arrive at the railway station his mood of nostalgic passion and the quiet peace of the town alike are shattered by a nationalist demonstration. It is useful to remember here that almost as soon as the First War was over, right-wing opinion in Germany, where the terms of the Versailles Treaty were widely and bitterly resented, began to express itself in such demonstrations as the
one that shocks Ludwig so much. The Versailles Treaty had placed strict constraints on the numbers of the German army, and the reader will notice that Zweig specifically speaks of the demonstrators as ‘civilians’. But directly after the war, volunteer bodies known as Freikorps began to form, and these groups amounted to private armies. Many were then absorbed into Adolf Hitler’s Sturmabteilung (Storm Section, infamous in history as the brownshirts or SA). The SA acted as bodyguards for the leaders of what became known in 1920 as the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, the Nazi Party, formed on the basis of the immediate post-war German Workers’ Party.

The reader will find also find mention of “banners of the Reich” in the text, and although we think of the period from the end of the Great War until 1933 as the Weimar Republic—not an official name—and government was indeed on republican principles, the term Reich remained in use as a term for its governing institutions. It was not until 1933 that Hitler, by then a popular demagogue, became Chancellor of Germany, proclaimed a Third Reich and ensured the
passing of the Enabling Act which, in effect, made the country a dictatorship. As Stefan Zweig’s account shows, he had been building up support for the Nazi Party throughout the 1920s. (One term, Jungvolk, often and correctly translated as ‘Hitler Youth’, I have left as ‘youth groups’, because the name Hitler Youth was not officially adopted until 1926, and we do not seem to have reached that point yet in the chronology of the story.) Protracted as Hitler’s rise to power was, however, coming events cast a long shadow before them, and Zweig’s protagonist in Journey into the Past, having felt the effects on his personal life of the First World War, is horrified to think of the prospect of war again.

Before it came, as he had known it would, Zweig went into exile, as so many other Jewish writers in Germany and Austria did, including his friend Joseph Roth—famous and distinguished as Sigmund Freud was, he too had to leave for England to die of cancer there. In an unprecedented act of vandalism, the books of ‘subversive Jewish writers’ were burned in university cities the length and breadth of Germany in May 1933; so willingly had the
right-wing student organizations embraced the ideas of Hitler and his propaganda minister Goebbels that they themselves organized the book-burnings. Still in Austria at the time, Zweig wrote to Romain Rolland: “My dear friend, I reply to you today, on May the 10th … when my books burn on the bonfire in Berlin outside the University, where I once spoke about you to an audience of a thousand.” Five months later he left his house in Salzburg, never to return.

England was Zweig’s own first country of exile, and he then went to the United States and finally to Brazil. Here, early in 1942, he and his second wife Lotte killed themselves in a suicide pact. It has been suggested that he had been cast into despair by military successes in the Far East on the part of Japan, which with Italy was Germany’s main ally in the Second World War, but a year before Zweig’s suicide the United States had entered the war on the side of the Allies, and it was beginning to be clear (if not just yet to the Germans themselves), that Hitler’s promises of a final victory were empty rhetoric, and Nazi Germany would ultimately lose. Many people now surmise, for instance
Clive James in his clear and useful essay on Zweig as a cultural cosmopolitan, that he despaired because the old, civilized world of a pan-European culture, in which he had been so much at home, seemed lost already in a time of new barbarism, and while the Nazis might lose the war itself, they had already, as James puts it, “won the war that mattered”.

Zweig’s last work of fiction was the famous *Schachnovelle*, commonly known by the familiar English title of *The Royal Game* (and also translated as *Chess Novel*)—the royal game, or game of kings, of course being chess. It is a sad irony that his protagonist here, Dr B, is a man who has survived solitary confinement in Nazi captivity by occupying his mind with chess problems, although his experience leaves him profoundly damaged. Dying by his own hand at the age of sixty, Zweig himself might well have written much worth reading if he too had survived.

Stefan Zweig was indeed not just an Austrian but a truly European writer, a fact very evident in his memoir of his life and times, *The World of Yesterday*. Whether or not the idea suggested above was the reason for his suicide, everything
was not lost after all. Although Germany and Austria under the Nazis had, by means of anti-Semitic persecution culminating in the Holocaust, deliberately deprived themselves of the great contribution made by their Jewish citizens to the art, music and literature of their countries, a cultural revival accompanied the economic miracle. The exiled writers like Roth and Zweig—with of course such cultural figures as Thomas Mann who, although not Jewish, left Nazi Germany to go into voluntary exile—now receive their due.

At the time of writing this note, I have recently read a long and very fine novel by Uwe Tellkamp, *Der Turm* [*The Tower*], published by Suhrkamp and winner of the 2008 German Book Prize for fiction, in which we hear how deeply its central character, a clever teenager in Dresden in the 1980s when the former East German Republic was inexorably crumbling, is impressed by Zweig’s *The World of Yesterday*. Brought up in East Germany, where children in his time are obliged, right to the rapidly approaching end in the 1980s, to trot out Communist Party slogans, the boy is amazed to read the memoir and realize that, on Zweig’s
evidence, there was a time before the Second World War and the communist regimes in Eastern Europe when cultural cosmopolitanism prevailed throughout the continent. It is easy to concur with the young man’s view of Stefan Zweig as the embodiment of that civilized idea.

Two further brief notes on the translation of the novella—first, we learn early on that the husband of the married woman with whom Ludwig falls in love is a Geheimrat. This title always gives an English translator difficulty. Literally it means Privy Councillor, and once it really did mean that, but by the early twentieth century it had come to be purely honorific, denoting nothing much except that a man had distinguished himself in his own sphere of life, in the case of Councillor G as an industrialist and chemist. I have added the briefest of explanations on the first occurrence of the term, and then referred to him as ‘the Councillor’. Geheimrat as an honorary title went out of use after the Great War. And second, at the very end of the novella a nostalgic memory surfaces in Ludwig’s mind; he recollects his beloved once reading a poem by Verlaine aloud to him, Colloque sentimental. Zweig has his protagonist reciting a couplet
from this poem first in French—*Dans le vieux parc solitaire et glacé/* *Deux spectres cherchent le passé*, and then translating it into German (which I have translated into English). In fact Zweig’s text merges the second line of the first couplet in the French original—*Deux formes ont tout à l’heure passé*—with the second line of the third couplet: *Deux spectres ont évoqué le passé*. I have left it exactly as Zweig had it, since, whether intentionally or subliminally, he was adapting Verlaine’s words to the idea that he wanted of two spectres in search of the past.

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2009