

## EXILE IN PARADISE

### The Feuchtwangers in Pacific Palisades

Of all the local refugees, Lion Feuchtwanger and his wife, Marta, seemed to adapt most readily to the American way and became true Palisadians. They liked the Americans—the camaraderie and the mixture of people—and felt comfortable here. Lion, a prolific and popular author who had been nominated for the Nobel Prize, aptly characterized himself as a "German novelist whose heart was Jewish and whose mind was cosmopolitan."

According to Marta's lively and insightful oral history at the University of California Los Angeles, "An Émigré Life", the Feuchtwangers had actually been refugees since 1925, when Hitler's growing influence in Bavaria led them to move from their home in Munich to Berlin. In 1933, when Hitler became chancellor of Germany, they were forced to flee and to abandon everything in their Berlin home to the Nazis, who killed their pets, trampled their gardens and destroyed Lion's magnificent library. They sought refuge first in Austria, then Switzerland, and finally at Sanary on the French Riviera, where they were joined by an ever-changing group of friends, among them the Thomas Manns, Bertolt Brecht and Aldous Huxley, all of whom, like the Feuchtwangers, later made their homes in or near Pacific Palisades.

When war broke out in 1939, Lion and Marta were interned by the French as "enemy aliens," and after France was defeated were in danger of being handed over to the Nazis. According to Marta's narrations, the situation for Lion was desperate, since he had been sentenced to death by the Germans for his books against Hitler and posters with his likeness were on display everywhere. Managing to escape from their captors, the Feuchtwangers crossed the Pyrenees on foot, reached Portugal safely and departed—each on a separate ship—for New York.

The Feuchtwangers came to Los Angeles, attracted by the climate and the ocean, and with the help of friends moved into a succession of rented homes—in Mandeville Canyon, on Sunset Boulevard and on Amalfi Drive. Each had a special appeal, but for their own home, the Feuchtwangers preferred a house by the sea. Their search eventually led them to Paseo Miramar, where virtually all of the nine existing houses were for sale, and all in varying stages of disrepair. The steep, brush-covered ridge was considered too remote from schools, markets, and medical care, especially under gas rationing. Even so, the Feuchtwangers were pleased. The picturesque site reminded them of Italy.

The house they chose was the Los Angeles Times Demonstration Home. It was built in 1928 and belonged to Judge Arthur A. Weber, one of the owners and developers of Miramar Estates. Marta was told that the Webers had patterned the house after a small castle they had seen near Seville and that they had returned from Spain with the authentic blueprints and wood for a ceiling and brought the patio fountain from Italy.

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According to Judge Weber's son, Arthur, adverse business conditions, which included the deepening Depression, forced them into bankruptcy. In addition, Alphonzo Bell's controversial quarrying activities nearby in Santa Ynez Canyon and his plans to build a cement factory in the residential area discouraged sale of lots in the subdivision and of the Times Demonstration Home itself, which the family called "Miramar." The Webers had to sell their home in Santa Monica, "rented" Miramar from the bank and moved there in 1931, when Arthur was four years old.

Today Arthur remembers Miramar as being a very lonely place for a small child. His father was absent a great deal of the time, since he traveled about, trying cases for the Los Angeles Municipal Water District. There were several adults in the household—his mother, Sophia ("Bya"), his grandmother, a great aunt, and two great-uncles—but there were few neighbors and no children anywhere around. Two sisters, Margaret and Jane, were considerably older and for the most part lived away from home. The society sections of the local newspapers carried the notice of Margaret's marriage in June 1937 and the story of her wedding reception at the Weber home. In 1939, partly because of the impact of the isolated life on Arthur, the family moved to Santa Monica, and four years later Judge Weber died suddenly while trying a case in court.

The origin of the name of the Feuchtwanger house, "Villa Aurora," has been somewhat of a mystery over the years. Marta seldom if ever referred to the house by that name and when asked, was really not sure of its genesis. Lamont Johnson, a good friend and neighbor on "The Hill," remembered that in the early 1960s the neighborhood wanted to give the little enclave a European caché by titling the major Mediterranean style structures with French and Italian sounding names. Marble plaques were produced with a variety of romantic sounding names obtained at random from dictionaries and atlases. The names were affixed to nine houses, the Feuchtwanger's being one.

When the Feuchtwangers came house-hunting, a caretaker employed by the bank had been living in the house and was now ready to leave. The task that confronted the Feuchtwangers was monumental: the windows were broken; there was a foot of dirt in the house, spider webs in the basement, and a tangle of weeds and shrubbery in the garden. Lion had just sold his novel "Lautensacks" to Colliers magazine, providing funds for a down payment on the house, but not enough for furniture.

At first they had only sleeping bags, which were placed out in the garden and served as beds. Sympathizing with their plight, Pacific Palisades lawyer Eric Scudder, who had read and admired Lion's books, sent a workman to help Marta shovel the dirt, dead lizards, and mice out of the rooms. Gradually the Feuchtwangers furnished the house with interesting antique pieces from second-hand stores and bought a huge Oriental rug from titled neighbors (a Persian prince) farther up the hill.

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They purchased more lots for privacy, built paths down the hillside and bridges over the ravines; Marta planted trees and designed flowerbeds, with roses and seasonal varieties. The garden was a delight to them both. Lion worked in the library, where he dictated in German to a secretary, but the garden was his relaxation. Lion's generous income from book sales and movie rights permitted them both to indulge their hobbies—Marta to buy trees and Lion to begin again the pleasurable task of locating rare books and assembling a new library.

Friends and compatriots came to call. Charles Chaplin, Lewis Browne, and playwright Bertolt Brecht were frequent guests at their home, as was Charles Laughton, who gave Shakespearean readings in the garden. The Feuchtwangers and Manns also took turns hosting large dinner parties at which the men read from their latest manuscripts. When they met at the Feuchtwangers', for both English and German language sessions, the guests feasted on Greek and Italian salads and Marta's famous hot apple strudel.

Lion brought Brecht and his family to the United States in 1941. Although Brecht had a great talent, he was radical in politics and a skeptic in his point of view. He had no use for the Feuchtwangers' house and remarked, "Pacific Palisades doesn't exist; it's just trees and hills. When someone is sick there is no doctor; when you need a pharmacy, there's nothing to buy. You cannot live so far away from civilization."

Nevertheless, Lion and Brecht worked amicably together on a play, "Simone". Later it was published by Lion as a novel, and in that form was chosen for publication by the prestigious Literary Guild. The screen rights were sold to Goldwyn, Brecht's share of the proceeds enabling him to buy a house in Santa Monica and to continue his writing. Many plays from this period, including "Mother Courage" and "The Good Woman of Szechwan," were eventually world famous, but only a new version of an earlier work, "Galileo", was performed while he was here.

Pearl Harbor and the involvement of the United States in the war compounded the tension in the lives of the émigrés. The Japanese were sent to internment camps, and the Germans, who were designated "enemy aliens," were placed under an eight o'clock curfew. Curiously, this ruling did not apply to Austrians and was not imposed in the East.

Thomas Mann and Albert Einstein both made a plea on behalf of those affected, but the curfew remained in force, and although it was humiliating to those who had resisted the Nazi regime, it was observed with good-natured acceptance. Several of the writers even managed to use the long evenings and the enforced isolation to their advantage and put in long hours of work on their writing. Salka Viertel's three sons, the Thomas Manns' son Klaus, and others from the refugee colony joined the armed forces and served their new country. All now had to watch and wait until the war came to an end.

The drama and tragedy of the refugees did not cease with the celebrations of V-E Day (Victory in Europe) but continued on through the painful months of hearing, one by one, the tales of friends and relatives who had perished in the Nazi holocaust. There were sad footnotes during and after the war, as many of the refugees themselves died. Several old friends were missing from Salka Viertel's famous soirées, but in their place were such talented newcomers as Norman Mailer, James Agee, John Huston, Norman Lloyd and Jean Renoir. Christopher Isherwood lived in Salka's little garden house for a time and John Houseman rented the main house when Salka no longer needed it for her family.

The era of the Cold War and the House Un-American Activities Committee investigations cast a chill over the émigrés who remained. Bertolt Brecht, whose radical views were well known, was called before the committee on October 30, 1947, and after one day of testimony boarded a plane and left for Europe.

The charge generally leveled against the émigrés was an ironic one—"premature antifascism." \* Even Salka Viertel, when she applied for a passport to visit family and friends in Germany, was repeatedly and rigorously questioned by the immigration authorities, and although her application was ultimately granted, she thereafter found it difficult to obtain employment. Objecting to a variety of such arbitrary actions and again protesting what he perceived to be injustice, Thomas Mann returned to Europe in 1949 and died in Switzerland in 1955.

Lion Feuchtwanger, whose postwar works included "The Widow Capet" and "Goya," chose the life of Benjamin Franklin as the subject of a new novel, "Proud Destiny." Envisioning the book as his gift to America, he postponed applying for his second citizenship papers until the manuscript was finished—in retrospect, a mistake in timing. He was called to testify in the McCarthy hearings, accused of premature antifascism and action on his application repeatedly delayed.

Lion's next play, "The Devil in Boston," was a commentary on the mood of the times. Its theme was Cotton Mather and the New England witch-hunts, a dramatization that predated by several years Arthur Miller's famous stage success "The Crucible." To no apparent purpose, the committee's badgering continued. Lion appeared before them less than a week before he died in December 1958. In a final vindication, Marta was told the day after his death that her citizenship had been granted and that, had he lived, Lion would have become an American citizen as well.

Marta's life had always been so interwoven with Lion's that without him even their garden brought painful memories. She let the weeds and flowers grow rampant as she sought a physical outlet for her grief and loneliness—walking in the mountains, scrambling up the ridges, and plunging into the surf. Deer and raccoons that came to her doorstep provided welcome distractions and, with time, the ministrations of friends and the inspiration of music helped to heal the wounds.

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In Lion's honor his friend Ernst Toch composed an impressive new work, his Fifth Symphony, based on the Old Testament theme of Lion's last book, "Jephta and his Daughter." When completed in 1963, it was given its first performance by the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Marta's tribute to Lion was twofold. In his memory, she made it possible for the University of Southern California to establish the Feuchtwanger Institute for the Study of Exile Literature under the direction of Dr. Harold von Hofe. She also donated Lion's magnificent library, their house, and the surrounding gardens to the University with the understanding that she could remain in the home during her lifetime. In recognition of Marta's own contributions to scholarship and learning, she herself was awarded an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree by the University of Southern California in 1980.

Randy Young

*Excerpted from:*

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\* The charge of "premature antifascism," of being opposed to fascism before the US entered WWII was one of the levers McCarthy used to start persecuting an individual. This fact, and the more general truth that the US government and much of America's elite intelligentsia were very sympathetic to the fascists for a long time, has been pretty much written out of history.