



HAUSER & WIRTH PUBLISHERS

## The Publishers Emil and Emmie Oprecht

By Ute Kröger

For twelve years the publisher said ‘no’: ‘no’ to coercion and oppression in the dictatorship states, ‘no’ to their intolerance, their cruelty, and their inhumanity, which increased as their power increased. [We published] many books against the dictatorship, against its economic system, against its contempt for Christianity and Judaism, against the war it was preparing: these were warnings, signals against the rising darkness, intimations, prognoses, cries of fear, out of concern for neighboring countries and their creative potential, in which we participate in ways that are a boon to our own creativity. It was also out of concern for our Switzerland, which came into being through the desire for freedom, and which requires the air of European freedom in order to breathe.

—Emil Oprecht, publisher’s statement in the catalog of Europa Verlag, 1948

Rämistrasse 5, the current home of Hauser & Wirth Publishers, was until 2003 the location of Zurich’s most famous bookstore, the Buchhandlung Dr. Emil Oprecht. Between 1933 and 1945, moreover, it was a place where publishing was a tool of resistance against National Socialism, where émigré writers were supported through personal courage, and ultimately, where a platform of exchange was established that helped shape a liberal democratic Europe.

Emil Oprecht (1895–1952) was born in Zurich and grew up in modest circumstances. His dedication to political and social activism started early. Together with his later wife Emmie Fehlmann (1895–1990), he organized an ‘relief action for foreign proletarian children’ immediately after World War I. Initially a member of the youth organization of the Social Democrats, he was fascinated by the idea of communism and joined the newly founded Communist Party of Switzerland in 1921, but in 1926 rejoined the Social Democrats. After a banking apprenticeship, he studied economics, but from 1921 to 1925 was literary publishing director of the Cooperative Union bookshop and publishing house in Zurich. With Conrad Erhard Helbling, a former medical student, he then founded the bookstore and publishing house Oprecht & Helbling at Rämistrasse 5 in 1925. This was the starting point for all the publishing endeavors that would follow. In the 1920s and 1930s, Emil and his wife Emmie built and expanded their publishing house and bookstore. She understood herself as ‘interior minister,’ while he took charge of ‘external affairs.’ They not only agreed in their political convictions; from 1933 they also, each in their own way, provided support to refugees.

All areas of their publishing activity testify to their political engagement. The Oprecht Verlag was the literary imprint. As Emil Oprecht described its program in 1939, it ‘first and foremost foster[ed] the contemporary novel; not the novel as a mere an art form, not the novel as entertainment, not the novel of the accidents of an individual fate; rather, the novel as a mirror to our own time.’ The Europa Verlag, founded in 1933, focused explicitly on politics and current affairs, and had a New York branch from 1938 onward. Both imprints were forthright in fighting against fascism, dictatorships and Nazism in Germany, on the one hand, and for democracy, freedom, human dignity and the political independence of Switzerland, on the other. In the early 1940s, the Neue Internationale Bibliothek series was established for books on social issues that looked toward the democratic restructuring of Europe after the war. The series included Gunnar Myrdal’s ‘Warnung vor Friedensoptimismus’ (Warning against Peace Optimism, 1945) and Fritz Bauer’s ‘Die Kriegsverbrecher vor Gericht’ (The War Criminals on Trial, 1945).



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In the weeks after the Nazis seized power, Oprecht and the Zurich-based writer and patron of the arts Carl Seelig initiated a reading series in the Alte Kirche Fluntern. This disused church belonged to the city, which had repurposed it as a storage space and warehouse, and in 1931 rented it to the dancer Trudi Schoop, who established the Studio Fluntern dance school and made it available for externally organized events. Seelig and Oprecht invited numerous emigré writers to speak there, among them Alfred Polgar, Else Lasker-Schüler, Ernst Toller and Erika Mann.

Oprecht was not intimidated—whether as a publisher or as a bookseller—by personal attacks or the belligerent threats far-right Frontists made against him as a ‘cultural bolshevist.’ Books that were burned in Germany were on display in his shop window regardless. ‘People crossed the street in order not to have to greet us, and they avoided the shop because we were helping the persecuted writers,’ Emmie Oprecht recalled in an interview in 1989. Bureaucracy, too, placed large and unwieldy obstacles in Oprecht’s way. In 1937 he was expelled from the German Publishers and Booksellers Association, posing an existential threat to his bookshop’s survival, and the Swiss government, purportedly in order to ‘uphold its foreign policy mission,’ warned him in a letter that, in response to complaints from Germany, ‘appropriate measures’ would be taken ‘if [he] continue[d] to publish or distribute such biased books.’

But Oprecht was not to be deterred by legal or diplomatic pressure. In 1938 he was substantially responsible for organizing a rescue action that would go down in the history of European theater. After the owner of the Pfauentheater in Zurich relocated to the US under the pressure of global political events—much like Thomas Mann and many other cultural figures of the time—the Neue Schauspiel AG was established by private shareholders in collaboration with the city of Zurich. Its founding not only prevented the closing of the theater but also, crucially, created a place of refuge for those who had fled from Germany since 1933, and, in those weeks and months after the Anschluss in 1938, from Austria. As members of the ensemble, they found a safe haven and work that meant they could stay in Switzerland. Among them were the actors Therese Giehse, Ernst Ginsberg, Karl Paryla and a young Maria Becker, as well as the directors Leopold Lindtberg and Leonard Steckel. From 1938 until his death, Oprecht was chairman of the board of Neue Schauspiel AG; in 1940 he also assumed the role of managing director. ‘Oprecht was everything at once: bookseller and publisher, advocate for and lifesaver of émigrés,’ writes his biographer Peter Stahlberger. And, one might add, he was also their friend. The most famous in this regard was certainly Thomas Mann, who at Oprecht’s funeral service in 1952 gave a moving eulogy paying respect to their close personal and professional relationship. In 1938—after Mann’s expatriation and the revocation of his honorary doctorate from the University of Bonn in 1937—Oprecht published Mann’s written response to the authorities, which took the form of a general reckoning with the Nazis. This pamphlet, titled ‘Ein Briefwechsel’ (An Exchange of Letters), as well as a special issue of the magazine ‘Mass und Wert’ with the title ‘Vom zukünftigen Sieg der Demokratie’ (The Coming Victory of Democracy), remain topical and relevant to this day. The journal ‘Mass und Wert’ was helmed by Thomas Mann and Swiss writer Konrad Falke; it came out from the Oprecht Verlag every two months from October 1937 to October 1940; from 1939 Thomas Mann’s son, historian and essayist Golo Mann, was its editor in chief.

Emil and Emmie Oprecht also provided direct lifesaving assistance in 1940. After German troops invaded France, many people who had fled south in panic and chaos were trapped, most of them interned in hellish camps such as Gurs, and others in hiding. The Oprechts organized an unprecedented relief action with money they begged and scrambled together, generously donated by Zurich residents, and with books for those held in internment camps. They organized the transfer and distribution of cash, searched for the missing, and put people in touch with one another. In close collaboration with the American journalist Varian Fry of the Emergency Rescue Committee in Marseille, Emil Oprecht secured entry visas for the United States. Emmie Oprecht, meanwhile, coordinated all this from the offices at Rämistrasse.

After her husband’s death, Emmie Oprecht continued to direct the publishing house for several more years; she ran the bookshop until her death in 1990. It was then taken over by Barbara Sidler, her colleague of many years. The historic bookshop finally closed in 2003.

Translated by Elizabeth Tucker



HAUSER & WIRTH PUBLISHERS

### Highlights of the Publishing Program

Ferdinand Bruckner. 'Die Rassen: Schauspiel.' Zurich: Oprecht, 1934. ('Races: A Drama,' translated 1934.)

Heinrich Regius (Max Horkheimer). 'Dämmerung: Notizen in Deutschland.' Zurich: Oprecht, 1934.  
(Partly translated in 'Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926–1931 and 1950–1969,' 1978.)

Ernst Bloch. 'Erbschaft dieser Zeit.' Zurich, Oprecht, 1934. ('Heritage of Our Times,' translated 1991.)

Ulrich Becher. 'Die Eroberer: Geschichten aus Europa.' Introduction by Ernst Glaeser. Zurich, Oprecht, 1934.  
(The Conqueror: Stories from Europe.)

Konrad Heiden. 'Adolf Hitler: Das Leben eines Diktators: Eine Biographie.' Zurich: Europa, 1936.  
(Hitler: A Biography,' translated 1975.)

Heinrich Mann. 'Es kommt der Tag: Ein deutsches Lesebuch.' Zurich: Europa, 1936.  
(The Day Will Come: A German Reader.)

Else Lasker-Schüler. 'Das Hebräerland.' Zurich: Oprecht, 1937. (Land of the Hebrews.)

Franz Carl Weiskopf. 'Die Versuchung: Roman einer jungen Deutschen.' Zurich: Oprecht, 1937.  
(Temptation: Tale of a Young German Woman.)

Erich Kahler. 'Der deutsche Charakter in der Geschichte Europas.' Zurich: Europa, 1937.  
(The Germans,' translated 1985.)

Walter Mehring. 'Die Nacht des Tyrannen: Roman.' Zurich: Oprecht, 1937. (The Night of the Tyrant: A Novel.)

Friedrich Wolf. 'Zwei an der Grenze.' Zurich and New York: Oprecht, 1938. (Two at the Border.)

Hermann Rauschnig. 'Die Revolution des Nihilismus: Kulisse und Wirklichkeit im Dritten Reich.'  
Zurich: Europa, 1938. ('The Revolution of Nihilism: Warning to the West,' translated 1942.)

Arthur Koestler. 'Ein spanisches Testament.' Zurich: Europa, 1938. (Previously published in English as  
'Spanish Testament,' 1937.)

Frans Masereel. 'Von Schwarz zu Weiss / Du noir au blanc: Ein neuer Holzschnittzyklus in 57 Bildern.'  
Zurich / Paris / New York: Editions Oprecht, 1939. (From Black to White: A New Cycle of Woodcuts in 57 Images.)

Willy Brandt. 'Krieg in Norwegen.' Zurich / New York: Europa, 1942. (War in Norway.)

Sigrid Undset. 'Wieder in die Zukunft.' Zurich / New York: Oprecht, 1944. (Previously published in English as  
'Return to the Future,' 1942.)

**'bücher 1933' is on view from 15 April through 25 May 2023**

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