

Romantic Remarque

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He was given a few personal interviews and will not discuss the new book he is currently working on, but Erich Maria Remarque does speak out firmly on how nearly all of his ten published novels have become best sellers: »It happened against all expert opinion. *All Quiet on the Western Front* was refused in Germany by its best publisher, who thought nobody wanted to read any more about the war. The American edition of *Arch of Triumph* was refused because the publisher thought nobody wanted to read any more about refugees. *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* was refused in America at first.«

The way to write a best seller, for Remarque, is by not attempting to do so. »All my books were written about simple people, in miserable circumstances, not at all best seller material. I never thought they would be best sellers.« To date, his books have been sold in uncounted millions of copies in dozens of languages; eight films have been made from them plus a ninth from one of his plays.

YOUTH. Erich Maria Remarque was born in Osnabrück, Westphalia, on June 22, 1898, the son of Anna Maria and Peter Maria Remarque; they also had two daughters. The family was of French Catholic origin, their ancestors have fled from France to the Rhineland during the French Revolution; the father was a bookbinder by trade.

Blond, blue-eyed, husky Erich graduated from the local Gymnasium in Osnabrück and passed onto a local seminar for teachers. In 1916 when he was not yet 18 he was drafted into the German army despite his weak lungs. He later stated: »At that time I was brimming over with enthusiasm and animated, as all young Germans were, by a great feeling of patriotism. We were all convinced, all we kids of seventeen, that we were fighting for the salvation of civilization.

»What does one think about at 17? One is beginning to read and beginning to discover music. For my part, I was dreaming that I would become a composer, and behold, I found myself thrown into barracks and then, a few weeks later, I was sent to the front.«

Remarque saw his best friend's abdomen ripped open; he was himself wounded several times. His early wounds were slight but the last tore through his kneecap and leg, hospitalizing him in Düsseldorf for almost a year. Discharged at the beginning of November, 1918, he voluntarily boarded a train to the front lines to rejoin his old unit, now in Belgium. He met soldiers returning from the front, heard news of the naval mutiny at Kiel and of the impending German defeat. By the time he found his unit the armistice had been signed; he arrived just as his commanding officer was concluding a farewell speech.

Back at Osnabrück, he was walking home from the station when he came on a riot around a tavern: the pianist had been asked by some drinkers to play the national anthem, but when some others would not join in the singing, those who requested the anthem took it as a patriotic slur and started a fight. Commented Remarque: »The whole damned business was starting all over again, right there in my home town, while the armistice was still news.«

SEARCH. Remarque had lost his mother and many friends during the war. He came back to nothing and enrolled in a six months schoolteachers' course offered by the government to rehabilitate returned soldiers. Afterwards he taught in a small village near the Dutch border for a year; the next year he cut and polished gravestones at Osnabrück, and on Sundays played the organ in an insane asylum. When a war time comrade asked him to join a gypsy caravan, he agreed and pursued an itinerant life throughout Germany, sitting around camp fires at night, listening to romantic tales.

Because Remarque was a skilled mechanic, a friend offered him a job as a test driver for the Continental Tire Company in Berlin. He accepted, tested cars on a variety of roads and under all weather conditions. He had written some poetry during the war years; now he turned his hand to articles that he sold to a Swiss motor magazine. Continued publication helped to advance him from a test driver to a copywriter in the company's advertising department. He left to become an assistant editor of *Sport im Bild*, an illustrated sports weekly, and to try another kind of writing at night: a novel of his war experiences, now almost a decade behind him. Its title: *Im Westen nichts Neues* (Eng. tr.: *All Quiet on the Western Front*).

In answer to a question about how he came to write this famous novel: »I made a number of attempts to write a play, but I was never very successful in that. I suffered from rather violent attacks of despair. When attempting to overcome these attacks, it happened that gradually ... my mind reverted to my experiences during the war. I was able to observe quite similar phenomena in my acquaintances and friends. ... The shadows of the war still oppressed us, and particularly so when we did not think of it at all. On the very day on which these ideas swept over me I began to write, without lengthy reflection. This was continued for six weeks – every evening when I returned from my office – and by that time the book had been completed.«

The manuscript lay in a drawer for six months. On the advice of a friend, Remarque sent it to Samuel Fischer, a highly reputable publisher. It was rejected with the comment that nobody wanted to read about the war. Remarque next sent the manuscript to the huge Ullstein publishing firm; they accepted it with enthusiasm. Published in 1929, the novel became an immediate success, selling 1,200 000 copies in Germany alone during the first year.ⁱ

Of this period of his life, Remarque said: »Suddenly I was famous. I had not changed, but my friends started looking at me as if I were something that had just been invented. They treated me with awe, most of them, or with envy, and when I talked to them that book was always there between us.« His love for high-powered motor cars sent him on an unplanned driving tour of western Europe, he signed false names in hotels, stated his occupation as dog breeder, toured through Normandy, Brittany, Limoges, the Pyrenees, to escape the monotony of his fame.

His anti-war sentiments made him many enemies, sparked personal attacks on him; he was said to be a youth who had never seen action at the front, a man of 55, a French soldier, the author of a novel about life in a brothel. Remarque commented acidly: »They asserted that my name was Kramer. My name has never been Kramer. Others, who for their purposes found the name Remarque more convenient, declared without further ado that I was a French Jew.«ⁱⁱ

An American film version of *All Quiet* was released in 1930, catapulting Lew Ayres to fame. When the film was shown in Berlin, Joseph Paul Goebels [sic!], then head of the Na-

ⁱ Total U.S. sales since publication in 1929 surpassed this figure of 1963.

ⁱⁱ Which he was not.

tional Socialist Party in Berlin, attacked. The Nazis loosed white mice in the audience, threw stink bombs, had uniformed men stage a demonstration outside the theatre. The film was eventually banned in Germany and was not seen there again until 1950.

REFUGEE. In 1923 Remarque married Ilse Jeanne Zambona, who had previously been married to a wealthy German industrialist. The Remarques were divorced in 1930, but continued to be seen together at dinners, theatres, trips to Switzerland and Holland. That same year Remarque published a second novel, *Der Weg zurück* (Eng. tr., *The Road Back*), which described the collapse of German national morale after 1918. As nazi strength continued to grow at the polls, Remarque became marked as a dangerous enemy because of his pacifist views.

At four o'clock one morning his agent found Remarque in a Berlin night club, begged him to leave the country immediately. Remarque later recalled: »There was fantastic luck again. I considered, should I order another drink and then go home to bed, or should I order another drink, get into my car and drive to Switzerland?« When the nazis came to seize him later that morning, he was already in Switzerland. He later recounted how, in his drive to Switzerland, German road guards mistook his Lancia for an official car, gave him heel-clicking salutes, helped to speed him on his way.

Remarque had built a house at Porto Ronco on Lake Maggiore in 1931; here he lived as a political exile absorbed in his private collections of Oriental rugs, antiques, 19th century French paintings, dogs, and sport cars. He avoided politics, remained elusive to interviewers, worked on a third novel about pre-nazi Germany; it was published in 1937 as *Drei Kameraden* (Eng. tr., *Three Comrades*).

The next year Remarque remarried his former wife Ilse Jeanne Zambona. In 1939, just before he left Porto Ronco for a visit to the United States, his maid pleaded with him to take most of his things out of the country because of impending war; he casually advised her to send whatever she like to a friend of his in London. It was Remarque's good fortune once again that the maid sent almost everything; as events turned out, he sailed aboard the *Queen Mary* on its last prewar voyage.

Remarque arrived in the United States as the world-famous author of three novels with total sales of 5 1/2 million copies in 35 languages. He became a refugee resident in the United States on a Swiss card of identification; his collections were saved intact and sent later on to him. Of these he said: »I like old things and beautiful things, They are a consolation if life seems sometimes too unbearable.« The prestigious Knoedler Galleries held a show of his paintings, the Metropolitan Museum of Art sought his advice on Persian rugs.

His next three novels *Flotsam* (1941), *Arch of Triumph* (1946), *Spark of Life* (1951), published in the United States, were concerned with the plight of victims of the Hitlerian regime. Remarque personally helped many refugees in need, particularly Jews who escaped from nazi Germany.

At first he lived in Hollywood because of its resemblance to the Lake Maggiore scenery and to be near such friends as Marlene Dietrich, Josef von Sternberg, other members of the American film colony who could recall the flowering of the arts in Berlin in the late 1920s. But Remarque eventually settled in New York, advising refugees to live in the center of a big city and to cultivate the friendship of a large number of people who did not speak their native tongue.

He stayed for a long while at the Ambassador Hotel on Park Avenue, then moved into an apartment near Sutton Place, where he sat at a desk overlooking mid-town Manhattan, writing in longhand in German, a framed letter of Goethe hanging on the wall nearby.

LATER YEARS. Remarque became a United States citizen in 1947, continued to live in New York after the end of World War II and spent a few months every year at his Lake Maggiore home. In 1957 he and Ilse Jeanne Zambona were divorced for the second time. He later began to court movie actress Paulette Goddard, whom he had known for several years. They were married on February 25, 1958, stayed in separate apartments in the same building. They live now in a small villa facing Lake Maggiore. Said Remarque at the time of his marriage: »To say that youth is the happiest stage of life is an illusion. Life is like a well-constructed novel: the writing is the same on pages four and 50 and 275. But the interest really grows and reaches its peak around page 200.«

He returned to West Germany several times after the war, declared after a 1963 visit: »They really do not like to see us emigrants. We are an unpleasant reminder. There's even the irony that they think of us as ›deserters‹ – we who were forced to flee!« He found that he was as cut off from the new Germany as he had been from the old, a European irreparably uprooted.

In recent years he and Paulette have made their home at Lake Maggiore for reasons of his health, particularly his heart trouble. He came to the conclusion that he was not truly at home in any particular country. He has therefore become a citizen of the world and is not sad about it.

WORK. Remarque sometimes writes for ten hours a day, and sometimes not for years; in between bouts of writing he works at the back of his mind. When he does write he can work regardless of surroundings, using a pencil and his eraser.

About his past novels, he said: »They were cut to the core. First by chapters, then by sentences, then by words. I tried to avoid to repeat or even to mention what the readers would know anyhow. I never tried to explain anything as the author, hovering as a *deus ex machina* over the book. The author disappears in my books. If he appears then he is the ›I‹ who tells the story, hero or anti-hero himself. All my books are written from only one point of view, the view of the main person in the story. The author never interprets. Everybody in the book is seen through the prism of the main person, for example, of Ravic in *Arch of Triumph*. What Ravic doesn't see doesn't exist. He is always on stage. It is difficult to construct a story that way. But the reward is greater inner suspense.«

Remarque has consistently portrayed the irrational circumstances of war that send men of different nations out to kill each other in the name of patriotism. He has always written about Germans as members of an international community bound to the values and ethics of an international community, which set him in direct opposition to the preachments and aims of Hitler. As his work matured, Remarque moved beyond the arena of war and its destructive effects upon people to that of love, of affirmation in the face of peril.

The famous novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* told about a young private soldier and three classmates who passed directly from school to the front lines of the first world war. The book focused on essential human qualities in its depiction of the life of the common soldier and its indictment of the nightmarish slaughter of European battlefields.

Wrote English critic Herbert Read: »This book is the Bible of the common soldier, the Tommy in the front lines who month after month endured the mess and stink of death, and all the loud riot of killing, the testament of the only man who is competent and worthy to speak of the war. When this kind of experience is presented in anger and without art, it only arouses resentment and pity. But this book wins our sympathy by its detachment and its esthetic merits.« The *Manchester Guardian* hailed it as the greatest of all war books; *Le Monde* thought

it should be distributed in every school. Said Christopher Morley: »It is to me the greatest book about the war that I have seen.«

On the heels of this spectacular success, 100,000 advance orders were received before publications of Remarque's second novel, *The Road Back*. It portrayed the frustrations of a group of disbanded German soldiers, a lost generation born to defeat and despair. It did not have the impact of the first book, nor did Remarque's third novel, *Three Comrades*, a study of the bewilderment of the postwar generation of young Germans, afraid of their emotions, without trust in anything but the sky, trees, earth, bread, tobacco.

Flotsam, written in the United States, was the first of a trio of novels about refugees. It was concerned with Germans driven beyond their country's borders because they were either political enemies of the nazis or Jews; they moved from country to country uncertain of the future, finding no secure haven.

In 1946 Remarque published *Arch of Triumph*, felt by some critics to be his most important book since *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The theme of love in the shadow of catastrophe, that would mark his later novels, was first fully developed in the story of a tortured love affair between an actress and a German refugee physician who lives in France illegally just before the outbreak of World War II.

The doctor had been a renowned surgeon in Germany; without a visa in France he earned his living as a physician in a Parisian bordello and as a »ghost surgeon« for incompetent French surgeons. His love for the actress when France is on the brink of disaster has been called one of the most memorable love stories of the time; it was made into a film classic, starring Charles Boyer and Ingrid Berman, then near the peak of her career.

Said Remarque of his storytelling technique: »There is an inner suspense in a story and an outer one. The inner one is important; the outer one alone makes a book only an adventure story. The inner one needs much more skill in handling the story. In *Arch of Triumph*, form is only a reflex of Ravic's (the German doctor) observations and emotions. No one word is explained about him by the author. Nor about any other person in the book. Only what Ravic sees and feels.«

Here, as in later books, Remarque concentrated on rendering the look and smell and feel of his background city with a devotion marked by the cities. Against this backdrop, Ravic states the dilemma of man in a crashing world. »Before, one had many things – security, background, faith, aims – all of them friendly railings to which we could hold when love shook us. Nowadays we don't have anything – at least a little despair, a little courage, and otherwise strangeness within and without. Then if love flies in, it is like a torch on dry straw. One doesn't have anything but love.«

Remarque's next novel was as product of five years of research: *Spark of Life* (1951) dealt with life in a concentration camp. The central character was Prisoner 509, behind barbed wire for ten long years, reduced to a number, who managed to draw on the inexhaustible resources of the human spark to stay alive while others who could not do so perished. A trickle of news about the approaching end of the war revived his sense of identity, but in an act that saved the lives of others, he ended by giving his own life on the eve of liberation.

In 1954 *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* established Remarque as one of the great romantic writers of our time. It was a novel about a young German soldier who retreated across the open snowy wastes of Russia during World War II; he returns to Germany on leave, finds among the ruins and desolation love with a beautiful girl, tenderness, a marriage made hasty by the need for him to return to a collapsing front. In the end, his death on the battlefield makes the brief moment of love he found and enjoyed all the more poignant, the only real meaning left behind him.

The film version, shot in Germany, featured John Gavin and Lilo Pulver; Remarque worked on the screen play, was even selected by the director to make his screen debut by playing a part.ⁱⁱⁱ

Remarque's eight novel, *The Black Obelisk* (1957), returned to the time of his postwar years when he had played the organ in an insane asylum; it was a tender love story involving a delicate schizophrenic girl; it also satirized German life in the pre-Hitler era.

Heaven Has No Favorites (1961) dealt with the love of a middle-aged highly successful racing driver for a 24-year-old tuberculous girl who is doomed to die. Their love is intense and romantic, with all the charm of lovers living silkily in Paris, but death closes in at the end, for their love has no future. Wrote the *New York Times*: »It restates powerfully Remarque's romantic thesis: it is in the presence of death that men become most human and most worthy of love.« Here war plays no part, but only love and death.

Said *MD's* reviewer: »Death is always between the lovers, like the third person in a love triangle, the specter of racing accidents being subdued only by the more imminent presence of the specter of tuberculosis. ... They both have their race and lose it. But while the race lasts they win a victory: they know in one short spell all the intoxication of love and all the thrill of real living.«

The Night in Lisbon (1964), Remarque's tenth novel, took as its hero a refugee arrived in Lisbon to escape the nazis during World War II; his story is one of rekindled love with his wife in their flight to freedom. But near the end, when they are close to safety, his wife dies an untimely death.

On his writing habits, Remarque has said: »I never reread what I have written until I have finished a draft; that is fatal. It is better to write a bad novel than to try to write a perfect one – and not write it.«

SUMMING UP. By the English literary review *Spectator* about Erich Maria Remarque »An extremely powerful writer.«

ⁱⁱⁱ Professor Pohlmann