

# In *Leopoldstadt*, playwright Tom Stoppard looks to his past and the fate of Europe's Jews

Fred Mazelis  
19 February 2023

*Leopoldstadt*, the latest play by Tom Stoppard, the 85-year-old Czech-born British playwright, is a semi-autobiographical work. The work deals with the fate of European Jewry by tracing the destiny of an interlinked Viennese family over the first half of the 20th century. Taking its name from the old Jewish quarter of Vienna, the play was mounted in London several years ago, and has come to Broadway (directed by Patrick Marber), where its run has been extended after positive critical and audience reaction.

The Merz and Jakobowicz families, who form the central axis of the work, are related by marriage, including intermarriage with non-Jews. The various heads of the secular and assimilated families, part of the upper-middle class of the era, include Hermann Merz (David Krumholtz), a successful businessman, married to the Catholic Gretl (Faye Castelow); his brother-in-law Ludwig Jakobowicz (Brandon Uranowitz), a mathematician who finds anti-Semitism hindering his career, and is married to Hermann's sister Eva; and Ernst Kloster (Aaron Neil), also a non-Jew, a doctor married to Ludwig's sister Wilma (Jenna Augen).

The time frame is 1899 to 1955, just over half a century, and the action, in five separate acts but without intermission, takes place at each point during these years in the same drawing room in the well-appointed home originally occupied by Hermann and Gretl. The family grows over these decades, of course, and the cast, which numbers well over two dozen, along with it. Several cast members return later as new characters. The program helpfully includes a two-page "Merz and Jakobowicz Family Tree."

The contrast between the uniformity of the setting and the tumultuous events of the 20th century speaks in its own way to the collapse of a way of life, the outcome of the unprecedented upheavals of two world wars, the Great Depression and the Holocaust. The costumes (by Brigitte Reiffenstuel) effectively depict the changing generations.

The scene in 1899 opens with the above-named brothers-in-law and their families socializing. The children play, at one point innocently but revealingly placing a Jewish star atop a Christmas tree. Hermann, embodying what in Stoppard's eyes is clearly the complacency of prosperous middle- and upper-class layers in the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, argues with Ludwig when the latter speaks of the persistence of anti-Semitism and refers to the recently published writings of Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism.

After a second act, set in 1900, the scene jumps ahead a quarter of a century, to 1924. Hermann and Gretl's son Jacob has come back from the Great War missing an arm. There are brief allusions to various events, including the war, the collapse of the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires, the hyperinflation of 1923 that has just subsided

and the appeal of "Bolshevism." Here, as throughout the play, Stoppard displays the wordplay, the historical references, the witty repartee and other flourishes for which he is well known. He provides his audience a historical survey—but, unfortunately, it is not a very deep one.

This third act, which should have been the fulcrum of the story, is seriously wanting, and only highlights the overall weakness of *Leopoldstadt*.

The act includes only the barest mention of the Russian Revolution, or the great events in Germany—the revolution of 1918, the ouster of the Kaiser, the murder of German revolutionaries Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. Stoppard inserts a passing reference to the Marxist views of one of the cousins, but nearly everything remains on the surface. We meet intriguing individuals, but the play makes almost no sense of the forces shaping their lives. The causes of the cataclysm that befell Europe less than 15 years later are only hinted at. The same fatal flaw was manifested in *The Coast of Utopia*, Stoppard's 2002 play, staged in New York City in 2006, which also set itself ambitious goals, in that case the lives of Russian revolutionary exiles in the mid-19th century.

The next act brings us to 1938, several months after the *Anschluss* that forcibly annexed Austria to Hitler's Germany, during the infamous *Kristallnacht* events, the vicious Nazi-organized pogrom of November 9-10, which also had its brutal expression in Vienna and other Austrian cities. The family home is invaded by thuggish Nazi officials and police, who abuse the family and order them to prepare for deportation.

The final act takes place in 1955. Three members of the Merz-Jakobowicz clan meet in the family home. Rosa (again played by Augen), one of the daughters of Wilma and Ernst, and the only one of her generation to survive the Holocaust, has come back from the US to arrange for the restitution of the apartment. 1955 is also the year of the Austrian State Treaty, in which the Soviet Union, US, Britain and France agreed to withdraw their occupying troops and grant the country its independence.

This final act is the one in which the autobiographical elements of the play emerge most unmistakably. The theme of *Leopoldstadt* finds expression in the final dialogue between Rosa, her nephew Nathan (Uranowitz) and Leo (Arty Froushan), the son of Nellie and her husband Aaron. While Nathan has survived in Europe, his cousin Leo has grown up in Britain, where his mother found refuge after marrying a British soldier.

There is a parallel to Stoppard's life story. Leo's last name is Chamberlain, and Stoppard's is equally "British." Leo is the grandson of Ludwig, who had warned about anti-Semitism more than 50 years

earlier. Like Stoppard, however, he considers himself British and has little knowledge of his family background. In Stoppard's case, he was only vaguely aware of his Jewish family until a cousin visited him in London in 1993, when he was already in his mid-50s. Stoppard's mother always avoided the subject of family history, and it was only 30 years ago that Stoppard learned that all of his four grandparents were Jews, and that they had all died in Auschwitz.

Leo, Nathan and Rosa discuss the family saga. At one point, Rosa reviews the family tree to explain matters to Leo. About two dozen names are recited, and Rosa announces the places where they died or where they were put to death, with only the three of them present having survived. In this way, the drama spells out the enormity of the losses suffered in the Holocaust. In fact, about two-thirds of Vienna's pre-1938 Jewish population of 166,000 (which amounted to some 10 percent of the city as a whole), survived the genocidal campaign, a far greater percentage than in Hungary or Poland. But that does not detract in the slightest from the scale of the mass murder. And even in Vienna, of course, certain families were hit much harder, as is the case in *Leopoldstadt*.

Nathan somewhat sharply tells Leo, in the course of the conversation, "You live as if without history, as if you throw no shadow behind you." This is the way that Stoppard, born Tomas Straussler, attempts to deal with his own decades of at least partially willful ignorance.

More importantly, the words are intended as a warning. Although the words are depicted as dating from 1955, they were written by Stoppard more than 60 years later, at a time of renewed anti-Semitism, including especially the rise of right-wing nationalist political parties and governments. The "post-Fascist" party of Georgia Meloni, the direct political heirs of Mussolini, is in power in Rome. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) sits in the German *Bundestag*, and Marine Le Pen's National Rally has come close to the French presidency on several occasions. In the US, the Republican Party has been transformed into a political formation just as threatening as these fascist parties in Europe.

As noted, *Leopoldstadt* benefits from the writer's customary wit and verbal abilities, also to be found in many of his film scripts (as varied as Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1978 *Despair*, Terry Gilliam's 1985 *Brazil*, Steven Spielberg's 1987 *Empire of the Sun* and John Madden's 1998 *Shakespeare in Love*).

The acting is excellent. Uranowitz, as both Ludwig in the earlier part of the play, and then as Nathan, a bitter Holocaust survivor, in 1955, more than 50 years later, certainly stands out, as do Augen as Wilma and Rosa, and Krumholtz as Hermann.

Broadly speaking, Hermann and Ludwig make the strongest impression as characters. Since Marxism is given short shrift, Stoppard gives these two central figures the task of articulating the choices, in his view, facing the Jewish people in Central Europe—assimilation or Zionism. Hermann has taken assimilation to the extreme of not only marrying a Catholic woman, but also converting, as he says, for "insurance" against a wave of anti-Semitism. In 1924, Nellie, the socialist daughter of Ludwig and Eva, mouths a few words about the choice facing Austria being between "the red flag" or the "old guard, with fascism only a step away," but this is largely lost in the shuffle.

Stoppard is knowledgeable and cultured, but he abstracts the family history in an impermissible manner from the general course of historical development. There are sobering moments, but the play's warnings become very one-sided, ignoring the actual history of the

first half of the century, with all its upheavals and revolutionary potential.

The dramatist is arguing that the threat of anti-Semitism is real, and this warning is indeed a timely one. But the play tends to separate anti-Semitism from fascism, from its socioeconomic roots. It suggests, along the lines argued by figures such as Daniel Goldhagen, in *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, that the age-old prejudice is rooted in the history—the DNA, metaphorically speaking—of the German people and of the population of many other countries as well.

The reference to Theodor Herzl in the first few minutes of the play can only be interpreted as an indication of the Zionist founder's prescience. The tragedy depicted in *Leopoldstadt* is seen as inevitable. The two world wars in the 20th century are not explained. Because of his orientation and history, Stoppard has no doubt never thought about what the working class coming to power in 1923 in a socialist revolution in Germany would have meant, but his audience is not obliged to follow his example. The playwright does not even hint that Hitler could have been stopped, that the mass parties of the German working class commanded more support than the Nazis on the eve of Hitler's ascent into the chancellorship.

What follows from Stoppard's premises is that the only defense against anti-Semitism is Zionism. This is exactly the argument made by Zionism today. All talk of Jews surviving and thriving elsewhere without at least the option of salvation in the Zionist state is depicted as akin to the foolish and blind complacency of Hermann Merz. The bitterest irony is that these arguments are made at the very same time that Zionism is virtually completing its own journey from nationalism to chauvinism and extreme reaction, as expressed in the makeup of Netanyahu's latest cabinet. The Zionist regime is not only politically embraced by much of the far right; its oppression of the Palestinian people is also stoking anti-Semitism.

Of course Stoppard does not spell out these points. He may share the concerns of most liberals with the shift of Israeli politics to the extreme right, and with the decades-long occupation of the territories seized in the 1967 war. But that does not change the fact that *Leopoldstadt* limits itself to the surface and points in the wrong direction when it comes to the fight against anti-Semitism and fascism.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**