

A Book That Battles Against War – Stefan Zweig’s “Jeremiah”¹
By Yisroel Shtern (1930)
Translated by Renata Singer (2006)

In recent years many books have been published dealing with the War².

Almost all of them depict the War in such dark and gruesome colours that the reader comes away shocked. Terrified he asks himself: how could a whole world be so violent and people-devouring for so long? And it’s not only fear that overcomes the reader. As he reads these well-crafted war books, fierce anger gnaws at his heart as well, and curses pour from his lips against the politics-fixing hangmen, against the “lawful” deal makers, those fine and smooth-talking diplomatic brother-murderers, who go about in top-hats and tails, ruling over people and countries.

These books create anger not only against the rulers, but also against the ruled. Rage is directed not just at the leaders, but also at those who let themselves be so “well” guided. Those who lead to the killing-fields are slaughterers, but those who allow themselves to be slaughtered are cattle.

Perhaps, in the catastrophe known as the “World War” the latter are more responsible than the former. As the famous German poet Franz Werfel³ says: “It’s not the murderer who’s guilty, but the murdered ...”

And here we arrive at some less than happy thoughts about the literary works that took the War as their subject.

Almost every one of them appeared after the War, when it was all over - the dead were already in their graves, the survivors had had a wooden leg fitted, or were going around with a coat sleeve hanging down where a hand was missing, or were “looking” out at God’s world from fierce black holes with unseeing eyes, or with a half-burnt face, or a contorted, twisted mouth.

¹ (All footnotes by Translator except where indicated.) Ed.: the Yiddish title is “a book which fights against war”. Shtern himself was detained in Vienna from 1914 to 1917, aged 20 to 23 years, as an enemy (Russian) alien. (Possibly like others he had gone there from Congress Poland to avoid conscription into the Russian army).

² i.e. World War 1, 1914-1918.

³ Franz Werfel (1890-1945), was a Czech-born Jew who wrote in German. He served in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War 1 and was charged with treason for his pacifist views. His best-known works are the novels *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1933) and *The Song of Bernadette* (1941).

Then, when everything was well and truly over – the walls of towns burned down, the grain in the fields destroyed, women had long ceased hoping for their husbands' return, mothers had no strength left to cry over their sons, and small children had forgotten what their fathers looked like – then, after all this, the war books turned up.

But earlier, in the thick of it? Then, these same writers had been silent. Worse actually, they weren't silent, but spoke the same crazy language as the millions of mindless "fighters". They were themselves at the Front. The hand that later wrote against war had earlier held a gun and itself made war.

We understand they hadn't done this on purpose, of course they had let themselves get carried away in the general flow. But.... but... what if Remarque's book *All Quiet on the Western Front* had not appeared recently⁴, but had achieved this same success with millions of readers in the years 1914-1920? ⁵ Who knows? Perhaps the course of events would have been a little different.

Oh, how we needed authors during the War, who were sincere, clever, who could see with open eyes, free of the militaristic epidemic!

But, unfortunately, they were rare then. That's why we should take particular note of such rarities. And it's just such a book that I'm going to discuss now.

Stefan Zweig's *Jeremiah* ⁶

The book was written in the years 1915-17 and first appeared in 1917.

In the Jewish tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem Zweig found the material to represent the conflict between the person who loves his land, his child, his brother-human, and that other person who at any opportunity

⁴ (Ed.):The runaway bestselling novel of the First World War, and a banner for pacifism, this German novel was translated into many languages. "Im Westen nichts Neues" was first published in 1929 when the author was 31 years old.

⁵ (Ed.) 1914 – 1920 ie, from the start of the World War until the end of the Polish-Soviet War of 1919 – 1920.

⁶ Stefan Zweig (1881-1942) was born in Austria of Jewish parents. He was a prolific writer of biography, essays, and short stories. His wrote the anti-war play *Jeremiah* while in the army himself; it was staged in Switzerland in 1918.

Scripture relates how the prophet Jeremiah warned that insurrection against Babylon under the auspices of Egypt would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and the enslavement of the Jews. He was declared an outlaw during Zedekiah's reign. The false prophet Hananiah ridiculed him and died soon after, as Jeremiah had predicted. (The Kings of Judah, during the more than 40 years of the 6th century BC in which Jeremiah prophesized, were Josiah, Jehoiakim, Zedekiah and Gedaliah.)

forgets his natural inclination for peaceful labour and quiet joy, and becomes wild and blood-thirsty, baring his wolfish teeth.

The nation learns that the Jewish King, Zedekiah, is going to ally himself with the King of Egypt against Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, and that the Jews will shortly declare war against Babylon.

How does the nation respond to the news of the forthcoming slaughter?

News of these great events has chased the townsfolk out of their quiet homes. They stand in the great square in front of the King's palace, wanting to find out the details. The people of Jerusalem are gathered by the colonnade of the palace, in the street and on the steps - a chaotic, bewildered rabble of men, women and children, waiting expectantly. Many voices can be heard rising from the mob. Here is a typical dialogue from the second act, when the most senior of the war party, Abimelech, has rushed into the palace to the King.

Baruch: Let's follow him! Let the king hear our voices, let him hear our will in front of his palace.

Zebulun (his father): I'm giving up on you if you don't shut up. The conference needs to take place in quiet.

Baruch: He doesn't need to consult. Let him decide for war. We all want war.

Voices: Yes, we all want... We all...

A voice: No, I don't want any war.

Voices: Be quiet! Someone's bribed you to say that. Who are you?

The speaker: I'm a peasant and my land only blooms in peace. War tramples my fields. I don't want war, I don't want it.

Baruch (fiercely): Shame on you! May you rot in your field and choke on your wheat. Israel is our field and we'll make it fruitful with the blood we shed for the one and only God.

The speaker: Then you go and die, but let me live. I love the earth, and that's from God too, and he gave it to me.

It's this peasant voice, the voice of the earth, eternal in its deep holiness, eternal in its quiet blessing, eternal in its life-affirmation. It's the voice of the eternally human which is bound to nature and the earth, and therefore feels an aversion to every firebrand, to every sinister agitator, to every sham "defender of the Fatherland", to every false prophet.

Ah yes, the false prophet. The bitter struggle between the false saviour of the people and the real friend of the people, the true prophet, stands at the heart of Stefan Zweig's poetic drama.

The supporters of war are afraid of anti-war voices because they know that these are infectious. The masses can begin to doubt in the "fortune" of giving away their lives for the prize of becoming a national hero. And the war preachers of all nations and of every era hate vacillation. War must be waged with fire and impetus and with great, proud and chivalrous slogans. And they seek helpers, supporters in their holy work. They run to the heralds, the priests and the prophets, to inflame the hearts of the nation, so people will regard this leading to the slaughter as a holy deed.

And they do find a great help in the person of the false prophet Hananiah. Hananiah goes to the people and tells them that God's word froths in him like a foaming sea. It storms from his mouth, ringing out to the Jews: "Stand up, Israel, gird your loins, take up armour and spear, for Assyria is your captive and Babylon your booty. I have filled your weapon pouch with arrows that can't miss their target and with spears that will never break. Thrust out the no-sayers, finish off those who would hold you back, don't listen to the weak-willed."

So we should pay no attention to doubters, not listen to any who can't grasp the salvations that will come from bestial hate and blood-letting. Not tarry or wait, but at once "let sound the trumpet and let the tools of war ring out."

Such is the false fervour of the false prophet. And how does the prophet Jeremiah answer him?

"Tell me, brothers mine: is war such a worthwhile thing that you praise it so? Yet I tell you, people of Jerusalem, that war is a beast angry and biting, which tears the flesh from the strong and sucks out the marrow of the mighty. Whosoever awakens it cannot put it to sleep again, and whosoever draws out his sword, can easily fall on it himself."

Listen to how Jeremiah begins: "Is war such a worthwhile thing etc." Just so simply, quietly, artlessly, with love for the people, with sincere devotion to

them. The prophet often uses plain words, for the truth is simple. Plain too are Jeremiah's further questions:

“Why do you call for war, you men of Jerusalem? Have you raised your sons to be murdered, your daughters to be shamed? Are your houses built for burning and your walls for destruction?”

But who will listen to him at a time of general confusion? The whole of Jerusalem is caught up in smoky, suffocating agitation. Everyone goes around as if in a cloud of smog. The minds of the townsfolk are befogged. No one is capable of taking in a clear, comprehensible word. The prophet is denounced as a traitor, a stooge of Babylon. It wouldn't take much for them to kill him; in any case, there is no chance he will be heeded as they won't even let him speak.

But Jeremiah can't and won't be silent. Jerusalem calls out inside him. Inside him her blood calls out not to be shed, her walls, not to be destroyed, and her name, not to be erased. But Jerusalem doesn't heed his warning, the people don't listen to Jeremiah, don't comprehend his love that is full of fear and his fear that is full of love. No-one listens as he calls through the streets: “Guard the peace! Guard the peace!”

Jeremiah foresees the terrible destruction that war will inexorably bring. He can't rest by day or sleep at night. He sees such frightening visions that fear and dread take hold of him. He trembles, and his heart caves in, like a wall shattering. He sees things that if written would make people's hair stand on end, and their sleep would vanish, like dust from their faces. When he relates all this, when he describes how in his dream he saw that “the end is nigh, the end is nigh ...” — they answer him, “Away with your nightmares and dream-solutions, it's awake people who are needed now.”

“And there are plenty of the “awake”. There's Peshur, there's Nahum, there's Omri, there's Abimelech, there's Hananiah.

And all of them talk the people into believing that the Jews' sole solution and greatest happiness, honour and glory can only come from war, “for Israel will never be conquered as long as God's stars shine; and if we come out together with Egypt, then in three months time Babylon will be ours.”

The people believe this blindly, for they hear it from those who hold the chief posts of the land. One is a High Priest, another the Chief Administrator, a third the head of the army, a fourth the “prophet” of the people, etc. So the masses are assured that “within three months victory is certain” and they

joyfully respond, with drunken cries. The triumphant voices of the townspeople can be heard:

“In three months ...do you hear ... in three months ... down with Jeremiah! Let him be silent!”

It didn't take long to become evident that in fact it wasn't the “hot patriots” who were right, but Jeremiah. Everything was wiped out, slaughtered, laid waste, burnt, and “the end” came. But by the time you looked around to see who *really* was right, it was already too late ...

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Stefan Zweig's dramatic poem *Jeremiah* is a book of colossal scope, which merits the highest honours because of two things: firstly, for its superb, grand scenes and original poetic insights; and secondly for its timeliness. While the setting is historical, all the events and the dialogue are perfectly suited to our times. Just take these few lines for example:

“A time is coming such as there has never been in Israel, and a war such as there has never been on earth! A time when the living will envy the dead in their peaceful graves, and the seeing the blind in their darkness.”

Essentially the poet wanted to hold up a mirror to our last tragic years and if he chose to use a theme two thousand years old it was probably to evade the sharp eye of the censor. But this strategy didn't help. The military censor understood only too well what it was all about, and stringently prohibited distribution of the book.

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