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Remarque – Lost & Found

The Sydney Morning Herald (Sydney, NSW, AUS)

20.04.1946, Seite 8

Standort Original:

Signaturen: R-A 2.1.015/008

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By Beam Wireless From New York

Erich Maria Remarque is one of a legion of »lost« authors. Dispossessed of his native Germany he has lost not only much of his rich background but also a complete freedom of choice of his subjects for the future.

He can't write about Germany because he no longer knows the country; he prefers not to write about European refugees because the public is growing tired; and he won't write about the American scene because he doesn't know it sufficiently well.

At 48 years of age he is compelled by fate and fortune to »make a break« with the past and commence a new literary life.

His »Arch of Triumph,« currently one of America's best sellers, has proved that he can write with the same vivid style which attracted world attention to »All Quiet on the Western Front,« but it is the last of its kind to come from his pen. »I wrote this because I wanted to tell the story,« he explains. »But there will not be another.«

Remarque intends to call on his memory to write fiction based on European life.

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When in Berlin on May 10, 1933, a uniformed Nazi student stepped towards a bonfire saying, »Against the treachery towards the German soldiers of World War One I give to the flames the works of Erich Maria Remarque,« he destroyed not only books of great literary merit, but he robbed a fellow German of the chance of writing about his native country.

»And,« says Remarque. »I feel an author only writes really well about his own country. Conrad and Hemingway are the only exceptions I know of, and they are not really exceptions. Conrad was away from Poland for many years before he started to write and Hemingway always has American characters in a foreign setting. I could write about Germans in America, but who would be interested?«

Remarque is not the sinister-looking character so popularly portrayed in publisher's photographs. He assumes a rather stern and forbidding expression when he lowers his wide bushy eyebrows, but mostly his face is lighted by a broad smile. I found him sitting in his luxurious hotel suite overlooking fashionable Park Avenue, surrounded by his magnificent collection of van Goghs, Renoirs, Degas, and Cezannes.

He spoke with a heavy German guttural and frequently was searching for the correct English phrase. He wished to talk only of literature and art.

»How can I know of other things?« he asked. »The Germany I knew no longer exists. I am a man without a country – at the moment.«

Remarque hopes to become an American citizen some time this year, but the mere process of naturalisation cannot restore to him all that he has lost. »I would be incapable of writing about the American scene,« he announced with an almost violent shrug of the shoulders. »American writers can do that so much better. I have spent 42 years in Europe and only six in America, so how can I know? I know Americans only in wartime. A man writes best about his own country, and I have lost mine.«

The man who fought as a private in the German Army in World War One, and who had his German citizenship taken away from him by Hitler, is rapidly adjusting himself to changes and already has laid the foundations of his new form of writing. »»All Quiet on the Western Front,«« he says candidly, »was a freak – one of those lovely freaks. It was documentary writing and it was easy because I had a most perfect experience of the background. You can't go on writing like that unless you have the background. Always reviewers will say »It is not All Quiet.««

»»The Road Back« did not reach the same heights,« continued Remarque, staring straight ahead without seeking either agreement or disagreement. »That was because I was relying on the same background. »Flotsam« was a semi-documentary book about refugees, but it was no good. You have the choice of going on writing documentary books or of writing fiction, and if you haven't the background you must make the break towards fiction. I made the break in »Arch of Triumph.« You must have a character and a plot.«

Remarque gestured wildly as he did almost throughout the interview, then leaned forward and said, quietly, »»Arch of Triumph« isn't all fiction. Some of the scenes are absolutely true – I myself lived through them in Paris. Some people say the book is not good fiction because it is too sensational and that is understandable. The life lived by refugees is sensational and almost too fantastic to be believed.«

Remarque, who writes his many scripts in longhand German and rarely attempts to read the English translation, has made his decision and now feels more contented in himself.

»It is not easy for a writer who has lost his country to know what to write about,« he explains. »My problem is material, but one must be practical. I will write fiction about Europe.«

As soon as conditions permit, he intends visiting England and France, and probably Switzerland, where he owns a home, but he says he will never return to Germany. »I will never go back to the country that took my citizenship from me – never, never!« He almost exploded. »Why,« he added in a quieter voice. »I don't know whether my friends became Nazis.«

Contrary to much that has been written previously, Remarque did not leave Germany because of the Nazis, but merely took a trip to Switzerland in order hastily to complete a manuscript for an impatient American publisher. That was in January, 1933, but by the time he had finished his work, the Nazis were in power, and, as he says, »it was wiser not to return.«

Born in Canabrock, he served with the German Army on the western front in World War I, and drifted through several occupations to writing. At the time of the change from high-pressure motor car tyres to balloon tyres, he served as a test driver, during which »I hit my head a few times when my cars turned over. There was a short interval in my life,« he says, »that was very sinister. I became a partner in the tombstone business.«

After writing »All Quiet On The Western Front« in 1929, he lived mostly in Berlin, where he had not felt the impact of the coming Nazi regime. »Berlin was a big city,« he explains, wearing a wry smile, »and the Nazis were not apparent everywhere. We did not take Hitler seriously – thought it was just a matter of letting him wear out. I didn't realise the strength of the Nazi movement until I was driving to Switzerland, and men, women, and children, in small villages were raising their hands in the Nazi salute. It was just luck that I had to go to Switzerland to write that manuscript – otherwise I probably wouldn't be here.«

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Remarque, having settled his personal writing problem, is not going to rush things. He is going to write only when he feels he has a story to tell. »Goethe wrote when he felt like it, and wrote what suited him. Between his masterpieces he produced some of the worst rubbish. To get an impression I am likening myself to Goethe,« he said laughingly. »But I know we can learn from the old masters.«

Financially Remarque will have nothing to worry about. »Arch of Triumph« is a best seller and shortly Hollywood producers will start filming it. David Lewis, associate producer of the independent company which bought the film rights for 200.000 dollars, plus a percentage of the film's eventual earnings, said: »It was the biggest bargain I or anyone else ever got.«

– H.A.