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Germany's Novelist of the Great War: Erich Maria Remarque

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Erich Maria Remarque

By William Leon Smyser

We were feeling our way through the stream of cars which at that point partially blocked the road from Potsdam. Erich Maria Remarque, slouching back easily behind the great black wheel of his Lancia, manoeuvred the car with a left hand that seemed hardly to touch the bar on which it rested. I remembered that in the course of his many professions since the War he had once been a racing driver.

We were not speaking of his book that one subject on which his friends have agreed never to annoy him, but about the gigantic »whispering campaign« of lies and slander which the foes of *All Quiet on the Western Front* had redoubled in intensity as soon as it became evident that the book might win the Nobel Peace Prize.

»The story about my having changed my name is the stupidest,« said Remarque. »People have tried to saddle me with the very ordinary name ›Paul Kramer,‹ and to prove that for a pseudonym I have taken it and spelled it backward. My family has been called Remarque, or Remark, ever since it settled in Westphalia after Louis XIV's wars in the Lowlands. Up until then – 200 years ago – the family had lived in Northern France. That's why the more rabid Nationalists have insisted that I am a Frenchman. They are as ridiculous as the others who say I'm a Jew.

»What they would like so much to prove,« he said, »is that I was never at the front at all. They have found men to swear that I am a little old chap of sixty-five who was over fifty when the War broke out, and just the other day a critic in one of the reactionary papers said that he had taken his school examinations with me some years ago and that I couldn't be more than twenty-two to-day. Those who admit that I was a soldier said that I was only a *Train Soldat*, and I did all my service in camps way behind the lines.«

Imperceptibly the speedometer had advanced to over a mile a minute. Abruptly, over a dip in the road, we came upon a wagon standing by the kerb, and simultaneously, just beyond, an automobile in the line from Berlin turned out of file and came over into our side of the roadway. It was all too quick for anyone else to do a thing. Remarque, hardly stirring in his seat, steered between the light wooden cart and the oncoming car without even scratching their paint. Had the Lancia's beam been 1 in wider we should have landed in the ditch.

»I am not interested in politics,« continued Remarque as if nothing had happened. »A man can be on the ›Right‹ in his politics or he can be on the ›Left,‹ but the truth is always the

truth. I am a writer, impartial, no party. My only interest in this world is life, the fullest, finest, happiest living. War, as I saw it, was the negation of life ... On the other hand, I am no idealist. If Westphalia were invaded to-morrow the next day would find me with the colours. I am pacific, but no pacifist.«

The numbers on the speedometer dial went only as far as 130. No the needle stood at 70. Remarque had stopped taling.

»This is really good, isn't it?« he said quickly.

To this man speed is no mere safety-valve for pent-up emotions, but instead an end in itself, a pleasure which life in the twentieth century affords. As we slowed down to turn off the road I remembered what he once had said about his driving. Someone had been praising his book....

»They might as well have been telling me I had pretty teeth of eyes,« he had snorted. »People should compliment ladies and leave men alone. I wrote this book because I had to. It was easy.

»We should be proud only of the things we do when we are not naturally prepared for them. A weak man who carries an injured person to safety; a caved-in fellow who develops into an athlete – they have something to be proud of. That's why I'm proud to be able to drive a car. I had a smashed knee, a stiff forearm, and a hand half paralysed. When I was taken on by an automobile company to test out cars it was the proudest day of my life.

»I am happiest when I can win the confidence of someone who had not shown confidence in the rest of the world. If we were to pass a yard with a nasty dog, a *bosen hund* which had been snapping at everybody who came along, and who growled even at the people who fed him, and got him to wag his tail at me and to lick my hand, that would be a real victory. It would be getting a little more out of life, and getting more out of life is the only reason for living.«

Half sportsman, half poet, Remarque is a very different person from most of the men about him, yet his life story is typical of almost any young German of his age.

When the boy was not at school or in the country he was allowed to follow his one interest, music. He had no teacher, but he soon discovered for himself for simpler compositions of Bach and Brahms, and from the start worked from four to six hours daily upon the very best masters. By the time hi was seventeen he had been working for more than a decade at the piano. He was able to play whatever he chose. His ambition was to become a pianist. Then came the War; within a year his hand was so maimed that he could never again touch the instrument.

For Erich Maria Remarque the War was entirely negative, nullifying every dream which he had ever cherished. His mother died. His greatest friend, an »elderly man of thirty-five,« gave in to consumption. His childhood sweetheart starved to death. When he was wounded and lay in the hospital with his hands half paralysed and his leg in a brace which was not removed for months, he was told that he might »go home.« But all that this word had once meant existed no longer. He begged to go back to his only remaining friends, hi comrades of the front. Here he saw out the War. He saw them die. With the Armistice he faced a world empty of hope ...

He got a job as teacher in a country school not far from his old home in the *Haide* of Friesland. Here everything would seem to have been ideal for the rehabilitation of war-shattered nerves. But it was all too quiet. He went away.

For a time Remarque took up the nomadic life. He peddled things from door to door for a merchant. He joined a gipsy troupe and lived a care-free, hand-to-mouth existence. It was a life which accorded well with the restless disposition of the young man. His hand grew better and he was able to play the organ.

Gradually he drifted back towards towns and men. He took to studying motor-cars, and qualified as a racing driver. He entered the Scherl publishing houses, and writing became the thing he finally hit upon.

The man lived every minute of his life, not once, but a hundred times. It is no wonder that with the War behind him he should have been obsessed with it, crucified by it, until in an agony of energy he should have poured forth the whole story of his immortal book.

The book was written to rid him of haunting, subconscious, unformed fears which obtruded themselves at every moment into his waking hours and his sleep. Work as he might at teaching or peddling or tramping or reporting, he could not rid himself of strange loneliness and dreadings. He sought companionship. He married. But the nameless fears remained.

It was then that in a certain sense he psycho-analysed himself. He opened up the hidden valves of memory and poured out what he had tried in vain to conceal.

»I wrote every night for weeks. He who writes himself down writes quickly, and this was something I was taking out of myself for myself ... to save myself. I hardly altered a line. I wrote it down to be through with the War for ever.«

It is one of the profound ironies of Remarque's life that his book, once written and published as a sort of Aristotelian catharsis which was to bring its author peace and relief from an obsession, has haunted him ever since.

»When a business man has made a good deal he doesn't talk about it the rest of his life. He goes out and does another stroke of business. I believe that writers should be like ordinary men.«

Remarque is asking himself the same question which most of his critics have posed: Will he be able to write a second book as powerful as his first? The answer is to be found in Remarque's own resourcefulness. He has lived life to the full and has observed it steadily. He is not losing his head in the success of his first effort, but realises that it will be harder now to write that it was before.

His salvation lies in the fact that he is not in any sense a »literary« man. His writings have always been about what he has felt or observed at first hand ... what he has lived. He believes that young men can write only about themselves. This he will only do quite simply. Words and style are probably important, but they cannot take the place of life. Life is the basis of all.