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By Omer Anderson

Bonn

The trouble with being Erich Maria Remarque is that you have no place to go home.

Remarque, now 70, says, »I'm in a curious position. Most writers at some time or another want to go back to their roots. To revisit, actually or in their imagination, their home towns. But if I want to go back, it just isn't there. Obliterated. Bombed out.«

So Remarques divides his time between a small apartment high above New York's 57th Street and an elegant villa on Lake Maggiore, in Switzerland.

In West Germany, Remarque is regarded as half living literary Titan and half wispy legend. But he looms as a lonely figure to most Germans – certainly to the younger generation – far out of focus with the current realities of German life.

On a swing through his homeland several years ago, Remarque found all unquiet in West Germany. He professed to be frightened at what he saw – a landscape crawling with Hitlerites. But time has tempered Remarque's assessment of the »New Germany.« He said in a recent interview at his Lake Maggiore-villa: »You ask whether I believe everything will go well this time in Germany. If I didn't believe so – and perhaps the wish is the father of the thought – it would mean that I didn't feel myself to be a German, but an American.

»But in America I am always known as a German writer. I may have little in common with the Germany of today, but I am a German, and my concern with Germany – new or old – is that of a German.«

Remarques was asked whether he had any plans to return to Germany to live. »Return?« Remarque asked, lifting his eyes to gaze reflectively on the lake. »I have been away too long, and I am holding onto the house (his villa) in Ronco. Paulette (his wife, Paulette Goddard) would like very much to make a trip on the Rhine. But she knows that I am not very well.«

Remarque has had two heart attacks in recent years, and he worries now about his health. His ambivalent attitude toward his homeland identifies him with the postwar generation of German intellectuals few of whom feel well in West Germany.

While Remarque is remote from the realities of contemporary German life, he is symbolical of the reluctance of present-day German writers and even composers to identify themselves with the Federal Republic.

Remarque begs off returning to the Federal Republic to live on the grounds of age and illness. But leading literati of postwar Germany such as Rolf Hochhuth (who lives in Basle) and Peter Weiss (who lives in Sweden) shun residence in West Germany. Guenter Grass lives in

Berlin and regards himself as living in a world entirely apart from the Federal Republic. West Germany's most famous contemporary composer, Hans Werner Henze, lives in Rome.

Writers like Uwe Johnson who reside in the Federal Republic, nevertheless, reject any meaningful identification with the life here. Remarque is a reminder of the Bonn republic's singular failure to win the loyalty, or even the tolerance, of intellectuals.

Remarque is rejected by the materialistic-minded Bonn burghers as a symbol of traumatic era the sooner forgotten the better. But their intense preoccupation with materialism is repugnant to the intellectuals. In this sense, Remarque is a symbol of the present as well as the past. Germany's literati, today as yesterday, find very little to admire in the Fatherland.

Remarque's remarks about his travels between two continents are revealing in this respect. »I now think of New York as my home. It's an unbelievable city. There's virtually everything. I am very happy to have become an American,« he said.

»I have met exceedingly cultivated people in America. Americans have an innate sense of freedom, whether they realize it or not. They act toward each other that way. It is so easy to mix with others. This freedom is something that is very hard for a European who has not observed it to conceive of.«

Remarque was stripped of his German citizenship early in the Nazi era and expelled from the country. His books were burned, and he became a prime target for Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Paul Goebbels.

He bought his Lake Maggiore villa – Casa Monte Tabor – in 1931.

Remarque remembers today that the villa represents about all that remains from prewar royalties from »All Quiet on the Western Front«. He had to leave the rest of his money behind when he was expelled.

At the villa, near the village of Ronco, he shows visitors a verse from Goethe, penned in Goethe's own neat script:

»Wer auf die Welt kommt, baut ein neues Haus, / Er geht und lasst es einem zweyten, / Der wird es anders zubereiten, / Und niemand baut es aus.«

»For a refugee, that is a good saying,« Remarque observed. » I am also a ›refugee.««

Even today Remarque still regards himself as a refugee. Although he calls New York City »home«, and he has his villa on Lake Maggiore, Remarque restlessly seeks to recapture a life which no longer exists.

The great irony, as he himself probably appreciates, is that he shares this fate with some 10 million Germans – driven not out of Germany by the Nazis, but from German areas overrun by the Red Army during the war. These Germans, although they live comfortably in the Federal Republic, are, nevertheless, as reluctant to accept West Germany as their home as is Remarque.

After leaving Hitler's Germany Remarque wandered for ten years before becoming an American citizen. Part of the time he was stateless, part of the time a Panamanian, and part of the time a Mexican.

It is hard for Remarque, even today, to speak of Germany without bitterness. He observed only recently, »Anybody coming out of Germany always brings the worst conceivable opinions about me.

»In any other country of the world they think more kindly about me. In America, for example, people react to me: ›He is a successful man. Therefore, he must have qualities.‹ But in Germany they say: ›He is successful. Therefore, he can't have much real ability.‹«

The story of Erich Maria Remarque and Germany – Old and New – is an anthology of irony. The most arresting of the many facets of this irony is the fact that Remarque, far from being rejected in Germany as totally as he imagines, is entirely in tune with the contemporary German mood toward war, if not materialism (although nobody would accuse Remarque, famous for his fastidious living, of having rejected materialism).

Even today, Remarque recalls with wonderment the success of »All Quiet.« »I still can't comprehend it,« he says. »I never deserved *such* success. This sounds like false modesty, but it is the simple truth. I finished that book in four weeks. Everything that I have written took years.«

»All Quiet« virtually wrote itself – but it took some selling to get published. Legend has it that Remarque tramped to as many as 49 different publishers before getting it accepted. But he says today that this is not true. Remarque remembers. »It is true that Samuel Fischer, at that time the leading German publisher, rejected the book. He said the public was sick of war and wouldn't read anything more about it.

»But the second publisher – Ullstein – accepted the manuscript.«

Eighteen months after publication the book had sold 3.5 million copies. Even today, the book still sells well, and has been translated into every global tongue, including Zulu and Es-kimo. Over the years, the royalties have rolled in from one book after another, but Remarque's reputation (he feels) has become somewhat tarnished.

»I am not to blame for the fact that my later books have become best-sellers. I have done everything to discourage this. Consider the themes I have picked: the war, concentrations camps, the misery of refugees and so on – hardly ›best-seller‹ themes.«

Remarque resents accusations, too, that he ducked out on the last war. He says defensively, »I'm accused of having done nothing in the last war, and having whiled away the war in New York nightclubs. This is very unjust.

»Life is not easy when you have no one standing behind you. I have tried to make the best of it. Others in my situation have not been able to stand it. For example, Stefan Zweig (now living in East Germany. He did something very dangerous – he wrote his autobiography.«

Remarque is working now on another novel. He has completed 500 pages, writing with a sharp pencil and eraser, which he uses often and fastidiously. Remarque rejects a typewriter, claiming it influences a writer to verbosity. But he is dead opposed to writing an autobiography or his memoirs.

For Remarque has no intention of destroying the legend of Remarque. Much better the way it is, with his public titillated, for example, to know whether Remarque regards himself as belonging to one of the »ten men most worth loving« (as Marlene Dietrich one sighed.)

Despite his hatred of war and Nazism, Remarque is anything but violent in temperament. Markedly reflective, he also has a fastidious enthusiasm for food and drink and wit, for the small and fast Italian sport cars, and for American women and comic strips.

Among his favorite works in modern American writing are the early books of Thornton Wilder and Ernest Hemingway. One of his preferences among modern Europeans is André Malraux. Remarque's philosophical interest has carried him far outside Western philosophy into such areas as Zen Buddhism.

Remarque does writing at a huge 17th Century desk from Florence. From his desk he can see Lake Maggiore or, when he chooses, the framed letter of Goethe. Although Remarque regards New York City as »home,« he spends very little time there nowadays. Because of his

health, he prefers to live in his villa. The New York apartment is occupied by Paulette Goddard's mother.

Before he married Paulette, the former wife of Charlie Chaplin, Remarque was romantically linked with Greta Garbo for many years and then with Marlene Dietrich. Paulette is with him on the Maggiore, and she still makes films – mainly in Europe and mainly for television. She was in Milan recently for TV, and Remarque explained, »We never bother each other about what the other does. Perhaps she will return at the end of the week.«

So Remarque is resigned to the present. In fact, so much so that he just accepted a decoration from the President of the Federal Republic, Heinrich Lübke. The German ambassador in Switzerland presented the author with the Federal Republic's Officer's Cross of the Order of Merit. Lübke paid tribute to Remarque's »human and political approach to the issues of his day.«