

Early years at the Swiss frontier : woman strengthened by adversity

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Woman strengthened by adversity

The people of Schleithem are as tough as old leather and as single-minded as the bull which appears on their banner, so the saying goes. Novelist Brigitte Schoch is one of them. She spent her early years in 1944 and 1945 right on the Swiss-German border. Her father, Gustav Schoch, a well-known local councillor, was killed during the American air raid on Schaffhausen on April 1, 1944.

Only 500 metres separate the Talmühle (meaning the mill in the valley) – the romantic spot where much of her childhood was spent – from the border gate which opened in April 1945 to let through 5,000 refugees. And

Alice Baumann

50 years now lie between the Schaffhausen writer, Brigitte Schoch, and the time when she, together with her grandparents, aunt, mother and two sisters, were in Schleithem awaiting Germany's surrender.

The author, who appears in her own novels as a fifteen-year old girl, was in fact only ten and a half at the time. She writes of the problems that the war and later the occupation brought in their wake. She describes how she once helped a British pilot to get away. He spent a few days as a guest in their home, and she fell in love with him. She tells of her sorrow when she saw the bombs falling on the neighbouring villages of Stühlingen and Fützen – before the outbreak of war there were often cross-border marriages. She reports on the everyday things which a young girl of those days would have been busy with.

Adventures told in the form of a diary alternate with evocative descriptions of nature in the Randen hills and the valley of the Wutach. Both these books are a mixture of truth and fantasy, but the historical dates and facts are absolutely correct right down to the weather. The author spent many hours poring over the articles and advertisements in the local newspaper, "Der Schleithemer Bote", for the years 1944 and 1945. She also has – and this is obvious when you talk to her – an astoundingly good memory. "I am always thinking of the periods of the war and after the war", she says by



Brigitte Schoch, the well-known author. (Photo: Max Baumann)

way of explanation for her depth of knowledge and strength of feeling. "There were shock events like the death of my father, and also moments of fear like when we thought the Germans were coming across the border – at one point their tanks were actually rolling towards us – and later the warnings about the refugees whom we were told might overrun us. These memories are never far from my mind".

Filling the gap

And what was it like being a young girl at that time? "The women had to put their shoulders to the wheel. And like our mother we children had to take over the work of the men and labour valiantly in the stables, the fields and the vineyards. Each of the children was given a job, which made us feel important. We dealt with the corn, the potatoes, the pigs, the hens and the wood, so we did not go hungry".

But some good did come out of the generally grim picture. Says Brigitte Schoch: "Their independence and the self-confidence which went with it

brought women nearer to equality and the right to vote. And as to the young people: well, there were no hard drugs then, and even if there had been not many would have been interested".

A father lost

Brigitte Schoch's home life was shattered when on April 1, 1944, bombs fell around the Schaffhausen council buildings and railway station. Her 43-year old father was one of 40 people who lost their lives. Her whole outlook on life changed abruptly. "I could not take in what had happened. I imagined he would come back one day – perhaps for the following Christmas. My diary entries began with 'Dear Papa'. It was then that I began to take refuge in my phantasy world, which is reflected in my books". Her close relationship with nature also stems from this period. For two whole years an oak tree was a source of comfort to her.

For many years this attractive fair-haired woman sought a partner whom she could love as much as she had her father. She found him in the person of a British author and historian with whom she has had a relationship for 22 years. She helped to save the English airman when she was ten, and when she was 40 her love was won by another Englishman 15 years younger than herself. Fate sometimes works in wondrous ways. But back to our pleasant conversation in the secluded garden of the Talmühle.

"Fifty years have gone by since then". Brigitte Schoch was thinking aloud. "A memorial plaque and a large block of stone from the Black Forest hills are the only reminders of those days which I lived through here as a schoolgirl. I would love so much to know what happened to the 5,000 refugees our village looked after at that time. At the Talmühle we never heard from them again . . ."

"Reiher am Himmel – Flüchtling im Tal" (A Heron in the Sky – A Refugee in the Valley), 1981, Sfr. 35.– + postage, and "Eisvogel am Fluss – Soldaten im Land" (A Kingfisher on the River – Soldiers in the Countryside), 1994, Sfr. 39.80 + postage. Both were published by Verlag Peter Meili, now Impressum AG, Schaffhausen, and may be ordered from the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad, P.O. Box, CH-3000 Berne 16.