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Stefan Zweig and the Nazis

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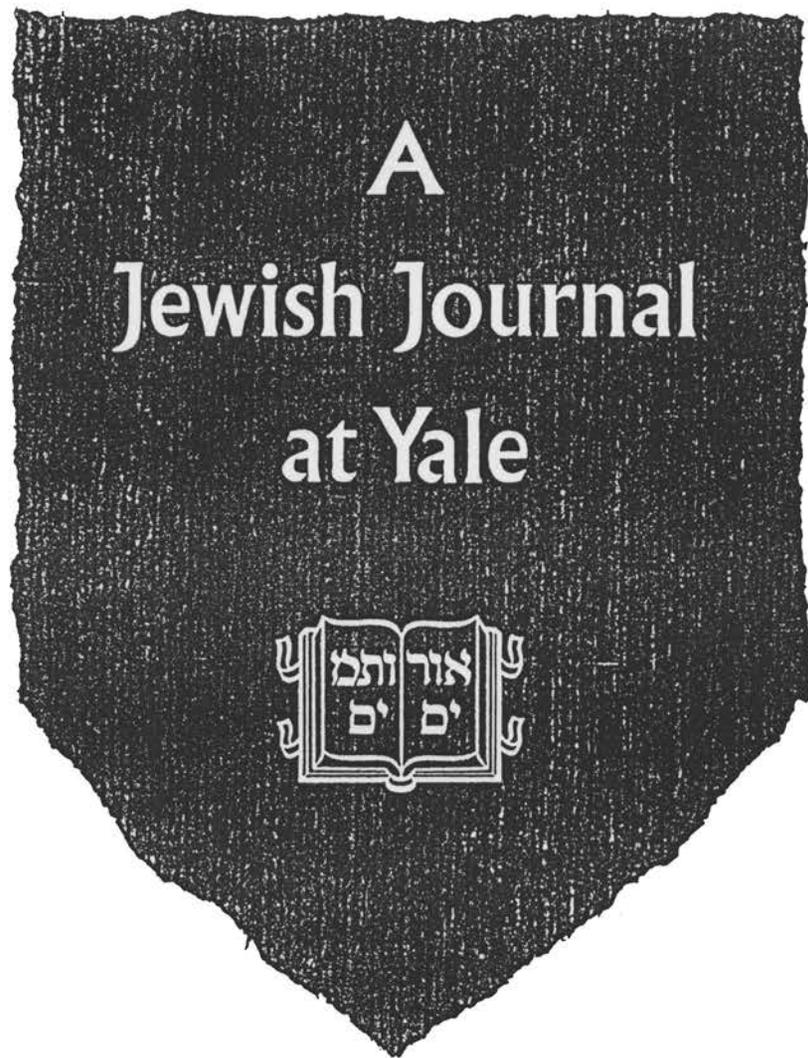


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Havdalab

Twisted wicks of spice and light and wine
draw out the wax and wane of braided time,
stretch the knotted texture of its rhyme—
a moment's cadence in an endless line.

The vial of time uncorked emerges gas;
its spiced perfume inebriates the air
of weeks and years that waft unendingly—
with subtle scent of present, past and last
night's wedding of a bride, tonight retired,
full-bellied with the richness of her womb.

—Janina Frankel

Ken Frieden

Are authors responsible for all the readings and misreadings their texts encounter? Stefan Zweig's *Jeremiah: A Dramatic Poem in Nine Images*¹ is a troubling instance of a literary creation that—due to historical change and the way it was later read—may have destroyed its creator. Zweig hardly identified himself as a Jewish writer, yet the "final solution" decisively incriminated the resigned pacifism of *Jeremiah* and forced him to reassess his literary career. After fleeing Nazi persecution, Zweig chose suicide in 1942; his suicide declaration observed that "the work of my own language has perished for me."² One peculiar copy of Zweig's dramatic poem, housed in the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University, provoke further contemplation on the anguish Zweig must have endured.

Dated "Easter, 1917", *Jeremiah* at first resists political interpretation by calling itself "a dramatic poem in nine images." Like Hugo von Hofmannsthal's early works, Zweig's text partially eludes mimetic conventions through its poetic form. *Jeremiah*'s verses suggest prophetic fantasy rather than political commentary. Further, the nine "images" (*Bilder*) replace scenes of a traditional drama. But these "images" are also parables that function as criticism of the raging war. Zweig's *Jeremiah* sets aside his Jewish identity to act as prophet of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

Initially, *Jeremiah* and Baruch represent a radical opposition. Before he becomes *Jeremiah*'s scribe, Baruch speaks for the youth of Israel when he asserts that "we all want war." Prophesying the fall of Jerusalem, *Jeremiah* responds that "war is an evil, biting animal, he eats the flesh from the strong and sucks the marrow from the powerful." Thus *Jeremiah* favors slavery under the Chaldeans if this is necessary to avert war. Against the claim that this is a "holy war", he cries "Remove God's name from the war, for it is not God who conducts war, but rather men! No war is holy, no death is holy, only life is holy." *Jeremiah* pronounces the pacifistic slogan, "preserve peace, preserve peace."

Yet the opposition between *Jeremiah* and Baruch is overcome. While *Jeremiah* begins as an allegory of the destruction of Austria-Hungary by World War I, it concludes with an idealized prophetic representation of the Jewish fate. The final "image" is entitled, "The Eternal Way" and depicts the march of the Jews out of Jerusalem into exile and servitude. Zweig's allegory becomes literally applicable to the Jews when *Jeremiah*'s pacifism turns into blind acceptance. After King Zedekiah has been literally blinded, voices among the Jews comment that "a blind man is no leader." *Jeremiah* firmly contradicts them: "God closed off earthly vision from him,/That he might better see His eternal Kingdom." As the final scene shifts from pacifist polemic into an exalted, passive acceptance, Zweig reveals his vision of Jewish existence.

Perhaps to mark these crucial passages, the lower right-hand corners of pages 149 and 151 in Yale's copy are torn away; this mutilation takes on double significance. As the Jews march into slavery, Jeremiah sings:

Wandering people, suffering people—in the holy name
Of Jakob, who once wrested a blessing from God for you—
Rise up to travel into the world,
Prepare and walk an unending path!
Throw you seed
Willingly into the darkness of the peoples and years,
Wander your wandering and suffer your suffering!

The enslaved Jews take up Jeremiah's words of jubilant acceptance, and the Chaldeans respond with astonishment: "What is with this nation . . . are they not the conquered . . . what are they singing . . . in this mildness there is a power that is dangerous." The Jews' joyful resignation bewilders the Chaldeans until one of them interprets the source of their strength: "they believe in the invisible." The Chaldeans comment that this belief cannot be learned, for it is the Jewish secret. Thus, Zweig's play ends with a victory for the vanquished Jews. In the words of the Chaldeans, "One cannot conquer the invisible! One can kill men, but not the God that lives in them. One can overcome a nation, but never its spirit." The events of World War II transformed this statement into facile optimism.

First published in 1917, *Jeremiab* became unprintable within German borders after the Nazis' rise to power. In 1939, however, Bermann Fischer Verlag and Allert de Lange published Zweig's dramatic poem in Stockholm and Amsterdam. Whether clandestinely or by official order, this edition found its way to Munich. Yale's copy of the 1939 edition bears a black stamp on its copyright page:

Haupt-Archiv
der NSDAP
Muenchen
Nr.

Apparently no number was given, and the book arrived at Yale Sterling Memorial Library, anonymously donated, in 1949.

What does it mean that *Jeremiab* was held by the archives of the National Socialists during the Second World War? Was this copy confiscated from a deported Jewish family or imported for purposes of research into the Jewish mind? Did the marked pages provide emotional support to persecuted Jews, or were they a source of information to the SS?

Zweig's posthumously published autobiography, *The World of Yesterday*, attests to the author's awareness that the Nazis studied his books. His name was already hotly disputed among Nazi authorities in 1933, when he collaborated with Richard Strauss on an opera entitled *The Silent Woman*. At that time, "all imaginable files of the Gestapo and all my earlier books were combed through." Somewhat complacently, Zweig observes that "nothing could be found to show that I ever had said a detrimental word about Germany." On the contrary, "my books had already enjoyed the honor of being widely read by the National Socialists; it had been the *Fouché* in particular which as an example of political unscrupulousness they had studied and discussed repeatedly."

A more sober passage, however, describes the fate of Zweig's books in the early forties:

Of the hundreds of thousands and even millions of my books which had their secure place in the book shops and in innumerable homes in Germany, not a single one is obtainable today; whoever still has a copy keeps it carefully hidden.

As Zweig penned his autobiography, he knew that the bulk of his literary achievement had been annulled by Hitler's decree. Those copies that remained were "locked away in the so-called 'poison cabinet' for those few who with a special permit from the authorities want to use them 'scientifically'." What had the Nazis done to his language?

Some authors have been destroyed by their own language. As Nietzsche would have realized had he lived to see what Heidegger refused to acknowledge, a writer may be undone by others' distortions of his texts. If, by identifying with Austrian pacifism during World War I, *Jeremiab* played into the hands of the Nazis, did Zweig find himself guilty of evading a deeper relationship to Jews and Judaism?

Notes

¹ Stefan Zweig, *Jeremias: Eine dramatische Dichtung in neun Bildern* (Stockholm: Bermann Fischer Verlag, 1939). All translations are my own.

² Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday* (New York: The Viking Press, 1943). Parts of the autobiography were written at the Taft Hotel in New Haven.

³ The edition of *Jeremias* that is discussed in this essay recently disappeared from the Sterling Memorial Library.