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St. Louis Post-Dispatch (St. Louis, MO, USA)

01.03.1946, Seite 39

Standort Original:

Signaturen: R-A 2.1.015/005/016

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The German Author, Erich Remarque, Was an Early Intellectual Victim

By Alvin H. Goldstein

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New York, March 1.

In conversation, Erich Maria Remarque, the author of the current best seller, »Arch of Triumph,« is a quiet, dispassionate man. Intense emotions disclosed in that account of German refugees' hell-on-earth and in his universally distributed »All Quiet on the Western Front,« are not evident in the slightly broken speech of the German novelist.

Remarque, an early intellectual victim of Nazi destruction, does not consider himself a refugee. It is the Nazis who are refugees from humanity, and Remarque long ago renounced them. It is as a German that he hates them with an intensity that he thinks cannot be equaled by a citizen of any other nation. They have stigmatized him as a potential Nazi, solely on the basis of his nationality.

»I do not even have the excuse of being a Jew,« he said with a gesture of helplessness. »Members of that group automatically are exculpated of any participation or agreement with the Nazi disgrace. They are held beyond suspicion. But as long as the horror of Nazism is considered something peculiarly German, I am branded by the same shameful iron. Do you wonder that my hatred flows deeper, perhaps even than one who has suffered physically at Nazi hands?«

One of the developments in post-war Germany that gives Remarque *much* despair, is the failure of a segment of the German population to insist on participation in the trial of war criminals at Nuernberg. He had hoped to learn of a popular movement, inspired by the cry: »Let us punish our own.« He thinks – or rather, hopes – that its failure to materialize is due to fear of Nazi revenge easily visited when the days of Allied Army occupation are at end.

»A young fanatical Nazi boy of today will be about 23 years old in ten years,« Remarque observed. »They are skilled in the devious methods of underground organization. Then if Allied troops are removed – – – ,« he ended the sentence with a significant cluck of the tongue, drawing his finger across his throat.

»After all,« he concluded, »those unsympathetic to Nazis have survived in Germany only through remaining silent and unprotesting. Perhaps it is too much to expect a demonstration from them now unless they could be assured of future security against Nazi assassins.

Personally – and I assure you I do not seek to evade the question – I have no solution of my own to the problem.«

As to punishment of the war guilty, the mild-mannered writer declared in flat, even tones that he would be gratified to kill them personally with his own bare hands. Regarding the prosecution of so-called German intellectuals who abetted the Nazi cause, Remarque was less concerned. He pointed out that contrary to foreign opinion, the German scholar, artist or intellectual was not a vital influence in the community, although he may have been honored nominally with a degree.

»The single exception is the scientist,« he added, »and he was an exception because he had the means to contribute to Germany's military and physical strength.«

In his own case, after he was internationally celebrated as author of »All Quiet on the Western Front,« distributed in the United States as is his current »Arch of Triumph« by the Book-of-the-Month Club, translated into many languages both for reading and motion pictures, he received about 100 marks or \$24 from German publishers for short stories. Collier's paid him \$2500 or about 1100 marks for each story.

On the eve of Hitler's ascendancy in 1931, Remarque renounced his native land and moved to Ascona, Switzerland, where he continued his writing.

His own father, a professional naval officer, had sought to dissuade him from that career, not convinced that writing was rightfully a man's work. Even while the applause for »All Quiet,« a preachment on the futility of war for the common man, was thundering across the continents, the elder Remarque sought to arrange a five-year whaling expedition for his son, much as if he were seeking to separate him from a sweetheart, confident she would be forgotten between time and distance.

Before he had turned to fiction after removing the tattered German Army that served as the emblem of his disillusionment in 1918 in the cause of »Deutschland Uber Alles,« he entered and quickly abandoned the teaching profession. In rapid order he became a farm manager, a tombstone salesman, an automobile tire-tester on motor speedways, an advertising slogan writer and then a newspaper writer.

In 1940, he moved to the United States to fulfill motion picture studio commitments in Hollywood. He insists that he is fond of movies, but admits that he rarely attends them. With equal enthusiasm, he asserts that he is devoted to Hollywood (except »people out there take too much exercise«), but shows no inclination to move from his New York hotel apartment where he established residence in 1942.

Whereas »All Quiet on the Western Front« dealt with the tragic destiny of the German soldier, tricked into a war by the consuming quest of his leaders for power, »Arch of Triumph« turns the same sardonic eye toward the hapless state of German refugees, political and racial in Paris. Previous books, »The Road Back,« and »Three Comrades,« discussed with equal bitterness the lot of the wretched vanquished soldier; »Flotsam« was an earlier treatment of the refugee. None were sequels in any sense, a device abhorrent to the author.

So cynical and pessimistic is »Arch of Triumph« in tone, even the title serving as sort of a bitter jest, that Remarque is seriously contemplating a violation of his established rule. He is

inclined to agree that he owes it to himself and his readers, and to some of the principal characters in the book who were created in part in the images of actual persons, to bring events up to date in another book.

Curiously enough, it is Remarque's own chief figure of »Arch of Triumph,« »Dr. Ravic,« who points the most demanding finger for a sequel where hope may balance despair. The character of »Dr. Ravic« was suggested to the author when he learned that a famous Berlin surgeon who had incurred the displeasure of the Nazis, had performed an operation for Remarque's wife in Paris. The refugee surgeon, living surreptitiously under an assumed name in the comparative freedom of the French city before it fell before German conquest, earned his living by performing operations for less able surgeons who paid him a relatively trivial fee.

Thus this man became the »Dr. Ravic« of the novel, a refugee to whom flight was commonplace, a man without name or nation, hunted and harassed until his emotions are dead and he no longer knows fear, love, hope, sorrow, or ultimately, even bitterness. It is »Dr. Ravic« who rides unmoved on a crowded truck to a French concentration camp when France prepares to fight Germany. »It was so dark,« the final line of the book sets forth, »that once could not even see the Arc de Triomphe.«

Well, the man whose experiences suggested the fictitious »Dr. Ravic« in real life is Dr. Willhelm Swienty, Remarque related. Dr. Swienty, now fully recovered from Nazi abuses and concentration camp hardships (not to mention the steady diet of calvados that kept him going in Paris, is medical director of a State Hospital in Maine, honored and happy in his profession and ready for American citizenship.

»So it certainly looks like I should write a sequel though I don't like to rehash old ideas,« Remarque concluded with a smile. »When ›Arch of Triumph‹ was written there was a reason to be cynical and depressed. Today, in 1946, times have changed. I have changed. Now, I can laugh at some of the jokes about the Nazis, like the question in the intelligence test they gave to new property owners: ›What is our Fuehrer's favorite food‹ Those things weren't funny then. They were true and they hurt.«