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“This visa issue is the most important issue in our lives right now.” One of many: Anna Seghers in exile, 1933–1947

Those leaving their homelands to find prosperity or good fortune someplace else will not even be immune to homesickness if everything they wish for in their new life comes true. But those forced to escape to save their very lives without even being certain of finding shelter will never forget this existential threat.

The National Socialist regime established itself in Germany in early 1933 following Hitler's appointment as Chancellor of the Reich on 30th of January, the arson attack on the Reichstag parliament building on 27th of February, the Reichstag elections on 5th of March and the Enabling Act of 23rd of March. The risk for anyone who failed to fit in with this new view of the world grew from year to year: for people of Jewish origin, communists and socialists, for homosexuals, Sinti and Roma, Jehovah's Witnesses and many others. A first exodus had set in after the 27th of February. Ever new groups of refugees would embark on the perilous journey in the following years – also as a consequence of the German Reich's geographical expansion. The preferred countries of exile were Czechoslovakia, France and the Soviet Union initially, later also the UK and US. The number of people who saw themselves forced to get out in the German-speaking region is estimated at around 500,000 – most of them emigrants of Jewish origin, approximately 30,000 people who fled “exclusively or primarily for reasons of political persecution”, and a number of persons whom Claus-Dieter Krohn refers to as “cultural dissidents” (Krohn 1998, 1) that is hard to estimate. An exact quantification is complicated by overlaps between these roughly defined groups and the fact that refugee movements extended over longer periods of time and across large geographical distances.¹

What follows here is meant to sketch out the lives and travels of Anna Seghers and her family: in many respects typical for political exiles after 1933, or situations of exile in general, but of course also very unique fates – as every life is.² Anna Seghers left no autobiography and, apart from a short period predating 1925, never kept a diary. In her letters she exercises great restraint, especially when it comes to private circumstances and hardships. The correspondence during her period of exile nonetheless makes her situation in life accessible, and she reflects upon her experience of it in her literary texts.

“Aren't you thoroughly fed up with such thrilling stories? Aren't you sick of all these suspenseful tales about people surviving mortal danger by a hair, about breathtaking escapes? Me, I'm sick and tired of them. If something still thrills me today, then maybe it's an old worker's yarn about how many feet of wire he's drawn in the course of his long life and what tools he used, or the glow of the lamplight by which a few children are doing their homework.” (Seghers 2013, 4). This is said by the narrator of the novel *Transit*, sitting in a pizzeria in Marseilles, a meeting place for people engaged in a frantic search for visas and travel options, just as Anna Seghers had been there in 1941. By birth, the unstable world of the refugees was as alien to her as the proletarian world of workers: Anna Seghers, née Netty Reiling, was born on November 19th, 1900 as the daughter of a wealthy art and antiques dealer in Mainz. She met the Hungarian sociologist

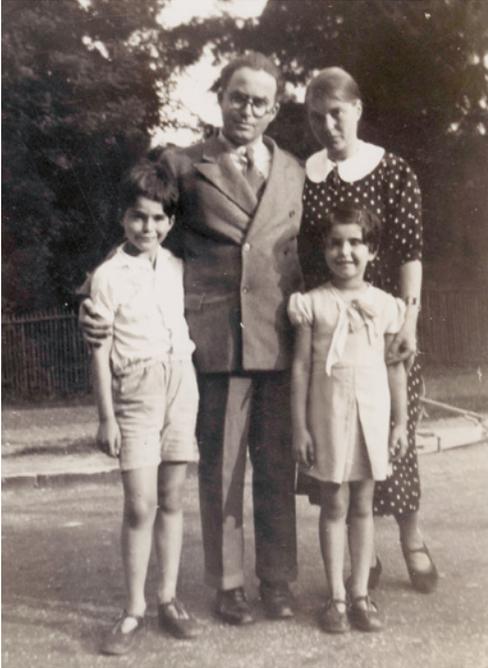


Fig. 1 Anna Seghers with her family in France, ca. mid-1930s | Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Anna Seghers Archive, no.3759

and economist Laszlo Radvanyi (1900–1978) during her studies in Heidelberg. After their wedding in 1925, the couple moved to Berlin, the children Peter and Ruth were born in 1926 and 1928. 1928 is also the year Seghers was awarded the Kleist Prize, one of the most important literary awards of the Weimar Republic, for her novella *Grubetsch*, published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, and for her first published book, *Revolt of the Fishermen of St. Barbara*, which made her more widely known. And 1928 is also when she joined the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (KPD, Communist Party) and the Association of Proletarian-Revolutionary Authors, and additionally involved herself in the Marxist Workers' School run by her husband under his alias of Johann Schmidt. ▶ Fig. 1

After the Reichstag fire on February 27th, 1933, Seghers was questioned, but not arrested—this relatively lenient approach probably being explicable by the Hungarian citizenship she had acquired by marriage (Zehl Romero 2000, 268). Seghers still decamped as quickly as possible, first to Switzerland, where her husband was already staying, and then to Paris. Son Peter was recuperating from scarlet fever at a children's home in the Black Forest, and daughter Ruth was currently staying with the grandparents, who delivered both children to their parents at the French border in June 1933 (see Seghers 1938 [1984]).

In Paris, the family settled in the suburb of Meudon, somewhat better off than many other exiles thanks to the support from Anna Seghers' parents, but it was still always a struggle to make ends meet. Amongst other institutions, Laszlo Radvanyi also taught at the Free German University established by exiles in 1935 (see Vormeier 1998, 229), his activities under his party name of Johann Schmidt attracted the interest of the Gestapo. In Berlin, the Office of the Secret State Police enquired about "Dr. Johann Schmidt" at the Foreign Office on November 23rd, 1937 because the *Pariser Tageszeitung* of November 7th, 1937 had announced a presentation by Schmidt at a book exhibition held by the Society for the Protection of German Authors. The German embassy in Paris was only able to report, however, that Schmidt had taught at the Free German University and, the source for this also being the press, had already delivered a talk on the subject of "Ideologies and their Role in History" in 1936.³

Seghers was actively involved in the "Society for the Protection of German Authors Abroad" established in 1933, spoke at many events, including the 1935

“First International Writers’ Conference for the Defence of Culture” in Paris, where artists from a broad political spectrum took a joint stand against Nazi Germany in the sense of a people’s front (*front populaire*). Political trench warfare was just as familiar to the communist and social-democrat groupings in exile, however, as it had been in Germany previously and would also be in Mexico later. Despite the political activities and adverse circumstances, Seghers’ literary output was extensive: Besides many other smaller contributions, her novels *A Price on His Head* (1933) and *The Rescue* (1937) were brought out by publishing houses-in-exile. In the autumn of 1939 she completed the novel *The Seventh Cross*, whose first edition appeared in 1942 in Boston and English. She took refuge in her artistic work, wherein Seghers dealt with the political events, sometimes almost up to the minute, as is the case with her novel *The Way Through February*, which treats of the 1934 February Uprising in Austria and was published in Paris in 1935. Despite the political interests, she never sacrificed her artistic ambitions. When Johannes R. Becher⁴ accused her of lacking dedication to the political work, she wrote to him, probably in December 1933: “I find most of all these small things being done there incredibly bad and hence superfluous—oh God, it is so uncontrolled. ... I admit that I am a little extravagant and obsessive in all things artistic, but am convinced that one cannot be obsessed enough.” (Seghers 2008, 18). And the “obsessive” artist Seghers also created completely “unpolitical” texts such as her novella *The Finest Legends of Robber Woynok*, which appeared in 1938 in the exile newspaper *Das Wort*, published in Moscow: The story of the solitary, mysterious robber Woynok and his lonely death. Seghers wrote to the publisher Fritz Erpenbeck about this in March 1938: “I am now sending you a story tomorrow. I think it appropriate to preface the story with a motto. Because the story is unpolitical, it is a kind of fairy tale.” (Seghers 2008, 44). The motto is: “And don’t you have dreams, say, wild and gentle ones, in your sleep between two hard days? And do you know perhaps why an old fairy tale, a little song, yes even only the metre of a song occasionally pierces the hearts we’re knocking our fists bloody on, without any effort at all? Yes, effortlessly is how the whistle of a bird touches upon the bottom of the heart and thereby also upon the roots of the deeds.” (Seghers 1938, 22).

The situation in Europe continued to deteriorate: March 1938 saw Austria’s “annexation” by the German Reich, September 1938 the Munich Agreement, whereby Great Britain and France, amongst others, tolerated the annexation of the “Sudetenland”. In August 1939, the German Reich and the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact that caused a stir amongst left-wing exiles and served to further distance some who already felt alienated by the politics of the Soviet Union and Communist Party anyway, for example the author Gustav Regler. After the beginning of the war in September 1939, exiles also had to fear an attack by the German Reich in France. Their status changed inside France, too, because the presence of foreigners, and especially communists, was perceived as a threat there, even if they were declared enemies of Nazi Germany. In the spring

of 1940, Laszlo Radvanyi was interned at Camp Vernet in southern France as an “undesirable alien”, along with many others (Radvanyi 2005, 38). On May 9th, 1940, Anna Seghers wrote to Wieland Herzfelde in New York: “As you know, there are always plenty of news here and I only tend to relieve half the mess by writing, the other half I keep to myself so as not to drive our friends to utter distraction. Just the other day, for example, I became aware of the bagatelle that my mother was to be forced to go to Shanghai from where she is now after the death of my father because a quota was free there by happenstance—I am still busy cracking that strange nut. You know about my husband.” (Seghers 2008, 72f.).

Following the occupation of Paris by German troops in June 1940, Seghers and her children managed to reach the unoccupied part of France—after one failed attempt—but the safety it offered was limited. Article 19 of the Armistice of Compiègne required France to extradite all German citizens named by the German Reich from where they lived on French territory. Although Anna Seghers was not a German national (which is also why her name is not found in the expatriation lists of the German Reich), the Gestapo was still looking for her, and her situation was not only desperate in financial terms: While she had Mexican visa for herself and the children, her husband did not, and was unable to leave the internment camp without. Her visa had moreover been made out in her pen name and not the real name shown in the passport. Seghers was one of 20 persons to be provided with entry visas by direct order of Mexico’s president, Lázaro Cárdenas. The publication of this list in Mexican dailies was reported back to Berlin on August 12th, 1940 by the German ambassador Ruedt von Collenberg.⁵ As early as March 15th, 1940, Seghers had already asked the author Franz Carl Weiskopf in New York: “But we know very well that it is incredibly difficult to get entry visa for the United States. I therefore entreat you to move heaven and earth to get the visa for Mexico for me, my husband and my children. ... This visa issue is the most important issue in our lives right now.” (Seghers 2008, 438, French in the original). Seghers also emphasizes in other places that she would have preferred to take shelter in the USA, but getting US visa was becoming ever more difficult, especially for communists, which only left the way to Mexico, a country that was particularly ready to welcome prospective exiles who leaned to the left, offering them a work permit and good living conditions. Like many others, Seghers depended on help, help getting visa, transit visa, boat tickets. She lived in Pamiers, close to Camp Vernet. There were consulates and aid agency offices in Marseilles, the only still possible port of departure.

“We are still here in Marseilles and waiting for our transit visas. I don’t know if I will get them. This life here—half a life, half a reality—would be unbearable if I hadn’t started to do some serious work. Serious, but also something very light, very delicate.” (Seghers 2008, 466, French in the original). This is how Anna Seghers described her situation on March 3rd, 1941. Uncertain whether and when she and her family would be able to leave, she started to work on the novel *Transit*, where she thematizes the situation of the refugees in Marseilles.

The family finally departed on March 24th, 1941, reaching Veracruz at the end of June after stopovers in Martinique, San Domingo and Ellis Island / New York, and Mexico City offered a new home. This is where Seghers completed the novel *Transit*, contributed to the journal *Freies Deutschland*, and presided over the “Heinrich Heine Club”, which offered a German-language cultural programme until 1946. ▶ Fig. 2

Her husband could work as a scientist. The income was meagre, but the financial situation improved considerably in 1943: *The Seventh Cross* enjoyed great success in the US-American book market and the sale of the movie rights to Hollywood paid off handsomely – the movie with Spencer Tracy in the lead under the direction of Fred Zinnemann came out in 1944.

As early as September 1st, 1942, Seghers had already summed up her situation as follows in a letter to Johannes R. Becher and Michail Jurjewitsch Apletin in Moscow: “It goes like this with our lives: There is certainly an unbelievable wealth of things to see and learn here. The country, the people, the Indian question, all these living conditions that resemble nothing we have ever known, all this must be great for an author. Only that I, that we all, more or less have a feeling of being too far away from the focus, from what is most important, ...” (Seghers 2008, 137f.).

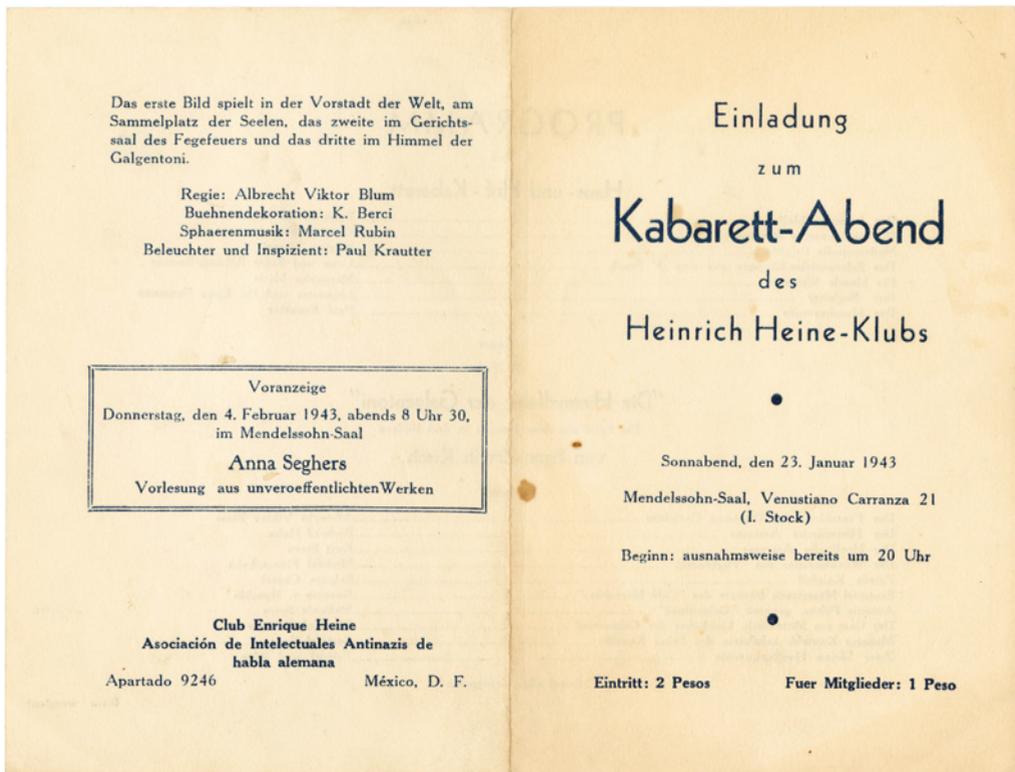


Fig. 2 Programme for a “Cabaret Evening” at the Heinrich Heine Club on January 23rd, 1943 featuring Steffie Spira, Egon Erwin Kisch and Brigitte Chatel (actually Brigitte Alexander), amongst others, with the announcement of a reading by Anna Seghers | Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Kurt and Jeanne Stern Archive, no.158

MARTES 6 DE JULIO DE 1943
A las 20 horas en la Sala de Espectáculos del
PALACIO DE BELLAS ARTES
GRAN MITIN
CONTRA LA BARBARIE NAZI
Y
en Homenaje al Pueblo Martir de
LIDICE
Presidido por el Lic. Miguel Alemán,
Secretario de Gobernación.

Oradores:

Dr. JAN MASARYK, Ministro de Relaciones de Checoslovaquia, hablará a control remoto desde Londres.

Dr. KAREL WENDL, encargado de negocios de Checoslovaquia,
Lic. ANTONIO VILLALOBOS, Presidente del P. R. M.,
Sr MAURICE GARREAU DOMBASLE, delegado del Comité Nacional Francés,
Lic. VICENTE LOMBARDO TOLEDANO Presidente del C.T.A.L.,
Lic. ALEJANDRO CARRILLO Diputado Federal.
Dr. OSKAR STERN, Vicepresidente de la Asociación Checoslovaco Mexicana,
LENKA REINEROVA, escritora Checoslovaca,

EN LA PARTE ARTISTICA PARTICIPARAN:

Srita. Amparo Margain y la Srita. Enriqueta Legorreta, con canciones Checoslovacas acompañadas por el Maestro Carl Alvin.

La Srita. Dolores del Río, asistirá al acto.

Banda de la Srita. de Marina, dirigida por el Capitan 1o. Estanislao García Espinosa.

Poema Sinfónico del ciclo "Mi Patria" del compositor Checoslovaco B. Smetana, ejecutado en México por primera vez por la Banda de la Srita. de Marina, dirigida por el Maestro Carl Alvin.

ENTRADA LIBRE **!No deje Ud. de asistir!**
Organizado por la Asociación Checoslovaco-Mexicana.

Imp. "EL LIBRO DIARIO", Mexico 26, Méx.

Fig. 3 Asociación Checoslovaco-Mexicana: Gran Mitin Contra la Barbarie Nazi, 06/07/1943, Mexico D. F.
| Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Lenka-Reinerová-Archiv, unsigned

Seghers' eyes are turned to Europe, and not only hers. The feeling of being unable to do anything against the war and political upheavals governed the lives of those who had not emigrated to settle somewhere else but were expatriates who wanted to fight what had caused them to flee, and return. They could do little from afar, but did try to send signals. ▶ Fig. 3

On July 7th, 1943, the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City hosted an event to commemorate the village of Lidice, destroyed by the National Socialists in June 1942 in retribution for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, and its murdered population: organized by the Asociación Checoslovaco-Mexicana, with speakers including the journalist and author Lenka Reinerová, a speech by Jan Masaryk, the foreign minister of the Czechoslovakian government in exile, broadcast from London, a performance of Bedřich Smetana's *Má vlast* (My Homeland) directed by Carl Alvin (Karl Alwin), former conductor at the Vienna State Opera. According to an article in the August issue of *Freies Deutschland*, this was also attended by the Soviet ambassador, Konstantin Alexandrowitsch Umanskij. Whereas Anna Seghers was not in the audience: She had been hit by a car on June 24th, 1943 and suffered a severe head injury. After falling into a coma for several days, it took her a long time to overcome the subsequent amnesia. Immediately after her recuperation she wrote the novella *The Excursion of the Dead Girls*—the only one of her literary texts with autobiographic references. Then she worked on the novel *The Dead Stay Young*, which illustrates the history of Germany from 1918 to 1945 in a richly populated panorama and was published in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1949. She would only turn to her impressions from Latin America later, for example in the novellas *Crisanta* (1951) and *Benito's Blue* (1967), or in the novel *Crossing: A Love Story* (1971). Seghers retained her orientation to Europe for as long as she lived in Mexico, which was almost six years, no less, in her work and also in her concern for friends and most of all her mother, whose emigration she failed to secure in spite of all effort. Seghers' father had died in 1941, her mother was deported to the Piaski camp in 1942 and murdered, her date of death unknown.

With travel opportunities limited immediately after the end of the war, Seghers did not return to Berlin until April 1947. She never saw Mexico again. The destroyed Berlin was so alien to her at first that she missed a "Mexican sector" (Seghers 2008, 219). On December 16th, 1947, she reported in a letter to Katharina Schulz, Peter and Ruth Radvanyi's nanny in Berlin and Paris: "The return to Germany (I don't know how long I will stay) is also not all that easy for me. The people are different from the people in Romanic countries and even more so from the Indians. It will not be that easy for me to get through many things. The many and abrupt adjustments are not straightforward for me either. It is not simply forgetfulness, or inertia, when I am much too shattered sometimes to write. Especially as I have done in this letter, what I have on my mind. I don't even believe that the mouth runneth over when the heart is full. The lips will be sealed even more then, occasionally. We have experienced a lot of sorrow, a lot

of despair (in which we are not alone), a lot of stupidity and a lot of viciousness from this country, also many wonderful things. My friend Philipp Schaeffer, whom you knew, I believe, could not be found here. He was guillotined. So he existed here in this country, and those who did that to him. I am not even talking about my mother. Neither am I talking of the barbarity of fascism alone, which will be cruel and savage in any country.” (Seghers 2008, 265f.).

Seghers lived in West Berlin; she had a Mexican passport that offered her a certain freedom to travel, for example to Paris, where her children were studying. In the GDR “emigrants from the West” were generally suspected of being less reliable in political terms than the comrades who had gone to the Soviet Union after 1933. Seghers gave up her Mexican citizenship under pressure from the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED) (Socialist Party) in 1950, and moved her place of residence to East Berlin.⁶ Her husband only returned in 1952 and was awarded a professorship at Humboldt University. Seghers did not take on any party posts, but presided over the writers’ guild from 1952 to 1978 and always remained a communist and a loyal citizen of the GDR. In 1947 she was awarded the Büchner Prize by the City of Darmstadt, followed by many accolades in the GDR and USSR. The reception of her works was only hesitant in the Federal Republic, often one-sided in the GDR. Here as there, she was usually reduced to *The Seventh Cross* and the party author—neither of which does justice to the complexity of her work. In 1981 she was made an honorary citizen of her home town Mainz, in June 1983 she died in Berlin.

She retained her Mainz-ian inflection all her life, harboured sympathies for France, and also for Latin America, remained loyal to the party she had opted for as a young woman, and lived in Berlin for many years. Where she felt at home must remain unanswered. “Not the residents of a street, but those who cut across it in passing will savour its peace most profoundly.” (Seghers 1938 [1984], 9).

1 The number of publications about exile in 1933–1945 being vast, only a few references here: On places of exile, institutions and other general information, see Krohn et al. (1998), on exile in France, see Vormeier (1998), Roussel/Winckler (2012), in Mexico Patka (2002), Pohle (1986), Aktives Museum (2012).

2 My biography of Seghers is based on Zehl Romero (2000/

2003), Wagner et al. (1994), and the recollections of her son see Radvanyi (2005); for more about the exile, with documents from the FBI archive, see Stephan (1993) and also *Argonautenschiff*, the yearbook of the Seghers Society, published since 1992.

3 PA AA, R 99588.

4 Johannes R. Becher (1891–1958), author, exiled from 1933 in Austria, Prague, Paris, from

1935 in the Soviet Union, from June 1945 back in Berlin, culture minister of the German Democratic Republic 1954–1958, member of the SED’s Central Committee.

5 PA AA; R 99600.

6 On the political and cultural situation in the early GDR, see Brockmann (2015), who also takes a detailed look at the discussion around Seghers’ novel *The Dead Stay Young*.

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