

Research on the Identity Issue of Stefan Zweig Based on His Works

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Stefan Zweig is a well-known Austrian novelist, poet, playwright, and biographer, who has left a wealth of literary works for future generations. In his early years, Zweig lived a happy life. He was a European, a world citizen, a humanist, and a pacifist, but during the violent social turmoil, he was only a Jew, and his self-identity consciousness began to awaken. Afterwards, Zweig tried to rebuild his identity to alleviate the identity crisis, but all his efforts ended in failure. This paper will explore the Sisyphean process of identity construction of Zweig from several aspects, combined with his representative works from different periods, in order to interpret Zweig and his works more deeply.

Keywords: Stefan Zweig, Jews, identity issue, crisis

Introduction

In February 1942, the famous Austrian writer Stefan Zweig was found dead in his apartment in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. His suicide shocked the literary world and many German exiles did not understand it, just as they did not understand his political reticence. But the great spiritual crisis that Zweig endured in his later years should not have been ignored: Once, a person loses his identity, he also loses the meaning and foundation of his existence, and this can lead to anxiety and pessimism, just as Zweig (1942/2011) said in his autobiography *The World of Yesterday*:

As an Austrian, a Jew, a writer, a humanist and a pacifist I have always stood where those volcanic eruptions were at their most violent. Three times they have wreaked havoc with my home and my way of life, cutting me off from the past and all that it once comprised, and flinging me with dramatic force into a void where I soon became familiar with the feeling that there was nowhere to turn. (p. 17)

It can be seen that the loss of identity had a huge impact on Zweig, which was also one of the main reasons why he chose to end his life in the darkness before dawn.

The English word “identity” comes from the Old French word “identite” and the late Latin word “identitas”. Its basic meaning can be interpreted as: the same nature or state of existence of a substance or entity (Wang, 2007). Identity means that something is the same, or it is itself. In general terms, it can refer to a unified state, absolute consistency, a personality, complete equivalence between two expressions, or such an equivalent expression, etc. (Qian, 2000). It can be seen that identity first refers to internal consistency. When people confirm their own identity, they will subconsciously confirm their existence and belonging by looking for similar groups. They will exclude things that are different from themselves and move closer to those with the same attributes or

the same inner essence. This is a behavior of seeking identity. Austrian Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud believes that identification is a process of emotional and psychological convergence between an individual and others, a group or an imitated person (Che, 2007).

As for Zweig, he was both an Austrian and a European Jew, and he showed obvious “hybrid” characteristics. At the same time, the identity crisis was particularly evident in him who was experienced and sensitive. After the Nazi occupation of Austria, Zweig lost his original nationality and identity and had to go into exile abroad. The rootless feeling always accompanied him in his later years and could not be shaken off. Therefore, Zweig’s identity crisis became increasingly serious. He constantly tried to know himself and reshape his identity, which was deeply reflected in his literary creation. Unfortunately, Zweig ultimately could not escape the fate of failure. This paper will explore the identity crisis and changes at different stages of his life based on his works, in order to have a deeper understanding of this great writer.

Ideal World Citizen and Europeanist

Stefan Zweig was born on November 28, 1881, in Vienna, Austria. His father was a hardworking and successful Jewish businessman, and his mother came from an international family that owned many bankers, managers, professors, lawyers, and doctors. In such a favorable family environment, Zweig had a broad vision and open-minded ideas, which provided the basis for his identity as a “world citizen”.

From a broader perspective, although Austria was in the late period of the Habsburg monarchy at that time, it experienced a “Golden Age of Security” (Zweig, 1942/2011). Under the enlightened governance of Franz Joseph I, new and traditional thoughts complemented each other and together promoted the vigorous development of Vienna’s culture. The entire empire presented an illusion of peace and prosperity. It was this family and social environment that endowed Zweig with cosmopolitan ideals, humanitarian sentiments, and a lifelong obsession with literature and art. As a student, he began his literary creation under the influence of Hugo von Hofmannsthal and published “Silver Strings”, a selection of poems. After that, many of his works became familiar to the public, and Zweig was famous in the literary world. Although Zweig was aware of his Jewish background at this time, he did not feel humiliated and anxious. In his own words: “I personally must confess that I never felt the slightest coldness or scorn for me as a Jew either in school, at the university, or in literature” (1942/2011, p. 46).

Therefore, in his early years, Zweig positioned himself as a European and a “world citizen” instead of a Jew. The works he created at that time were gorgeous in rhetoric, but lacked deeper content and ideas.

The writers initially limited their interactions to their own circles, so to a certain extent they lacked rich experiences and deeper feelings about life, and their horizons were not broad enough. The worship of pure art was based on the abandonment of “civilian life”, and the extraordinary existence of aestheticism was incompatible with reality. (Zhang, 1987, p. 190)

This also reflected that Zweig did not consider his Jewish identity too much in his literary creation. For him, there was no identity crisis at that time.

As a world citizen, Zweig often traveled around the world in his early years and made many foreign friends. Although he mainly wrote in German, his thoughts and spirit belonged to Europe and the whole world. European integration and cosmopolitanism were his lifelong goals. However, compared with other Europeanists, Zweig had his own unique insights on European integration. He was committed to the coexistence and blend of European

cultures, and attached importance to the influence of European culture on people's sense of belonging, rather than the one-sided pursuit of political unification. Therefore, he opposed Napoleon and Hitler's conquest of Europe by force. In addition, Zweig did not emphasize that the Greek, Roman, and Christian cultures were the origins of the European culture, because he believed that the European community with a shared future based on historical origins brought ordinary people traumatic collective memories full of confrontations and wars. This kind of memory strengthened the sense of identity with one's own nation, rather than the sense of belonging to Europe (Zhang, 2004). Therefore, Zweig advocated the cultural construction model of Vienna that recognized the differences between cultures and sought the possibility of harmonious coexistence on this basis. Compared with economics and politics, it was cultural identity that could inject a continuous stream of energy into the lasting peace and prosperity of Europe.

In general, due to his wealthy family background, Zweig did not experience the suffering of the Jews in his early years, and could not understand the pain of the lower classes and the true face of the society. In his eyes, Vienna and Europe were all beautiful and peaceful. At this time, he positioned himself as a Europeanist and a world citizen, and his Jewish identity was very weak. However, with the changes in the world situation, Zweig's original identity would gradually collapse, and he would fall into the identity crisis step-by-step.

Identity Crisis in War

The First World War not only completely destroyed the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but also shattered Zweig's happy and comfortable life. Many Jews who spoke German and had completely Europeanized living habits like him had to face their identity issues again. Zweig once believed that as long as the Jews integrated into Europe culturally, they would be accepted by Europe and become part of the European people. Therefore, many Jewish families tried their best to send their children to school. They had a common idea that they could escape the Jewish temperament and the fate of outsiders through education and culture.

However, the facts dealt Zweig a heavy blow. Western Jews made outstanding contributions to Vienna's culture, leaving their names in music, literature, art, architecture, and other fields. But once the war came and the society fell into turmoil and unrest, the Jewish issue would still be used by some sinister people. They made Jews scapegoats for social problems. Faced with such facts, Zweig painfully realized that the arrival of the new era broke all previous orders. Not only did his personal survival become a problem, but even the desire to maintain a certain inherent faith and peace in the depths of his heart was very difficult to achieve (Zhao, 2004).

After that, Zweig tried to rebuild his identity and began to transform into a writer who was good at seeing into the human mind and concerned about the real world. Jews and Judaism also became important themes of his literary creation. During World War I, his play *Jeremiah* was published. This work based on the Old Testament tells the story of the prophet Jeremiah predicting that the Jews would face a great disaster, but no one believed him. Zweig used this tragedy to say what others did not dare to say publicly at that time—expressing hatred for the war and doubting victory. As Zweig himself said: "I unconsciously touched upon a topic that had not been used on me until then: whether from my blood or from the quiet formation of traditions, this topic is closely related to the fate of the Jews" (Zweig, 2015, p. 216).

This was the awakening of Zweig's Jewish consciousness. At this critical moment, he chose a prophet of his own nation to express his struggle against fate.

In 1922, Zweig's popular novella *Letter From an Unknown Woman* was published. The two protagonists of the work, the writer R. and the unknown woman, both reflected Zweig's personal experiences and thoughts, and together they constituted the identity image of a Western Jew. First of all, one of the sources of Jewish self-esteem is the intellectual identity they pursue or have already obtained. The writer is the collective image of that group of young Europeans, and of course, the image of Zweig himself. In addition, the experience of the unknown woman can be said to be a microcosm of the life of Western Jews and Zweig. In order to deserve the love of the writer, she studied hard and read nearly a thousand books, symbolizing the importance that Jews attached to the culture and education in order to change their own destiny. Her love for the writer exceeded the ordinary relationship between men and women and became a faith, just like Zweig's lifelong pursuit of the European culture. The woman longed for the writer's recognition and hoped that he could remember her. Zweig also longed for the European culture to recognize him and the values created by Jews. But in the end, the unknown woman could only wander around, and Zweig and his Jewish compatriots could not escape the fate of losing their original identities and going into exile in other countries.

His short story *Buchmendel* is even more tragic. Mendel, a Jewish book peddler, was a genius at memorizing prices and titles. He loved books, but knew nothing about the world outside. However, the Nazis regarded him as a spy and put him in a concentration camp. After that, he was no longer a genius at memory and died alone. Zweig's fear and helplessness about the loss of his European identity, as well as his sense of powerlessness about the fate of the Jews, can be seen from this work.

Through these various characters, Zweig presented to readers the identity crisis amidst social turmoil and unrest, as well as the tragic fate of the Jewish people. At the same time, he also allowed readers to glimpse his efforts to rebuild his identity in extreme circumstances, as well as his anxiety and powerlessness in the face of failure.

Destruction of Faith and Choice of Death

The smoke of World War I has not yet dissipated, and the outbreak of World War II in 1939 brought mankind into a more serious disaster. Zweig, who traveled around the world, finally had to go into exile in Brazil. In the New World, he deeply realized that he was no longer an Austrian citizen, let alone a world citizen that he had been proud of. The ideals and beliefs of European integration, supranational humanitarianism, pacifism, and cosmopolitanism that he had pursued throughout his life have been completely shattered. Not only that, Zweig's freedom to express his thoughts through literary creation was also ruthlessly deprived. The Nazis listed his works as banned books and burned them wantonly. From then on, no German publishing house dared to publish his works. For a writer who regarded literature as his life and unified his hobbies with his profession, Zweig could no longer use his pen to touch people's emotions and influence their thoughts. This was tantamount to ending his literary life and making his life worse than death, and the worst was the Holocaust that befell European Jews. Hitler's ultimate goal of anti-Semitism was to completely exterminate the Jews. Faced with the loss of more than six million Jewish compatriots, Zweig suddenly realized that being a Jew was now his only identity, and this could not be changed by his will. This completely changed his outlook on life and values, and the forced acceptance of Jewish identity made him fall into endless despair.

Faced with such a dilemma, Zweig's works before and after World War II deeply revealed his reflection on life and his despair. *Beware of Pity* is one of his main works of this period. The protagonist of the novel, Anton

Hofmiller, met the noble family of Kekesfalva who lived outside the city, and cared about Edith, the paralyzed daughter of the family, but Edith mistook this sympathy for love. When faced with Kekesfalva's request to marry him, Hofmiller inquired about the family. To his shock, they were not real nobles, but Jewish upstarts. After that, Hofmiller began to hesitate. When he decided to take on his responsibilities, Edith committed suicide out of despair. It is very ironic in the novel that the reason why Hofmiller was unwilling to marry Edith was not because she was disabled, but because of her Jewish identity. Similarly, although the family of Kekesfalva was rich and generous, in the eyes of some locals, they were always Jews of humble origins, and their wealth was not enough to make up for the defects of their identity. While enjoying the wine and food they provided, everyone still secretly despised this Jewish family. In this way, Zweig wanted to tell people that no matter how much effort the Jews had made and how brilliant their achievements were, as long as they were still Jews, they would never escape the fate of being expelled and isolated from society. When writing this novel, Zweig witnessed with his own eyes that the whole world was expelling Jews and Jews had no place to stand. This deepened Zweig's humiliation and despair after he recognized his identity.

After all these setbacks, Zweig (1942/2011) realized that it was no longer possible for him to rebuild his identity. "Against my will, I have witnessed the most terrible defeat of reason and the most savage triumph of brutality in the chronicles of time" (p. 18).

In 1940, Zweig wrote his last autobiography, *The World of Yesterday*, which was similar to a suicide note. This work reveals a strong sense of pessimism. With the help of his memory fragments, Zweig rebuilt the "peaceful world" of Europe in the late 19th century, which was in sharp contrast to the chaotic Europe in World War II. In the process of rebuilding the ideal Europe, Zweig's memory was disordered. He inadvertently turned his memory into a fiction and an imaginative construction. When telling the stories in his memory, he portrayed a utopia to the readers. However, as World War II gradually deepened, human society entered its darkest moment. The utopia constructed by Zweig in *The World of Yesterday* collapsed along with his faith.

Conclusion

On February 23, 1942, Stephan Zweig, who once called himself "Jeremiah", committed suicide in an extremely pessimistic mood. Thus, his self-identification ended in failure. It can be seen from his works that in his early years, Zweig was an Austrian, a European, a writer, a humanist, and a pacifist who had no worries about food and clothing and was full of beautiful fantasies about the world. However, the turmoil made him lose everything and become a thorough Jew. He also tried various ways to redeem himself, reshape his identity, and alleviate the identity crisis like some protagonists in his works. But after all his efforts were in vain, Zweig realized that he and the Jews were isolated and helpless. For Zweig, once he lost his identity, he was like a duckweed floating on the water and a balloon in the sky. He did not know where his life was going, so the meaning of survival was gone. This is also an important reason why he did not want to live in the world, so he ended his life timely in a dignified manner.

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