

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 49 (2022)
Heft: 6

Artikel: He just wanted to be as Swiss as everyone else
Autor: Linsmayer, Charles
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051893>

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He just wanted to be as Swiss as everyone else

Jenő Marton's books were a declaration of love for a nation that never came around to embracing the Hungarian native as one of its own.

CHARLES LINSMAYER



Jenő Marton
(1905–1958)

“With their small brains and side-oriented eyes, male ants could not be relied on. Weak-willed, unfathomable and erratic as they were, their task was important. Because they had to produce offspring, they were fussed over and cherished, even though they always seemed to be in the way.” Although this reads a little like a feminist pamphlet, it is an extract from one of the most original novels ever produced in Switzerland. “Gunaria, das Reich der Ameisen. Sinn und Deutung der Gemeinschaft” (“Gunaria, the kingdom of the ants. Making sense of a community”) is set in an ant colony where community needs take precedence over the individual.

Circus, then reform school

The book's author, Jenő Marton, was born in Hamburg in 1905. Marton arrived in Switzerland as a Hungarian circus child in 1917 and was sent to the reformatory in Aarburg to be moulded into an obedient citizen after being thrown out of school in Zurich. He stayed at Aarburg until 1925 and recounted his experience there in the 1935 novel “Zelle 7 wieder frei” (“Cell number 7 is free again”). Marton spent his whole life wanting to be as Swiss as everyone else. And he was willing to put in an inordinate amount of effort to achieve this goal. He trained as a tailor in Aarburg, before working as an advertising advisor, a film director and then as the managing director of a cash register factory. Marton was also heavily involved in the Zurich Scout Movement, a commitment that inspired his literary works.

Original children's books

Marton followed up “Zelle 7 wieder frei” with a series of skilfully written

children's books, including “Die Dreihäuserkinder” (“The children from Dreihäuser”), 1935, the incredibly successful urban adventure story “Stop Heiri – da dure!” (“Stop, Heiri – this way!”), 1936, and the autobiographical “Jimmy, Jacky & Jonny, die Zirkusbuben” (“Jimmy, Jacky & Jonny, the circus boys”), 1941. The aforementioned “Gunaria”, which likewise appeared in 1941 (under the Büchergilde Gutenberg publishing label), also had a personal twist to it. However, “Gunaria” will ultimately be remembered as an exquisitely allegorical homage to democratic Switzerland – the country that finally made Marton a citizen in 1940, albeit without allowing the au-

“Cell number 7 is still free!” Wolf Georg was not even listening anymore. The word ‘cell’ was all he needed to understand. The cells were hidden behind these small lattice windows. Wolf Georg had never heard of lattice windows, because he had never come across them until now. Resistance was futile. He could see no way out. It was a cruel realisation. And it was humiliating for him – a companion's companion, a friend's friend, brother's brother and father's son – to be passed around like a piece of livestock. “Follow the head warden.” Wolf Georg followed the man out.

thor to change his name to the more Swiss-sounding “Georg Martin”.

Alpine masterpiece

But Marton's masterpiece came in 1943/44 with “Jürg Padrun”, a novel that won the Büchergilde award. “Jürg Padrun” is the high-water mark of 20th century Swiss-centric literature, written by an author whose desire to belong gave him the determination and stamina that others lacked. Jürg Padrun, an 18th-century forest ranger in the Engadine village of Avrona, sounds the alarm when he realises that the trees above the village are diseased. Braving prejudice from villagers, he fights to restore the forest. Padrun dies in the inevitable avalanche, but the forest saves the village. With its slightly archaic, rhapsodic tone, its remarkable fusion of Ladin and German verse and prose, and its tension-filled narrative, Jürg Padrun is a thrilling epic of unique charm. The academic rigour with which Marton describes the various practices and terms associated with Alpine life takes the edge off the occasional moment of pathos. He goes into further detail in an accompanying glossary, adding his own illustrations for good measure.

But even this most fervent declaration of love for Switzerland failed to engender the response that Marton hoped for. The author eventually gave up writing for good due to personal struggles and a lack of critical acclaim. By the time he died on 18 June 1958 at the age of 53, he was as good as forgotten.

Jenő Marton's antiquarian books are available at libraries.

CHARLES LINSMAYER IS A LITERARY SCHOLAR AND JOURNALIST BASED IN ZÜRICH