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

By Charles Linsmayer

Lina Bögli went on a round-the-world journey and exposed the colonial period in the bestseller "Forward"

Born a farmer's daughter in Oschwand on 15 April 1858, Lina Bögli was sent to work as a maidservant in the Jura aged 12 after primary school. From 1875, she spent three years working in Naples for a wealthy Swiss family. Employed as a nanny, she not only learned Italian there but also German, as she herself later revealed. From 1878 to 1892 – interrupted by two years of teacher training in Neuchâtel – she then lived with an aristocratic family in the Polish city of Krakow, working as a tutor. From there she set off on a journey in 1892 that would take her around the world.

An ill-fated love affair

Once her memoirs "Forward: Letters written on a trip around the world" – published in Philadelphia in 1904 and also brought out in German as "Vorwärts" by Huber Frauenfeld in 1906 – had made her famous, Lina Bögli circulated the myth that she had agreed to undertake the journey to consider a marriage proposal from a Polish officer who was killed during the First World War. In reality the man in question outlived her; the marriage had not taken place because he could not raise the 50,000 crowns that a married officer had to deposit as security. Disappointed, she let Captain Bijak die in 1914 in her diary: "The death of the only man whom I ever loved, and out of love did not wish to marry to avoid destroying his career, became my destiny so to speak because without having known and loved him I would never have thought about going on a round-the-world trip."

Travelling the world as a teacher

With 1,400 Swiss francs in her pocket, Lina Bögli boarded the express train in Krakow on 12 July 1892 and when she arrived in Sydney she possessed exactly 5 pounds sterling. Just a few weeks later, she was earning a good wage teaching at three Australian private schools at the same time. She did the same thing in Honolulu, San Francisco and at many

other stops on her journey: she looked for a teaching post and saved up to pay for the ticket to continue her journey. On 12 July 1902, she stood once again at Krakow railway station and could hardly believe that she "had been away from Europe for ten long years, the places and people seemed to have changed so little".

The travelogue that she wrote at the castle of her former employer caused such excitement that she set off for Japan and China in 1910 to repeat the success with a second, three-year-long journey. The ensuing second book, "Immer vorwärts", published only in German and in the middle of the First World War, only enjoyed a moderate level of success, however. And when Lina Bögli died on 22 December 1941 in Herzogenbuchsee after years of tirelessly travelling to lecture, the world dominated by Europe that she had portrayed was irrevocably destined for demise.



Quotation

"Fait accompli. I have completed the task that I set myself ten years ago and indeed with the greatest of precision; I promised myself that I would return to my point of departure on 12 July, the day on which I set off, and last Saturday, 12 July, I arrived back at Krakow railway station. Now I really do believe I've earned my friends' compliments when they say that punctuality is my principal virtue."
(From "Forward", 1906)

Reflection of the colonial world

The self-assured, daring Lina Bögli described the world she discovered in a very naïve and unpretentious way and not without her awkward prejudices. Upon encountering the native inhabitants of Australia, her verdict was: "These are certainly not attractive people, the least prejudiced person cannot claim that. The women are even uglier than the men, most of them are terribly thin with disproportionately long limbs which makes them look more like apes than humans." But the book does not lack humour, albeit unintentional. A 90-year-old Maori chieftain in New Zealand confessed to her that he had eaten several white people despite them not tasting half as good as dark-skinned people and that the young woman standing before him nevertheless looked like a "tasty delicacy". Relating the story she wrote: "I have not been so keen on him since, especially when he kisses my hand as it seems as though he holds it indecently long against his lips!"

CHARLES LINSMAYER is a literary scholar and journalist in Zurich

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Under the title of "Talofa", Lina Bögli's "Forward" is available from efef-Verlag, Wettingen, and also as a Lenos paperback. The French translation "En avant" is available from Bernard Campiche.