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

By Charles Linsmayer

The old warhorse and conman served in many armies of the world and his memoirs are legendary – Hans Ormund Bringolf

The provision of mercenaries – something in which Switzerland had specialised for centuries – reached an absurd but literarily important pinnacle in the 20th century in Hans Ormund Bringolf. Born on 11 January 1876 in Baden-Baden, the son of a businessman from Schaffhausen and a Russian mother, he sat his school-leaving examination in Neuchâtel, studied in Innsbruck, Vienna and Berlin, and obtained his doctorate in law in Greifswald at the age of 22, thanks to the wealth of his by then deceased father – he was well known as the heavy-drinking and hardy but equally profligate son of a millionaire. However, his heart was set on a career in the military. As a cavalryman in the Swiss army he was nicknamed “Leutnant Bringolf selig” (Lieutenant Bringolf deceased) because he charged into everything and was declared shot dead hundreds of times after every patrol.

He fed steak to the horses

In 1900, Bringolf joined the diplomatic service as a military attaché in Berlin and Vienna. However, his extravagant lifestyle – he held banquets for hundreds of guests, had soup served in gold plated dishes and fed the horses steak – brought him to ruin, which he dealt with by illegitimate means. In 1904, after his ostentatious marriage to a factory owner’s daughter, he was exposed as a counterfeiter of cheques, fled to Mexico and made his way through South America dodging bills. He finally embarked upon a career in the US army and took over the command of Negros, an island of the Philippines, as a Constable Officer. However, he was dismissed due to his excessively intense drills. His next stops were Paraguay and Brazil. Having now descended to cleaning shoes, he happened upon the idea as “Legation Councillor Dinichert” of appointing honorary consuls all over the place on behalf of the Department of Foreign Affairs, holding grandiose feasts and sending the bills to Berne. After being exposed by a fellow countryman, he spent two years in jail in Lima. On his return to Europe, he went on a tour of luxury hotels in Germany

as “Baron von Tscharnher”, for which he spent another two years behind bars in Mannheim.

Career pinnacle – 1914 to 1924

The First World War saw him granted parole. Bringolf became a captain in the foreign legion and obtained such notoriety as the courageous “Lion of Monastir” that he was awarded the Cross of the French Legion of Honour in 1924. At that time he had regained his authority and dignity, having been appointed director of Alsatian coal supply. But, as ever, no sooner had he managed to get his head above water than he suffered a setback. This time it was at the hands of the “Schaffhauser AZ” newspaper, which exposed him as a convict, and he was dealt a decisive blow when this appeared in the

“Humanité”. After a final attempt as a coal agent in Belgrade he gave up and wrote the “Lebensroman des Leutnant Bringolf selig” in the poorhouse in Hallau. This was published in 1927 in Zurich. It did not sugar-coat his life but it did reveal an original narrative talent.

In 1930, when the Parisian “Éditions Au Sans pareil” launched its outsider series “Les têtes brûlées”, volume 1 was the exact same book, published under the title “Feu le Lieutenant Bringolf: Quelques fragments de ses Mémoires”, with whose swashbuckling author the editor of the series, Blaise Cendrars, felt an inner kinship. However, he took the word “deceased” literally and believed the author to be dead. That was certainly not the case as in 1940, when Finland was recruiting volunteers in Tornio, Bringolf found himself back on the battlefield. He affirmed that he would join the US army if he were not wanted. “Despite being 66 years of age I have no doubts that I could make another modest contribution to world events,” he wrote. However, he was not involved in any further military engagements and died a civilian death in Hallau on 4 March 1951, leaving behind an estate of 2 francs and 75 cents. Wreaths were sent by the French and Finnish armies.

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Quotation:

“What attracted me to the cavalry was not the riding or the military involvement but instead the pleasure of wearing an immaculate uniform and owning horses and magnificent horse tack. For me, being a soldier began after evening roll call when you could visit the dining room of a Bernerhof or the railway restaurant with a 7-cm-high collar and clink the extra-large spur rowels.” (“Der Lebensroman des Leutnant Bringolf selig”, Jean Frey, Zurich 1927)

BIBLIOGRAPHY: “Der Lebensroman des Leutnant Bringolf selig”, published in 1927 in German, in 1930 in French and in 1931 in English under the title “I Have No Regrets; The Strange Life of a Diplomat-Vagrant, Being the Memoirs of Lieutenant Bringolf”, is only available from second-hand bookshops.