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Truth and fiction on the French coast

Kurt Guggenheim fell out of love, but fell in love with France, during his stay in Le Havre from 1919 to 1920.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

“Zurich’s faces nauseated me,” wrote Kurt Guggenheim in his diary in September 1919 during his time in Le Havre. The 23-year-old trader had spent three listless and frustrating years at his father’s coffee-importing business – until his father arranged for him to do a stint at a coffee-roasting plant in Le Havre. “Entfesselung” was the title of Guggenheim’s 1934 debut novel – the story of a young man who breaks free from the conservative shackles of his home town. However, Guggenheim’s two years in Normandy take on a whole new significance in light of his 1964 work “Salz des Meeres, Salz der Tränen”, in which the same young man moves to France to overcome the pain of breaking up with Esther, the central character in Guggenheim’s earlier novel “Die frühen Jahre”. The salt of the sea – Salz des Meeres – is a metaphor for the stinging tears – Salz der Tränen – that the character sheds over his sweetheart. “I lived without love,” writes Guggenheim in the novel. “From 21 July 1918, the last date on the cover page of Esther’s diary, I was no longer able to love.”

French revelations

Yet life in Le Havre was a different matter altogether for the young Swiss. On the coattails of Louis Dupuis, his colleague at coffee roasters Rauber, Guggenheim got to know the sunny, easy-going attitude to life that young French men and women shared during the post-war years. He buried himself in French literature, “devouring books at random” – from Pascal and Maupassant to Zola and Proust. This left an indelible mark. Guggenheim, a Jew, also found his spiritual home in the French language, enabling him to diarise his most intimate feelings during the National Socialist era without having to resort to the German that had been hijacked by anti-Semites. The artists of the impressionist movement also fascinated him so much that his 1972 work “Minute des Lebens”, exploring the friendship between Cézanne and Zola, proved to be one of his most moving novels. As Guggenheim noted in 1980, “If I didn’t have the French language, my life would be half-empty.”

Romance over sublimation

But how did things turn out for Guggenheim in Le Havre? The lovesick young man in “Salz des Meeres, Salz der Trä-

nen” is unable to put losing Esther behind him. He falls even deeper into depression after learning of Esther’s marriage to his rival during a visit to Zurich.

However, Guggenheim’s unpublished diaries reveal that the story of a traumatised émigré who is incapable of love is a contrivance that lends the novel a special poignancy but has little to do with real life. Apart from Eva Hug, the girl on whom Esther’s character is based, Guggenheim also fell in love with the slightly older Angéline Savoy, who travelled from Zurich to Le Havre in November 1919 and lived with her admirer for two weeks in a hotel. Guggenheim would look back at that fortnight “with sweet melancholy”, calling them his “14-day marriage”. Angéline would spend an additional three months with him in 1920, until it all became too much for Guggenheim himself – the writer deciding in April 1920 that a “long period of ardent introspection” and a literary appraisal of his love for Eva Hug was the best course of action after all.

Those two years in Le Havre must have been a particularly intensive experience, considering that Guggenheim doubled the length of time by referring to “four years” in 1955. In any case, it was definitely a key period in his life, given that the novelist not only discovered France but was also able to build a wealth of material for his works, which he very consciously and elegantly moulded into a “reworking of selected memories”.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: All the aforementioned novels are available from the Kurt Guggenheim collection of selected works, published by Verlag Th. Gut, Zurich.

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“Without realising, I had very quickly begun to regard this country through the eyes of the impressionist painters. Experiencing the landscape of the River Seine and the port of Le Havre in a different way to a Sisley, a Pissarro or a Monet seemed unthinkable to me. Their literary contemporaries also influenced my view of many localities.”
(Quote from “Salz des Meeres, Salz der Tränen”, Kurt Guggenheim, selected works, volume 1, reprinted by Huber, no. 4, Frauenfeld, 1989)