Commentary: Today's World in *The World of Yesterday*

Recent political events across the United States and Europe have shaken the international community. A weakened European Union, the presidential election of Donald Trump, and widespread anti-immigration sentiment indicate a decrease in support and enthusiasm for international cooperation. Countries have turned their focus inward and are emphasizing border protection and national interests above all else, at the expense of broader international concerns.

The geopolitical landscape is marked by anxiety and uncertainty, as the bonds of the global community seem increasingly fragile. The nature of today's political climate led me to Stefan Zweig's autobiography, *The World of Yesterday* (University of Nebraska Press, 1964). Zweig was born in Vienna in 1881, and raised during a period of international harmony that he called "the Golden Age of Security (23)." He led a cosmopolitan life, and was a frequent international traveler; fittingly, he was a strong supporter of European unity and open borders within the continent. As an adult, he witnessed the creeping division that would ultimately shatter Europe, not once but twice during his lifetime. In 1934, Hitler's rise prompted him to flee Austria, and at age 52, Zweig found himself a refugee (413). His horror at what he considered the demise of Europe drove him to commit suicide at 1942, shortly after sending the final manuscript of his autobiography to his publisher (vi). Zweig's internationalist perspective on the tragic events of his time are illuminating, and make the parallels to today in his narrative especially chilling. Tragically, Zweig's life ended shortly before the post-war years swung the pendulum back towards peaceful and cooperative international relations. Today, we seem to be witnessing the reverse, making Zweig's account especially relevant.

Against the backdrop of today's fractured world, Zweig's frequent references to boundaries, borders, and divisions are particularly interesting. Whether symbolic or territorial, real or metaphorical, they were a constant presence in Zweig's narrative. As a child growing up in the ancient Austrian monarchy, the stability and permanence of the state were hallmarks of civic and political life; security was something granted by the state alone. Perhaps it was these lessons, instilled at such an early age, that prompted Zweig to pay attention to borders, whether between states, social circles, political groups or cultural norms.

Fittingly given the subject of *AmeriQuests*, some of the most significant moments of Zweig's life involved crossing state borders. Traveling from Austria to Switzerland during World War I, he recalled the drama of crossing the border, noting that in that moment he was "already thinking differently, more freely, more actively, less servilely (286)." He returned to Austria nearly a year later, but found himself hesitating at that same border, as any pacifist would likely do when leaving a neutral country for one at war. Zweig's ultimate decision to return to Austria, despite the certain hardships that lay ahead, was "a turning point" in his life (307).

Zweig saw border-like divisions in other areas of his life as well. He writes that his upper-class upbringing was a kind of insulation against the harsh realities of the outside world, as external disasters never penetrated "the well-padded walls of 'secure' living" and even foreign armed conflicts "did not penetrate the existence of my parents (47)." He left the propriety of Vienna to study in Berlin for a semester at age 20, where he noted the lack of social divisions in their culture; he was particularly surprised to witness true poverty within his very own social circle (something that would never have happened in Vienna). Later, in Paris, Zweig similarly notes a lack of visible barriers between luxurious shopping streets and dirty back alleys, and people of different socioeconomic status mixing freely together (152).

Given the emphasis placed on permanent statehood and security throughout his early education, it is interesting (but perhaps not surprising) that Zweig ultimately saw himself not as a citizen of the state, but of the world. By age 40, he had lived in Austria, France, England, and Switzerland, and he had traveled to Spain, Algeria, India, Ceylon, Burma, the United States, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. His feeling of belonging to the world – Europe in particular – shielded him from the outbreak of Austrian nationalism at the beginning of World War I. Zweig was unable to join his fellow citizens in demonizing Belgians, for example, as he had "lived too internationally to be able suddenly, overnight, to hate a world that was as much mine as my fatherland" (250). Zweig also glorifies how easy and open international travel was before 1914, and he describes with great aplomb his travels through Europe, India and North America without a carrying a passport or seeing anyone else's.

His stories suggest that in the early 1900s, many others shared this belief. In Belgium, for instance, he heard that the first Zeppelin flight had crashed. According to Zweig, this was experienced by all Europeans as a tragedy, not as something specific to Germany. Similarly, all Austrians celebrated Bleriot's flight over the Channel in 1909 as a European victory. These scientific advancements further diminished the utility of borders in Zweig's mind; "[h]ow useless, we said to ourselves, are frontiers when any plane can fly over them with ease, how provincial and artificial are customs-duties, guards and border patrols, how incongruous in the spirit of these times which visibly seeks unity and world brotherhood! (219)"

Given his global citizenship, and the centrality of European unity in his beliefs, it is not surprising that Zweig was devastated by the military conflicts and subsequent political developments of the first half of the 20th century. His hope of a unified Europe slipped further and further away, as borders that were once purely symbolic (Zweig likened them to passing over the Meridian of Greenwich) became impassable barriers. Where once you could travel freely, one now needed a passport to even be treated as a human being (436). He hated the fact that the first stop in a new country was no longer a cultural landmark, but a government office to acquire a permit. Most significantly to Zweig, human beings were now "codified, registered, numbered and stamped" and otherwise treated like objects (438).

While Zweig was devastated for Europe, he was also personally heartbroken. He applied for British citizenship in 1938, after leaving Vienna for what he knew would be the last time. Zweig confesses that once forced to rely on alien identity papers, a part of his original identity was destroyed forever (438). He ultimately relocated to Brazil, though it was a painful process, as Zweig considered "every impression of a rubber-stamp in my passport a stigma, every one of those hearings and searches a humiliation (438)." In his final message to his publisher, sent the day before he took his life, Zweig wrote: "After one's sixtieth year unusual powers are needed in order to make another wholly new beginning. Those that I possess have been exhausted by long years of homeless wandering."[1]

It is thus clear how devastated Zweig was to be stateless – despite his insistence that he valued his global citizenship above all things. I believe it is this tension that makes his description of his refugee status so potent, even decades later. After all, the fundamental issues faced by refugees, especially on personal level, remain constant. While it was tragic to read, it was also beautifully written and one of the best parts, for me, of Zweig's narrative: the moment he became

[1] ARC. Ms. Var. 305, Stefan Zweig Archive, Archives Department, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem. Available at http://primo.nli.org.il/primo_library/libweb/action/dlDisplay.do?vid=NLI&docId=NNL_ARCHIVE_AL002645087.

a refugee, Zweig felt that he had "slipped down to a lesser, even if not dishonorable, category (435)." He describes how vulnerable he felt after being forced to exchange his Austrian passport for an English alien certificate: he saw his passport as "a symbol of his rights (435)," whereas the certificate was a favor bestowed by the state that could be revoked any time. He imagined the constant suspicion that his new status evoked in others: as a stateless person, they couldn't simply deport him if they felt he overstayed his welcome. He was unable to shake the feeling that with every breath of air, he deprived a citizen and should thus express gratitude. Zweig acknowledges the absurdity of these thoughts, but asks:

> Of what avail reason, against one's emotion? (439)

For me, this description beautifully captures what must be the myriad frustrations and conflicting emotions experienced by refugees of today and throughout history, around the world. Despite the passage of time, Zweig's words are hopefully a comfort to anyone who has experienced something similar, and a reminder that they aren't alone.

Kingsley Trotter, Vanderbilt University Law School