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Twentieth-Century Woman

Marta Feuchtwanger's Extraordinary Journey —It All Began in Munich, 1891 . . .

photographs by Cecilia White

Marta Feuchtwanger, c. 1926

Marta Feuchtwanger at home in Pacific Palisades

By Lawrence Weschler

If you attend concerts, plays, consular receptions, university lectures, or any number of other public occasions in Los Angeles, you've almost certainly seen her; and if you've seen her, you've no doubt wondered who she is, this splendid octogenarian dowager, perennially wrapped in her long black Chinese gowns, her sleek white hair pulled back tight in a neat bun, her face a study in wry animation. Well, meet Marta Feuchtwanger: A more vibrant woman you are seldom likely to encounter.

Despite her eighty-eight years, Marta these days is a very busy woman. Just try to slip an appointment in edgewise as she reels off her commitments—this committee for the Watts Towers, that performance of an experimental theater company at the Fox Venice, this next visit from the Polish ambassador. She no longer trudges down the hill from her Pacific Palisades home each morning—every morning of the year—to bathe in the chilly waters of the Pacific (she gave that up a few years back—"Come on," she winks, "There *are* limits to what an eighty-eight year old woman can do"). But you'd be hard-pressed to locate any other such limits as she drives off virtually every evening, often chauffeuring friends a generation younger than she to various cultural and political events throughout the Southland. And during the days she devotes hours to her teeming desk, managing the literary estate of her late husband, the eminent German historical novelist, Lion Feuchtwanger, or escorting rapt visitors through the extraordinary library which is equally much his legacy and which Marta has now willed to the University of Southern California. So pinning her down for an appointment is seldom easy.

But not long ago over a period of six months, I had the good fortune of sliding several dozen meetings into Marta's frenetic calendar. As part of a joint undertaking by the UCLA Oral History Program and the USC Library, I was dispatched to record Mrs. Feuchtwanger's reminiscences on tape. The fifty hours of recorded conversation that resulted have now been distilled into four volumes of edited transcript, almost 2,000 pages covering her friendships and interactions with many of the greatest figures in world politics and culture over the past century. This absorbing record has recently been made available for perusal by scholars and other interested parties at the libraries of both universities.

Throughout the vast interviews, Marta maintained a light, easily flowing tone. She sometimes seemed as bright and sassy as the young woman whose life she was recounting. Although her English is entirely fluent, the transcripts are festooned with delicious literalisms, near-misses of translation (as when she describes hiking through Sicily and encountering "a small herd of porks"), and the tapes preserve her marvelously distinctive diction, in which, among other trademarks, the v's often flutter into w's (as when she tells you of "the clinching and wampish dress" she once wore during a particularly bawdy Munich Fasching).

Marta was born in Munich in 1891 to middle-class assimilated Jewish parents, their only child to survive infancy. From out of an over-sheltered childhood, she blossomed into a lovely teenager, physically active and intellectually alert. In 1910 she met Lion Feuchtwanger, seven years her senior, a young playwright and critic, at a party given by one of his sisters. His parents, quite wealthy Othodox Jews, had virtually disowned their lapsed son, who had in the meantime taken to living a bohemian life, espousing *l'art pour l'art*, and cutting a dashing figure in Munich underground society. He was immediately taken

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a slight, silly-looking young man from that table solicitously hurried over to help him with his coat. It was Adolf Hitler.

A few years later, in 1923, Hitler's abortive (and premature) Beerhall Putsch signaled the closing of an era. Although Hitler had ludicrously failed this time around, the political climate in Munich quickly deteriorated, and most of the city's cultural elite were presently scampering for the safer high ground of cosmopolitan Berlin. Lion and Marta joined the exodus, but Lion also sounded an early alarm in his writings. His 1927 novel *Success* included the first sustained satirical treatment of Hitler in German literature; it was a portrait the Nazis would not forget.

The Feuchtwangers' Berlin years were lively. Feuchtwanger's reputation soared with the sensational successes of such novels as *Jud Suss* (known as *Power* in America). They played host to cultural figures from throughout the world, ranging from Sinclair Lewis to Sergei Eisenstein. Lion plowed his substantial royalties back into a nascent bibliophilic obsession: By 1933, his was one of the finest private libraries in Berlin. It, and almost everything else, would be lost.

In January, 1933, while Lion was on tour in America and Marta skiing in Austria, Hitler seized power in Berlin. The Feuchtwangers would never return to their ransacked home. Upon rejoining each other, they instead sought refuge in France, in Sanary, a tiny fishing village along the Riviera that somehow became quite magnetized during this period. For seven years, their neighbors included Aldous Huxley, Thomas Mann, Franz Werfel, and Alma Mahler. Lion worked feverishly, composing his greatest historical novels, the Josephus trilogy, while at the same time producing a string of contemporary stories spotlighting

Marta Feuchtwanger in the library

Lion Feuchtwanger

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with her.

Marta describes the nervy tone of their early encounters, Lion's persistent siege, her own persistent stubbornness. But the chemistry of the relationship gradually took hold, and the two were soon pursuing "a secret courtship," two years of secret dalliances in Lion's attic apartment, secret, that is, "until it was no longer possible to keep it a secret." The interview session in which we covered this period was particularly coy, as interviewer and interviewee alike contrived to relate the entire process without once resorting to use of the word "pregnant." Marta deployed every conceivable euphemism, finally relating the events of her wedding day, during which she was gowned in black, "because I couldn't very well wear white in my condition."

Their marriage, conceived in secret, entered into out of necessity, would last forty-eight years; but it barely survived its first. Within a few months the young couple was in Lausanne with Marta delivering her child, a daughter. Both mother and daughter, however, contracted puerperal fever; the child quickly died, and the mother almost followed. Marta recalls one night when she lapsed into a virtual coma. Two nurses were bathing her, "and one said to the other, 'This is the last night we will have to be here.' I heard that," she recalls, "and even though I couldn't speak anymore, still, in my mind I said, 'I don't think I will do that.'" And miraculously, Marta did recover. The Feuchtwangers would never have another child—there simply would not be the time, Marta explains—but it is interesting that throughout his novels, Feuchtwanger is haunted by the elusive presence of daughters.

As Marta recovered, the two began a gypsy honeymoon, trekking from the French Riviera down the boot of Italy across to Sicily and eventually over to North Africa. For almost two years they lived out of their knapsacks from day to day, utterly oblivious in their primitive happiness to the gloom that was inexorably gathering over Europe.

In August, 1914, the young couple was sojourning in the desert of French Tunisia when they suddenly found themselves arrested as enemy aliens. Lion was incarcerated in a prison camp, and Marta, on the outside, worked frantically to wheedle his release. At length she succeeded, and the two quickly smuggled their way back to Munich, where Lion was summarily slapped into the Kaiser's army.

During the war years, Lion's aesthetics gradually changed: In short, he became politicized. Indeed, his "Lied der Gefallenen" in 1915 was among the first German antiwar poems. As the war savaged the monarchial social order in Bavaria, Lion and Marta became increasingly sympathetic to the socialist upswelling that, with the conclusion of hostilities in 1918, briefly saw the ascendency of a progressive leftist regime in Bavaria. That experiment was quickly squashed by the Berlin authorities, but Lion's and Marta's political sympathies would persist.

Much has been made of the extraordinary convergence of artistic genius in Berlin during the late twenties, but few people realize how seminal Munich was in earlier years. Indeed, for all intents and purposes, Munich can be seen as Berlin in preparation. It was here that Kandinsky and the Blue Rider movement invented pictorial abstraction, here that Bruno Walter secured his first major orchestral podium, that Max Reinhardt dazzled summer theater audiences, and that Thomas Mann and his brother Heinrich vied for literary supremacy.

As Marta unfurls stories of Munich at the time, she displays a sly sense of narrative, often withholding identities for the punchline. One afternoon in 1919, for example, as Marta tells it, Lion, who was by then the town's ranking theater critic, was approached by a brash twenty-year-old medical student from the provinces who thrust upon him a sheaf of pages, his fledgling dramatic effort. Feuchtwanger was impressed and championed the work into production. The boy's name was Bertolt Brecht. (The two would remain lifelong friends and even collaborate on three plays.)

About the same time, Marta continues, some of their friends in the interim socialist government were manning the food-rationing office when they were visited by the papal nuncio, in full regalia, who meekly inquired whether under the new regime the church might still receive its allotted stamps for butter. This man was Eugenio Pacelli; in 1939 he would become Pope Pius XII. Indeed, it now seems as if much of midcentury were in gestation in the streets of Munich.

One afternoon in the public gardens, Marta and Lion were having tea. As on any other afternoon, the tables were crammed with diverse parties in animated conversation. The table next to theirs, for example, presided over by composer Hans Pfitzner, was embroiled in political disputations. As Lion rose to leave,

the same time producing a string of contemporary stories spotlighting the German calamity. In the meantime he slowly built up a second library, almost as fine as the first, and equally doomed.

In 1940, with Franco-German relations deteriorating, the French government interned its Jewish exiles as potential enemy aliens. The Feuchtwangers, like all other Germans, were herded into camps. They were separated, with Lion incarcerated near Nimes and Marta in the foothills of the Pyrenees. In June, the Nazis swamped the French defenses and seized control of the camps. Feuchtwanger was among a select group of individuals they were specifically seeking. During a summer fraught with danger, Marta (age forty-nine) escaped out of her camp, wandered through Southern France, its roads swollen with disoriented and despairing refugees, and finally determined Lion's location. She secreted herself into his camp (disguised as a black marketeer), established contact, secreted herself back out, and then, with the assistance of two young American consular officials, engineered Lion's kidnapping out of the camp. The Feuchtwangers then holed up in a Marseilles attic for several months before they were able to hazard their perilous escape, by foot over the Pyrenees, by train through fascist Spain, and finally on two separate ships out of Lisbon.

Within a year they had reestablished themselves, this time on the California Riviera, eventually securing a delapidated castle in the hills of Pacific Palisades. Marta quickly set about its rehabilitation. Once again they found themselves in a rich community of emigres. The whole Sanary group had resurfaced on the West Side of Los Angeles, and now they were joined by others, including Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky, Bertolt

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Brecht, Fritz Lang, Otto Klemperer, Bruno Walter, Max Reinhardt—the list is legion. Many found employment in local universities or Hollywood. They found succor in one another's company. They spent evenings on the Palisade, watching the sun set over the Pacific, contemplating the ravages in the land they had left behind, awaiting the coming dawn. They worked as best they could. Lion wrote books and was quite successful; with the royalties he set about amassing his third library, perhaps his greatest. They were, as someone had called them, exiles in paradise.

Time passed. The war ended. Dawn came. But the eastern sky was bloody with revelations of concentration camps and bomb devastation. And the satisfactions of victory were further tempered by a pervading sense of anxiety as America lurched from its external war against fascism into an internal obsession with communism. The very broadcasts and papers with which these emigres had cried out against Nazism from its earliest festerings were now being cited against them as evidence of longstanding "communist" sympathies. The Feuchtwangers saw their friends Brecht and Hanns Eisler hounded out of the country and Thomas Mann leave in disgust. Feuchtwanger himself, despite the success of his novel *Proud Destiny*, a celebration of the American Revolution that he saw as his present to his adopted land, was repeatedly denied citizenship on grounds—and this was the official charge—of "premature antifascism." (Ironically, Stalin was simultaneously banning his once-popular books in the Soviet Union on grounds that they were too reactionary.) A few days after Lion's death in 1958, at age seventy-four, Marta received a call from a functionary at the Immigration Service, grievously apologizing that they had been just about to grant Lion his citizenship and wouldn't she come down on her next birthday and receive the honor.

In the months following Lion's passing, Marta curled into a solitary seclusion. The only companions she allowed herself were the animals she encountered on long hikes through the Santa Monica Mountains or during her early morning swims in the Pacific. Dejected, she allowed her elegantly terraced garden, which had been almost as celebrated as Lion's library, to revert to nature. Gradually, however, she was coaxed out of her isolation through the solicitude of friends. Slowly her interest in the world regenerated. She busied herself with the stewardship of Lion's estate, negotiating with the trustees of USC to establish their house and its contents as the Lion Feuchtwanger Memorial Library. She continues to live in the house, over the years shepherding thousands of visitors through its magnificent rooms. In 1961, as the Bel Air fire surged to within a few hundred yards of the house, imperiling the library for yet a third time, seventy-year-old Marta heroically stayed behind, supervising its evacuation and watering down the grounds, thereby saving them.

Marta's tour of the library is today one of the highlights of a Southern California visit for many world dignitaries. The collection of more than 35,000 volumes includes some extraordinary gems, and Marta, a spry gleam in her eye, takes her visitors through a marvelously cadenced walking history of Western Civilization. You are shown the first Florentine edition of Sophocles, inscribed by Michelangelo Buonarroti; or the first edition of Rousseau's *Treatise on the Inequality of Men*, inscribed by Beaumarchais to his dear friend Benjamin Franklin; or a bound collection of a contemporary Paris journal, the complete series from 1792 to 1814, including transcripts of the hearings of Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, Danton, and Robespierre (a volume initially compiled by Napoleon's brother). As you walk through the house, you are shown the recessed organ at which Bruno Walter used to sit and play; at one point Marta unexpectedly upends a chair to show you the black-crayoned autograph Rostropovich left behind after a private recital. The stories flow with gracious ease. At the end of the tour, you inscribe your name in a guest book that includes the signatures of many of the world's leading citizens.

"Nothing human is alien to me," *Marta insisted on the last day of our* interviews. Her indefatigable interest in the world would seem to bear that out. She recently willed her entire financial estate to USC, and the proceeds will one day fund a Feuchtwanger Institute for Exile Studies on the campus. The life of Marta Feuchtwanger, born in Munich in 1891, has been subject to many migrations, none perhaps as definitive as the temporal: In her serene old age she resides on the far shore of another continent, on the nether cusp of another century. But through her expansive generosity—in the form of her taped recollections, her announced endowments, but most important, her ongoing presence—she has spanned them all.

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