

Zeitschrift:	Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber:	Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band:	40 (2013)
Heft:	1
 Artikel:	From the narrow Val-de-Travers across the rivers and seas of Europe - Cilette Ofaire
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DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906632

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

By Charles Linsmayer

From the narrow Val-de-Travers across the rivers and seas of Europe – Cilette Ofaire

"I was a pale little girl brought up by a stepmother who did not enjoy having me, to say the least. If circumstances had allowed me to live according to my natural disposition, I would have spent my entire life squatting by a warm oven shivering and jumping out of my skin each time the sound of an opening door jolted me out of my day-dreams." But circumstances did not permit this stay-at-home existence. Cécile Houriet, who was born in Couvet on 13 January 1891 and graduated from commercial college before becoming a glass painter, fled Val-de-Travers forever in 1914 and married the artist Charles Hofer in Paris. However, he then volunteered to go to war and left her behind starving and freezing by the Seine. As secretary to the author Cuno Hofer, she travelled to Hungary in 1919 and discovered her talent as a diarist. After returning to Paris, she contracted tuberculosis and visited a sanatorium in Leysin, where she produced her first independent publication in 1922, the illustrated series "Joies des puéricons" about Parisian nightlife.

An artistic tour of Europe

Having regained reasonable health, she returned to her husband, who was now living in Hamburg and, together with him, happened upon an idea in 1923 that would define her life. They bought an old houseboat, christened it "San Luca" and sailed in it on rivers and canals to Prague, then on to Amsterdam in the summer and finally Paris, painting pictures all the while, which they sold on the quayside. When "Edition Stock" published her novel about these journeys in 1934, her name appeared above the title "Le San Luca" spelt as the Parisians pronounced it – Ofaire.

The couple had purchased a seaworthy steamboat in England in 1931 that they named "Ismé" and which Cilette

Ofaire – after Charles had run off and she had obtained her captain's licence by teaching herself – put to sea in May 1932. On one of its many adventures (usually without paying passengers!), the "Ismé", captained by Cilette Ofaire and manned in the engine room by an Italian called Ettore, sailed along the coast of Portugal and Spain into the Mediterranean, reaching Ibiza in 1936 where it fell victim to a bombardment during the Spanish Civil War.

A ship as a symbol of freedom

In Sanary-sur-Mer, where she sought refuge, Cilette Ofaire resurrected the ship and her experiences aboard it in the novel "L'Ismé" based on her comic-style illustrated expedition diary. The Lausanne-based "Guilde du Livre" initially published 4,000 copies of it in 1940. The royalty was 250 francs (6 Swiss cents) per copy!

Cilette Ofaire, who spent the rest of her life as a Swiss abroad, had further books published before she died on 11 December 1964 in her small home in Sanary-sur-Mer at the age of 73: the novel "Silvie Velsey" (1938) and the novellas "L'Étoile et le Poisson" (1949), "Un jour quelconque" (1956) and "Chemins" (1945), the poignant story of a disappointing visit to her home town of Couvet. Her most impressive work was nevertheless the seafaring novel "L'Ismé", which depicted the courage and undaunted spirit of a brave woman in a world dominated by men and, with its warm and compassionate humanity, was received by French people as the symbol of a better, freer world when it appeared in bookshops in occupied Paris in 1943.



Quotation

"Having a small boat, crossing the oceans aboard it and feeling like a free citizen of the world – that is not enough to make you wise. For that above all you need a heart capable of loving, a soul that can still feel wonder and a conscience that constantly and vigilantly reminds you that you are one person among many and have a connection with the universe."

(From "Nachruf auf Georg Dibbern", 1959)

CHARLES LINSMAYER is a literary scholar and journalist in Zurich

BIBLIOGRAPHY: The following titles are available in French from "Plaisir de Lire": "Silvie Velsey", "Un jour quelconque" and Catherine Dubuis' biography of Cilette Ofaire entitled "Les chemins partagés".