

**In Search of the World of Yesterday  
(Rosh Hashanah 2023/5784)  
By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch**

**From the summit of Hitler's Eagle's Nest high in the Bavarian Alps, Rabbi Ammi Hirsch gazed upon now-tranquil Europe and reflected: "The brilliant Jewish intellectuals who helped create and define the Western European golden age and put their faith in the enduring ascent of humanity were unequipped to truly comprehend the ruthlessly evil." It didn't have to happen that way, he says. "History is not inevitable." That depravity "was the result of human will and conscious decisions. We can make a difference. Tomorrow hasn't happened yet..."**

Stefan Zweig was one of those dazzling Jewish intellectuals who helped create the golden age of Western Europe. He was a deeply learned, refined, cultured, well-spoken, impeccably dressed, sociable and urbane man, a product and model of European enlightenment at the peak of its splendor. Genius poured out of him. Effortless eloquence brought him international fame.

Destined for literary greatness from an early age, he was awarded a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Vienna before his twenty-third birthday. By the 1930's he had written dozens of poems, novellas, plays, librettos, biographies and historical texts. He was among the most prominent and prolific writers in the world, beloved and read by millions worldwide. His works were translated into nearly fifty languages. He traveled widely and acquired a brimming Rolodex of acclaimed friends, who, themselves, were luminaries of science, art, music, and culture. Stefan Zweig, a pacifist, internationalist and humanist, was the archetypical Enlightened European Man.

He was born in Vienna in 1881. The Zweig family lacked for nothing. They were affluent and secure. The centuries-old Austrian Monarchy provided peace, stability, and sanctuary. Anything radical or violent seemed impossible - relics of bygone eras of famines, revolutions and upheaval. The Enlightenment was at its peak. Nineteenth-century European liberalism was convinced that it was on an inexorable road towards progress. Soon, all violence would end. This unwavering faith in the Age of Reason had the force of religion. People believed in progress more than the Bible, and science, the archangel of progress, seemed to prove its gospel conclusively through daily miracles. It was self-evident that technological advance must inevitably result in an equally rapid moral advance. The possibility of barbaric relapses — of wars between the nations of Europe — was absurd. You may as well believe in ghosts and witches. The binding power of tolerance and conciliation would soon eliminate conflict between nations and religions, in favor of a spirit of common humanity. Peace, the greatest of human goods, would soon come to all.

Vienna was the cultural capital of the world. Generations of the celebrated artists, musicians, authors, intellectuals, journalists, and philosophers of Europe gathered in Viennese cafes to discuss the latest theories of the natural and social sciences. For these Men of Letters, Vienna was the center of the universe.

And Jewish intellectuals were at the center of the center of the universe. Zweig later wrote that "a good part, if not the greater part, of all that is admired of...Austrian culture in music, literature, the theater, the art trade, was the work of the Jews of Vienna, whose intellectual drive, dating back thousands of years, brought them to the peak of achievement."

While there was a traditional Jewish community in Vienna, the Jewish intellectuals were mostly secular, having long ago ceased believing in the religion of their ancestors. Their faith was in the swift and enduring ascent of humanity. Stefan Zweig was among them. “My mother and father were Jewish only through the accident of birth,” he said. Zweig was a cosmopolitan, a citizen of the world. He came to know his fellow Viennese intellectual, Theodor Herzl, and maintained a warm relationship with him — Herzl had given Zweig’s career an important early push by publishing essays of the then 19-year-old aspiring writer. Still, Zweig later described “The Jewish State” — Herzl’s Zionist manifesto — as an “obtuse text, a piece of nonsense.” “I remember the general astonishment and annoyance it aroused in bourgeois Jewish circles in Vienna,” Zweig later wrote. “What on earth, they said angrily, has that usually clever, witty and cultivated writer Herzl taken into his head? What stupid stuff is he saying and writing? Why would we want to go to Palestine? Our home is in Austria.”

Stefan Zweig was in his mid-twenties — already an accomplished and prominent author, admired by, and ensconced in, the upper crust of Viennese society — when a teenage Austrian vagabond came to town, seeking fame and fortune as an artist. I wonder whether Stefan Zweig ever ran into Adolf Hitler in Vienna. At one point, they lived no more than three miles away from one another. Did they ever see each other during those years? Were they ever in the same place at the same time - perhaps in the Burgtheater or the opera? Hitler would stand for hours in front of the Vienna Opera House painting its façade.

Ten years later, Zweig and Hitler would become neighbors again.

After World War I, Zweig left Vienna and purchased a magnificent mansion in Salzburg up on the Kapuzinerberg Mountain. His home became a European meeting place. Many fellow writers and leading cultural lights came to visit — the likes of James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Toscanini, H. G. Wells, Ravel, Richard Strauss and Bela Bartok. The mansion still stands. The next time you visit Salzburg, you can climb the mountain and see it from outside the gate. Now, as before, it is a private residence.

Zweig loved that house. If you have ever seen “The Sound of Music” — those stunning views of the Austrian Alps were Zweig’s daily repast. From his patio, facing south, he could take in the intoxicating beauty of the mountains surrounding the close-by German town of Berchtesgaden. “Those were rich summer days,” Zweig later wrote, “when art and the beauty of the landscape complemented each other. [After the devastation of World War I] We were justified in believing in humanity again.” “What could go wrong?” Zweig wrote. “Here was my house and who could drive me out of it?” “We spent so many happy hours with all our guests, sitting on the terrace and looking out at the beautiful and peaceful landscape, never guessing that directly opposite — on the mountain in Berchtesgaden — a man lived who would destroy it all.”

Hitler began visiting the hills above Berchtesgaden in 1923. He, too, loved the stunning Bavarian views. Eventually, he purchased and expanded a house on a gorgeous mountainside above the small village. From there, he could look down on his native Austria and the picturesque city of Salzburg, a mere twelve miles away, as the bird flies. Scholars estimate that Hitler spent three quarters of his time in Berchtesgaden before the War. He later wrote: “These were the best times of my life. My great plans were forged here.”

No one below — none of Zweig’s contemporaries who sat on his veranda whiling away the summer days, deep in philosophical, theoretical, and rational thought - none of those most brilliant intellects of Europe - foresaw that the plans of their new neighbor included the establishment of a thousand-year Aryan racist supremacy that would destroy everything they held dear. “None of us in Germany and Austria,” Zweig wrote, “contemplated the possibility of one hundredth, of one thousandth, of what was about to break over us a little later.”

None of Zweig’s guests knew that, in effect, they were living the last peaceful days of Pompeii, oblivious to the toxic magma building up inside the mountain to the south, so close that if they only applied their prodigious intellectual gifts to a commonsense understanding of politics and human nature — they may have heard the rumblings, felt the reverberations, perceived the intensifying heat, seen the clouds, spotted the smoke, smelled the sulfur, and anticipated the explosion.

“The sun of Rome is set. Our day is gone. Clouds, dews and daggers come; our deeds are done.”

Practically none of the intellectuals of Europe realized until it was too late that goodness cannot temper evil by moral example alone. “How with such rage shall beauty hold a plea, whose action is no stronger than a flower?” Zweig and his circle were too refined to truly understand the cold-blooded hearts of those who inhabited the Berchtesgaden mountainside twelve miles away. “With our ideas rooted in justice,” Zweig wrote, “we believed in the existence of a German, a European, an international conscience, and we were convinced that a certain degree of inhumanity is sure to self-destruct in the face of humane standards.”

Zweig and his pacifist and humanist peers were unequipped to comprehend the motivations of the ruthlessly violent. The only way to defeat them is on their terms, not yours. The enemy of peace is not war, itself, but the unrestrained impulse to power, domination and suppression, tolerated, permitted, or even encouraged by those who should know better. In the end, it was not reason that persuaded those thugs. “So foul a sky clears not without a storm.” It was Royal Air Force bombs that flattened the mountainside twelve miles away.

Fellow Viennese intellectual, Sigmund Freud, understood human drives better. While both were in exile in London during the late 1930s, Freud shared with Zweig that while deeply distressed, he was not surprised by the terrible outbreak of bestiality. It is impossible, Freud thought, to root the elemental, barbaric, destructive drive out of the human psyche. Perhaps the communal life of nations might suppress somewhat these deep-seated impulses, but they would remain ineradicable forces in daily life, and fundamental to human nature. Knowingly or not, Freud agreed with the Book of Genesis: “*Yetzer lev ha’adam ra mi’ne’u’rav*” — “the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth.”

I visited Berchtesgaden this summer. I shall not return. Once is enough. I wanted to breathe the air, see the sites, and view now peaceful and tranquil Salzburg from above, as the devouring beasts saw it then. There is always a part of me that asks, “What did they miss that is obvious now?” “Would I have seen it back then?” Those caught up in great historical upheavals, Zweig wrote, “always fail to recognize them in their early phases.” It is only after the events, looking back, that we can more deeply understand what happened and why.

I wanted to connect the jigsaw jumbled in my mind all these years later; to fathom the unfathomable. Knowing the sharpening daggers and wicked plans that the monster forged from here — I wanted to stand where he stood, to try to comprehend — if not intellectually — at least

emotionally: What drove those rapacious villains? And why did so few see it, until it was too late?

I hadn't realized until I arrived that the entire mountainside was polluted by Nazis. Martin Bormann lived nearby, with his wife and ten children. He oversaw the construction of what is now called the Eagle's Nest on the highest mountain above. Albert Speer lived on the other side of the hill. On the neighboring hilltop Hermann Goering built his mansion. A Kempinski Hotel now stands there, most of its upscale guests blissfully unaware of the sordid history of the place, or the still-existing network of tunnels and bunkers right below the hotel that connected the homes of the senior officials of the Third Reich. Goering's servants' quarters still stands on those grounds. I took a picture of it. An elderly woman was walking around the lawn; it seemed to me that she lived there.

In the 1930s and 40s, this mountainside teemed with Nazis. Hundreds of Germans from the surrounding villages would ascend these slopes trying to catch a glimpse of their messiah. From time to time, he would emerge from his house to receive the elated throngs. You can view pictures of him greeting locals at the end of his driveway. Goebbels and his team of propagandists loved those shots.

There is nothing left of the house, itself. It was pummeled by the RAF towards the end of the War, blown up again by fleeing SS guards four days after the German surrender — and in 1952 the Bavarian government destroyed it completely, removing all the rubble, hoping to discourage tourists from visiting.

The only part of the complex that still stands, is pieces of the retaining wall. These stones — covered in moss, grass and small bushes - are hard to notice; a guide needs to point them out to you. In fact, the entire hillside has been reclaimed by the forest. You would never know that there was a mansion here, with two driveways, and a huge cleared-out lawn.

And that's the thought I kept mulling in my mind. Nature repossessed this hill and reclaimed it. You are inside a resplendent Bavarian forest. The woods are lovely, verdant, lush and deep, majestic tree limbs "uttering joyous leaves of dark green." If you didn't know where you were standing, you would feel peace and tranquility: birds singing, trees rustling, crickets chirping, fallen branches snapping under your feet. It is hard to believe that there was ever a house here, let alone an entire Nazi neighborhood. Bormann even built a kindergarten on these grounds for his children and those of other Nazi officials. Today, you can hardly imagine it because you are surrounded by nature. It took less than a century for Mother Earth to vigorously and emphatically reassert her dominion over the arrogance of Man.

"I met a traveler from an antique land  
Who said — "two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert...Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read...  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”  
—Percy Bysshe Shelley

Everything evil here is now gone, decayed into the earth. Nothing beside remains. The forest stretches far away. The few heaped stones and mossy scabs testify to the hubris of the Thousand-Year Reich. You have no power over us. We are free of you — you self-proclaimed king of kings whose visage the frown and wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command — is now vapor. Nature is permanent. Everything human fades away. Your thousand-year empire lasted less than a decade. Even the wreckage is hard to find.

I visited Berchtesgaden on a picture-perfect summer day. From the summit of the Eagle’s Nest, I could see forever in every direction. A cloudless azure sky floated over the rugged peaks, the sunbeams illuminating the gateway to heaven. How could something so pure, so divine, fashioned by God on the third day of creation, be the locus of such sacrilegious profanity? The incongruity of it all — the knowledge that although Hitler is dead, his venom is still toxic, shatters the soul.

But looking down on the now peaceful villages below, with Salzburg in the distance, I took away from my three hours in Berchtesgaden not only a sense of despair, but also hope. Because what you tell yourself over and over again, is that it didn’t have to happen this way. It was not preordained, written in the stars. The depravity emanating from here was the result of human will and conscious decisions, each one of which could have been different. Neville Chamberlain stood precisely where I stood, in the first of his three meetings with the German dictator, hoping to bring peace to those times. What if he had sized Hitler up in this, the first meeting, and took immediate measures to confront the monster? It may still not have prevented the War, but it could have made it easier to win, with far fewer casualties. Did the Berchtesgaden pack of wolves even realize how degenerate Germany would eventually become, or did their appetites grow more ravenous only after seeing what they could get away with - step-by-step, ignored atrocity after ignored atrocity?

History is not inevitable. There is far more coincidence, spontaneity and willfulness than we care to admit. Blaise Pascal playfully wrote that had Cleopatra’s nose been shorter, “the whole face of the world would have changed.” What he meant was that had she not been as riveting to the Romans, who connected the profile of a woman’s nose with beauty, nobility and strength of character: Had her face been shaped differently, she would not have captivated two Roman emperors, bore their children, and thus, created the conditions for the eventual rise of Augustus and the flourishing of the Roman empire. Pascal’s point was that so much of human life and history is dependent on a vast string of contingencies, the importance of which we do not appreciate at the time.

Talmudic rabbis made a similar point. They tell the story of two men: one named Kamza and the other, Bar Kamza. A wealthy man threw a party and sent his servant to invite his friend, Kamza. The servant mistakenly invited bar Kamza, whom the wealthy man despised. Upon seeing bar Kamza at his party, the host ordered him to leave. Trying to avoid embarrassment, bar Kamza offered to pay for his food, then for half of the expenses of the party, and finally, he offered to pay for everything. Each time he was rebuffed by the host, who forcibly removed bar Kamza in front of the communal leaders, who said nothing. The humiliated bar Kamza, seeking to take revenge on the elders of the community, informed the Romans that the Jews were preparing a

revolt against them. To make a longer story shorter: one thing led to another and the Romans eventually burned the Temple and destroyed the kingdom.

The Talmud concludes that Jerusalem was destroyed — not because of Roman power or national interest — not because it was inevitable or preordained. “Come and see how great is the power of shame,” taught Rabbi Elazar. “Jerusalem was destroyed because of Kamza and bar Kamza.

We have a tendency to look back at events and conclude that they were inevitable. It is not true. Nothing is inevitable. History is the sum of human choices, the result of one day after another after another. Standing where the dictator stood ninety years ago, you need to force yourself to put aside for the moment what you know transpired and imagine standing there at that time the future hadn’t happened yet. It was still preventable.

We are living through momentous times. One day historians will write definitive chapters of our epoch. But does anything seem inevitable to you? A century from now students will look back at the events of our days and be tempted to conclude that whatever developed had to happen this way. But that would be unserious and arrogant. If we are to truly understand history, we have to assume that things might have unfolded differently. We have to believe that Jerusalem need not have been destroyed. Jewish sages insisted that we have the power to change events. “It is not for you to finish the task, but neither are you free to desist.” The reason we care so much about contemporary events, the reason we fight so hard is that we believe we can make a difference. Tomorrow hasn’t happened yet. Our actions can sway the balance and influence the outcome.

This is the central message of the High Holy Days.

*“U’teshuva, u’tefillah, u’tsedakkah — ma’avirin et ro’ah hageziera”* — repentance — the willingness to admit mistakes and make amends — prayer — the capacity for self-reflection — and charity — the commitment to righteous living — remove the evil of history’s decree.

We can never despair.

Stephen Zweig died of despair. He fled Salzburg in 1934, for London, but he always felt that the Nazis were at his back, and kept trying to outrun them. After the conquest of France, once again, the Germans were only miles away. Zweig’s intuition that he would always be a prime target was correct. After the war the Allies discovered what they called “The Black Book,” a list of prominent individuals who would be arrested immediately upon a successful German invasion. Stefan Zweig was on page 231, his London address clearly noted.

Zweig and his wife, Lotte, fled again, reaching New York City in 1940. He settled for a few months in Ossining where he wrote most of his monumental memoir, “The World of Yesterday.” In the summer of 1941, he set sail again to Petropolis, Brazil, to a German refugee colony north of Rio de Janeiro.

Zweig was about as far away from the German war machine as could be imagined. But he was still haunted, and never really adjusted to England, America or Brazil. His home would always be refined, cultured, classical Europe, now in ruins and lost forever. “I knew,” he wrote, “like the patriarch Lot in the Bible, that all behind me was dust and ashes, the past transformed into a pillar of bitter salt.”

Zweig died in exile, at the far end of the world. He was sixty years old. On the evening of February 22, 1942, after completing a game of chess with his neighbor, Zweig returned home, he and Lotte swallowed a deadly amount of barbiturates, and they expired soon thereafter. They were found the next afternoon by their housekeeper. Zweig, always impeccably dressed, had fastened his tie before his death, in the manner of the high European culture of his age. He and Lotte were holding hands; she was curled up beside him, her head tenderly resting on his shoulder.

The brilliant novelist, playwright, poet, journalist and intellectual, who was read by millions in the first half of the 20th century, composed one last note. He had written many thousands of pages in his life, but his final message was one page long. It is preserved in the archives of the National Library of Israel.

Zweig wrote: "I think it better to conclude in good time and in erect bearing, a life in which intellectual labor meant the purest joy, and personal freedom the highest good on Earth. I salute all my friends! May it be granted to them to see the dawn after the long night! I, all too impatient, go on before."

How to explain the nature and depth of Zweig's despair? He was as safe as one could be during those times. In 1942, both the United States and the Soviet Union had joined the war against Nazi Germany. In a few months, the tide would turn. Even the German high command knew that they were unlikely to prevail against the Allies.

But Zweig probably sensed that even if Germany was defeated, the world of yesterday — of European enlightenment, and culture — his world — was gone forever. He was convinced that Europe had destroyed itself; that its sun had set. Its day was done. And therefore, Zweig felt that his race had likewise run its course. His books had been burned in the public squares of Germany. The University of Vienna revoked his Ph.D. explaining that "a Jew is unworthy of an academic title." My guess is that Zweig thought that even if the Nazis were defeated, he would never be able to retrieve his old life — the only one that he felt was worth living. Even if he survived, he would remain in permanent spiritual exile. It wasn't until 2003, 62 years later, that his doctorate was posthumously and officially reinstated. Vienna, of course, has never recovered its former glory.

Perhaps part of Zweig's despair also had something to do with his Jewishness. Towards the end of his memoir, Zweig wrote that he simply couldn't fathom what it was all for: it was all a colossal waste. He was a Jew only by happenstance. There was nothing specifically Jewish he and practically all of his Jewish friends actually believed or observed. Their Judaism had been essentially discarded in favor of atheism, secularism, internationalism, cosmopolitanism and pacifism.

Speaking for himself, and probably most of his Jewish friends, Zweig wrote: "The most tragic part of this Jewish tragedy of the 20th century was that those who were its victims could not see what the point of it was...When their ancestors had been cast out in medieval times, at least they had known what they were suffering for — their faith and their law...They still had what today's Jews lost long ago — an inviolable faith in their God." "...When they were burnt at the stake, they held the holy scripture to their breasts, and the inner fire it gave them made the murderous flames seem less fierce. When they were hunted down all over the world, they still

had one last refuge in the Lord their God... As long as their religion held them together, they were still a community.”

“However,” Zweig wrote, “the Jews of the 20th century were not a community anymore, nor had they been for a long time. They had no faith in common with each other; they felt their Jewish identity was a burden rather than a source of pride, and they were not aware of having any mission... They were increasingly impatient to integrate with the lives of the peoples around them and become part of their communities, dispersing into society, in general... They were more French, German, British and Russian than they were Jews.”

“...Only now,” writes Zweig, “were Jews forced, for the first time in centuries, to be a single community again... But why was this their recurrent fate, and theirs alone? What was the reason for this pointless persecution, what was its aim? They were driven out of the lands where they had lived, but never given any land of their own. They were told: ‘Don’t live here with us,’ but no one told them where they *were* to live...” “...And so they looked at one another with burning eyes as they fled. ‘Why me? Why you? Why you and I together, when I don’t know you, I don’t understand your language, I don’t grasp your way of thinking — [and] when we have nothing in common? Why all of us? No one could answer that question,” Zweig concluded.

I am reminded of “Leopoldstadt,” that stunning play by Tom Stoppard. For those of you who saw it, do you remember the last devastating act, when the Stoppard figure, a visiting Englishman named Leo Chamberlin, meets an Austrian cousin, Nathan, who survived the War? Chamberlin, whose given name was Leopold Rosenbaum, took the surname of his stepfather — “in case Hitler won,” his mother said. He was eight years old when he left Vienna for England but had no recollection of his childhood in Austria. His parents worked hard to suppress any flicker of Jewish memory. Rosenbaum was gone for good, they thought. As Nathan recites the list of Chamberlin’s relatives who died in the Holocaust fervently trying to reawaken long-dormant Jewish memories, he lashes out at Chamberlin with these words — from Stoppard’s perspective, the key sentence in the entire play: “You live as if without history — as if you throw no shadow behind you.”

Stefan Zweig, like so many fellow Jewish Europeans, lived as if without Jewish history — as if he threw no Jewish shadow behind him. And he thought — he was convinced — that the world would accept his offering. This is the ultimate tragedy of Stefan Zweig and our people. Every time we forget — or purposely ignore — the Jewish shadow behind us, at some point, in some way, we will be reminded of it by others.

I do agree with Zweig’s last written words in his memoir about the Jews: “Perhaps it is the ultimate point of the existence of the Jews,” he wrote, “that through their mysterious persistence in living on, they raise Job’s eternal question to God again and again — to keep that question from being forgotten.”

Why? Why me? Why you? Why you and I together? Why all of us?

On this sacred and awesome day, don’t forget — never forget — there is a long Jewish shadow behind us.

Stefan Zweig, this brilliant, lucid, deeply learned genius of our people, concluded his memoir with these words: “In the last resort, every shadow is also the child of light, and only those who



have known the light and the dark, have seen war and peace, rise and fall, have truly lived their lives.”