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Autor: Linsmayer, Charles
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His friends called him “Devil of the sea”

The novels of lawyer Heinrich Herm injected an expansive sense of adventure into the otherwise patriotism-fuelled literature of pre-war Switzerland.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

The French son of a shipowner falls head over heels for German literature and music before marrying a German girl. At the outbreak of the First World War, the young man looks on in horror as the cathedrals that symbolise Christian European culture are destroyed by the mutual hatred that has torn the continent asunder. Aiming to rescue France and save Germany from the hubris of the Prussian aristocracy, he volunteers to fight in the French trenches. After the war, however, our hero – now a shipowner himself – uses his *métier* to promote international reconciliation.

Seafarer, adventurer and rebel

This is the story of “Dome im Feuer” (Cathedrals on fire), a novel published by the Berlin publisher Grote in 1926 – and written in a style suggesting that the author originally grew up speaking French. The writer called himself Heinrich Herm and, according to the book sleeve, lived in Switzerland. After this inaugural publication came seven more novels, set in every imaginable location except Switzerland.

“Dämon Meer” (The demon sea), 1927, and “Moirä”, 1932, are exciting seafaring stories. “Begegnung im Urwald” (Jungle encounter), 1934, takes the reader to a world far from civilisation, and “Die Trikolore” (The tricolore), 1937, a century and a half back to the French Revolution. The open seas make a comeback in “Die Dämonen des Djemaa el Fnaa” (The demons of Jemaa el-Fnaa), 1943, and “Kapitän Hagedorn’s Fahrt ins Licht” (Captain Hagedorn’s journey into the light), 1944. Whodunnit “Die Mitgift” (The Dowry), 1941, juxtaposes the author’s passion for seafaring with the criminologically adroit portrayal of a court case. This work is a relative outlier, but no coincidence: “Heinrich Herm” was the pseudonym for a university professor who taught Roman law and the history of law – something only insiders knew.

The professor who liked to travel

Heinrich Herm was none other than Henri Legras in real life. Born in 1882 in the French city of Rouen, Legras studied in Rennes, Caen and Paris before taking up the post of professor at the University of Fribourg in 1912. He married German national Gertrud Schlesinger and became a citizen of Portalban on the shores of Lake Neuchâtel.

Like the protagonist in his first novel, Legras loved German culture. He began writing in German, targeting a German-speaking audience. Legras would actually have become a sailor had a physical impediment not prevented him from doing so. However, he made the most of his protracted semester breaks by travelling as a passenger on the high seas instead. His first major voyage took him to Chile. Legras indulged his wanderlust so consistently thereafter that his companions nicknamed him “The devil of the sea”. These travels were to find eloquent expression in Legras’ novels. Their portrayals of the sea and seafaring are particularly impressive, while their white-knuckle narratives mirror the many journeys that the author experienced travelling alone on small cargo vessels.

Loss of German readership

Legras’ works had attracted an enthusiastic following in Germany by the mid-1930s. Following Hitler’s seizure of power, however, he lost both his prominent Berlin publisher and his readership. With him being married to a Jew, we can only guess how much Nazi Germany’s anti-Semitic and racist laws contributed to him forfeiting the support of his German publisher. By the time Henri Legras-Herm died on 1 November 1948 in Fribourg aged 66, he had already been largely forgotten as an author. He even failed to find a publisher for his final book “Als die Normandie noch ein Museum war” (When Normandy was still a museum), despite regarding this work as his literary legacy.

CHARLES LINSMAYER IS A LITERARY SCHOLAR AND JOURNALIST IN ZÜRICH



“Outside, a tall crane’s electric searchlights quivered to and fro in constant rhythm. An iron-ore steamer was loaded. As the dark cloak of the night gradually dissipated into grey ash, a black flue slowly glided past behind the bare trees. Pushed down to the water line, like a soul weighed down by worldly feats, the ship sailed through the canal guarding the harbour exit before heading out into the storms of the Nordic seas. Despite its weight amid the winter storm, it refused to sink.”
(Excerpt from “Die Mitgift” (The Dowry), Francke-Verlag, Berne, 1941; out of print)