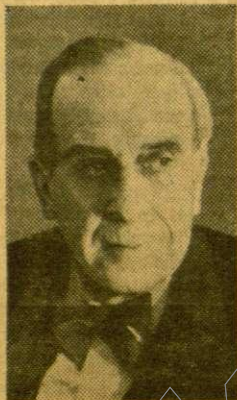


Books of The Times

By ORVILLE PRESCOTT

NO one seemed to remember how long the column of marching soldiers had been on the road to Turka. They should have been there already. What was the matter? Were they lost in this wilderness of fog and rain and mud? Adam Ember was the only one who seemed to realize that they would never reach Turka, that they were not taking part in a sensible military maneuver, that somehow they had left the real world behind them and had plunged into the timeless and eternal world of war—all the wars that men have fought with clubs and spears and bows and rifles and planes and atomic bombs, Adam's account of his experiences in the universal war, the archetype war, is the substance of "The Night of Time,"* a strange and compelling novel by René Fülöp-Miller.



René Fülöp-Miller

René Fülöp-Miller was born in Transylvania sixty-four years ago. The son of a German father and a Macedonian mother, he ran away at 14 and tramped around the Balkans until he nearly starved in Vienna, where he slept on park benches. Later he studied at four universities, fought in the Austrian Army on the Russian front in World War I, worked as a reporter, spending two years in Russia, and became the world-famous author of many books. An authority on Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, the Russian theatre, communism and psychiatry, he is probably best known for his "Rasputin: The Holy Devil," which was published twenty-seven years ago.

Evil, but Not Ultimate

"The Night of Time" contains none of the attributes of conventional fiction. By turns symbolical, satirical, laboriously humorous and gruesomely realistic, it seems to belong to the post-World War I school of anti-war fiction in which novelists attacked the cruelty, suffering and irrational folly of war as if war itself were the ultimate evil. But mid-twentieth-century history has persuaded many persons that wars are not the ultimate evil. Submission to the monstrous tyranny of a Hitler or a Stalin is far worse, for the individual and for society.

Nevertheless, even if Herr Fülöp-Miller's indictment of war ignores the fact that some wars are necessary to preserve the values that all wars do so much to destroy, the book remains emotionally powerful and intellectually stimulating. In its nightmare, surrealist fashion and in its blend of the worlds of Kafka and Remarque, "The Night of Time" casts a cold and sinister spell upon one's imagination.

*THE NIGHT OF TIME. By René Fülöp-Miller. Translated by Richard and Clara Winston. 338 pages. Bobbs-Merrill. \$3.75.

Its many horribly realistic details are parts of a weirdly unrealistic whole. Its solemn symbolism is balanced by cheerful satire. Its anguished pity for the self-destructive folly of men is mixed with rage.

Adam, who tells his story in the first person, is everyman. The army in which he fought is every army. It included men with German, French, Italian, Slavic and Irish names. The enemy is any enemy. The front is vaguely Eastern European. The reason for the war is unknown. The war itself was bungled. For the company in which Adam was a grave digger and collector of bodies it consisted of night marches, struggles with mud so deep that many men drowned in it, a desperate attempt to hold a position on Hill 317 "at all costs," lack of ammunition, exhaustion of supplies, hunger and thirst and death.

Death Becomes a Hobby

"Adam," said the captain of the grave-digging squad, "remember this, wars exist for the sake of death. Whether they are won or lost doesn't matter. What is always at stake is the grand army under the ground." To recruit that army of the dead was the only important matter to Adam's captain. His obsession was so great that he almost seemed like Death himself.

Adam spent much of his time with corpses, and Herr Fülöp-Miller spares his readers no grisly horror. But Adam had time left over in which to share the general starvation and to realize with guilty horror that the dead from each day's shelling were eagerly counted by the survivors. Their scanty rations went to feed the living. Adam and the others ate "dead men's bread."

When Adam took over for a dead telephone operator and tried to help the commandant cajole food supplies out of a rear-echelon office, he plunged into an insane situation. Men were starving, but channels, priorities, formal procedures, red tape and traditional practices took precedence. First the commandant shouted, then he pleaded.

"The deputy replied that with the best will in the world he could not offer any precise prognosis since receipt of the new application must first be recorded registrationwise, submitted to the quartermaster's first lieutenant, transmitted by the latter to his superior office, the Supplementary Supply Office, where it would be placed in the hands of the technical assistant to the head of the staff section so that requisitions might be made, thence returned to the quartermaster's office to be approved after re-examination, then submitted for ultimate approval to the office of the administrative chief of the Quartermaster Corps, which, in turn, would issue to the quartermaster's first lieutenant the order to instruct the supply magazine in Skolpe to implement the order."

How exaggerated the above paragraph may be for satire's sake only old soldiers will know. At any rate, it is proof that Herr Fülöp-Miller dislikes military bureaucracy almost as intensely as he dislikes war itself.



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