

Literature series : an anti-war novel written in General Guisan's headquarters

Autor(en): **Linsmayer, Charles**

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An anti-war novel written in General Guisan's headquarters

The endless rice and grain fields of Italy's Po Valley are the setting for Orlando Spreng's 1941 homecoming novel "Il reduce".

CHARLES LINSMAYER

In 1936, a young man returns from Mussolini's war in Abyssinia to his native village of Sesto Cremonese in the Po Valley. Rico is sun-tanned, but his outward appearance is deceptive. The horrors in which he played a part have psychologically disturbed the farmer's son and alienated him from his former life. When he seeks solace from Daria, the wife of Beduino, the betrayed husband brutally beats up Rico and Daria and disappears from the village forever. However, Rico can no longer bear civilian life in the village. When he returns to Africa, the young Nera, who remained loyal to him from the start, is at his side.

The novel convincingly portrays the rural Cremonese landscape, the flooded rice fields, the never-ending roads through countless fields, the unswerving canals and the gigantic, impenetrable cornfields which give events a particular magic.

A writer who worked for the post office

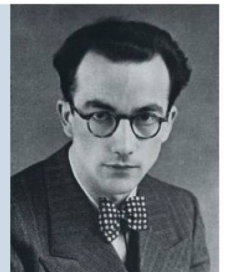
"Il reduce", the subtlest and most unconventional anti-war novel in Swiss literature, was typed in 1940 at the headquarters of the Swiss general Henri Guisan near to Berne on an army typewriter. The author was Bernese postal worker Orlando Spreng, who was born on 30 October 1908 in Sesto Cremonese, the very same village where his novel is set, as the son of a master cheesemaker from Berne who had emigrated to Italy. The family lived in Switzerland from 1914, Orlando became a post office employee and eventually took a position at Berne's Kornhaus post office. He caused a stir in 1939 with a kind of Swiss Svejik novel entitled "Le recluta Senzapace", the story of a good-natured but blundering recruit from Ticino by the name of Senzapace who as a sort of regiment fool becomes an entertainer for his brigade and eventu-

ally captivates the whole of Switzerland. Spreng nevertheless produced his best work in "Il reduce", the novel in which he expresses his homesickness for Italy, the country of his boyhood, and which could have had the makings of a success as part of the emergence of neorealism in Italy. However, only the traditional writer Francesco Chiesa had opportunities there under Mussolini, while Spreng had to be content that his very untypically Swiss novel was included in Guido Calgari's series of books about home entitled "Terra nostra" and that its translation by Jakob Bühner was looked upon favourably by the "Büchergilde Gutenberg" book club to whose members it was restricted.

When the borders reopened, nobody remembered the Swiss "homesick Italian", and his last book, the acerbic novel set in Ticino called "Il Lago", which dealt with the "colonialists" from German-speaking Switzerland, was forgotten until it was published in the same series of books about home in 1952. Two years earlier, on 27 January 1950, Spreng had died in an Italian hospital in Viganello after suffering a fatal brain haemorrhage at the age of 41, which he had foreseen years before and also touched upon in "Il Lago".

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Jakob Bühner's German translation "Der Heimgekehrte" with an epilogue by Charles Linsmayer is available as volume two of "Reprinted by Huber".

CHARLES LINSMAYER IS A LITERARY SCHOLAR AND JOURNALIST



The old woman went on,
"Can you tell me why this war is
being fought? Or any war come
to that? Why do we kill when
every man on both sides has a
mother, wife and family?
A piece of land is not worth
the tiniest drop of human blood!"
(Orlando Spreng:
"Der Heimgekehrte",
Verlag Huber, Frauenfeld 1988,
p. 204)

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