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Between two worlds: books and literary figures among the Swiss abroad
By Charles Linsmayer

She evoked an imaginary La Chaux-de-Fonds in her writings from her sickbed in Paris – Monique Saint-Hélier

In 1934, the Neuchâtel "Express" reported on the sensational success of a local writer – "une des nôtres" (one of our own) – who was hiding herself away "in Paris under the pseudonym of Monique Saint-Hélier and had captivated the literary world with her novel "Bois-Mort". "Bois-Mort" was the first work in the "Les Alérac" series of novels written by Berthe Briod-Eimann between 1934 and 1955. It is an immense narrative work focusing entirely on an imaginary La Chaux-de-Fonds and is distinguished by the fact that, while the actual plot is restricted to a few hours, the destiny of entire generations appears before the mind's eye of the protagonists.

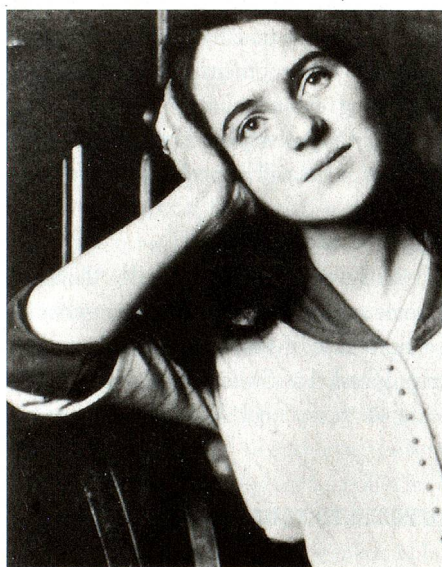
At loggerheads with family and the Church

Berthe Eimann, a pharmacist's daughter, was born in La Chaux-de-Fonds on 2 September 1895 and lost her mother at the age of three. So profound was her grief that when she began her literary career in 1927 she assumed the name of Saint Hélier, who is celebrated on 16 July, her mother's birthday. She underwent her first of several operations, which resulted in complications, at the age of 11, acquired her Swiss school-leaving diploma in Lausanne at 21 and at 22, against her parents' wishes, married Protestant theologian Blaise Briod, with whom she converted to Catholicism on her wedding day. Both were studying literature in Berne when she fell ill again. An unresolved lifelong conflict with the Catholic Church began during a two-year stay at the Viktoria-Klinik hospital in Berne because the hospital priest, with support from a bishop, would only allow her to continue receiving the sacraments if she burned books she owned written by Montaigne and Calvin. She refused, refraining henceforth from taking part in confession and communion. She also complied with the severest of the clerics' orders about never discussing reli-

gion with Blaise again. After being discharged from hospital, in 1923 she became acquainted with Rainer Maria Rilke, who insightfully encouraged her to write. When he died in 1926, the 24 French poems of the "Les Roses" series were lying on his desk with the inscription "Joy forever – Joie pour toujours. Nous les destinons à Monique."

Wrested from illness line by line

At the time, Monique Saint-Hélier and Blaise, who was working for the League of Nations, had been living for several months in Paris, a city that frightened her with its noise. Rilke's death was another blow and she fell so seriously ill in 1927 that she was never able to walk again until the day she died on 9 March 1955, and wrote her entire body of work in bed. The Alérac series was preceded by two works dedicated to Rilke's memory: "A Rilke pour Noël" (1927) and "La Cage aux rêves" (1932) – an astonishingly modern account in novel form of how a dying young woman deals with the beginning and end of her conscious existence. With its collage style, it is a work that penetrates deeper into areas of the soul than a linear text ever could. In contrast to what it suggested, the novel was not Monique Saint-Hélier's last book, but her remaining 23 years defy description in their gravity. During the German capture of Paris, Blaise carried the sick woman to safety away from the bullets, and when she continued the Alérac series after the war, Grasset, her publishing house, demanded that she abridge the work so drastically that the compositional principle was completely destroyed. "Ah, les éditeurs, les voilà nos ennemis", she wrote in one of her last letters.



Quotation

"I am not the type who can fully integrate into modern Parisian life. I suffer terrible anxieties and am terrified of people. I feel like a blind person who has to be led by the hand and stumbles over every step or like an unsophisticated provincial person with all the awkwardness of a convent schoolgirl. How I wish you could be here, my friend. I was never anxious when I was in your company." (15 June 1926 to Rilke)

BIBLIOGRAPHY: "Les Oiseaux du matin et autres nouvelles" and "L'Arrosoir rouge" (part 4 of the Alérac series) are available in French from Editions de l'Aire. From Editions Zoé: "J'ai tant à vous dire. Correspondance avec Rilke 1923-1926". The following are available in German: "Morsches Holz" from Suhrkamp and "Traumkäfig" (La Cage aux rêves) as volume 7 of Reprinted by Huber with a biography of Monique Saint-Hélier by Charles Linsmayer.

CHARLES LINSMAYER is a literary scholar and journalist in Zurich