

# ‘You Live Life Only Once’

**Marlene Dietrich And Erich Maria Remarque – the Story of  
a Boundless Passion**

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## France, 1939

The grey puma, as the writer Erich Maria Remarque called his beloved Lancia, already began stuttering and spluttering just outside Cannes. It was a beautiful summer's day, the 20 August 1939, deep-blue and translucent like a bottle of Evian.

The kind of day that was best suited to slowing down, taking a deep breath and enjoying the South of France's majestic, late August light.

But Remarque was in a hurry.

Sitting beside him on the passenger seat was a teenager, fourteen-year-old Maria Sieber, the only daughter of the German actress Marlene Dietrich. The diva was Remarque's lover, whom he also affectionately nicknamed the "puma". To avoid any confusion, Remarque differentiated the pumas by colour. The grey puma was the Lancia. The golden puma, his pet name for the greatest German-language movie star of the twentieth century.

Dietrich was currently in Hollywood filming her first Western, but her thoughts were back in France with her daughter and Remarque, whom she wanted to bring to safety. The diva had procured tickets for them on the Queen Mary, one of those luxury steamships with a dance hall, swimming pool, orchestra and white starched tablecloths. In ten days' time, the 30. August, the Queen Mary was due to set sail from Cherbourg.

But now the grey puma was stuttering and spluttering, and it was at least another 900 kilometres to Paris, the milestone they needed to reach by the end of the following day.

Remarque tried to maintain his composure. Cursing was out of the question. What would Marlene's daughter, the teenager on the passenger seat, think? The news reports were bad enough, the rumours even worse.

Hitler had invaded Austria one and a half years before, and then, six months ago, Prague too. The Munich Agreement, the pinnacle of the Western powers' shirking of responsibility, was rendered obsolete once German tanks rolled onto Prague's Wenzelsplatz. Remarque was a radical pacifist, but Munich had been

lunacy. And then Germany's aggressive rearmament, the shifting of its economy towards a major war. A land in uniform, full of rage and flaming torches. Followed by the nonaggression pact between Hitler and Stalin. A secret supplementary agreement in which the two dictators decided to tear the map of Poland to pieces. It was like a countdown in the wrong direction. Towards catastrophe.

The author of the internationally-bestselling anti-war novel "All Quiet on the Western Front" had recently said: "When I wrote this twenty years ago, during the war, I wanted to save the world. A few weeks ago in Porto Ronco, I saw war approaching once again, but all I could think of was saving my art collection."

Remarque wrestled with himself behind the wheel. The collection of paintings, consisting of everything the Nazis had derided and declared degenerate—his Van Gogh, the Cézanne, the Picasso—should be on their way to America, but Maria Sieber, who Marlene called "the child" or "the tomcat", was sitting with him in a car that was threatening to give up the ghost.

In contrast to the many other exiles who now had to up sticks yet again, Remarque had no fear for himself personally. If it had been up to him, he would have stayed in Europe, he wouldn't have fled to America yet. Immediately after the seizure of power in 1933, his house in Ticino had become a refuge for those who were escaping Hitler. One of them, the Jewish journalist Felix Manuel Mendelsohn, had been killed in Remarque's garden. A mistake, apparently, whereby Mendelsohn had been confused with Remarque, the man of the house. He had continued to support the refugees. Love thy neighbour. Especially when their lives are blowing up around them.

Remarque tinkered with the carburettor, and looked for a repair shop, but the Lancia's spluttering and stuttering continued. Eventually he raised the bonnet at the side to allow more air in. This made visibility through the windscreen tricky, but he didn't complain.

That night was spent in emergency quarters. "Thick embroidered pouffes on the ground," he wrote in his diary, disconcerted and amused, "a somewhat hunchbacked proprietress. Floral carpet. A kimono. Showed us the bathroom. Disappeared." The next day, their journey continued toward Paris, the country in a sinister choreography toward the abyss. "Draftees everywhere, with their little

suitcases. So many horse carriers. Colourful soldiers. Almost ghostly at night. Savage news updates...the dark columns in the searchlights. The jittery, loyal horses in the night. A huge white cross at the Fontainebleau intersection—chalky white horse in the searchlights. The silent woods. almost full over the plains, Matthias Claudius. Many thoughts.” These were Remarque’s depictions of the surreal scenery.

Morale didn’t improve any when they reached Paris. The farmers’ heads hung low as they pulled their animals along behind them on ropes, as though they were headed to the slaughterhouse. The agony of the surrendered provinces now lay behind them. But the lights were going out in Paris too. Not gradually, but on command, and all at once.

Due to the threat of war, a blackout had been decreed in the City of Light. Remarque tried to comfort Maria on the passenger seat. “Never in modern history has Paris needed to hide her splendour. We’ll drink to her, and wish her well,” said Remarque. He wanted to go to the artists’ haunt Fouquet’s, on Champs-Élysée, and bid adieu to his beautiful city there. For decades, court had been paid between its bright-red awnings to the luminaries of that modern era which was so hated—and meanwhile secretly envied—by the Nazis in Berlin. Fouquet’s was a centre for *joie de vivre*, charm and liveliness, but also for melancholy, for affluent refugees, and sometimes those who had little too. It was a place of love, and love affairs. An intense medley—with one of the best champagne cellars in the city.

Remarque enjoyed its cosmopolitanism—the decisive grace with which the restaurant took a stand against its fate. Fouquet’s was his Europe, a sparkling locale of the civilisation that might soon be crushed by barbarians in field-grey and black uniforms.

“This isn’t a peace treaty, it’s a twenty-year ceasefire”. The words of General Foch, the commander-in-chief of the Allied troops on the Western front, about the Treaty of Versailles, which humiliated Germany in 1919. Now it seemed he had turned out to be right.

Down to the very year.

Foch, of all people, who in 1929 had died a natural death in Paris at the age of 77, after sacrificing hundreds of thousands of young men's lives in futile mass attacks on the deadlocked Western Front during the First World War.

Foch, of all people, one of those arrogant and brutal generals who existed on both sides, in protest of whose utter lack of conscience Remarque had written "All Quiet on the Western Front". The 1929 novel whose first edition the publisher had advertised with the words "Remarque's book is the memorial of our unknown soldier—written by all the dead".

As they were making their way in the limping Lancia along the harvested fields towards Paris, Maria had noticed the resignation in the country dwellers' faces and asked Remarque: "Do they already know they're being defeated?"

"Yes, they're old enough to remember the last war," answered Remarque. "Look at these faces, tomcat. Remember: war knows no glory, only the sound of wailing mothers."

Remarque carried in him the melancholy of the artist who was one of the first to depict the First World War, the twentieth century's original catastrophe, beyond any distorting ideology. The blood-soaked soil of the Western front, the tattered flesh of the dead in barbed wire, the loud and silent screams of the heavily injured, whose best conceivable fate it was to spend the rest of their lives crippled. The helplessness of the individual, if he really had come in search of glory, in the face of a war that was being waged industrially.

To have experienced and described all of this was painful, for certain. But even more painful was the fact that, despite the international success of his novel, people hadn't learnt a thing.

It seemed that at least his countrymen hadn't; the Germans. And if there were an escalation beyond even more painful, then perhaps this: many claimed the Germans had sleepwalked into the First World War. But what Hitler and his followers were now planning was completely different: a brutal attack on all the progressive values Europe had ever produced in its history.

And into its place would step insidious violence, for all those who didn't enjoy the mercy of being classified as Germans, or at least Aryans. For them, the only future was as the Germans' vassals or slaves.

Or death.

During his last few months in Paris, Remarque had repeatedly witnessed (and later precisely portrayed in his novel “Arc de Triomphe”) the misery and poverty of people who had already been forced to flee Hitler in the post-peace and pre-war era. The desperation of waiting in cheap hotels with expired visas, hoping for a miracle that might perhaps bring salvation: a boat ticket to North or South America. The suitcases stuffed with the books, certificates and made-to-measure clothing that had once been symbols of a bourgeois existence. Some even had artworks in their cases, cut from the frames.

And if it really came down to it, they were prepared to give up even these for five days in a dark cabin on the Queen Mary.

Remarque himself had a ticket for this steamship to New York. He looked with guilt at those who had been left out in the cold in this last, desperate surge to freedom. “People standing around residential blocks. To drive away gives an awful feeling. Everything in me battles against it. So many thoughts, such self-contempt,” notes Remarque.

The Nazis, under Joseph Goebbels’ command, had deterred people from attending the Berlin screening of “All Quiet on the Western Front” in the late 1930s—with stink bombs and white mice.

“After just ten minutes, the cinema resembles a madhouse. The police are powerless. The embittered crowd violently attacks the Jews,” Goebbels wrote triumphantly in his journal. People were crying “Jews out” and “Hitler’s at the gates”. Goebbels, himself one metre sixty-five tall and handicapped with a club foot, noted with delight:

“The Jews are small and ugly. Outside, a rush on the counters. Windowpanes rattling. Thousands of people contentedly enjoying the spectacle. The screening is cancelled, and the next too. We have won.”

The whip cracker’s inciting propaganda quickly had an impact. Just six days later, the anti-war film was banned under the allegation that it “endangered Germany’s international reputation.”

“A triumph,” Goebbels rejoiced. And one which increased his popularity, not least with the man he liked to call “the boss”: Adolf Hitler. “My reputation in Munich has been significantly enhanced by the Remarque affair.”

After seizing power in 1933, the Nazis had burnt Remarque’s books with the words: “Against the literary betrayal of World War soldiers! For the education of the people in the spirit of military strength. I surrender to the flames the writing of Erich Maria Remarque.” They had just officially stripped him of his German citizenship. “With the support of the Jewish publishing house Ullstein, Erich Remark has insulted, in the most vile and despicable manner, the memory of those who fell in the World War, thereby exiling himself from the German national community. The money earned from this book allowed him to buy a villa in Switzerland, in Porto Ronco near Locarno, where until recently he has entertained a lively succession of guests consisting exclusively of emigrants, Jews and Communists,” deputy Gestapo chief Dr. Werner Best reported to the German Foreign Office.

But even Remarque’s intense loathing of the new rulers in Germany couldn’t move him to become politically engaged. Throughout the 1930s, prominent refugees made numerous appeals against the Nazi regime, signed by peers such as Heinrich Mann, Alfred Döblin, Lion Feuchtwanger and Bertolt Brecht. Remarque, in his Swiss exile, refused to sign these lists. His name didn’t appear. Instead of public criticism, he contented himself with private mutterings. Disgusted by the Austrians’ submissiveness on the day the Germans marched into Vienna, for example, he wrote: “At around eleven in the evening, the taking of Austria begins. The clearest war—without bloodshed—in a long time. On the 12<sup>th</sup>, talking, talking. No one stirred—as expected. There’s already an A.-Hitler Platz in Vienna. The world is made of lackeys. Except the workers and a few others. And so the magnolias bloom as ever. The private war of a person outclassed. To make people in Braunau, where he was once denied honorary citizenship, see him differently.”

In the Spanish Civil War too—a kind of overture, from 1936 on, of what would strike Europe with full force three years later—Remarque held back, even

though it was obvious where his loyalties lay. Writers like George Orwell and André Malraux fought in the International Brigades against the Spanish fascists and their supporters from Italy and Germany. And Remarque, whose literary heroes in many of his books left no doubt as to their republican, antifascist stance? Remarque hides away. “The scent of blood drifts across Europe from the Spanish plains,” Remarque noted in spring 1937. “And from the whole world comes the decaying stench of idle hearts. This cursed century! Too many interfered in the war of 1914/18—now too few, and the wrong people. World peace, or at least that of Europe, is in the hands of two ambitious fools who become more and more brazen the less resistance they encounter.”

Seeing Mussolini and Hitler as fools was a particularly Anglo-Saxon reading of the two fascist dictators, who, with their braying, their martial gesticulations and pathetic threats, hit a note that was sometimes even comical—especially when seen through the lens of a culture bound to irony and self-mockery.

Fools here nor there—in Spain, Franco’s troops and those of the two dictators destroyed the Republic, and not having been there had already begun to gnaw away at Remarque even back then. “Thinking about all kinds of things”, he wrote in 1938, “about Spain. I should go.”

But his doubts, which were also self-doubts, won out. He was almost 40, and as a bestselling author led a luxurious life between Ticino, Paris, London and New York. One which was clouded again and again by the sudden onset of personal melancholy; and traumatised by the misery of the First World War.

Goebbels, of all people, had some time ago signalled to Remarque, a star writer who could quickly win over a large audience, that he would gladly have him back in the Reich. That he would be willing to ascribe the success of “All Quiet on the Western Front” to the Jewish Ullstein publishing house.

Remarque had refused.

He didn’t want to go to the political Front. That was that. He was a writer. The two callings, in his opinion, shouldn’t be mixed, because otherwise literature would degenerate into propaganda. “Politics only ruin art,” he had concluded back in 1936. “One should be a writer or a reporter; the writer should have eyes, and see everything, but mustn’t politicise. Of course, it can transpire that his books inspire



political action, but this should occur without will, because intention of this kind kills art.”

He wasn't like Thomas Mann, the Nobel prize winner, who confidently said of himself in American exile: “Wherever I am, Germany is.” Remarque was hesitant where writing was concerned, and lamented in his journals, “I'm not a writer, after all”. Over the years, the underhanded attacks following “All Quiet on the Western Front” had worn him down. Being on a pedestal wasn't for him; let alone a podium.

Nonetheless, it was clear to whom his sympathies and heart belonged. He was a radical pacifist and humanist; he just didn't believe in the solutions of communism. In Spain, word had gotten out that the Stalinists had shot the anarchists from behind. You couldn't trust ideologies, even less so their rulers. For anyone who was serious about humanism, their only remaining option was democratic civilisation. In Fouquet's, a longing to visibly belong to its defenders burned loudly and torturously in him. “I still don't want to leave. To run away. But the puma will worry herself to death and needs me. I sat there on the street as darkness fell, I love the city and wanted to stay and knew I wouldn't—if the ship sails.”

His passion for the diva and sense of responsibility for her child were stronger. Not even the precious, dust-covered bottle presented to him almost reverently by a waiter in Fouquet's later that evening could change that. “We don't want the “boches” to find it here, do we, Monsieur?”

Remarque had agreed. He let the waiter uncork the bottle.

The Nazis' murderous war machine initially rolled eastwards. But on 19. May, France had made a mutual defence agreement with Poland in case of a German attack. If Germany was serious about invading Poland, France would once again be at war with Germany. A conflict it was neither prepared for nor wanted.

The Lancia, at least, could show solidarity with the French. Remarque handed the vehicle over to a good garage, with the idea that it stay even if the Germans invaded. “If you need to flee the city with your family, you're welcome to take my car. Pumas are good for fleeing in,” he said to the garage owner.

On the morning of 30. August, Remarque and Maria continued on by train to Cherbourg and to the Queen Mary. The ship was in dock, but enveloped in a stern silence. Concerned faces flitted across the deck. The band was silent. The water had been drained from the swimming pool, and its base now contained camp beds. The chic dining room—also a camp.

The party was over.

The era of camp beds and medics had begun. After the luxury liner's arrival in New York, it would be painted grey and serve Britain as a troop transporter for the next six years.

On 31. August, just a day after the Queen Mary's departure from Cherbourg, a small SS troop staged an attack on the German radio station Gleiwitz, which was close to the border, and the SS men passed themselves off as Polish franc-tireurs: "Achtung! Achtung! This is Gleiwitz. The station is under Polish control (...) The hour of freedom has come."

Just a few hours later, at dawn on the 1. September, the Wehrmacht attacked Poland. Hitler ranted in the Reichstag: "Last night, for the first time, Polish regular soldiers fired on our territory. Since 5:45 a.m., we have been returning fire. And from now, bombs will be met with bombs." To ensure that the Germans heard this feigned rage, the speech was broadcast on national radio.

Did the Wehrmacht know about the Nazis' devious plot to kickstart the Second World War?

Some Wehrmacht commanders, certainly, were intimately acquainted with Hitler's plan. Back on 22. August, while Remarque was spending the last peaceful days of summer in the luxury hotel Eden Roc in Cap D'Antibes, together with illustrious guests like the American ambassador to London, Joe Kennedy, Hitler had said to selected officers: "Close your hearts to compassion. (...) Survival of the fittest. Extreme severity."

Remarque had made it to New York, but there was no sign of peace, or even sleep. "News of Poland being invaded is like a bomb," he noted on his first night in America. "England's declaration of war. The hope there'll be no hostilities. The slowly creeping start of war. Silence in the on-board lounge as news sunk in. The King of England's faltering speech. Arrival this morning. A zigzag course

since yesterday, on account of U-boats and being escorted through warships. News that SS Athenia was torpedoed.”

### Venice, 1937

The sky over Venice was clear, transparent, a minor relief after the sticky days of August. A wind had blown the hot greyness of high summer from the canals, and an exhilarated ease unfurled through the city—not least because its annual film festival had come to a close. The exertions of the competition seemed to have been carried away by the waves of the sea, and the chilled wine that was passed around as early as lunchtime.

Marlene Dietrich was sitting at the lido in front of the Grand Hotel Excelsior with Joseph von Sternberg, the director who had made her a star. The master who had given her an international hit back in Berlin with “The Blue Angel”, then enabled her leap to the swiftly-growing movie industry’s promised land—Hollywood.

“The soldier’s daughter,” he had called her back then. He’d regarded her as his creation. That was all a long time ago. His hair, now grey, fell across his face.

Sternberg had also been Dietrich’s lover. But for some time now he’d had to reconcile himself with the fact that she no longer desired him. He had tried so hard to impress her again. Including having a house built by Richard Neutra in the rural San Fernando Valley, a futuristic castle of steel with a glass dome over the bedroom.

Just he, Dietrich and the stars, that had been his plan.

“Another one of your crazy ideas. Why do you have to live out here in an oven? Only you could suddenly decide Beverly Hills isn’t good enough anymore... Even Malibu is better than here. How do you intend to get to the studio in the mornings? And there was no need to *build* a house if you’ll only be here on Sundays. If you want to play hermit, just rent a barn,” Dietrich had moaned.

Heartbroken, von Sternberg had travelled around the world. Korea, Japan, China, Cambodia; but nowhere seemed far enough to finally break free of her. As he wrote, “Shanghai Lily was so often sitting next to me”. Shanghai Lily—another of the femme fatales he had tailor-made for Dietrich. “It took more than one man to change my name to Shanghai Lily,” he’d had her say, hoping he would be the exception. The one and only. But it was all in vain, there was no way back into Marlene’s heart. Keeping her company over lunch, though; that he was still permitted to do.

Von Sternberg suffered, but he suffered blissfully.

She was no longer making films with him either. But a new director who could produce her as enchantingly and mysteriously as von Sternberg had never appeared in Hollywood. Not even Ernst Lubitsch, whom Dietrich abhorred for his bad manners. So maybe it wouldn’t hurt to have another lunch with her creator. Even though his popularity with the Hollywood bosses was now akin to that of a crocodile on a sofa.

At the end of the day, he and Dietrich were in an industry that recognised only success or defeat; they were like old war comrades.

A handsome man approached their table. His hair was neatly combed back, and his blue eyes sparkled beneath a high forehead. Vivacious, with just a touch of melancholy, they radiated the refinement and sensibility of a gentleman who had come to wealth not through inheritance but through his own hard work. A financial framework which enabled him to move freely and nonchalantly in places like the Excelsior, and to have no fear of the occasionally extravagant hurdles posed by luxury. Erich Maria Remarque’s bank account was so full he no longer needed to think about money, and could devote his attention to other things—for example, the beauty who was sitting before him, eating lunch with the diminutive Joseph von Sternberg.

“Mr von Sternberg? Madam?”

Strictly speaking, Madam wasn’t at all fond of strangers who interrupted her mid-conversation. And she was quite clearly eating her lunch. But this unfamiliar man had an air about him that aroused a certain leniency in her.

Was it the carefully coordinated Mediterranean-blue tones of his shirt, trousers and neckerchief, signalling good taste? Was it his bird of prey-like eyes, which also held a note of sorrow? Was it his voice, which admittedly had a restrained, German sound, but was also self-assured, as though it could hold its own in Paris, London or New York? The Germany this man embodied was a different one. A Germany of generosity, not megalomania.

The dazzling stranger in blue bowed deeply.

“May I introduce myself? Erich Maria Remarque.”

Without hesitating for long, the diva stretched out her hand towards him. He took it, and gave it a deft, natural-looking kiss. Von Sternberg, the great director, recognised at once that something was happening. He signalled to the waiter to bring an extra chair.

“Won’t you join us?”

Remarque hesitated the hesitation of a gentleman. But Marlene made it easy for him, giving a casual nod toward the seat.

“You look far too young to have written one of the greatest books of our time.” Her attention was now focused on him alone. Von Sternberg looked like an extra who hadn’t managed to get off the set in time.

“Perhaps I only wrote it in order to hear your captivating voice say those words,” answered Remarque. A little wooden and unimaginative, perhaps, but, faced with a diva whose blonde locks the September breeze was playing with oh-so-carefully, a slight tremble now crept into the throat of this man of letters. Better to play it safe. Stay in the game. Not obstruct chemistry, which was now taking charge, with foolish comments.

Remarque pulled out his golden lighter and lit her cigarette. She cupped her pale hand shieldingly over his tanned one, and inhaled deeply.

What a thoroughly pleasant surprise, and at an hour when others were still occupied with their morning ablutions. The two of them were fascinated. With each other. With Venice. With love, or whichever gifted marksman had made his arrow whirr elegantly through the blue air. Von Sternberg, the extra, made himself scarce.

Dietrich looked at the stranger. He seemed familiar. He was Berlin, thank God. Who had sent her this man? He wasn’t one of the pretty actors with whom

she usually passed the time. She had almost forgotten to breathe, some years back, while reading his book “All Quiet on the Western Front”. It was moving, like a great film, yet also utterly tangible and sincere. She’d felt as though, here, for the first time, was the voice of one of those terrible demons that had held the better of her generation captive all these years. Including her, and she hadn’t even been in that strange war. This man had a great mind, and tenderness too, and a dark humour with which he tried to keep his melancholy in check. A man who could paint. Like von Sternberg used to. Except with words. And he looked like a film star. She was now wide awake. It was as though the water was dancing the Charleston on the canals.

Quotidien things like the time of day were no longer important. The writer and the diva forgot the constraints of day-to-day life, they talked and talked until it got light.

“Remarque and I spoke until dawn! It was wonderful! Then he looked at me so earnestly and said: “I must confess something to you—I’m impotent.” And I looked up at him and said: “Oh, how wonderful! I said it with such relief! I was so happy! We would simply talk and sleep, and be tender, and everything would be so wonderfully easy,” Marlene said later, swept away by the encounter, to her daughter Maria.

On their way to the hotel, Remarque relativised his coquettish self-diagnosis on the matter of impotence. Entirely renouncing going to bed together; it seemed this wasn’t something he wanted after all. He could absolutely be of service, he assured her, even if not in the traditional heterosexual sense: “If so desired, I can of course be a very captivating lesbian,” he said, completely in the style of the brazen Berlin years. Back then he had been a member of Mali, a lesbian club which he was permitted to frequent for writing.

Things didn’t stop at suggestive chit-chat. During the early days of their romance, Remarque notices a book by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke in Marlene’s hands. His sarcastic insinuation that this was probably an essential prop for any movie star who held herself in high regard only mildly amused Marlene. Rilke was her favourite poet. In the sands of Venice, Marlene recited by heart: “The Tomb of a Young Girl”, “Leda”, “Day in Autumn”, and of course “The Panther”.

In early September, as the 1930s gradually approached their end, Venice was the meeting place for these two world-famous figures who had deeply inhaled the chaotic, modern spirit of 1920s Berlin and were still fully pervaded with it.

The racing, radical changes of this century. The speed on the streets of the metropolis. The misery of a brutal and lost war. Hyperinflation and soup kitchens. The glittering bars where war profiteers, speculators and artists amused themselves. The six-day races. Boxing matches. Charleston dance events. The blurring of gender boundaries. Women fighting for autonomy and equality.

Everything that had seemed set in stone during the era of Kaiser Wilhelm II had come crashing down.

Women in dress coats. Women with boxing gloves. Women behind the wheel. Women who simply rented gigolos, like the later legendary director Billy Wilder, for an afternoon in the fashionable pleasure palace “Haus Vaterland”—in 1920s Berlin, all of this belonged to the new normal.

Men like Remarque and women like Marlene had energised things to such an extent that, within just a decade, Berlin had become the most modern metropolis in the Western world. A paradise for some. An utterly depraved swamp of odiousness to others, who were now trying to beat into being and plunder a completely different Reich.

To destroy the “den of iniquity” that was Berlin, as Hitler had vowed.

Marlene and Remarque.

Goebbels was fascinated by the den of iniquity’s two shining figures. Their charisma. Their ability to find a direct route into the hearts and minds of the masses. The propaganda minister would have loved to use and abuse them for his own means. But where Remarque was concerned, as Goebbels soon realised, he had stumbled across the wrong man.

With Marlene, in the whip cracker’s opinion, there was still hope. Admittedly he had found “The Blue Angel” as objectionable as “All Quiet on the Western Front”. Appalling. Utter filth. “So that’s what the mind of our city man of letters looks like” he had ranted. He condemned Dietrich for having allowed herself to be taken to Jewish Hollywood. But he also saw himself as a great seducer of women, and Dietrich as fair game.

“Today I am forty years old,” wrote Goebbels on 29. October 1937 in his diary. “A terrible feeling. The best is now over.”

His bad mood was lifted by the prospect of luring the biggest star of German cinema back to Berlin, where the rhythm was now set not by the shimmy but the Horst Wessel song.

### **Paris, 1937**

The Hotel Lancaster in Paris was one of Marlene Dietrich’s favourite addresses. Located in a side street of the Champs-Élysées, Marlene’s daughter Maria later described the Lancaster in her memoirs as “a kind of private palace in the heart of Paris”. The hotel was known for being tasteful and discreet—Baccarat chandeliers, doors like in Versailles, and a small ocean of constantly-replenished flowers in blue, yellow, white and pink, the colours of spring.

Within the Lancaster’s walls, Marlene felt safe. “It was unthinkable and impossible to bribe the Lancaster staff,” wrote Maria. “That kind of thing was unheard-of here. If someone had dared, they would have been guillotined for sure.”

After their passionate days together in Venice, the two conquerors, Marlene and Remarque, set off towards Paris, where they planned to spend the rest of the year together. Love’s sudden intoxication inspired Remarque to have their joint suite opulently furnished with white lilacs and Dom Pérignon. Inside these rooms, they gave free reign to their fascination with one another. She was deeply impressed by him; a writer who possessed verve and wit, but who could also exude a certain melancholy in a tuxedo. And in addition, he was someone she could take care of.

He soaked in the diva’s aura—captivated, like a little boy, by the elaborate dressing up ceremonies before they went out to Fouquet’s or La Coupole or Maxim’s. The black comb which, tilting her head a little to the side, she “mercilessly and vigorously” ran through her short hair. The selection of evening gowns, all from the finest addresses: “The white with the golden bodice from



Schiaparelli, or the black-and-gold from Alix (...) or the green-and-red from Alix, or perhaps the pretty outfit from Lanoin that will scratch you at the neck again” as Remarque noted.

Paris was the lighthouse of freedom in a Europe where the fascists were smashing in all the lights. A government of the people’s front ruled here, enabling a place of hope and tolerance for many refugees. Tens of thousands of German Jews, artists and left-wing politicians had fled to the French metropolis. There was a multitude of impassioned German language newspapers and magazines. Publications like the “Parisian Tageblatt” which, after a thoroughly robust internal editorial debate, was now called the “Parisian Tageszeitung”.

After the wedding of Hermann Göring to the actress Emmy Sonneman in spring 1935, Klaus Mann had personally congratulated the Nazi bride in the “Tageblatt”: “Don’t you ever feel disgusted? And if you don’t: don’t you ever feel afraid? Because the hour will come when you’re alone, the wedding hoopla can’t last forever, and there won’t be grand dinners every evening. The fat husband is on his way—he might be sitting in his office signing death warrants, or inspecting bombers. Darkness is falling. You’re alone in your beautiful palace. Do the ghosts not come? Don’t you see those murdered in the concentration camps stepping out from behind the opulent portieres? Those beaten to death, shot trying to escape, those who committed suicide? Does a bloody head not appear? It might be Erich Mühsam—a poet—and wasn’t it your erstwhile calling to speak the words of poets, before you became mother of a damned country that beats to death or exiles the brave among its wordsmiths?”

The kind of thing it hadn’t been permissible to say in Germany for a long while, in Paris was printed in the paper. Courageous, brilliant, and in German. Berlin, the den of iniquity, was taking in the air once more on the Seine, and on good days, even dancing.

The Nazis had always hated Paris, but ever since the intelligentsia they had tried to extinguish had begun to blossom there, they hated it even more.

In early November, Remarque found himself locked into the diva’s bathroom—by her Majesty herself. What had happened?

Evidently, a renewed attempt by Goebbels, who wouldn't tire of trying to bring Marlene home to the Reich. Admittedly Julius Streicher's Nazi paper the "Stürmer" had berated Marlene a month previously, for allegedly taking American citizenship: "Spending time with Jews has made her character completely un-German. The picture shows the swearing-in ceremony in Los Angeles. In shirtsleeves (!), he (the judge) records Marlene Dietrich's oath, in which she betrays her Fatherland."

But then, a short while later, Marlene had her and Maria's passports extended at the German embassy in Paris, and contested that she was an American citizen. What she concealed was that she had made an application to become one. She also kept to herself the fact that, six months previously, she had signed an appeal against General Franco, that Spanish fascist leader whom Goebbels regarded as a "blessing", hoping he would destroy his republican opponents "root and branch".

"Marlene Dietrich has submitted in our embassy in Paris a formal declaration against her detractors, emphasising that she is German and wants to remain so. She is also due to appear in the German theatre with Hilpert. I will now put her under my protection," Goebbels subsequently and hopefully wrote in his journal, before sending his Hilpert to Paris.

And so two of Goebbel's emissaries soon appeared in the lobby at the Lancaster, and in uniform too. If it's Paris, then uniform it is. If a person has little or no character, this is how to seek an anchor in the elegant metropolis.

One of them, Heinz Hilpert, looked as though he were dressed in some kind of disguise. He seemed to find the attire slightly unpleasant. He was director at the Deutsches Theater, successor of the legendary Max Reinhardt, who had been driven out by the Nazis. To err on the side of caution, Joachim von Ribbentrop—the "Special and Authorized Ambassador of the German Reich" with a base in London—had been sent alongside the pliant Hilpert. Ribbentrop wore his uniform with conviction. A parvenu of horror, like Goebbels.

The two uniformed Nazis were awaiting an audience with the diva. The concierge telephoned up. Marlene reacted quickly. Sending them away wouldn't do. Letting them come up would—but with the ostracized Fatherland-traitor

Remarque in her rooms, the whole theatre regarding the German passport might start up again. So she decisively turned the key in the door to the bathroom, where Remarque happened to be. Then he couldn't be a disturbance.

To the two emissaries, she then played the eager-to-repent sinner who wanted to return to Hitler's glorious Reich as soon as possible. Great joy from the two uniformed men. Once they had departed, the liberation of Remarque.

"Don't you dare lock me in again, Marlene, do you hear me? Never again! I'm not some recalcitrant child, nor am I so stupid as to put myself in genuine danger through sheer foolhardiness," he shouted.

"My darling, I was afraid for you," answered the diva. "You know how they hate you for leaving Germany as a non-Jew. Perhaps they only came because they thought they'd find you here. The story about Hitler wanting me as a big star for his Reich. (...) That's not even true. He's only sending his high officers to tail me, (...) because he's seen me in "The Blue Angel" and wants me in lace panties."

Remarque laughed loudly; a rare occurrence. The Nazis weren't just barbarians, they were also idiots.

"Marlene Dietrich has refuted all the allegations against her. I will have her rehabilitated in the press!" wrote Goebbels in his journal, confident of victory.

### **Paris, 1937**

*Gas bill 5.72 Tips 0.28 6.00*

*Fashion House Becker 2673.60*

*Pedicure 4.00*

*Telephone bill 143.60*

*Zoo with the child 3.50*

The man who recorded such expenditures daily, conscientiously and in fine pencil, had friendly eyes, combed-back blonde hair, and answered to the name Rudi. His surname was Sieber, but that was irrelevant. Everyone called him Rudi—he was a

sporting fellow who always seemed willing to help others. And immaculately dressed, too: silk shirts, golden cufflinks, made-to-measure suits.

Half an eternity ago, in May 1923, Marlene and Rudi had got married. He had been a kind of Rudi Friday in the film industry. She, back then eagerly seeking a way to her big break, saw him as important, and promised him her unending loyalty in the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church.

It was precisely this declaration, to have just one partner in life, that revealed itself to be a problem for both spouses. When Marlene discovered that Rudi could be relied upon in almost all matters except his sexual abstinence outside the shared marital bed, she decided they would stay together regardless. She considered sexual loyalty to be overrated, in any case. She called him “Papi”, and he called her “Mutti”. Soon there was also “Tami”. This was the abbreviation of Tamara, the nanny for Maria, their daughter, who occasionally slept next to Rudi in Mutti and Papi’s bed.

Rudi hadn’t merely survived Marlene’s international career—including their move to Hollywood—without being sacked by the diva. Papi had also revealed himself to be a kind of second backbone for Marlene: the most important support in her life. Confidant, manager, bookkeeper, representative on the home front, partner in crime, and alibi when the rumours about Marlene’s affairs intensified and threatened to sully her image.

When, for example, Josef von Sternberg’s ex-wife Riza Royce had had enough of her husband’s affair, and sued Marlene on the grounds of “marital breakdown” for half a million dollars in damages, Rudi immediately travelled from Berlin to America to give exonerating interviews. He loved his wife more than anything else, he gushed. A journalist promptly asked Rudi exactly what it was he loved so much about her.

“She makes such good pancakes,” Rudi had answered.

Rudi stayed four weeks, smiled loyally and sunnily for the cameras, and by the time he departed, Marlene was fully rehabilitated. On the way home, a telegram from Mutti reached him.

“We’re thinking of you with love and longing. Everything is empty.”

There was no doubt that in the strange world of show business, Rudi was a constant to be relied upon. Not having him available to her made Marlene nervous. As early as autumn 1933, when Goebbels declared that Germany was leaving the League of Nations and would no longer discuss the topic of disarmament, Marlene had asked Rudi to pack his things and come to her in America; and also to place a comprehensive order for travel luggage.

“Be a dear and buy some large suitcases tomorrow that you can throw everything into. You know there are never enough suitcases when one’s packing.”

Too few suitcases? Not with Rudi. Even when the diva later travelled with up to 30 trunks, Rudi knew exactly where the cases were and what was inside them.

Making notes, filing documents, keeping track of things; these remained Rudi’s special disciplines, even when the list of his wife’s lovers got longer and longer. He packed everything into his files. Even the love letters Marlene received or wrote herself.

“You – only you – the master – the giver – reason for my existence – the teacher – the lover whom my heart and mind must follow.”

Marlene had copied out this letter to von Sternberg and sent it to Rudi. File this away please. Organisation is essential.

When Rudi, father confessor and postal clerk in this marriage, remarked once that the long telephone calls—which Marlene needed to battle her homesickness for Berlin and the chic loneliness of a Hollywood star—were getting too expensive, he received a response that left no doubt of its clarity.

“Stop worrying. (...) I have a lot of money and I spend it so I can talk to you and the child.”

Rudi, Tami and the child.

Marlene didn’t call this collection of people “my family”, but rather her “environs”. And Remarque, the well-travelled writer who so precisely observed and brilliantly depicted the highs and catastrophes of the Western world in the early twentieth century, was flabbergasted when he met his beloved world star’s environs in the Hotel Lancaster in Paris.

“The environs” had also taken up lodgings in Paris. The thirteen-year-old child had been assigned to organise the star’s wardrobe, to tidy things away and have them laundered. Rudi took charge of the bookkeeping and chauffeured Marlene and her new lover through the French capital.

It was all rather too much. A writer should really have enough imagination to cope even in unusual situations. But the complex arrangements of Remarque’s experiences in the French city with Marlene were not necessarily the circumstances of a tender, unfurling love. More like the beginning of an unpredictable, hurtling rally drive. Sometimes they seemed to be gliding along in perfect intimacy, then the engine would stutter and they felt like two strangers. Then the car would be engulfed in flames, and they would yell at each other. And then, in the hastily patched-up vehicle, they would once again set off on their way.

There was no map for this trip, which sometimes felt like an expedition into the heavens, but then, within just a few minutes, could transform into a trip to hell.

There were no rules of any kind. Remarque was filled with horror at the idea of a relationship accompanied by rules and regulations. Marlene also viewed such a thing with contempt—not least because she preferred to define which path would be taken, and above all, how.

The diva wasn’t wearing the trousers just for the fun of it.

[END OF SAMPLE]