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

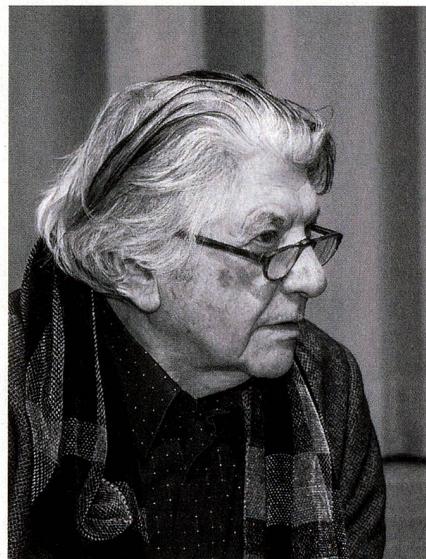
Rome and Barcelona brought out the writer in him, but Paris became his literary home – Paul Nizon

“Nothing, as far as I know,” is the answer to the question “What do you have to say?” in Paul Nizon’s first novel, “Canto”, written in 1961. “Nothing, no opinion, no agenda, no story, no fable, no theme. Only this passion for writing in my fingers.” Completed in 1962, the novel reflects a period spent in Rome in 1960 – an experience that awakened not only the writer in him, but also the “creature of instinct”, the eroticist, for whom the body of the city and the body of a woman combined to form a single, enthralling enigma.

Cities as places of experience

Nizon was born on 19 December 1929, the son of a Russian father and a Bernese mother. For him, cities have always been both vital places of experience and sources of inspiration. Berne, the city of his birth, appears in “Im Hause enden die Geschichten” (1971) as the place that offers a young man the first opportunity to escape a family home that feels like a prison. In Zurich he wrote not only “Canto” but also the thought-provoking “Diskurs in der Enge” of 1970: an essay that recognises a basic condition of the Swiss artist in “closeness and what it engenders: flight”. Barcelona, the setting for “Untertauchen” (1972), led, through an encounter with a dancer, to his final split with bourgeois existence and a life as a full-time writer: “disappearing in order to finally exist”.

“Stolz”, a novel about an artist who has lost himself, made Nizon a successful writer in 1975. But it also precipitated a life crisis from which he, unlike the eponymous main character, escaped not through death, but by fleeing to Paris, where he has lived ever



Quotation:

The reality I am talking about cannot be distilled or packaged once and for all and carried around in a bag, a box or a word. It happens. It wants to be lived out in a process of trying to understand it and, more than that, it needs to be fashioned, for example through the medium of language. That is why I write. The reality created by language is the only reality I know and acknowledge. It gives me a sense of being present and to some extent in harmony with what really happens in secret.

(“Die Belagerung der Welt. Romanjahre”, Suhrkamp-Verlag, Berlin 2013)

since and where he achieved the recognition as an author long denied him in the German-speaking world.

Writing in a boxroom

Working in his legendary boxroom and other writing studios, while coming to know the city as a very personal habitat and a backdrop for all manner of love affairs, he has produced not only the masterly Paris novels “Das Jahr der Liebe” (“My Year of Love”, 1981), “Im Bauch des Wals” (1989), “Hund. Beichte am Mittag” (1997) and “Das Fell der Forelle” (2005), but also over 1,500 pages so far of his “Journal”. This record of his life and work is a precise yet personal account of Nizon’s writing – writing which continues to refuse commitment and conveys experiences and memories in words so intensely, monomaniacally and unhesitatingly that he can state without exaggeration: “I crawl out of my books.”

Consistent to the last

Nizon, who has lived in Paris since 1977, whose name is included in the “Larousse” and whom “Le Monde” has described as “currently the greatest magician of the German language”, has always remained a Swiss citizen. “I would have become a Parisian,” he says, “if there were such a thing as Parisian citizenship”. At an age when most have retired, he still sits at his desk every day and continues his lifelong dialogue with himself and his memories. “Do you want to die at your writing desk?” Dieter Bachmann asked him in an interview in 2009. “Yes, absolutely,” he replied. “I hope soon to finish a book I’ve started, entitled “Der Nagel im Kopf”.

CHARLES LINSMAYER is a literary scholar and journalist in Zurich

BIBLIOGRAPHY: All the works mentioned here are available from Suhrkamp-Verlag, Frankfurt. Most recently published: “Die Belagerung der Welt. Romanjahre”.