



Schwarzenbach, Annemarie (1908-1942)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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A widely-traveled writer and photojournalist, Annemarie Schwarzenbach documented social conditions from Afghanistan to Alabama and was one of the pioneering women of the profession. Her fiction reflected the tormented attachments and recurring loneliness that plagued her brief life.

Schwarzenbach was born into privilege on May 23, 1908 in Bocken, near Zurich, Switzerland. Her father, Alfred, was a wealthy textile industrialist; her mother, Renée, a prominent hostess, was a granddaughter of Otto von Bismarck, first Chancellor of Germany.

While Schwarzenbach was growing up, her mother conducted a long-term affair with opera singer Emmy Krüger, which may have catalyzed Annemarie's awareness of her own attractions to women. The family indulged Annemarie's inclinations to dress and act like a boy; school photos show her adopting the boyish demeanor that would make her the object of others' infatuations throughout her life.

Schwarzenbach entered Zurich University in 1927 to pursue studies in history and literature. At this time, she also began writing fiction.

Three years later she met Erika and Klaus Mann, the prodigy children of novelist Thomas Mann, and began a relationship with Erika. She traveled throughout Europe with the siblings and frequented Berlin's artistic circles and homosexual bars with them. She also began using morphine, which led to a lifelong addiction and periodic detoxifications in private clinics.

In 1933 Schwarzenbach traveled to Spain with photographer Marianne Breslauer, one of many journeys that would provide material for her career. Breslauer described her as "a strange mixture of man and woman." A frequent subject of Breslauer's portraits, Schwarzenbach was adept at striking sulky poses that still retain their androgynous allure.

The rise of the Nazis ended Berlin's cultural exuberance. The Manns took refuge in Switzerland but found fascist politics gaining ground there also. Erika could not tolerate Schwarzenbach's emotional ties to her parents, who viewed the right-wing National Front as good for business, and broke off their relationship. In 1934, however, Schwarzenbach accompanied Klaus Mann to Moscow to attend the first Congress of Writers.

After a suicide attempt, probably prompted by her conflict with her family, Schwarzenbach traveled to Persia (Iran) where, in 1935, she married French diplomat Claude Clarac. It was a utilitarian arrangement (both were homosexual), and it usefully provided Schwarzenbach with a diplomatic passport. However, soon after her marriage she fell into a depression, exacerbated by a scandal caused by her love affair with the daughter of the Turkish ambassador to Teheran.

During this period she wrote *Tod in Persien* (*Death in Persia*), not published until 1998, an autobiographical novel that she later reworked into *Das Glückliche Tal* (*The Happy Valley*, 1940), a curious mixture of travel writing, autobiography, and critical commentary.

In 1937 Schwarzenbach teamed up personally and professionally with American photographer Barbara Hamilton-Wright. Their travels to Depression-stricken communities from New York through Appalachia to the Deep South resulted in a scathing series of articles for the European press on America's race and class relations, illustrated by stunning photographs.

Between trips to America, Schwarzenbach reported on the rise of fascism in Eastern Europe and was highly critical of Switzerland's neutrality. In 1939, after another personal crisis, she traveled to Central Asia with Swiss photo-journalist Ella Maillart, who was convinced she could rescue Schwarzenbach from her addictions. That proved to be a lost cause, but the pair produced a richly illustrated documentation of life in the region even as their relationship deteriorated. Maillart later recounted the journey in her memoir *The Cruel Way* (1986), in which she disguised Schwarzenbach as "Christina."

Many of Schwarzenbach's writings are literary hybrids that combine fictional, poetic, and autobiographical elements. Her first novel, *Freunde um Bernhard*, has a gay male protagonist. She casts the ill-fated love obsession of *Lyrische Novelle* as a heterosexual romance but later acknowledged that she modeled it on a lesbian relationship. Her travelogues are journeys into the psyche as well as narratives of exotic locales.

Much of Schwarzenbach's writing remained unpublished in her lifetime. In the late 1980s a renewal of interest in her work by German scholars and feminists generated a series of annotated editions of her fiction and commentaries. For English speakers, subtitled versions of Carole Bonstein's documentary *A Swiss Rebel* (2000), the exhibit program from the Godwin-Ternbach Museum exhibition, *Annemarie Schwarzenbach: Selected Photographs and Writings, 1933-1940* (2005), and recent excerpts translated by Isabel Cole and Chris Schwarzenbach provide the best windows into her life and work.

Schwarzenbach's photography from Central Asia offers an unromanticized record of traditional life that preserves her subjects' dignity against the arresting starkness of their environment. Her American work, by contrast, projects the sullen resignation of both African-Americans and poor whites in the human-built barrenness of city streets and industrial zones.

She perhaps most hauntingly captured the rising threat of fascism in Europe through unsettling portraits of Hitler Youth and National Socialist functionaries, smugly confident in their group identities.

Early in the war years Schwarzenbach returned to America, enduring further depressive episodes and a doomed affair with wealthy émigrée Margo von Opel. In New York she reconnected with the Mann siblings and through them met writer Carson McCullers, who fell hopelessly in love with her. Schwarzenbach, intent on rekindling the bond with Erika Mann, did not reciprocate. Mann, however, was preoccupied with legal and financial support for European refugees.

For Schwarzenbach the political was personal. Financially dependent on her family and anxious to avoid estrangement, she opposed their class position intellectually through her journalism and other writings. But emotionally, she still sought and needed their approval.

Her fellow expatriates, especially the Mann siblings, whose politics were unambiguous and who had thrown themselves into anti-fascist activism, had little patience with her internal dilemmas.

News of her father's death and the deterioration of her relationships precipitated an emotional breakdown in 1940. After two institutional confinements in the U.S., Schwarzenbach returned to Switzerland in 1941 and tried to pick up the pieces in the mountain town of Engadine.

She took reporting assignments in Portugal and Africa and reunited with Clarac in Morocco, before returning

to Switzerland in 1942. She also initiated regular correspondence with McCullers, who had dedicated *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941) to her.

While bicycling to St. Moritz to sign papers on her house in September 1942 she took a spill and incurred a head injury from which she never recovered. She died on November 15, at the age of 34.

Many of Schwarzenbach's photographic subjects appear authentically rooted in their environments. One is tempted to read this as a yearning for her own place in a world she roamed so hungrily. That may be a fanciful impression but, after all, she had that effect on people.

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