History of Remarque

Erich Paul Remark was born on June 22, 1898, to a Roman Catholic family in the city of Osnabrück, Westphalia Germany, in the Northwestern part of the country. He was very close to his mother, Anna Maria, but not close to his father, Peter, who was descended from a family that fled to Germany after the French Revolution. Remarque’s family was so poor that he earned money by giving piano lessons so he could buy clothing. Piano playing, and other interests, such as collecting butterflies and exploring streams and forests, later appeared in his fictional characters. He loved writing so much he earned the nickname Smudge.

Remarque attended two different elementary schools and then the Catholic Präparande (preparatory school). He loved the drama of Catholic rituals, the beauty of churches and the flowers in cloister gardens, and works of art. These things would also feature in his fiction. While in school, however, he had problems with teachers, and eventually paid them back by ridiculing them in his novels. At the Präparade, he argued so much with one teacher that he used the man’s personality and another’s name (Konschorek) to produce the character of Schoolmaster Kantorek in All Quiet on the Western Front.

In November, 1916, when Remarque was eighteen and a third-year student at Osnabrück’s Lehrerseminar (teacher’s college), he was drafted for World War I. After basic training, he was assigned to a reserve battalion, but often given leave to visit his seriously ill mother. In June 1917, he was assigned to a trench unit near the Western front. He was seriously injured that year by grenade splinters and sent to the St. Vincenz hospital in Duisburg for much of 1917-1918. He was there when his mother died in September, 1917. Remarque was devastated by his mother’s death. After the war, he substituted her middle name, Maria, for his own, Paul.

The war ended before Remarque could return to active service, but even though he had not experienced frontline fighting at its worst, the war had changed his attitudes forever. He learned to realize the value and fragility of each individual life, and had become disillusioned with a patriotism that ignored the individual. To him and many of his companions, civilian careers no longer held any meaning.

In June 1919, he began two years’ work as a substitute for teachers on leave. Remarque was blond and good looking, and very muscular. He was very interested in all sports, especially cars and racing. Finally, bored with teaching, he wandered from job to job: playing organ in an insane asylum, working for a tombstone firm, working as a small-town drama critic, writing advertising copy for an automotive firm. In 1925, he married an actress, Jutta Ilse Zambona, shortly after taking a job as associate editor of the illustrated magazine, Sport im Bild (sports in pictures or sports illustrated).

Early in 1920, as Erich Remark, he published a novel so poorly received that the embarrassment caused him to adopt his great grandfather’s spelling of Remarque. His journalistic writing was not well received, either. Therefore, the success of his novel All Quiet on the Western Front (in German, Im Westen nichts Neues – nothing new in the West) was a
surprise to everyone. Remarque noted that he hadn’t even set out to write a bestseller but had written, instead, to rid himself of the bleak moods that he and his friends were still experiencing.

Despite its popularity, the book generated a storm of controversy. Some people charged that Remarque had written solely to shock and to sell. The Nazis chose to read it as an attack on the greatness of the German nation. Ignoring the book as literature, they spread rumors to undermine Remarque’s popularity. They claimed that he was a French Jew, an old man who had never seen a battle, or the worthless son of millionaire parents.

During the controversy, Remarque and his wife lived in Berlin. They were divorced in the early 1930s after Nazis exiled him but remarried almost immediately so that Ilsa, who suffered from tuberculosis, would not her Swiss residence permit. They lived separately until their final divorce in 1951.

Remarque’s sequel to All Quiet, based on his and his friends’ experiences after they returned from the front, was published in 1931. It was called Der Weg zurück or The Way Back. The sequel aroused further Nazi persecution. Joseph Goebbels, head of the Nazi propagands wing, and chief organizer of a Nazi witch-hunt, first brought things to a head when the American film version of All Quiet was screened in Berlin. His bands of Hitler Youth had rampaged through the theater hurling stink bombs, scattering white mice, and shouting, “Germany, awake!” The film was banned, and in 1931 Remarque was forced to leave Germany, where both his novels were thrown into the fire during the infamous book burning of 1933. Remarque was eventually deprived of his German citizenship in 1938.

Until 1939, he divided his time between Porto Ronco, Switzerland and France; from 1939 to 1942 he rented a bungalow in Hollywood. Eventually, he tired of the Hollywood glitter, and in 1942 began to divide his time between New York and Porto Ronco. In 1957, he received critical acclaim as an actor for his role in the film version of his novel A Time to Love and a Time to Die. In 1958, he married an American actress, Paulette Goddard, whom he had met in the 1940s. Remarque applied for American citizenship in 1941, becoming a citizen after the time required by law. He loved America, but he never felt fully accepted by the Germans and always resented the loss of his German citizenship.

Remarque was not the only member of his family to suffer at the hands of the Nazis. His younger sister Elfriede Scholz was beheaded for spreading subversive propaganda.

His work eventually included 11 novels, all written in German but immediately translated and published in English as well. They developed themes first introduced in All Quiet.

A series of heart attacks in the late 1960s obliged Remarque to choose Rome instead of New York for his winter home, and he lived there and in Porto Ronco until his death on September 25, 1970.