

The History Behind Tom Stoppard's Leopoldstadt

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. التاريخ وراء ليوبولدشتات لتوم ستوبارد

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Abstract

A look at the inspiration behind Leopoldstadt will make readers delve into the stories in the play, which, when put together, connect the dots to paint a canvas rich with a people's history and their identity in Europe. Stoppard looks at the events his family underwent, in addition to that of the city his play is set in. The playwright's family were from Czechoslovakia originally, but the play is set in Vienna, with the storyline stretching between 1899 and 1955. The audience experiences what it was like to live in Leopoldstadt, a district in Vienna, when it was on the cusp of the twentieth century, to the aftermath of World War II. By employing new historicism and cultural materialism, one can comprehend the different events that make up the plot, and see why Stoppard took certain historical incidents, related to his past, and fictionalised them. His life did not need to be sensationalised, as his childhood was riveting, filled with escaping from escaping the Nazi regime in Czechoslovakia, to living in Asia, before finally settling in England, and being known as the quintessential Englishman. Key Words: History, Identity, Culture, New Historicism, Cultural Materialism, Racism.

المخلص

النظر إلى الإلهام وراء ليوبولدشتات سيجعل القراء يتعمقون في القصص الموجودة في المسرحية، والتي، عند تجميعها معاً، تربط النقاط لترسم لوحة غنية بتاريخ الشعب وهويتهم في أوروبا. يلقي ستوبارد نظرة على الأحداث التي مرت بها عائلته، بالإضافة إلى أحداث المدينة التي تدور أحداث مسرحيته فيها. كانت عائلة الكاتب المسرحي من تشيكوسلوفاكيا في الأصل، ولكن تدور أحداث المسرحية في فيينا، ويمتد الخط الزمني للقصّة من عام ١٨٩٩ إلى ١٩٥٥. يشهد الجمهور كيف كانت الحياة في ليوبولدشتات، وهي منطقة في فيينا، عندما كانت على أعتاب القرن العشرين، في أعقاب الحرب العالمية الثانية. من خلال توظيف النزعة التاريخية الجديدة والمادية الثقافية، يمكن للمرء أن يفهم الأحداث المختلفة التي تشكل الحبكة، ويرى لماذا أخذ ستوبارد بعض الحوادث التاريخية المتعلقة بماضيه وجعلها خيالية. لم يكن بحاجة إلى تضخيم حياته، لأن طفولته كانت مثيرة بحد ذاتها، قبل أن يستقر أخيراً في إنجلترا، وأصبح يُعرف كرجل إنجليزي مثالي عندما أصبح بالغاً. الكلمات الرئيسية: التاريخ، الهوية، الثقافة، التاريخية الجديدة، المادية الثقافية، العنصرية.

١. Introduction

When reading about the life of Tom Stoppard (born 1937), it is evident that a piece of writing based on his family history was long overdue. His childhood was marred with Nazism, escaping Czechoslovakia without his father, living in India with his mother and brother, the death of his father, gaining a stepfather, going to the UK, changing his name, and living like an Englishman. His life was one for the theatres and films, much like the ones he spent decades writing. Though not autobiographical, *Leopoldstadt* is inspired by his own past, major aspects of which had been belatedly revealed to him. In an interview with Diep Tran, he states that the play does not involve his family, but rather, "I started with a clean slate of a family in Vienna, which I just found much more interesting than my own life. Because Vienna at the period I'm writing about is one of the most interesting places on God's earth because of the culture" (New York Theatre Guide). However, when watching the play, it is hard not to see connections between the events as they unfold, and the life of Stoppard .

٢. Family History and Historical Inspiration for *Leopoldstadt*

In *Cultural Mobility*, Reinhard Meyer-Kalkus writes, "No longer viable is the old model of literary scholarship in which a single nation or region or its language or language family is the focus. It is becoming increasingly difficult to relegate authors to a single culture and nation – they live and write in the spaces between" (2010: pp. 96-97). This is vital to note when looking at a piece of literary work using new historicism and cultural materialism, and especially so when dealing with Stoppard, who has been influenced from many sides, related to his heritage and upbringing. Brannigan states that one needs to deal with "relations of past societies," (1998, p. 9), which is the intention when attempting to understand *Leopoldstadt*. Naturally, Judaism plays a vast role in the playwright's life and his play. In his essay, *Invisible Bullet*, Stephen Greenblatt writes that "the role of religion in preserving social order was a commonplace" (1990, p. 33), when writing about Renaissance England. This idea can be used when attempting to understand Germany leading up to the time of WWII. Thus, by publicly declaring his contempt for Jews and Judaism, Hitler and the Nazis caused chaos in Europe, which had long-standing consequences, resulting in the death of millions. Stoppard's mother, Marta, constantly lived in fear of the Nazi regime and suppressed any knowledge of her past life, faith, and parentage/heritage. Decades after escaping Czechoslovakia, she continued to live apprehensively. When Stoppard found out that the rumours regarding his Jewish background were all true, on confronting his mother about it, she told him little about his past, with the promise that he would not look into it any further. She had asked him to "face away from his family's history" (Lee 2000, p. 844). When watching the play and reading about the life of Stoppard, *Grandma Emilia* could be compared to Stoppard's mother, in the sense that she looked after her family, but rarely spoke about her history when she lived in another country and had to escape persecution. She came to Vienna from Kiev. She repressed those memories, and the audience only knows of them when Eva mentions them to the children (p. 73). It is written that Stoppard's mother suffered from survivor's guilt (Lee 2020 p. 845), which explains her silence on the subject. Her first husband and other members of her family died at the hands of the Nazis who occupied Czechoslovakia on 5th October 1938. Consequently, one can assume that *Emilia* underwent the same emotional state. According to his biography, his mother not only hid being Jewish, but she was a 'complete atheist' (Lee 2020, p. 864). Stoppard was not of the same inclination. In the same source, he is quoted to have said that he thinks about God a lot. It is possible this came with age, as many hold a stronger belief as they age, but there was a pressure on him to face reality from others. His stepfather, Kenneth Stoppard, also did not want him to revisit his past, or at least not acknowledge it openly. Following his mother's death, Stoppard received a letter from Kenneth, telling him: "If you want to throw your lot with the Jews... maybe you should go back to your Jewish name." (Lee 2000, p. 596) The man who had raised and given him his name felt like it was all being thrown back in his face. Their relationship was allegedly not the same after that. His parents died in the late nineties, which of course freed him from any constraints about his past. However, one should mention that in an interview much later on, Stoppard showed remorse over this interaction between himself and his stepfather, as he said: "I shouldn't have told people about it. It was true for about 10 minutes" (Luscombe 2022). The anger his stepfather felt was only at the heat of the moment, and not a long-lasting feeling. One can assume that Stoppard felt guilty at publicising such a statement when it was not how Kenneth truly felt. He was a widower in grief. It is important to note that in his earlier biography, edited by Paul Delaney (1994), Stoppard talks about his life and upbringing, with references to leaving Czechoslovakia (p. 91), but there is no mention of religion. Or more specifically, there is nothing written about his family being Jewish. Therefore, he was aware that he was brought up by his stepfather in England, but being Christian was such an integral part of his existence, that any mention of religion would have been redundant. Audiences may ask if Stoppard needed to write a play on Austria and Jewish persecution. This is because numerous pieces of

fiction and non-fictional works document the events and their consequences. George Steiner wrote of the same atrocities, and he argues that “the reality of the Holocaust addresses the contemporary mind most effectively with the authority of silence” (Langer: 1976, 15). This is exactly what the playwright employed. At the end of the play, the history of the family members is revealed, with their fate being addressed in as few words as possible . This style packs a more powerful punch than any explanation ever could have. This is reminiscent of a death certificate: when a person has died, and their cause of death. The characters the audience is familiar with are named one by one, and Rosa says how they died in as few words as possible Other words and rationalisations are redundant. Langer (1976, 18) refers to this as a “distrust of language.” Whatever can be said, can also be twisted for one’s gain. To note that a person died in Auschwitz needs no explanation .

Orwell writes that “language merely reflects existing social conditions” (1984, 117). Hence if language can be used to understand love, war, and everything in between, trauma can be understood with the lack of it. One might ask if this is why Stoppard’s mother did not speak of her troubles. She knew naturally, how propaganda worked and how the Nazis made people view Jewish people, and so this distrust caused her to take this silent approach, as it were, on her family’s history not to have it discussed and scrutinized. Orwell mentions “If thoughts corrupt language, language can also corrupt thought.” (1984, 116) Therefore, giving such trauma any explanation for her would have taken away from the horrifying ordeal she had to endure .

Orwell continues to write that the “driving force behind the Nazi movement is the belief in human inequality, the superiority of Germans to all other races, the right of Germany to rule the world” (1984, 49). It was this right that allowed them to treat people severely, and maintain a dominant hand over them, silencing any opposition and killing those they deemed ill-equipped for their agenda .

For Kierkegaard, “Honesty is not just a matter of telling the truth, but of being willing to reflect on oneself and bring to light things one prefers to keep concealed” (Carlisle 2011 p.71). This makes audiences wonder if Stoppard’s need to write *Leopoldstadt* came from a desire to face his past, or if he needed it to explain to people that he was not ashamed of who he was .

However one may need to consider that in his 1946 essay, *Why I Write*, Orwell states: “All writers are vain, selfish and lazy, and at the very bottom of their motives, there lies a mystery. Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand.” (2004 p. 10). This turns the motive of writing around and one cannot help but wonder if this play was meant to apologise to those who felt Stoppard was dismissive of his heritage .

In *Power*, Foucault writes “Everyone has their way of changing, or, what amounts to the same thing, of perceiving that everything changes” (p. 444). Therefore, Stoppard may have changed his stance on what it means to him to be Jewish, and his acceptance of it altered through the years, but it is normal human behaviour to adapt, after having to deal with facts that shatter every belief that has been instilled since childhood. He went from not knowing he was Jewish, to learning and not acting upon it, and finally accepting it, as this chapter will explain . Promises may mean something to the people involved, but they rarely make any impact on others. Learning about his ancestors caused his mother “great stress” (Lee 2020, p. 844), forcing him to promise t her that he would not look it any further. Stoppard’s word to his mother regarding their Jewish ancestry was not praised but criticized by others, such as Croatian writer, Daša Drndić. In her novel, *Trieste* (2007), unashamedly labels Stoppard as a ‘blind observer’ who ‘look[s] away with indifference and actively refuse[s] to feel compassion’ (Kindle Location 1167). She goes on to write that when his mother remarried and relocated to England, they were able to “live their happily ever after, as if their earlier life had never happened, as if there had never been a family, a war, camps, another language, memories, not even a little Czech love.” According to Drndić, they had erased every detail in their life which caused discomfort for their gain .

The Croatian writer also notes that the reason Stoppard wrote about his family life later, is not because he wanted any sense of closure or understanding, but “starts digging through his past now that he is tired of writing plays or now that his inspiration has dried up – who knows? – and time unfolds before him.” (Kindle location 1190) There is very little compassion from her; she mentions other public figures in her novel who have acted the same way as Stoppard .

Drndić may not have been wrong in her assumption, as in his 2002 biography by Ira Nadel, Stoppard is quoted to have said he had become “habituated to the unexamined idea that although... there was some Jewish in me (my father’s father?), enough to make me more interesting to myself... it was not really enough to connect me with

the Jews who died in the camps and those who didn't" (p. 494). His "unwillingness to embrace his Jewish origins and Czech past" (p. 491) was not in his favour .

One can assume that he kept his promise, but not before publishing an article in Talk Magazine in September 1999, entitled 'On Turning Out to be Jewish.' He wrote that to show his acceptance of being Jewish, but it would be in Leopoldstadt that he made his feelings clearer on the matter, by putting elements of fiction in there and writing the tale as he saw fit. In this, he wrote his family's history but altered the characters' countries, together with the names. He also took stories from real-life people and fictionalized them. Lee writes that "he wanted the play to show up the historical testimonies it had merged from. He used names and family stories, lines and scenes and cultured details from many sources" (2020, p. 848). One can therefore assume the story of being a Jew in Europe was not only his to tell, but one of millions of people, and Leopoldstadt was merely one of many. One of the themes in the play is that of a Cat's Cradle, which the children are taught to play with a tied piece of string. This is also on the cover of the book and was used on billboards outside of the theatres and in advertising. This is because in the play, Ludwig teaches his grandson, Leo, and grand-nephew, Nathan, this game in Scene 8, before the Nazi Civilian comes into their home. This game of knots on a string seems random to the children, who cannot decipher how and why the knots move as they slide their fingers through the string. However, Ludwig explains, "Each state comes out of the previous one. So there is order underneath." Nathan realises that the knots are systematic and are "not allowed to show up anywhere they like" (pp. 67-68). This is meant to symbolize how history is never random, but rather a sequence of events that have been carefully planned. This is much like the history of the Jews in Europe. While some may wonder why there have been constant attacks on them in history, especially as there were periods of peace in between, Stoppard may want to show that the attacks, much like the knots, have always been there. They never truly left, but rather shifted with time. Stoppard wrote about the history of a Jewish family in the district of Leopoldstadt in Vienna because it was a city wherein the Christians and Jews lived together and integrated through marriage and societal affairs. More importantly, the Jews had been granted 'full civil rights' by Emperor Franz Josef (Lee 2000, p. 848). The audience can assume that Stoppard wanted to show that regardless of the freedom the Jews were given, they were stripped of them merely decades later by the Nazis. It can be considered that he chose Austria because people are aware of the history of Nazi Germany and the way they took over Austria to expand their territories and claim more people for their Fatherland. One of the inspirations behind Leopoldstadt was *The House of Wittgenstein: A Family at War*, by Alexander Waugh (2008). The story deals with the family of Wittgenstein, who had converted from Judaism to Christianity and had been practicing for three generations. The onset of Anschluss shocked them deeply. They realised that the Nazis did not count them as Austrians, but deprived them of basic human rights. Waugh writes that "In the first days of Anschluss some 500 Jews were said to have committed suicide. Many more fled the country; but the majority refused to believe that the anti-Semitic legislation enshrined in the 1935 Nuremberg Laws could be made to work in a city with such a large and integrated Jewish population as Vienna" (Kindle location 3380). This could be because many lived in peace for decades, and so to now realise that it had all been a façade as the Nazis were welcomed by many Austrians, was a devastating blow. This shock is so profound, that Paul Wittgenstein, pale in the face with the horror that he has absorbed the news of what has happened in Austria, tells his sister, Hermine, "Wir gelten als Juden (We count as Jews)" (Kindle Location 3403). Whatever they had done or achieved in their lives all amounted to the religion of their ancestors. The Christians who had married into the family were guilty of "Rassenschande (race defilement)" (Kindle Location 3403). This is much like what happened to Hermann in Leopoldstadt and his marriage to Gretl, and how he almost felt forced to sign away his paternal rights so that his son, Jacob, could keep the house and, more importantly, not be subjected to Nazi terrors. Much like the character of Leo who poses as an Englishman because he has very little recollection of his childhood, and had to be told the truth by Rose, Stoppard also experienced something similar. In his biographies by Lee and Nader, the writers mention his ancestry, and how he discovered his ancestral identity much later in life when he was already an established writer and had been known for his Englishness. It makes sense that Leo comes in at the end of the play, realising his heritage when all has been said and done. After all, this is how Stoppard himself was. He learned about his Jewish roots when most people involved were no longer in this world. Much like Marta Stoppard, Leo mentions that his mother, Nellie, "didn't want me to go to school with a German name. I was Leonard Chamberlain from when I was eight. She never talked about home and family. She didn't want me to have Jewish relatives in case Hitler won" (p. 94). It is in this part that the audience understand the fear that Stoppard's mother felt when raising her sons in England. In his 1941 essay, 'The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius,' Orwell writes: "But it is precisely the idea of human equality – the 'Jewish' or 'Judeo-Christian' idea of

equality – that Hitler came into the world to destroy.” (p. 89). His impact had been so great, that the people who fled still lived in fear of him and his political ideas. They and their relatives faced such persecution to the point that they were scared of any association. Foucault explains “This dysfunction of power was related to a central excess: what might be called the monarchial ‘super-power’, which identified the right to punish with the personal power of the sovereign.” (1991 p. 80). The Nazis felt justified in their treatment of the Jews, though it made little sense to others. This angers Nathan, who had to remain in Austria, and experience everything. He feels betrayed by the changing of Leo’s name, as he thinks it means that he is not proud of who he is. Claude Levi-Strauss writes that “the kinship system does not have the same importance in all cultures” (1963, p. 47). Though they are one family and share a culture, the idea of togetherness means more to Nathan because he was not allowed the same freedom as those who chose to flee. Naturally, it is not only Nathan who remains, but the memories of the dead linger on, whether it is in paintings or family recollections. Satre writes, “I would age in the darkness and become a lonely adult, with neither father nor mother, hearth nor home, almost without a name” (2000 pp. 72-73). Therefore, for Nathan to forget, or for Rosa to not recall their family history would cause them to not have a sense of belonging. Another example of historical events mentioned in the play includes the Klimt painting of Gretl. It takes the place of pride in the family home. According to Google Art & Culture (working with Belvedere and Klimt Villa where most of Klimt’s artworks are on display,) “acquiring a Klimt was not a financial investment, but also an expression of high social status. Collecting Gustav Klimt’s artworks expressed a certain identity and social belonging.” This would have been just what Hermann and his family needed following their conversion to Christianity and acceptance into Austria’s high society. During Anschluss, the German government in Austria knew the value of Klimt’s paintings, and so confiscated what they could. The property of the Jews “fell victim to Nazi looting.” Google Arts & Culture also writes that the house Klimt lived in was “Aryanised,” after it had been bought and looked after by a Jewish husband and wife. This would then explain why they took the paintings and other works of art from Jewish families. This would show them that they were not allowed to appear cultured in the society they lived in. Rather, they had to seem uncultured and more importantly, not Aryan-like. They wanted to create a ghetto that appeared impoverished. The Klimt painting is hung up for all to see throughout the events of the play. However, following the scenes when the Nazis take over, it is gone, along with the identity of the sitter. It becomes known as *The Woman in the Green Shawl*. In Scene 9, Nathan appears to be talking to an unseen person, as only his character is on the stage. He clearly states “I cannot say who took the painting. There were six or seven men who came in and took things, spitting at us and calling us filthy names... I didn’t see the ‘Portrait of Margarete Merz’ again until I saw it on public display at the Belvedere art gallery after the war.” (p.90) Though what Nathan says has some truth in it, he has understandably mixed some events, as he was just a child at the time. Later in the same scene, Rosa corrects him and remembers that while she was in New York Sally wrote to her and informed her that “A Brownshirt arrived here unannounced, with two Wehrmacht soldiers. They went from room to room making a list. Hermann signed for what they took... I’m going to get Gretl back” (p. 95). Therefore, to get Gretl back would be to put together the pieces of the family history shattered by the events leading up to World War II. This echoes the story of the Lieser family who lived in Austria. They recently recovered a lost painting of *Frauline Lieser* by Klimt which was recovered after 100 years. “This is based on the Washington Principles, an international agreement to return Nazi-looted art to the descendants of the people they were taken from” (Bell 2024). This was set up in 1998, “with the intention of creating a moral and ethical obligation on the holders of Nazi-looted art” (US Department of State 2024). Presumably, Stoppard wrote and incorporated such a story in his play, as it must have happened to many prominent families in occupied Europe, as those who were forced to leave their homes were only allowed to pack one suitcase. Of course, those who ran away did not make paintings their priority. It is only when things are settled down that one thinks of the smaller details, or those things lower down on the list of priorities .

٣ Conclusion Leopoldstadt may be read in isolation from other pieces of work, as its real meaning does not only come from intertextuality, though as written above, there are influences from other works of literature such as *Trieste* and *The House of Wittgenstein: A Family at Way*. Stoppard’s real ingenuity comes from incorporating history and presenting it in a play that spans several decades. Taking family history and that of the surrounding areas enabled him to come to terms with his past, and show writers such as Drndić that he is no longer in the shadows regarding the religion of his family. Going to the past to uncover details of one’s family, and understand what some people in Europe had to endure has given audiences and readers a chance to understand Tom Stoppard and who he truly is. In addition, due to his age and the idea that he may not write any other piece of work, makes

- one wonder if this play is Stoppard's final piece of writing for the theatre. A play where he puts differences aside and accepts his Jewish ancestry openly for all to see. His final curtain .
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