



Foto: Nachlass Frederike Zweig, Stamford, Ct. USA

*Stefan Zweig:
Fresh Look for Author,
And for Land He Lauded*

By SIMON ROMERO
Petropolis Journal
PETROPOLIS, Brazil

When the Viennese-born writer Stefan Zweig moved in 1941 to this city of imperial palaces nestled in the mountains near Rio de Janeiro, he was one of world's most translated authors, renowned for his taut novellas exploring passion, obsession and despair.

But after Mr. Zweig, despondent over the advances of the Nazis, took his own life here a few months later at age 60 in a suicide pact with his young wife, Lotte, he became known in his adopted country for creating one of most hackneyed phrases ever associated with Brazil: "Country of the Future.'

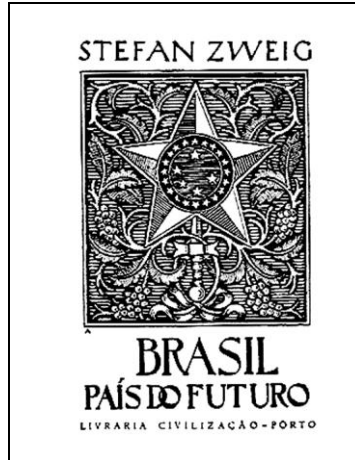


Foto: Archiv des Inselverlags, Frankfurt a.M.

Derived from the title of his 1941 book praising Latin America's largest country, the phrase got expanded and recycled ad nauseam as a refrain, "Brazil is the country of the future - and always will be," used to casually dismiss a nation long plagued by high inflation and entrenched corruption.

With Brazil's prospects now notably improved, Brazilians are reassessing Mr. Zweig and his legacy as the book's title gains new currency yet again, with everyone from advertising executives to visiting European diplomats and even President Obama, who visited Brazil in March, using it in a speech to suggest that perhaps Brazil's "future" has finally arrived.

"Brazil isn't the country of the future anymore," said Romero Rodrigues, a Brazilian Internet entrepreneur, in one typical new repackaging of the term. "It's the country of the present!"

The house where Mr. Zweig took his own life here by swallowing poison is set to reopen soon as a museum. Meanwhile, Brazilian writers and historians have been reflecting on the significance of "Land of the Future," and some of the political intrigue surrounding its publication 70 years ago.

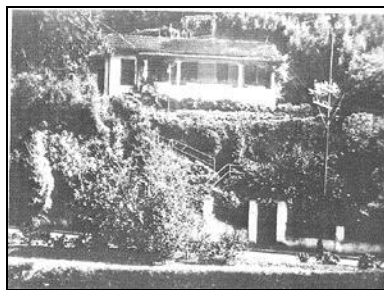


Foto: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Wien

In a recent televised discussion of Mr. Zweig, Alcino Leite Neto, editor of the publishing house Publifolha, compared his importance in Brazil to that in the United States of Alexis de Tocqueville, the French political thinker who wrote about American concepts of liberty and equality in "Democracy in America."

"We had Stefan Zweig," said Mr. Leite Neto, "who left us this book advocating tolerance, comprehension between people, an indictment in favor of peace written right during World War II"

A broader appreciation of his work is also under way, with two Brazilian feature films in production adapted from his writing, one from "The Invisible Collection," about Germany's experience with inflation, and another from "Leporella," about a housemaid who becomes infatuated with her employer.

But it is "Land of the Future" itself (published here since the 1940s in various editions as "Country of the Future"), and Mr. Zweig's wanderings in Brazil before his death, which have recently ignited the most interest.

Cultural officials in Petropolis this year organized a multimedia exhibit called "Stefan Zweig Lives!", and some Brazilians have begun joining the Europeans and Americans who occasionally appear in the city to see his house on Gongalves Dias Street, or even the cemetery where he and Lotte are buried side by side.



Foto: Stefan Zweig-Estate, London

"It's a little strange taking someone to the places of such tragedy, but we're happy to receive every kind of visitor," said Walter Raposo, 80, a horse-carriage driver in Petropolis who has guided several Zweig aficionados to these spots; they find Mr. Raposo and his carriage in front of the Brazilian emperor's former summer palace, now a museum.

Alberto Dines, a television host and eminence among Brazil's journalists who met Mr. Zweig as a child when the writer visited his school in Rio de Janeiro, has been a driving force behind the renewed attention in Petropolis and beyond.

His research and his own book on Mr. Zweig, "Death in Paradise," explore in detail the complicated origins of the book's title, which Mr. Dines explains was not Mr. Zweig's creation but a suggestion from James Stern, who translated his book into English from the German.

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The New York Times

Stefan Zweig moved to Petropolis during World War II

In a touch of irony, Mr. Zweig, born in Vienna's golden age to affluent Jewish parents, alluded in the book's epigraph to a line in French, "une terre d'avenir," from correspondence received by Arthur de Gobineau, a 19th-century French aristocrat, diplomat and theorist of European racial superiority who detested Brazil.

"It's a curious thing, because Gobineau was the father of modern racism," said Mr. Dines, who at age 79 is overseeing the completion of Casa Stefan Zweig, the museum created at the house where Mr. Zweig lived. "Coming from racist Europe, Zweig was amazed seeing the different races mixing so freely in Brazil."

Of course, some contend Mr. Zweig's largely optimistic observations on race relations at the time belied circumstances that were considerably more complex - and continue to be as affirmative action programs spreading across Brazil seek to reverse centuries of exclusion.

Still, Mr. Zweig's optimism was not dimmed by the obvious challenges in Brazil in the early 1940s, like an average life expectancy of 43 years and a population that was 56 percent illiterate. Some of his sanguine assessments continue to impress today.

He claimed, for instance, that Portugal had been farsighted by colonizing Brazil partly by emptying Portuguese prisons of undesired elements and sending them across the Atlantic. "As usual, it is not altogether clean manure which is the earth's best preparation for future harvests," Mr. Zweig wrote.

Mr. Zweig's reappraisal here coincides with renewed crisis in Europe - and with a new wave of Portuguese emigration to Brazil, but this time of unemployed professionals, not convicts. Some of those seeking opportunity in Brazil may even know that Mr. Zweig remains highly esteemed in parts of Europe, especially France, where his books are still widely available.

Strangely, Mr. Zweig's book on Brazil was fiercely criticized in Brazil shortly after its publication. Critics laid waste to the Austrian writer with vehemence, opening him to insinuation that he was paid by the authoritarian regime of Getulio Vargas to write the book.

Mr. Dines said the scathing reviews had been a way for reviewers to indirectly get back at Mr. Vargas's censors, since the critics equated praising Brazil with praising its dictatorship. Either way, the author of numerous best sellers had little need for Brazil's financial support.

But Mr. Zweig did need something else at the time: a haven from the Nazis. Mr. Dines, based on his own research of Mr. Zweig's path to Brazil, argues that the writer had an implicit deal with Brazilian authorities to produce his book in exchange for the residence permits hastily granted in Buenos Aires to him and his wife.

After all that, some mystery persists as to why he would kill himself soon after arriving in Brazil. He had acknowledged that a lifetime might be insufficient to properly understand Brazil. But in the suicide note he left describing himself as "one without a country," he still had only praise for the "marvelous" Brazil, that received him.

"After I saw the country of my own language fall, and my spiritual land - Europe - destroying itself," he concluded, "it would require immense strength to reconstruct my life."
