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Between two worlds: books and literary figures among the Swiss abroad

By Charles Linsmayer

He made the landscapes of Europe truly shine until a Swiss one became a portent of his death – Hugo Marti

Perhaps the most wonderful and impressive of Hugo Marti's achievements, when he returned to reside in Switzerland more or less permanently, was portraying each of the landscapes that he had become familiar with as a young Swiss abroad not as a backdrop in his books but rather as an indispensable and central element that captivated people. He intimated as much himself in 1934 when he wrote: "My characters are always so embedded in their landscape, they sometimes seem part of it to me."

East Prussia, Rumania, Norway

Aside from the Basel region, which the journalist and author, who was born in Basel on 23 December 1893, orphaned at a young age and grew up in Berne, transformed into his earliest place of longing in the aftermath of a tragic experience of death in "Kirchlein zu den sieben Wundern" (1922), it was East Prussia that first captivated him. It fascinated him as a student in Königsberg in 1913/14 and he evoked it afresh in a melancholic and poetic way in 1922 in the novel "Das Haus am Haff", which is infused with a tragic love affair. Rumania, still seemingly in the Middle Ages, where he was the private tutor of a prince in 1915/16, was portrayed with vibrancy and realism in "Rumänisches Intermezzo" in 1926 and in a romantic, dreamlike way in 1928 in the novellas "Rumänische Mädchen".

He maintained lifelong memories of Norway, to where he fled in 1916 with the Rumanian prince's children entrusted to his care and from where, engaged to Elsa Lexow-Breck, the daughter of a pastor from Oslo, he finally returned to Berne in 1919 once the war was over. "The days are like a dream to me", he wrote in the "Haff und Heide" series produced in 1917. The poems connected East Prussia with Norway and were dedicated to his wife-to-be, who, enigmatically concealed, also featured in Marti's finest novel, "Ein Jah-

resring" in 1925. The central character is a 19-year-old woman who meets Rolf, an author, by chance in the rectory. Without realising it, she wields so much power over the young man so hopelessly in love with her that in order to forget her he hurriedly gets engaged to someone else and in a state of desperation at the end bemoans his fate in a snow-covered mountain hut. When a friend visits him there and asks the girl's name, he replies: "I cannot say. I have never said her name aloud."



Quotation

"This luscious plant, which God has allowed to grow on the small European cape of vain hope, will not survive unless the new cell formation succeeds in ensuring organic recovery on the smallest scale and healing of the soul. But we are not talking about a mass phenomenon or impenetrable dervish-like politics, but blessed sobriety. If two or three decent people come together and talk or remain silent in testimony of the truth, more is achieved towards Europe's salvation than with the proclamation of thousand-year empires and eternal orders."

From "Davoser Stundenbuch", 1935

BIBLIOGRAPHY: "Die Tage sind mir wie ein Traum", his narrative work, is the only title by Hugo Marti that is available. With a biographical epilogue by Charles Linsmayer, in Reprinted by Huber, Verlag Huber Frauenfeld 2004

The literary legacy

Marti's landscapes are associated not just with love but also with death. This is also the case in his last novel, which, for the first time, takes place in a Swiss landscape in which he was currently living. Marti suffered from pulmonary tuberculosis from 1929 onwards, and his "Davoser Stundenbuch" was written in 1934 during a stay at a health spa in Davos. Taking it upon himself to give testimony on behalf of the countless victims of the white plague, he attempted the impossible by trying to comprehensively convey the terror and suffering that patients experienced with humour, compassion and irony. But to those fighting the disease the Davos picture-postcard scenery now just seems like "an extraordinarily realistic backdrop", against which we perform like amateurish actors more preoccupied with ourselves than with the play we have to act out."

Even though he went on to produce a biography of the poet Rudolf von Tavel, who wrote in the Bernese dialect, in 1935, the "Davoser Stundenbuch" became Marti's legacy. The universally popular editor of the "Bund" and selfless promoter of young talent finally died of pulmonary tuberculosis in Davos on 20 April 1937 at the age of 44.

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