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“The depths of despair”

Basel-born Lore Berger, who died in 1943 at the age of 21, only wrote one novel. But this solitary work resonates deeply even today, particularly among women.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

On 13 August 2023, 20 German-speaking Swiss writers gathered at the water tower overlooking the Basel suburb of Bruderholz. Standing on the tower's upper platform, they took turns to read out excerpts from the novel of an author who jumped off the water tower and committed suicide before any of them were born.

Rewind 80 years. One of the entries submitted for the 1943 Büchergilde award was a manuscript called “Der barmherzige Hügel. Eine Geschichte gegen Thomas” (The merciful hill. A story against Thomas). The jury would have probably put the manuscript quietly to one side had they not been informed that the anonymous sender was Lore Berger, born in 1921. Berger, whose father was a high school teacher, had earned notoriety that year on 14 August after jumping to her death off the Bruderholz water tower. Although it was the type of book to make readers during wartime even more depressed, it was voted in fifth place by the jury and then printed in autumn 1944.

A novel secretly written on the back of court records

Lore Berger had studied German for three semesters and published a series of children's stories. But no one had an inkling that she had written a novel secretly on the back of court records while serving in the women's auxiliary service of the Swiss army at Territorial Court 2B between February 1942 and June 1943 – 250 pages centred on a failed romance that had practically driven her to anorexia. Her account of this and of life in Basel as a student during the early war years was as poetic and sarcastic as it was accomplished. Yet it is unlikely that Berger's unfaithful lover was the reason for her suicide. More likely

“One can write a book for different reasons. Out of vanity, out of poverty, or as a calling. I, for one, like to recite a phrase that I once read: the dancer dances, the artist creates, the musician plays. Because all three wish to be freed from tension. This is how they find their release. By communicating to others.”

(Excerpt from “Der barmherzige Hügel”, Lore Berger, Th. Gut Verlag, Zurich 2018)

she felt shackled as a young woman – by society in general, a lack of understanding from her parents, an agonising sense of loneliness, and a lack of equality.

Esther, her alter ego in the novel, experiences the “depths of despair” after being jilted by boyfriend Thomas. Herein we see the symbolism of the water tower and the “merciful hill” overlooking Bruderholz on which it stands – from which Berger found release from her shackles.

Until the end of the story, the tower remains the focal point of an unrequited love that can only be reciprocated in Esther's dreams and fantasies. Indeed, the book's strength ultimately lies in the poetic way in which it juxtaposes a love story with the real-life contours of Bruderholz, starting as early as the preface (and continuing to the end): “People cry like others would do, grieving the loss of their happiness. But ignore that. Gaze instead at a field of barley as it ripples and sways in the breeze. Let it soothe your tired, ailing, tear-soaked eyes. Realise that this wide expanse is a home for you, offering a kindness and compassion of which you have heard all your life and in which you never believed.”

This year's literary vigil at the Bruderholz water tower reaffirmed how Lore Berger's only novel has stood the test of time and how her cry for help still reverberates generations later.

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CHARLES LINSMAYER IS A LITERARY SCHOLAR AND JOURNALIST BASED IN ZÜRICH



Lore Berger
(1921 – 1943)