



**Stefan Zweig, and “The World of Yesterday”
A reading of collected texts by Stefan Zweig
in memory of the 70th anniversary of the writer’s death**

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Introductory lecture: Michael Lahr

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Born in 1881 in Vienna, Stefan Zweig grew up in an upper middle class family. His father was the textile manufacturer Moritz Zweig. His mother, Ida Brettauer, came from an Italian banker’s family. Zweig published his first poems already at age 16. After studying philosophy and literature in Vienna and Berlin, Stefan Zweig worked for a while with the arts section of the respected paper Neue Freie Presse (New Free Press). He was also involved in the avant-garde movement Junges Wien (Young Vienna). The experiences of World War I turned him into a pacifist. After 1918, he worked for the peaceful reunion of Europe with his fatherly friend Romain Rolland.

Until age 52, Zweig lived a very successful life. He published a number of books and plays, travelled a lot, and in numerous lectures he promoted his dream of restructuring the world based on humanistic virtues. Molded by the spirit and the work of Erasmus of Rotterdam, deeply convinced of the inner personal freedom of man, and inspired by the idea of Europe, Zweig worked for a spiritually united Europe, in which there was no room for nationalism and revenge.

After the Nazis came into power, he emigrated to England. His books were burned by the Nazis. With the start of World War II, Zweig realized that the dream of a Europe united in the spirit of humanism, of which he had not only dreamed as a utopia, but whose realization he had worked for with all his spiritual and creative powers for almost two decades, was irrevocably destroyed. He went to live in Petropolis in Brazil. The continuing war, and the increasingly dark prospects in Europe finally depressed him so much that he committed suicide during the night of February 22, 1942.

The literary scientist Volker Michels is right on target when he says: he is *“easy to read and hard to live by (...). Authors of his kind stimulate the reader to commit themselves, to draw the consequences from their reading.”*

Zweig once wrote to Richard Strauss: *“All real works of art have the power to overcome resistance.”* Zweig was enough of a realist to see what the world around him was really like. But he does not stop at just picturing this world of reality. His books move us to develop energies for doing away with the deplorable state of affairs he describes. Every line challenges us, his readers, to overcome our own sluggishness of heart.

Stefan Zweig describes the tensions he experiences in a letter to Joseph Roth: *“We must make ‘in spite of the leitmotif of our life, we must know human beings and must love them nonetheless.”*

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