

Remarque Looks Back To The Writing Of "All Quiet"

Sometimes the name of a stranger lingers in the back of the mind for years and you are not quite sure why. That happened to me, after reading that disquieting first world war classic "All Quiet on the Western Front."

HERE IS A REAL WRITER I thought: tough, yet with a rare understanding of others.

So, when, an Italian friend said, "Erich Maria Remarque is in Rome for a fleeting visit to see Mondadori, his publishers" it seemed a fine moment to secure an interview and talk with him about this book of his, if possible. And it was.

He does not disappoint, or shatter youthful illusions. He is tall, erect in the Prussian fashion, ready to suggest he has all the time in the world to devote to intruders; he speaks English fluently if, occasionally, with a slant of his own.

Those who remember "All Quiet on the Western Front" will agree that Erich Maria Remarque endured much after being flung into the turmoil of conflict at the age of 18. Today, decades later, he is able to glance back and survey his lost youth with the air of a gentle cynic accustomed to the task of suppressing emotions, and recollections of events that darkened his early years.

Settling into the comfort of an enormous armchair and observing in offhand manner the luxury of his hotel sitting room, overlooking Rome's elegant Via Veneto, he said: "All Quiet" was finished swiftly, within four weeks.

"From the heart, not the head. With no thought of success or otherwise. It was very personal. For it describes the loss of a generation,

the importance of comradeship.

"I approached publisher after publisher, in Berlin. I was unknown and nobody wanted my manuscript. All said people were tired of war, wanted to forget it.

"Finally, it was accepted and it catapulted into an astonishing success. Soon a million copies were sold within Germany. Three months later it came out in England, in English.

"The Nazis were frankly stunned by all this. That I, a Catholic of an old Catholic family could be so boldly outspoken against war and its horrors was beyond them. And this just when they were trying desperately to persuade German lads to like it. They searched and searched records, trying to find a drop of Jewish blood in my veins. But failed.

"It became an obsession with them. So they deprived me of my German citizenship. It is very strange, a little heart-breaking to lose one's citizenship in peacetime. And for us Germans it is the ultimate insult. Now, I don't give it a moment's thought until I talk about it. Then it tends to disturb one a little again.

"But," he added slowly and sadly, "the Nazis had the last word. My anti-Nazi campaign killed my sister. After I left, was expelled, they arrested and condemned her to death after a sort of trial. Be-

cause she had always been my staunch supporter though no public figure, ever. This in 1938, when 'All Quiet' was selling well, under cover of course.

"One can't hold a country responsible for such acts and I don't. But I hear those in charge of my sister's trial have high positions nowadays with pensions. This is one of the things I don't understand very well.

"Yet," he added, "the wheels keep turning, in life. I received recently an offer from Bonn saying my citizenship would be restored, for they wanted to make me a 'Minister of Culture' because I was a literary man known in other countries.

"But I replied no, thank you, I am now an American citizen, the Americans asked to have me. I am delighted to be so, and I have my home in Switzerland, apart from a flat in New York."

Eleven books by Remarque have appeared in German, and in translation, since he wrote "All Quiet on the Western Front," and of these he says:

"I believe those who, like me, have seen their first effort a best seller are faced with a tricky problem to solve. Will the public, the critics be benevolent towards the next? But you have to count on criticism if your first has sold well.

"After much thought, I decided I would not be persecuted, shadowed, by 'All Quiet' my life long. I would not be overconcerned about it, but forget it.

"Success can be a torment, make one unbalanced, one must be independent of it. That is my firm belief.

"Now," he continued, "I take my time with my manuscripts. German is a language that doesn't flow. It has to be polished and repolished. It is a little pompous.

"Writing, too, can make you into a strange unsocial being. Some authors have to be left in a desert, or put into a monastery, that sort of thing, before they can even think of producing a book. Others can compose in cafes. I belong to the cafe contingent.

"At the rather lovely home my wife, Paulette Goddard, and I own on the edge of a Swiss lake I don't have a study, a room to myself. I can educate myself into a state of concentration anywhere, on our terrace, in our lounge with others chattering. In fact, I rather like it.

"It's curious," he adds, "but I hear the words in my head before they come out on the typewriter. I write with my ears. If I plug them there is no inspiration, just a blank. It is how a dramatic writer, a specialist in dialogue, generally proceeds."

Erich Maria Remarque has written three books on refugees: and touching them he tells you "Nobody, however much he's suffered, has the right to be steeped in bitterness; you should never look back at the past too much, it is unhealthy. You should fight for the future. That's why I've been preoccupied so with the plight of refugees.

"My work called 'Flotsam' was composed aiming at getting more European refugees into the United States. It was written, of course, in German with my repolishing method.

"But for years it appeared only in translations; for it was published during a period when all my works were banned in Germany.

"Today I seem to have good sales in Communist-controlled countries, and the Russian 'All Quiet' had an amazing, to me, boom in Moscow throughout 1963. Yet I never seem

From
MARGARET GILRUTH
in Rome

to get any royalties from the Communists."

How many languages, then, are the Remarque books translated into? His answer: "Twenty-seven, but most I don't have. I prefer collecting antique furniture, it gives me more satisfaction."

Now for a hint on writing from this veteran who seems to know no sunset, whose first effort is appearing in fresh editions; this January it came out yet again in Penguins, last year in the Italian cheap paperbacks.

"As any professional will tell you, the beginning is of prime importance. Get it behind you to your satisfaction; and you are on your way."

For the record, his own opening words for "All Quiet on the Western Front" are: "We are at rest five miles behind the front. Yesterday we were relieved, and now at last our bellies are full of beef and haricot beans. We have not had such luck as this for a long time . . ."

But his preface is, perhaps, more explanatory for those without the book on their shelves: "This is neither an accusation nor a confession, least of all an adventure story, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. It tries, very simply, to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by war."



Erich Maria Remarque.