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A Talk With Remarque
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Paris.

»Is a man's first war like his first love – unforgettable?«

Erich Maria Remarque, author of the First World War's classic »All Quiet on the Western Front,« who was pausing at the Ritz with Paulette Goddard, his wife, paused for the answer. Almost all of his eight subsequent novels, after all, return to that war. And he himself returns to Germany from his villa on Lake Maggiore, like a tongue exploring the cavity of a missing tooth.

»No ... Yes, I see what you mean,« he said, »though it's a ghastly comparison. A man's first war is a shattering thing. Love is his first experience of being taken out of his egotism, even to sacrifice himself for someone ... But there is something to your question.

»Because war is where everything taught to you, everything you respect by instinct, is destroyed. You are taught not to kill. You kill and you get decorated for it. For me it was an experience I could never lose. The fact that you had to kill people you had never seen for a reason you don't understand, because you are told to do it and told why to do it and can be made to believe it.

»My extreme respect for life, even the fly (my wife laughs at me for it) but ... « he smacked the table flatly ... »there! You've destroyed a life.« And Remarque avowed embarrassedly that cutting flowers or even stepping on a stone (»petrified ecstasy«) was exaggeratedly painful for him.

Having explored this reverence of life to what he himself sensed was a poetic *reductio ad absurdum*, Remarque returned, with some relief, to the reality of Germany, where he had just spent six weeks. But even here he reminisced – about the Nazi reaction to »All Quiet,« published in 1929, and their attempt to find a Jewish ancestor for him (»unfortunately, there were none«); about the incredulity of a Berliner, such as himself, that a clown like Hitler could become the fuhrer of civilized Germany.

But he finally saw it for himself early in 1933, before the Nazis came to power on a drive south to the Riviera via his Swiss villa, which he had bought in 1931. Thinking his Lancia was an official car, all through Germany they gave him the Nazi salute and cried, »Heil Hitler.« So, as soon as he reached Switzerland, he phoned his (first) wife: »»We must leave«, I told her. »Take the next train.« And she did.«

And Germany now? »The old people haven't changed much and the young people have been kept in ignorance. Those who want to forget the ugly past benefit those who have something ugly to hide. Culturally, the Germans have fallen back into provincialism.«

»The reporters asked me, »What do you think of Munich, our wonderful city?«« broke in Paulette Goddard, who had just joined us. »»To be honest,« I said, »it's provincial.« It is! And we should be honest with them.«

»They need a city like pre-war Berlin,« Remarque continued, »that creation of the Jews. You know, Wilhelm II protected the 600,000 Jews of Berlin, because they were a guarantee of cosmopolitanism. And now,« he brooded, »they are underground.«

Remarque was officially deprived of his citizenship in 1935 and it still rankles him that the new Bonn government has never canceled that old Nazi degree, simply as a gesture, since he's quite happy with his American passport.

»They really don't like to see us,« he said. »We're an unpleasant reminder. There's even the irony that they think of us as »deserters« – we who were forced to flee! »While we were suffering during the war,« they say, »you were sitting and drinking in nightclubs in America.« And who was guilty of that war?«

On this we all three sat brooding and soon fell to discussing the play currently popular in Berlin, dealing with the Pope refusing to help the Jews in Germany during the war.

»If the Pope himself was guilty,« said Remarque, »how, they say, can you blame the little German?«

»For the Germans,« said his remarkable wife, »God is guilty.«