

Stefan Zweig: Life as a Refugee

Born 1881.

Biographer, novelist and playwright.

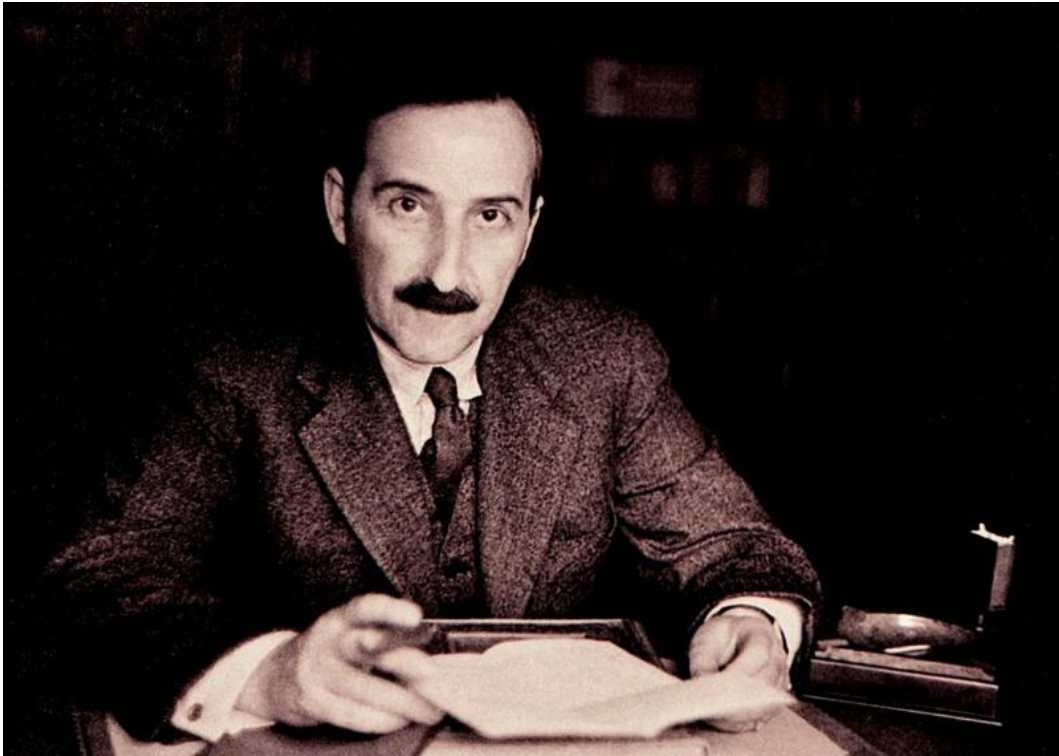
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1. Introduction



Chapters 1 to 7 were archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the www.theartsdesk.com website. The article was written in February 2017 by Jasper Rees, who had discovered he was a cousin of Stefan Zweig.

On 23 February 1942 at half past four in the afternoon in a secluded Brazilian hilltown called Petrópolis about an hour from Rio, a maid and her husband pushed at the bedroom door of a modest rented house. Despite the late hour, the tenants had not yet stirred. The door swung open to reveal, lying on the bed, a young woman in a cotton dress rolled over on her side, an older supine man wearing a jaunty moustache and a punctilious tie. The woman's body was still warm.

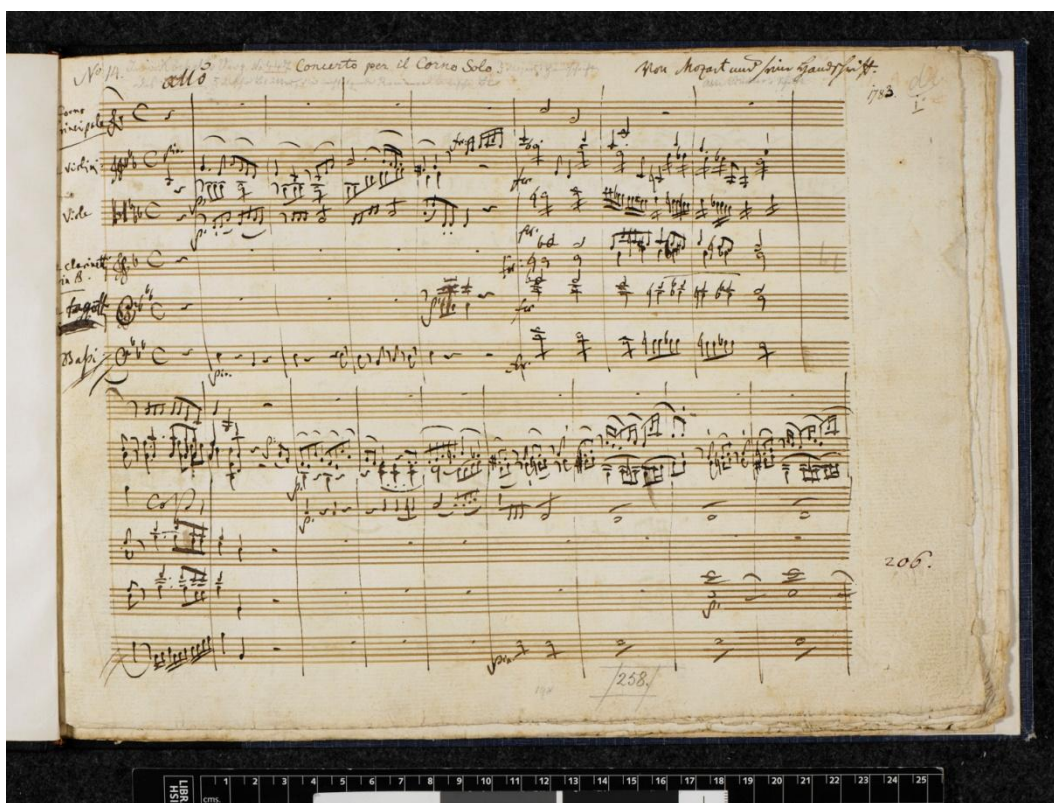
Word of the suicide of the famous writer Stefan Zweig and his wife Lotte hastened as rapidly around the globe as any news could, barely two months after the United States' entry into the war. For the previous two decades Zweig, an Austrian Jew born and raised in Vienna at the tail-end of the Hapsburg era, was perhaps the most translated author on the planet, certainly one of the most widely travelled and fêted.

Many of his novellas and stories, most famously Letter from an Unknown Woman, would find their way onto the big screen. Zweig knew everyone. He corresponded for years with Freud and spoke at his funeral, wrote the opera Die schweigsame Frau with Richard Strauss, was friends with Mann

and Rilke, Gorky and Joyce, Toscanini and Pirandello. Such was his stature that in 1932 he personally interceded to persuade Mussolini to commute the death sentence of an anti-fascist.

One is inclined to regard such giants dining at the top table of world literature as somehow beyond reach. Zweig in particular seems to hail from a mythical era he himself nostalgically refers to in the title of his memoir as *The World of Yesterday*. But sometimes these figures can come closer than one realises. In the case of this particular story, a great deal closer.

2. A Mozart Manuscript



The manuscript of Mozart's K447.

I first encountered Zweig before I had actually read him. I was writing a book called *I Found My Horn* about resuming the wind instrument I renounced as a school leaver. The focus of this midlife misadventure was Mozart's third concerto for French horn, which at the end of a year's practice I forced myself to perform to a paying audience. I discovered that the autograph manuscript was, oddly, in the British Library. The day before my performance, I received permission to inspect – to commune with - the piece of paper (pictured below) on which Mozart scrawled the very notes I had spent a year attempting to master.

The manuscript of K447 was part of the Stefan Zweig Collection. As is outlined in *Three Lives*, the superb biography by Oliver Matuschek, Zweig was an obsessive collector of historical manuscripts. He amassed documents featuring the handwriting of Leonardo da Vinci, of Handel and Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, Napoleon, Goethe and Nietzsche, even his and all Europe's nemesis, Hitler. By an imperishable irony, he owned the manuscript on which Haydn set down the notes to the German national anthem. "Nothing," he explained of his lifelong hobby, "can give an idea of the incomprehensible process of creation except, to some slight extent, handwritten pages."

3. A Family Connection

Soon after my book was published I received an email from my aunt, then in her late seventies. “Did you know you have a Zweig connection?” I did not. She offered a swift timeline. When Zweig and his wife Lotte died, his entire estate was inherited by Lotte’s next of kin, her brother Manfred. Manfred and his wife Hannah were in turn killed in a car crash in Switzerland in 1954, and the estate passed to their daughter Eva. Eva, my aunt explained, is her second cousin (and therefore also my mother’s).

In other words, I spent a year obsessing about a composition by Mozart when the original manuscript was, as it were, already in the family. Mozart's Third Horn Concerto K447 from the Stefan Zweig collection at the British Library “It’s not the sort of responsibility that one particularly wants to inherit.” Some years ago I sat in the North London kitchen of Eva, a small woman with a watchful birdlike presence who is Lotte’s niece and my second cousin once removed. This was the first and only time she spoke to a journalist about Zweig and her aunt and, to preserve her privacy, she preferred to keep her surname concealed. Eva inherited the collection in her mid-twenties. She was now in her early eighties. “While the war was still on it wasn’t a burden,” she continued, “but as soon as the war finished it was a tremendous burden. My father was working as a doctor. My mother was looking after a lot of people. She took on the entire correspondence. Publishers from all the countries he was published in started writing and it became a very large problem. It was a full time job for her.”

The rights to the books were sold off in due course, but the future of the manuscript collection remained problematic for several decades. Many had been retrieved from Austria, where Zweig had left them in the safe keeping of an antiquarian specialist, and most were stored in a bank vault until 1986 when they were eventually passed by Eva to the British Library. “I knew that this was not something that was meant for me,” she said. “Zweig had said it in some of his writings: he wanted it kept together and accessible to everyone.” Did she consider returning the entire collection to Vienna? “I wouldn’t have dreamt of it,” she said. “They forced him out. Quite a lot of the country supported the Nazis. They welcomed them when they marched in.”

4. Lotte Zweig



Lotte Altmann Zweig.

If there is any sense of regret for the responsibilities posed by the inheritance, it is not reserved for Zweig nor, in particular, for Eva's aunt Lotte. In the story of Stefan Zweig, Lotte Altmann (pictured right) is die schweigsame Frau - the silent woman, the unknown woman. Who was she? Thomas Mann implicitly defamed her memory when lamenting Zweig's suicide. "He can't have killed himself out of grief, let alone desperation," Mann railed. "The fair sex must have something to do with it." Zweig's first wife Friderike, a rather garish figure who more or less stalked Zweig until he succumbed, vengefully deleted Lotte from history when, with the Zweigs safely dead, she referred to herself in her US naturalisation papers as Zweig's widow.

Zweig and Lotte met in 1934. The author had sniffed the way the wind would soon blow in Austria and abandoned his splendid hilltop home above Salzburg to base himself in London. In urgent need of a secretary as he embarked on a biography of Mary Queen of Scots (inspired, as ever, by a document featuring her handwriting), he applied to the aid organisation for Jewish refugees. They recommended a well-educated young woman newly arrived from Germany and fluent in English and French.

Friderike, by now being edged to the margins of Zweig's life, later remembered Lotte in a memoir: "a very serious, not to say melancholy girl,

who looked the very embodiment of the fate that had befallen her and so many fellow sufferers... But she overcame her frailty with admirable energy.”

By the end of the year Lotte was no longer just Zweig’s secretary. No documents record the date her status changed. But a photograph of her in Monte Carlo taken in December 1934 by Zweig hints at intimacy. “Stefan Zweig pinxit,” he boasted in purple ink on the margin, like a Renaissance master authoring a work. Friderike discovered for herself in January 1935 when she burst into Zweig’s hotel room in Nice. “I have never seen a human being look so startled as this young girl roused from a state of deep drowsiness,” she recalled.

The rule was that at meal times we had to speak French. It was quite an effective way of keeping us quiet.

The bond deepened as Zweig went about the complex business of divorcing his wife and winding up his affairs in Austria. Lotte was the perfect antidote to Friderike. “There are no love letters,” says Zweig’s biographer Oliver Matuschek. “He calls her Fraulein Altmann or Fraulein Lotte until the last days before their marriage. They had very similar characters, not loud or self-important.” Eva confirmed that “Lotte wasn’t a passionate person, but it was a very close and a very warm relationship.”



Stefan Zweig with Lotte.

5. Hallam Street



Stefan Zweig's change of address card. 49 Hallam Street in 2021, below.



In London Zweig lived and worked in a service flat in Hallam Street, off Portland Place and convenient for his researches in the British Museum. Eva remembered it as “rather dark and slightly gloomy”. Whenever she visited she would turn into a sort of infant under-secretary. “In those days Lotte typed everything but she always had carbon copies and they had to be sorted and collated and that was the job I was given whenever I was around. I wasn’t aware of which books they were.”



Front door of 49 Hallam Street in 2021.

As a growing tide of refugees asked Zweig for more assistance than he could provide, and Britain started to look dimly on enemy aliens, the Zweigs secured British citizenship and moved out of London. Three days after the declaration of war, they married and made an offer for a house on a steep hill overlooking Bath, much as Zweig's old house (below) had towered above Salzburg. Eva and a cousin called Ursula, a refugee recently arrived from Italy, were both evacuated there.



6. Bath



Rosemount, Bath.

Stefan Zweig and Lotte Altmann “We called them Onkel Stefan and Tante Lotte,” recalled Ursula, who still had a tinge to her accent on the phone. “I was thrown in at the deep end but they were very kind. Stefan was always interested very much in everything was going on - did we do our homework properly? He was a very humane person who cared a lot. He tried to foster our interest in various things. We each had some little duties to perform in the garden. We had a vegetable patch which we cultivated. They would come and see how it was getting on. He was very musical and we sometimes re-enacted parts of operas while Lotte played the piano.” Eva remembered being taken to Covent Garden by Zweig to see Don Giovanni, and being shown treasured items from the collection, above all Blake’s portrait of King John and Mozart’s catalogue of his own works.

German was rarely spoken. Both cousins recalled a particular linguistic stricture. “The rule was that at meal times we had to speak French,” said Eva. “I think it has a double function. It was quite an effective way of keeping us quiet. But language was very important to him and he expected other people to be able to speak other languages too. Certainly French was absolutely expected.” He once wrote a charming letter to “Dear Evula” in which he glided between English and French, German and Italian.

Eva with Stefan Zweig and Lotte Altmann For the rest of the time Zweig and Lotte would spend hours shut away in the library, he dictating and she

typing. But there were other days, recalls Ursula, when this didn't happen. "Tante Lotte would say, 'Stefan is not in a very good mood today. You'd better not make much noise.' She was a very caring person although her health was not good at that time already. She didn't make any fuss. As a child of 11 you wouldn't know if a person was depressed."

Zweig's depression and Lotte's asthma are generally seen as the root of their joint suicide. The Bath ménage was broken up soon after the historic nadir of Dunkirk. Eva was shipped to safety (and three years of parentless misery) on America's eastern seaboard. On her return, in 1943, she recalls bringing back some of Zweig's precious manuscripts in her luggage. Ursula was reunited with her parents in London.



Eva with Onkel Stefan and Tante Lotte. Eva was the daughter of Lotte's brother Manfred. Manfred and his wife Hannah were killed in a car accident in Switzerland in 1954. The Zweig estate, which they had inherited when Lotte died, passed to Eva after the death of her parents.

7. The Americas and Final Days



The Zweigs' house in Petropolis, Brazil was later turned into a cultural centre and is now known as Casa Stefan Zweig.

In June 1940 the Zweigs sailed for the Americas. Their letters home in quirky English to Eva's parents (now available in Stefan and Lotte Zweig's *South American Letters: New York, Argentina and Brazil, 1940-42*, co-edited by Oliver Marshall, another of Eva's cousins) are often sprightly, but they are shot through with Zweig's anxieties. These were variously caused by the round of endless lectures, lack of access to his library or manuscripts, grappling with Portuguese, his impending 60th birthday, the impossibility of seeing any new work published. They contributed to ever more regular bouts of what Zweig called "black thoughts". "I pity poor

Lotte,” he wrote, “that she has to go through all my sadness.” It was in this period that he wrote *The World of Yesterday*, a magnificent farewell to a vanished past which can be easily read as the longest suicide note in literary history.

Lotte laid it all out in a letter to Eva’s mother. “I am a little worried about him at present, he is depressed, not only because it is really no pleasure to lead such an unsettled life, always waiting what will happen the next day before making another short-term decision, but also because the facts of the war, which is now becoming a real mass murder, and its seeming endlessness weigh upon his mind.”

And then there was Lotte’s ill health, manifested in endless nocturnal coughing. “Every night there are one or two dialogues between her and a dog in a house far away,” wrote Zweig from Petrópolis. She got thinner and thinner. Zweig complained of her loss of embonpoint: she was “only bones and coughs for weeks”. A summer spent in New York in 1941 and a failed treatment exacerbated her suffering.

But was this enough to warrant her participation in the final act? Zweig, a committed pacifist, had dabbled with the idea of suicide. In Bath he wrote that, against the possibility of a German invasion, he had “already prepared a certain little phial”. “He was thinking about suicide during World War One,” says his biographer Oliver Matuschek. “He had depression in Salzburg. He even asked Friderike to commit suicide with him. There must have been an idea for a joint suicide in his mind.”

The penultimate letter to London, 11 days before their deaths, speaks of keeping the house on for the winter. Then on 21 February Lotte wrote to her sister-in-law. “Dear Hanna, Going away like this my only wish is that you may believe that it is the best thing for Stefan, suffering as he did all these years with all those who suffer from the Nazi domination, and for me, always ill with Asthma.” In the same letter Zweig lays the same stress: “you would understand us better had you seen how Lotte suffered in the last months... we decided, born in love, not to leave each other.” She was 34.

Two of Zweig’s most celebrated biographies told of queens - Marie Antoinette and Mary Stuart - who were executed. Did Zweig execute his own queen? “I don’t think I was terribly surprised,” said Eva, who was 12 when she was told by the woman running the children’s home where she was living. “I think you’ve got to put yourself into the war situation. People were dying right, left and centre. I never really took in how young she was till much later. The asthma never stopped her. But she wouldn’t have wanted to go on living without him.”

Nearly 70 years on from Zweig's death, only one portion of the archive remains in Eva's possession: the many books and effects Zweig left behind in Bath. They include his pipe and initialled walking stick. There is a photograph of Eva and Ursula gardening with Lotte, her long face and wide-set eyes iterated across generations of my family tree. Zweig's tiny address book has the contact details of Freud, HG Wells and Bernard Shaw written in Lotte's hand. A copy of *Ulysses* is signed by Joyce to Zweig.

The books, including editions of Zweig's works published in many languages from Croatian to Japanese to Esperanto, are housed in the glass-fronted bookcases which Zweig had shipped from Salzburg to Bath. The most personal of them are first editions signed by Zweig to his new young secretary and lover. "Miss Lotte Altmann," Zweig writes optimistically in Mary Stuart, "with sincere thanks for her assistance with this and hopefully many other books."

8. Rosemount

This chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the commonbreath.com website. It was written by James Caig in 2021.

Bath Spa railway station nestles in the south east corner of the city centre, just inside the elbow of the River Avon. As the river doubles back on itself and aligns with the echoing contours of the A36, a steep bank of hills climb up to the Bath Skyline, a circular walk that overlooks the city. The actual view seems too unreal, too cute, for that description.

From above, Bath's Georgian marvel is a sophisticated cluster of sandcastles, as if the destructive waves of architecture that should have eroded it never arrived. It's like the hills held them back. I'm here to look at a building. The house of a writer. It's not in the city, but hidden somewhere in these hills, and we're here in the days before Christmas, the whole family in need of The Outside and something nice to look at. The dog is desperate for a walk and so are the children. But first I have to find the house.

I have a picture of the front gate and the name: Rosemount. In this literary treasure hunt the word feels like a lead. It has the ring of another time, don't you think, Rosemount, a time of mystery when the internet didn't explain everything and when a single name could hold a nameless power and sustain a great work of art. Like Rosebud, most obviously, or Manderley. And as we make our way up into the fog and whatever mysteries it may contain, we seem to leave behind the glut of layered modernity of the city's south east corner, with its river and its train station and its trunk roads all entwined around themselves, successive transport technologies superseding but never quite replacing each other. As we climb it feels like heading into the past.

We drive past a small parade of shops lining a cobbled street, then up a winding road to the landscaped gardens of Prior Park. Before we reach the more rural setting of Claverton Down, we take a right turn, then another, and find ourselves heading up a very old, very narrow street: Rosemount Lane. Top-heavy houses on one side, dodderly trees the other, and we're crowded in, edging forward in first gear, tilted back in our seats at a 20 degree angle. It's like the chain lift of a rollercoaster. The kids are hollering. The adults breathe in.

The road opens out into a rural crossroads. There on a huge gate pillar I see the name. It's painted in an elegant font, and beneath it there's the giveaway plaque. Now I'm here, I wonder what I should do. There's someone in the first floor window, a home office most likely, and I feel

torn between wanting to soak up the significance of my visit and looking like an idiot in the rain staring at someone's white stone wall. I take a couple of obligatory photos and stand there.



The entrance to Stefan Zweig's home at Rosemount, Bath.

But I'm glad I came. This house belonged to Stefan Zweig. Or rather he belonged to the house, and lived there in the first year of WW2, and I'm here because last year I read a book by Stefan Zweig. *The World Of Yesterday*.
