

CURT JURGENS

Charmer of Two Continents

This German actor is past 40, growing bald and paunchy, yet he's winning American movie fans just as he did European ones.

by Peer J. Oppenheimer

EUROPEAN ACTORS are box-office poison in this country. Top stars like France's Fernandel, Germany's O. W. Fischer, and even England's Alec Guinness generally do well only in the art houses. But Hollywood now thinks it has a man to beat the jinx. His name: Curt Jurgens.

Why should he succeed where so many others have failed? Ingrid Bergman, his current co-star in 20th Century-Fox's "The Inn of the Sixth Happiness," says, "Because this man has more charm in his little finger than most men in their whole being."



Cosmopolitan Curt Jurgens and Simone, his bride, eat meal with chopsticks.

She's not the only woman who thinks so. Four women married Curt for exactly the same reason—the last one, the former Simone Bicheron, just a couple of months ago!

But he's a man's man, too. His latest director, Mark Robson, said, "Curt has a vitality and strength unduplicated on the screen, or in real life."

To form my own impression, I went to St. Jean Cap Ferrat on the French Riviera, where Jurgens maintains one of his four villas. His other three residences are an ancient mansion in a vineyard outside Vienna, a hunting lodge in Bavaria, and what he refers to as "a modest bungalow with only 12 rooms" at Cadiz, Spain.



Curt (in early photo with father) claims he got his charm from him.

"I'm not extravagant," he grinned when I asked him about it. "They are all good real-estate investments."

The biographies say Curt is 43. He looks at least 10 years older. His hair is thinning, his stomach protruding. But when he shakes hands, when he

talks, when he strides around with his stomach in and chest out, self-confident and erect, the impression changes drastically. Here is a man of strength and charm, of wit and humor, whose presence would hold the center of attention wherever he might be.

Curt was discovered for films by accident in 1935. He was walking past the Berlin office of one of Germany's most popular stars, Willy Forst, who was just having an argument with his producer about a bit player.

"He will never do!" Willy was crying. "He can't act, he doesn't even look the part. Anyone walking along the street would be better qualified!"

Just then Curt Jurgens, tall, blond, and handsome, approached. "Get that man in here!" Forst demanded.

Minutes later Forst asked the surprised young Jurgens whether he had any theatrical experience. Before Curt could tell him that, in his spare time, he was studying with the famous Max Reinhardt, Forst insisted, "Never mind, it's just a small part. You'll do."

His performance attracted little attention, but his appearance did. He climbed slowly and steadily and, as he complained, always played the same part—the tall, handsome male suitor.



Dressed for role in "The Inn of the Sixth Happiness," Jurgens displays strength of character that marks him.

As the years passed and Curt grew older, balding, and paunchier, make-up hid the physical discrepancies to such an extent that he might easily have become the oldest young lover on the screen—if he hadn't put his foot down one day.

"I'm fed up being the handsome young nothing. I want to be myself. From now on I won't wear make-up or a hairpiece any more!" he insisted as he prepared for a 1950 film.

There was a hassle and threats and counterthreats—till Curt won his point. Result: the film became Germany's top money-maker of the year, and Curt received the highest professional honors bestowed that year.

In addition to his acting ability, his powerful looks and great charm, Curt has another asset which proved to be of tremendous value. He speaks German, French, and English fluently.

He was born in Munich, Germany, in 1915, but he comes by his continental charm naturally. His father was an importer-exporter who spent considerable time on business in Imperial Russia before World War I. It was at the court of the Czar in St. Petersburg (now Leningrad) that Curt Sr. met his future wife—a young French girl, Maria Noir, who taught French to the young ladies and gentlemen of the Imperial Court.

Because his mother spoke little German and because his father wanted Curt to learn French anyway, no other language was spoken at home. At 6, Curt was undoubtedly the only boy in Munich who couldn't speak German.

Curt learned his English in school—and improved it during a trip to the United States in 1949. "I must have been the oldest exchange student ever to come to America," he grinned as he recalled his first visit as a guest of the State Department.

To Curt, his father has always been "the great gentleman" after whose life he wanted to pattern his own. "When he talked, people listened. His wisdom was immense, his judgment fair and his marriage to my mother ideal. If I could ever achieve half the happiness in my own life, I'd be satisfied."

According to his sister, Mrs. Herbert Flynn, wife of a Los Angeles garage operator, he may well have reached his goal when he married Simone Bicheron in September. "I don't think his first three wives really understood Curt," she explained, referring to Lulu Basler, a German journalist, Judith Holzmeister, a Viennese of Brazilian ancestry, and the fiery Hungarian actress, Eva Bartok. "Our father was so happy with a French wife, I think Curt will finally find the same happiness with Simone."

I met the former model at St. Jean Cap Ferrat, where she and her mother were Curt's house guests at the time. She is 21, beautiful, quiet, modest, adequately awed by Curt's charm and success and, unlike his first three wives, quite willing to let him play the leading role in the family just as he has done on the screen. In short, the ideal marriage partner for a man like Curt Jurgens!