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

By Charles Linsmayer

He conquered the whole world with his poetry before ultimately returning to Sigriswil – Blaise Cendrars

A call to arms was made in Paris on 29 July 1914, five days before France entered the First World War. This began: "This is a grave moment (...) The time for words has passed, let us act! Foreigners, friends of France, for whom this country has become a second home, feel an imperative duty to serve it." This call was written by the Italian Canudo and the enfant terrible of the Parisian avant-garde, Switzerland's Blaise Cendrars, alias Freddy Sauter.

Globetrotter and heartthrob

Freddy Sauter, who was born on 1 September 1887 as a citizen of Sigriswil in La Chaux-de-Fonds, left home at the age of 16 and spent some time living in Persia, China and Russia, where he witnessed the 1905 revolution. When he began studying medicine in Berne in 1908, he was still suffering from the trauma of the mysterious death of his Russian fiancée Helena in a fire and in light of this experience it is little wonder that he soon switched his focus to literature. He still did not attend any lectures but he was by now completely obsessed with two female Polish students. He loved the blonde Féla and made the dark-haired Bella so jealous that she urged her friend to join her in a double-suicide pact. This time, however, he was able to avert tragedy and took Féla to Spiez where he spent an amorous summer living on credit and wrote his first love poems. By the time he called the foreigners to arms in 1914, he had spent a second spell in Russia, had visited the USA and, thanks to works such as "Les Paques à New York" and "Prose du Transsibérien" under the pseudonym Blaise Cendrars, he was regarded in Paris as the poet who, according to André Malraux, had "rediscovered poetry" for the French.

Fighting for France at the front

On 3 September 1914, he joined the army and two weeks later married Féla Poznanska, who by then already had a

son and would give him two other children. In October, he entered the foreign legion as a corporal and took part in the protracted trench warfare where hundreds of thousands bled to death for the sake of a few metres of land until he himself was so severely injured on 28 September 1915 that he had to have his right arm amputated. This released him from frontline duty, allowed him to return to his writing and provided the title for his 1946 novel "La Main coupée", a nightmarish account of trench warfare in 1914/15.

Full of vitality despite disability

Cendrars, who took French citizenship in 1916, continued to live his life despite his disability in a way that was inextricable from his 40-title literary oeuvre in terms of intensity, spirit of adventure and fullness until his death on 21 January 1961. He provoked a scandal in the USA in 1925 with "L'Or", the life story of General Suter, and in "Moravagine" in 1926 drew out the literary quintessence of the wars of his time. He gave much of his own perspective with his insatiable zest for life in "Bourlinguer" in 1948. "To the End of the World", which appeared in French in 1956, presented the character of Madame Thérèse – the myth of Paris in human form, the symbol of unfathomable human desires.

He had a platonic love for Raymonde Duchâteau lasting 32 years. When she became his second wife in 1949, the ceremony took place in Sigriswil, his place of origin, which wholeheartedly welcomed its famous son, causing him to exclaim: "I am very proud to suddenly be Bernese and an Oberländer, yes an Oberländer, I'm bowled over by that!"



Quotation:

"It is as though there were a forest behind me. I hear all the voices from the past. My life flounders in an impossible blind alley where misery threatens to overwhelm me. I hope I can endure it. I've become so used to it that I soon won't be able to do without it. It sounds terrible, another two or three years and I'll be addicted to misery. It will reach the point where I need it as a stimulant. What a subject!" (To Féla Poznanska, 10 August 1912)

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Cendrars' complete works are available in French from Denoël, and German translations can be obtained from Arche and Lenos.

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