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

By Charles Linsmayer

Friedrich Glauser disturbingly saw foreign countries, where he spent half of his life, "from the bottom"

The now legendary author of "Wachtmeister Studer" ("Thumbprint") and "Matto regiert" ("In Matto's Realm"), spent 20 of the 42 years of his life abroad. The first and longest period was 1896 to 1909, his childhood years in Vienna as the son of Swiss grammar school teacher Charles Glauser and his Austrian wife Theresia, née Scubitz. His mother died in 1900, and his father's new marriage resulted in turmoil. After facing expulsion from grammar school, Glauser was sent to boarding school in Glarisegg (Thurgau) in 1910. His first period in Switzerland lasted 11 years and saw him thrown out of Glarisegg, continue his schooling in Geneva, sit his school-leaving examination, begin a chemistry degree in Zurich, write his first literary works with the Dadaists, come into ruinous contact with morphine, become incapacitated (1918) and embark on an endless sequence of addiction and treatment for his dependence in Witzwil, Münsingen and Burghölzli (Zurich). In 1921, he fled to Mannheim, where his father was now living, to join the foreign legion.

Legionnaire, pot washer and coal miner

His second, gruelling stint abroad lasted four years, initially taking him as a legionnaire to Sidi Bel-Abbès, Seb dou, Oran and then to Gourrama, which provided the title for his novel about the legion in 1929. Declared unfit for military service in 1923 due to a heart condition, he worked as a pot washer in Paris and then as a coal miner in Charleroi. He started taking morphine again and ended up in an asylum in Tournai from where he was forced to "return home" in 1925 to be placed under the care of the hospital in Münsingen. It took him seven years before he once again succeeded in escaping to France. He was then imprisoned in Witzwil jail, but his stories were now being published in the "Bund" newspaper and he was soon working as a gardener's assistant in Liestal, Basel and Winterthur, before falling in love with the dancer Trix Gutekunst, finishing "Gourrama" and obtaining gardening qualifications in Oeschberg – all constantly interrupted by relapses into drug-taking and courses of treatment.

Journalist and farmer in France

In 1932, he finally managed to travel with Trix to Paris to work as a corre-

spondent. But he was short of money, so he tried to borrow from his father in Mannheim who showed him no compassion and had him taken back to Münsingen. He did not manage to depart again until 1936 by which time he had completed "Wachtmeister Studer", spent many months in Waldau hospital and finally been declared sound by a new warden. He went to Angles near Chartres, accompanied by the nurse Berthe Bendel, with whom he managed a small farm. Although it was barely tolerable in winter, he wrote some of his best stories here. In February 1937, he headed for La Bernerie in Brittany, where he worked on "Der Chinese" ("The Chinaman"), staying until December 1937. He then decided to emigrate to Tunis but lingered in Marseille, moving to the fishing village of Collioure. In early 1938, he arrived completely exhausted in Basel and underwent treatment for addiction at Friedmatt hospital.

Nervi, Italy, 8 December 1938

But he sought to leave Switzerland once again, and in April found accommodation in Nervi near Genoa where he worked on a Swiss novel for the 1939 Swiss national exhibition. He intended to marry Berthe and arranged for all the necessary paperwork to be sent. The wedding was due to take place on 6 December 1938. However, Glauser collapsed unconscious over dinner on the evening before and passed away in the early hours of 8 December. He was cremated in Nervi but was not laid to rest on foreign soil. His ashes were taken to Zurich where a sombre funeral service was held at Manegg cemetery attended by Felix Moeschlin, the president of the writers' society.

On 18 November 1938, three weeks before his death, Glauser had written to the actor Heinrich Gretler: "I don't want to reach the top but instead to lie low and tramp around this filthy world as inconspicuously as possible. I've always been interested in seeing what a country looks like from the bottom. That's how I've always lived and intend to continue living."



Quotation:

"When my case has been resolved, I'd like to work and save for six months. You, too. And then we'll go to Paris together. That is my hope. To turn my back on Switzerland. Awful country!" (To Liso Ruckteschell, 20 August 1920, in "Tagebuch aus dem Irrenhaus" in "Morphium", Arche-Verlag, Zurich 1980)

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BIBLIOGRAPHY: Glauser's works are available in German from Limmat-Verlag and Arche. Details of translations can be found at <http://opac.admin.ch>