

Site Map: [MAIN](#) / [A Reader's Journal, Vol. 2](#) [Webpage](#) [Printer Ready](#)



A READER'S JOURNAL

**Zeit zu Leben und Zeit zu Sterben
In English: A Time to Live and A Time
to Die**

A Novel

by

Erich Maria Remarque

ARJ2 Chapter: Reading for Enjoyment
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Edited by Frederick G. Goldberg of The
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©qyearq

This is the first new book in German that I have read since my college days in German Literature class where I read Theodor Storm's *Immensee* or *Lake of the Bees*. This is also my first review of a German book. My abilities in German are meager and it's no fun for me reading a novel where I have to look up words ten times a page and struggle with idiomatic expressions. Goldberg's footnotes for idiomatic expressions and his Glossary in the rear of the book was a great help. I was able to read entire paragraphs at times with comprehension without referring to the Glossary, and, only a few times, the Glossary failed me on simple words I should already know, like *hingen* is the past tense of the English verb *hang*.

Enjoyment was the key for me. I had to enjoy reading the book or I would have never completed it. Remarque's lyric passages are sprinkled everywhere in this book, as I will demonstrate with a few examples. The only time I was bombarded by strange words and I absolutely had to look them up was when Ernst Graeber and Elizabeth were being bombarded by bombs and the aftermath of an air raid which happened at least once on most days while Ernst was on leave from the Russian Front where the Germans were fighting the Russians and were slowly being pushed West. He made the best of his two weeks' leave, as we shall see, and remained true to his profession as a German soldier.

Our hero, Ernst Graeber, usually referred to as simply Graeber, had reported to his officer, expecting to hear that all leaves had been canceled, but was surprised to be told that his own leave has come through. He had to rush back to pack his things for the trip home.

When he got off the train and walked to his parents' home, he found all the buildings were destroyed, only some walls were standing. He began seeking his parents and found out they had left the town before the destruction, but no one could tell him where they went.

He decided to look up a Dr. Cruze, but instead found his daughter Elizabeth, whom he knew from school, but whom he had not seen for years and mistook her for her mother. She was to become his constant companion in a few days, but first he had to find news of his parents' whereabouts. In the ruins he found a small yellow book, his own Catechism with his own words written in the margins. It contained a hundred questions and answers to the secrets of life. He felt his world reeling around him, and wondered if this reeling was caused by the destroyed city with the mother-of-pearl sky he saw above him, or by the tiny

yellow book with answers to all the questions of humanity that he held in his hands?

He found his friend Bindings' home and described it this way. In the early twilight of the garden, there was a birdbath on the lawn, in which water was splashing, with narcissus and tulips blooming in front of the lilac bushes, and a marble female figure gleaming under the birch trees.

He and Elizabeth agreed that Germany could not win the war, and they struggled over how to respond to that imminent reality. They shared the reality that in war the idea of happiness is tied to eating.

When he proposed marriage to Elizabeth, she asked him why? His first answer was to protect her, her father had been taken to a concentration camp and she might be picked up next. Being married to a soldier could save her life. But later he closed the deal by admitting to her, "Because I can't imagine a life without you." Besides that, marrying a soldier during the war was very much easier than usual. While she located her papers, Ernst found a tailor shop and had his uniform ironed, the only clothes he had. The tailor gave him some clothes to wear while he did his job. Then Ernst, all dressed up as a groom, asked the tailor how much. He answers, "1000 dollars or nothing. Therefore, make it nothing! A wedding present." Later they showed up at the Marriage Clerk's office. There was only one couple there besides them, so they wouldn't have long to wait. The petty bureaucrat hassled the couple, saying that they needed two witnesses to be married. The groom turned to Ernst and Elizabeth and asked if they would be the witnesses and then promised to do the same when they got married a few minutes later. Everything went well. The now married groom gave Ernst a large sausage as a wedding present as thanks for being his witness. The clerk asked Ernst for their two witnesses, but when Ernst pointed to the new bride and groom, the clerk said that's impossible because the witnesses cannot be related to each other! Up stepped a Gestapo officer who berated the Clerk for hassling a German soldier and offered to be the second witness to Ernst and Elizabeth's marriage. Later Ernst and Elizabeth laughed when they imagined the eyes of Frau Liese when she would see the Gestapo chief's signature on her roommate's marriage license.

A bombardment began later as Elizabeth headed to her factory to get leave for a honeymoon. Ernst took shelter at first, but then left to get Elizabeth's things from her apartment in case it was bombed. He packed up her stuff in a suitcase and grabbed some bedding and canvas in case they needed it, which they did. They located each other and found a place under the ledge of building where Ernst built a crude shelter and place to spend the night.

The next day, Ernst looked around for a place for them to stay and found an old Inn still intact, run by a Frau Witte who said she could serve them dinner of Linden Soup. Here was an island of sanity and peace with a garden, some hot soup, a table and chairs, and someone to wait upon them. This was their wedding feast with their sausage gift being the main course. Here's how Remarque described their meal. Frau Witte brought the beer. Graeber opened the bottles and filled up the glasses. They drank. The beer was cool and good. They ate the soup. They ate slowly and peacefully and looked at each other. It became darker, A ray of light split open the sky, peeking through the clouds, shining on them. A thrush began to sing and night fell.

The moon rose over them. "Now we have everything," said Elizabeth. "The moon, the garden, and we have eaten and indeed have the whole evening ahead of us. It is so beautiful that it's almost too much to bear."

As the last evening came up in the second to last chapter of this book, the title rang through my mind, "Time to live, time to die." Ernst and Elizabeth have had their time to live, finding an island of happiness to spend their first day of marriage together on, and now Ernst was heading back to the Front to resume his duties as a soldier. Would he survive the waning days of the war or was this to be his time to die?

This marvelous story from the author of his WWI novel, *All's Quiet on the Western Front*, provides us a personal look into WWII from the perspective of a German soldier striving to live in a country torn to shreds, striving to love before he dies.

