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Her mind was still ablaze while she dreamt

Cécile Ines Loos lived in England, perhaps also in Poland, but her most astonishing trip abroad only took place in her imagination.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

"I am sending you my manuscript of 'Matka Boska' that perhaps contains my views on religion, lifestyle, love and wealth, etc." The letter sent by the secretary Cécile Ines Loos to the President of the Basel Chamber of Commerce in 1927 along with the novel indirectly alluded to how much hardship had preceded the book which would make her a famous author two years later. Born on 4 February 1883 as the child of a German organist and a mother from the upper echelons of Basel society, she was placed after the premature death of her mother with a foster family in Burgdorf, which handed her over to a pietistic orphanage in Berne. Coercive pedagogical methods were practised there which she would denounce in 1938 in her novel "Der Tod und das Püppchen". Trained as a kindergarten teacher, she first became a Swiss Abroad in 1906 as the governess for a Crown Court judge in England. Her fascinating experiences there would be interwoven into her second novel "Die Rätsel der Turandot" in 1931.

In 1909 all trace of her was lost. "I departed from the midst of so-called good fortune," she later revealed. "Matka Boska" suggests that she must have endured distressing circumstances in Poland until she was officially registered again in Milan in 1911 as the mother of her illegitimate son Leonardo. After a stay in Berne, where a pastor tried to steer her back towards a path of virtuousness and assaulted her, she disappeared again into unknown realms for years before resurfacing in Basel in 1921.

From chambermaid to author

She made ends meet as a chambermaid and a waitress, rose to the position of secretary and caused a furore with the publication of "Matka Boska". "I wrote and wrote like a mad thing to work my way out of my experiences," was her own account of her literary debut. After "Matka Boska" and "Turandot", her luck failed again. What she went on to write wrested her from a difficult destiny as a single mother on the verge of hunger and desperation. When her most suc-

cessful works, "Der Tod und das Püppchen" and "Hinter dem Mond", were published in 1938 and 1942, her gentle, imaginative prose met with little public response. Completely impoverished and reliant upon the support of the benevolent wives of professors, she died in Basel's public hospital on 21 January 1959. She had only gone abroad again on one other occasion, in 1952, when she used her savings for a cruise to Palestine.

Imagined Brazil

She nevertheless imagined rather than experienced her most wonderfully and convincingly described trip abroad. This was in her novel "Hinter dem Mond" in which she depicted the wife of a German pastor called Susanna who travels to Brazil where she has an unhappy marriage but gradually gets used to the foreign country over the course of 25 years. Susanna only manages to endure the hardships of the country and her husband's behaviour because she keeps the grazing animals of the Jura and her childhood friend Petitmoi in her mind's eye "behind the moon". Max Frisch alone believed that Cécile Ines Loos had never seen but only imagined Brazil when he said of her in 1942: "Her mind is still ablaze while she dreams."

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"I personally found education not just unfamiliar but also unappealing. Unfortunately, one always has to do what one least enjoys. The instinct for self-preservation did take hold of me one day, but this is more or less how it manifested itself: I went across the Earth and put a flower in the hand of everyone I met. It was a flower on a golden stem and signified joy. This had nothing to do with education. Education was simply a defensive position adopted by the strong against the weak." (From "Liebhabertheater", in "Verzauberte Welt", a reader, abridged edition 1985, out of print)

BIBLIOGRAPHY: None of Cécile Ines Loos' books are currently available but a new edition of "Matka Boska" will be published in autumn 2015 as volume 33 of "Reprinted by Huber".