In Transit

Narratives of German Jews in Exile, Flight, and Internment during “The Dark Years” of France

Ruth Schwertfeger

Frank & Timme

Verlag für wissenschaftliche Literatur

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Prologue

The word 'Transit' in the title of this book has very specific connotations for the years 1940–44—the Dark Years, 'Les Années Noires' as the French would call them. During the period that followed the signing of the armistice with Nazi Germany in June 1940, foreign born refugees who were trapped in France and anxious to leave were forced to exist in a perpetual state of transit that was vitally connected to their right to be in France. In order to receive permission to stay, even for a short period, they had to prove that they were in transit, were in possession of a *titre de voyage*—transit visa—that would take them through France to their point of departure, often through Spain en route for Lisbon. In other words, they had to produce instant proof they were leaving in order to claim the right to stay. When backed by other documentation, like an exit visa, a visa for another country, or a sailing ticket, a transit visa gave security, if temporary, to any refugee attempting to survive in France. If any of these documents expired, the process of procuring one or all of the visas began all over again. All of the documents had to harmonize.

For anyone familiar with German exile literature, the word 'Transit' is instantly recognizable as the title of a novel by the German Jewish writer Anna Seghers, which she began in France in 1940 and which contains detailed descriptions of the legal and bureaucratic hassles associated with the life of a refugee.[1] The ethos of the novel depicts the path of Seghers' own life during the turbulent period between 1939 and '40 when she fled south with her two children, initially to visit her husband who had been interned in Le Vernet and then to find a way out of France. She stated that she experienced directly the cafés of Marseilles, the waiting rooms of consulates.[2] While *Transit* is not autobiographical, it is biographical, a distinction that she herself made. Seghers clearly had firsthand knowledge of the trials of refugees, many at the hands of petty clerks. At least one writer—Hilde Eisler—mentions seeing Seghers in Marseilles in the café on the Cours Belsunce, quietly writing in a notebook. "I admired very much that in such an improvised existence, in an atmosphere of chaos and nervousness she exuded a tremendous sense of peace."[3]

Seghers continued to work on the novel during the course of a long and arduous journey that started for her and her family in March 1941 when they

had the necessary visas to leave France. Along with fellow refugees on board the refugee steamer 'Paul Lemerle,' Seghers was bound for Mexico, a journey that included a month's internment in Martinique and an additional month on Ellis Island. She completed the novel in Mexico. She left Mexico in 1948 to return to Berlin after 15 years in exile. *Transit* was first published in English translation in 1944 in the USA and then later in Mexico in German by the Freies Deutschland Press.

The novel is set in the harbor city of Marseilles in 1940. The German-born narrator who has a double identity but does not disclose his real name, never moves from the table in the little harbor café. Nor does the unnamed person to whom he is telling his story. The ethos is as static as the title is simple—*Transit*. Yet, Seghers leads the reader on a journey that is in constant motion, and consummately constructs and controls the commentary. It is a journey that in the end is left suspended, with an unknown destination, a manuscript that has no ending. Seghers penetrates in the course of this journey the bureaucratic nightmare that ruled consulates and government offices in Occupied France, the surrealistic world of refugee life, the administrative chicanery, the anguish of waiting rooms, the anxiety about a visa, a permit to travel, an exit visa, a residence visa, a transit visa, *sauf conduit* visas, exit stamps from internment camps etc. The search for valid documents became the sole focus of refugees, their obsession and raison d'être. It involved endless visits to consulates and was their first topic of conversation. The cast of characters includes both Jews and non-Jews, both partisans and the politically indifferent, *prestataires* and legionnaires. In the words of a fellow refugee, "Seghers has attempted to capture within a fictional frame the nightmare of panic and horror of tens of thousands of threatened refugees—Jews, anti-fascists, Germans, Austrians or Czechs, Poles and others in Marseilles who were hoping for a visa or some way to escape."[4]

Nevertheless, Seghers has done more in *Transit* than to depict the anxiety and anguish of refugees, for by choosing this title she confers on the word a meaning that ruptures the traditional meaning of passage from one place to another, a journey that implies a beginning and an ending. Figuratively, the word suggests transition or change; only that meaning survives. A further meaning, however, is also implied, in the open ending of the novel—the unknown destination. The fact that neither the narrator nor his listener move in the course of the story only serves to underscore the contrast between the narrow but safe confines of the little harbor café in Marseilles and the dark

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journey and unknown fate of the characters beyond the café. It is this journey—the transit—that is the substance and core of the novel. It is likewise the core of this book.

Right from the beginning of *Transit*, Seghers prepares the reader that the novel will not have a tidy ending. The rumor has reached Marseilles that the Montréal, a ship carrying refugees has just sunk. As already noted, Seghers places the story in the mouth of a most unlikely narrator—an under-educated German factory worker—who forewarns his listener that he is going to tell his story in sequence, just as it happened. Like him, we too are forced to listen. Despite his detached manner, the narrator appears to have a deep connection to the Montréal, one that the reader has difficulty deciphering, even though the cast of characters are recognizable types among refugees of the period. We only know that he is a political refugee who escaped from a German prison camp to France, by swimming over the Rhine. After yet another imprisonment in France, he had escaped again from a camp near Rouen, along with several Germans, one called Heinz who had lost a leg fighting in the Spanish Civil War, a writer called Paul Strobel and a dramatist by the name of Hermann Achsenroth. They meet up again in Paris soon after their escape. But after the fall of Paris they take separate ways out of the now occupied city to make their way to the south. The two writers, we later learn, had the financial resources to make that journey possible and more comfortable.

All meet yet again in Marseilles, the logical place to resort for anyone wanting to leave France in 1940. It is in Marseilles that the narrator meets two other characters who become central players in his story, both Germans, one a Jewish doctor, in love with a German woman, who is waiting for her exit visa in Marseilles. Her story emerges slowly, in the same deliberately slow cadence of the narration. The woman's name is Marie, and she is the estranged wife of a German Jewish writer whom she fully expects to catch up with in Marseilles as he is in possession of visas for both of them. Though she no longer wants to be his wife, she will not be able to leave without the visa he has in his possession. Seghers adumbrates rather than develops these characters, in an ethos of suspense and of suspension that gives the reader the sense that they are dangling precariously between two worlds, neither of which are clearly defined. What is clear, though, is that their survival and individual destiny, though no longer together, is dependent on a visa.

The narrator sets the intricate plot in motion in Paris, when he sets off to deliver a letter that Paul Strobel has given him to deliver to a man called

Weidel. The narrator happened to meet his fellow internee in the street, and found him in a state of panic to leave for the Free Zone. Seghers has the narrator make the following (one suspects discerning) remark about Strobel: "He couldn't bring himself to believe that he was not the same poor devil as I was…. He was firmly convinced that the Gestapo had nothing else to do but wait in front of this man Weidel for little Paul" (*Transit*, 118). Seghers thus touches on a fundamental aspect of German refugee status that other writers mention; at a certain level they were all under threat yet each one, especially the prominent intellectuals, was convinced that he/she was the most threatened.

The narrator seeks out the hotel in Paris where Weidel had last lived, only to learn that the latter has committed suicide in his hotel room—to the outrage of the French woman who manages the hotel and who is only too glad to dispose of the dead man's belongings. These consist of a manuscript, two letters of rejection—one from Weidel's wife, ending their marriage, and a letter of rejection from a publisher, and an official letter from the Mexican consulate informing him to come to Marseilles where a visa and money are waiting for him. The contents of the case define what his life has been reduced to—rejection on two levels—and hope in the form of a promised visa. Curious, the narrator begins to read the manuscript: "I had lived my life to the full but had not read. So this was all new to me. And my I read! In this story there was, as I have said, a heap of crazy people, a really mixed-up bunch…. Then suddenly, about on the thirty third page, everything stopped for me. I never learned how it ended. The Germans had arrived in Paris, the man had packed up everything, his few bits and pieces, his writing paper. And left me on my own right in front of the last page that was almost empty" (118). He grieves the loss of this unknown writer with whom he would have pleaded to keep on living. "I would have found a hiding place for him. I would have brought him food and drink." Seghers thus allows the narrator to become totally involved and identified with the life depicted in the manuscript.

After he reaches Marseilles he himself assumes the life of a refugee, with the brand new and coveted identity of a dead Saarlander, an identity that is not without significance for both the story and the period, poised as Saarland was between France and Germany, and having made the choice in a plebiscite of 1936 to be annexed to the Reich rather than stay with France. His new identity gives him the right to receive hand-outs from various committees that pay for a tiny room in a hotel in the harbor district that is also the quarters for refugees attempting to leave Marseilles. He makes a somewhat feeble effort to give

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Weidel's small case that contains the manuscript to an official at the Mexican consulate but the name on his identity card—Seidler—is presumed by the consular official to be the pseudonym of the dead Weidel, whose estranged wife is meanwhile anxiously looking for him. So, he (Seidler/Weidel) spends his days shuffling from café to café, consulate to consulate, with two identities—a Saarlander, and a German Jewish writer, both dead. We never find out his true identity. What we do learn, however, is about the identity of others.

In the course of long hours in local cafés, the narrator becomes obsessed with the sight of an attractive woman who is apparently looking for someone. He shadows her, waits for her, and finally connects with her, only to find out that the mysterious woman is Marie, the wife of Weidel who is the object of her futile search. It is no surprise when the narrator begins to project upon the dead man's wife an even more obsessive attachment and falls in love with her, but theirs is a shadowy, insubstantial relationship. Technically, his identity as Weidel has given him the right to be her husband and claim the visas that are in the case, but the presence of the German-Jewish doctor stands in their way, and the relationship is not consummated.[5]

The other sphere in which the narrator moves—that of France—is also sketchy but as is the case with the German characters, French characters are also depicted as flawed human beings, and though they are active in the Resistance, they are certainly not in the mode of resisters like Jean Moulin but rather ordinary men and women, represented in the Binnet family and their assorted relatives and extended family members, whom some may not even have called 'French' at that time—for example, the mistress of George Binnet who is from Senegal and who offers the narrator the help and hospitality he needs. He in turn helps her sick child, by finding a refugee doctor, who turns out to be the friend of Marie—a German Jew.

The genius of *Transit* lies in a depiction of the early days of Occupied France that is inhabited by credible characters attempting to survive in a world that has lost all sense of what is normal. They are not stereotypes who emerged from the mythology of a noble France or the German Resistance but 'poor devils' like the pompous writer Strobel, or the narrator himself, who is apathetic most of the time. He fails to keep appointments, even with the person he truly admires, his fellow resister Heinz to whom he confesses that his life is falling apart (119). He tries to tell Marie Weidel that her husband had committed suicide, but he does not insist on the veracity of his statement, with the result she does not believe him. She too is left suspended, and continues to

think that her husband is really in Marseilles, and has already picked up his visa, just as the consul had told her. For the consul also thinks that Seidler is Weidel.

One critic calls *Transit* "a political novel with a literary stamp"[6]. I see it rather as a literary masterpiece anchored in political reality. The narrator in the end makes a choice that may be reminiscent of *Casablanca* but without its romantic idealism. He does not leave with the wife of a dead German Jewish writer or entice her into staying with him. Instead he chooses to work on a farm near Marseilles, with relatives of the Binnets, people who are fighting the occupiers—former Spanish republicans now fighting against Nazism. At the end Georges Binnet tells him: "You belong to us. Whatever happens to us happens to you." (310)

Seghers' supposed indifference to Jewish identity has been raised by several critics, including the charge specific to *Transit* that, "A few Jews appear more or less anonymously in *Transit*."[7] I propose that it is not coincidental to the plot that Seghers' protagonist narrator is neither a Jew nor a writer. Seghers projects on this detached, unliterary man the role of observer whose personal story becomes enmeshed with the collective fate of those whom he is observing—mostly compatriots, endangered Germans like himself, some more than he is because they are Jews.[8]

In a letter written in 1960, Seghers referred to *Transit* as a novel that many people neither liked nor understood.[9] This is not surprising given the popularity of her other works, like *Das siebte Kreuz* (*The Seventh Cross*) but the negative response among readers might also betray something even more significant—the general ignorance about the particular dilemma of German refugees caught in France, especially those who were Jews. The same ignorance persists to this day, despite the wealth of material that has been published about France during the Dark Years. This book seeks to help dispel that ignorance by examining narratives written by German Jews from a perspective that connects them to both Jewish studies and to the history of the Vichy period.

1 *Transit*, translated by James A. Galston, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co.), 1944. Hereafter cited as *Transit*.

2 Cited in Anna Seghers, *Briefe an Leser* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1970), 43.

3 Cited by Hans-Albert Walter, *Exilliteratur 1933–1950*, Band 7 (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung), 421. Hereafter cited as Walter with volume number. My translation from

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the German.

4 Alfred Kantorowicz, *Exil in Frankreich: Merkwürdigkeiten und Denkwürdigkeiten* (Bremen: Schünemann Universitätsverlag, 1971). 154. Hereafter, cited as *Exil in Frankreich*. My translations from the German.

5 Klaus Sauer sees an imaginary love struggle between Seidler and the dead man for Marie but this interpretation hinges on the story being a love story. The narrator makes little or no effort to win the woman who is herself too bruised to respond to love. *Anna Seghers* (Beck: München, 1978).

6 Frithjof Trapp, *Deutsche Literatur im Exil*, Band 42 (Lang: Frankfurt, 1983), 180.

7 Lothar Kahn, *Between Two Worlds: A Cultural History of German-Jewish Writers* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1993), 228.

8 The reversal of this model is found in Lion Feuchtwanger's novel *The Oppermanns*, when his character, Gustav Oppermann assumes the identity of a non-Jewish German in order to return to Nazi Germany, to see for himself if rumors of the atrocities are true.

9 Cited in *Deutsche Literatur von Frauen*, Zweiter Band, ed. by Gisela Brinker-Gabler (Beck: München), 1988, 359.

Introduction

Transit contributes more than a relevantly weighted word to the title of a book about German-Jews in France during the Dark Years. The novel suggests a nexus from which essentially all the narratives and documents pertaining to the subject emanate. *Transit's* storyline, its array of characters, its ethos and leitmotifs, and its ambivalent ending provide material for a wider perspective from which to view and elucidate other narratives by German Jews, and not just those written by famous German Jews, a status that Seghers could justifiably have claimed already in 1940. The novel is, in fact, paradigmatic for writings that are all about exile, flight and internment, and in the case of some, about deportation. The latter belong to the novel's open ending. It is this open ending that also separates the novel from the experiences of ordinary German Jews whose narratives are about the threat or for some the actuality of a transit that had a specific destination, albeit unknown. Seghers' novel points to 1942 but does not take us there.

The experiences of German-Jews in France prior to and during the Vichy years is generally treated by historians as a sub-category of the meta-history of 'France under the German Occupation,' with most of the emphasis placed directly on the latter period—les années noires. (See the last chapter—'Historians describe the Transit of German Jews in France'—for details.) In a different discipline, literary scholars in *Germanistik* have assigned narratives that pertain to the same period to *Exilliteratur*, with much of the focus on exile and escape from France. (The novel *Transit* has been examined in this context.) While there exists an impressive, if modest corpus of scholarship, notably by German and French historians that focuses specifically on the fate of German Jews in the French internment camps, (to be covered in the last chapter) the absence of historiography in contemporary scholarship specific to German Jews on the Vichy years is striking, particularly in view of the intense scrutiny and multi-faceted perspectives within diverse genres that the memory of these years has elicited.

This book does not seek to interrogate memory of the Vichy years and its aftermath; nor does it intend to duplicate the extensive scholarship that has already been very effectively presented by scholars in German exile literature.

Though I draw from both fields of research, and may contribute fresh insights to both fields, my approach is different, in that it makes specific claims on narratives by German Jews about the thirties and the Vichy years for the field of Jewish studies, and seeks to identify the connections between the phases—exile, flight, internment and deportation—and what separates them.

There are compelling reasons to approach both the period and the narratives that describe it through this portal: First of all, within *Exilliteratur* scholars have made no significant distinction between narratives written by Jews and those written by other Germans.[1] Second, these narratives are not well known beyond *Germanistik*, since most of the translations into English, even by well known German authors, have long since been out of print. Others have not even been translated. As a consequence, the specific perspectives of German-Jews about a crucial period of history are not available to a wider readership, and also have not been integrated into Jewish studies in the academic curriculum. I, therefore, want to present specific evidence using primary sources of what it meant to be a German Jewish exile during the complex social history of France of the period 1933—1944. These sources, though uniquely German, belong to Jewish history and are also, if unequally connected to France. As such, they can be read on these three levels.

Why German Jews as a group do not command special attention by historians of the Vichy period may well be explained by a greater urgency that compelled post-war historians to examine the fate of *all* Jews in France. The evolution of the scrutiny of the Vichy years has its own history that may be summarized thus: During the immediate post-war period in France, the four years of Occupation were largely viewed as a blot on French history that were only bearable to think about when two mitigating factors were considered: the memory of a valiant Resistance and the recognition of an occupying army that had depleted the French nation of resources and debilitated the national will. The Dark Years thus lay relatively untouched as a subject until the 1955 documentary film *La Nuit et la Brouillard*[2] (*Night and Fog*), directed by Alain Resnais opened a national debate about the role of the Vichy French State in the deportation of Jews from France to camps in the east. Since then historians, film and documentary makers, novelists and journalists have produced ground breaking perspectives on different aspects of the French State that have moved the debate on Vichy away from the former binary representation of the France of the Resistance and the France of Collaboration. The American scholar Robert Paxton and Canadian, Michael Marrus played a major role in

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shaping a new understanding of the Vichy years. Drawing from German archival sources, Paxton refuted the notion that German pressure on a demoralized nation was the sole reading of Vichy history, and identified the National Revolution as a French product of the thirties.[3]

French historian Henry Rousso's publication of the mid eighties—*Le Syndrome de Vichy* generated unprecedented interest in the phenomenon of memory, a trend in historiography that continues to examine and re-examine the response in France to the Vichy period.[4] Incorporating non-traditional modes of historical inquiry—film, documentaries and literature—Rousso probed, as Paxton and Marrus had done before him, within the layers of a two-tiered, black and white history that had been carefully preserved in the collective memory for at least twenty years after the liberation. Scholarship on the Vichy years has continued to flourish, examining 'sites of memory,' 'vectors of memory;' the cinema produced a series of provocative films.[5] Several social histories (to be identified in 'History of Transit' chapter) on the fate of Jews under the Occupation added to a deeper understanding of the nature and degree of collaboration with the Nazis and the actual role of the French Resistance. The interest in the Vichy years has meanwhile not abated, as scholarly response to the controversial prosecution of former Vichy officials, like Maurice Papon demonstrates.[6]

I provide this brief summary to emphasize that historians have certainly not neglected the subject of Jews in France. Furthermore, there is also consensus among them that foreign Jews bore the brunt of maltreatment under the Vichy State. The designation 'foreign,' however, does not begin to define the national and ethnic origins of the many Jews who were thus categorized, and Jews from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia were no exception. German writers were very aware of this collective representation of their identity; one prominent writer questioned how seriously their experience of Occupied France has been taken, both in Germany and elsewhere. Writing thirty years later about what he calls "the extraordinary conditions which made his escape from Occupied France possible", Alfred Kantorowicz calls his adventure "little known in Germany and also abroad, an almost forgotten tendril of history."[7] If this is the case for someone relatively known—at least among *Germanisten*—how much more is it true for the others who were not known?

The organizing principle of the book is to start with writers who already enjoyed international status in the thirties and were recognized as the most

empowered and eloquent German-Jewish writers of their day, then to proceed by way of lesser known writers and journalists to narratives written by ordinary men and women, and then to adults who recount the experience of being a Jewish child in France during those same years. The latter category includes at least one instantly recognizable name but the narrative perspective is that of a child. The genres that are represented suggest a similar flow, from the novel and drama to fragmented sentences, at times one word that breaks into the recounted experience of hiding in France or surviving interment. All the narratives fall along the time line 1933–44, with the more famous ones set in pre-Vichy France. The latter tend to refer back to a longer exile, and describe a shorter internment and swifter exit than narratives written by men and women who were interned for their political involvement as dissidents. In the next category, ordinary people write about their internment as unwanted Germans Jews. Some include accounts of flight and life on the run in France. The flow of narratives becomes in the end a third person account about deportation, narrated by someone else or simply a document—a stark list—mostly from the year 1942, when the deportations began.

By choosing to focus on a broad array of narratives, and not just on writers deemed the most eloquent voices of the German language, I want to do more than simply add another dimension to the work already established by scholars in Exile literature, like Hans-Albert Walter who focused on prominent literary and political figures *before* (my italics) the Germans overrun the whole country—when emigrants and exiles had to deal with Vichy officials (Walter, Volume Three, 283). He does not focus on what he refers to as "the fate of the nameless exiles, 'the little people' or the mass Jewish emigration." I do not see the three phases as discreet entities but rather as extensions and developments of what preceded them. 'Die kleinen Leute' bore the brunt of the racial laws against Jews because they were unable to leave France before the transports began in the spring of 1942. They were not selected for transports on the basis of their being ordinary but because they were foreign Jews without recourse to the agencies that were set in motion for prominent German Jews whose status and wealth secured them access to routes out of France.

The question of whether the narratives that tell about deportation (whether directly or indirectly)—the last phase—belong specifically to Holocaust Studies should not be determined by the number of survivors, especially in a discipline that has manifested respect for every life. It is true that the majority of German Jews who fled to France did not end up in Auschwitz or other camps of the

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east. But it was the convergence of other factors that rescued them from that fate, and not because their status as Jews was insignificant. One of those factors was the protection offered in France, both by civilians and religious communities, both Catholic and Protestant. The narratives include testimony to these rescue efforts. But they also tell of terrible loss and hardship and the very specific struggles of children who survived hiding but emerged with fractured identities, both as Germans and as Jews.

The rounded statistic of 76,000 Jews who were deported from France and perished has become a touchstone in Holocaust studies. What is less known is that among the 75,721 there were 47,000 foreign Jews, of whom at least 6,258 were German Jews and 1,746 Austrian Jews.[8] That my focus is on the plight of German and Austrian Jews in no way implies that their story is more worthy of being told than that of other 'foreign' Jews in France, or that other 'foreign' Jews did not write about their experiences. Many did write but the fact is that German Jews occupy a singular position in France because of their double identity, and especially after the country was occupied by Nazi Germany. They have also left a significantly large body of writings that represent a very broad and diverse spectrum of insights both on France and on German and Jewish identity. The writings that follow show the ways in which people grappled with German-Jewish identity, re-discovered it, and were confronted in France with an identity that was imposed on them in ways that some had not experienced in the Weimar Republic.

By the end of the thirties, no matter what degree of assimilation German-Jews experienced before their arrival in France, their status put them in double peril; the safest direction they could take was westward out of France. Before 1942, all Jews in France did not necessarily know what lay at the end of the road towards the east. French historian Annette Wievorka argues that the will to annihilate a people does not emerge clearly from the testimonies of Jews deported from France. While this may be true, I would add that all politically engaged Germans knew from previous experience in Nazi Germany that there were camps, and they could be deported to them. (After all, Dachau was already open in March 1933.) Wievorka continues that testimonies of French deportees who were not Jewish are no different from those written by French Jews.[9] She further notes that while the extermination of Jews is not denied it is noted, as if in the margin. Wievorka identifies, however, one difference: "While testimonies by survivors of the deportations from France share the same structure, the itinerary for Jewish deportees for 'racial motive', as it was called

after the war, was different, in that all were transported together in a common *Judentransport* and underwent the selection process upon arrival at the camp." ('On Testimony',28)

Maybe the word 'racial motive' was a post-war construct, but *Judentransport* was a word that had real meaning to German Jews before the internment camps of France. In 1933 the road out of Germany to France was initially the same for all dissident Germans but the forced deportations of Jews in 1940 from Baden to Gurs have provided sufficient testimony that most of those deportees had neither the means nor opportunities to leave France and thus were more likely to be found on a common 'Judentransport'.

It is a curious irony that the identity of the German Jew was later captured as emblematic of a wider history and used as the rallying call during the student protests of May 1968 for the banished Daniel Cohn-Bendit—"We are all German Jews." The demonstration of solidarity that drew thousands into the streets of Paris stirred both gratitude and resentment in one young man, Alain Finkielkraut who much later was to describe the scene as a festival where Jewish identity was no longer for Jews alone.[10] Troubled that "[t]hey had adorned themselves with a status too rare and distinctive for their use", he upbraids his generation for assuming identities that transformed their unremarkable lives into revolutionaries. He writes: "Overwhelmed by the immense memory of all we had not lived, we aped everything, even the lucidity of our masters…. A German Jew? Come on: we were all imaginary Jews" (21.)

There is nothing imaginary in how German Jews experienced the vicissitudes of the thirties and the events of the Dark Years, and how they described and documented them, often within the very vortex of the events. As shocking as it is to read that *any* French Jews perished, the fact that the French state recognized that all French people had worth as French citizens underscores how little value Nazi Germany had placed on those who did not fit the criterion for citizenship. Nazi policies obviously also excluded political dissidents but they always excluded Jews on racial grounds.

While the French Republic's attempts in the thirties to provide for refugees in flight from fascism were flawed and inadequate, they should nonetheless be recognized. It was, however, that same republic that interned refugees from Germany and Austria, the very people who had fled there or had been expelled, and in 1939 would gladly have fought for the preservation of the French Republic. When the Nazi regime caught up with German refugees in June 1940, the Armistice agreement that was signed with France included the

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demand to hand them over, including those who had been denaturalized. The infamous Paragraph Fourteen is cited in many narratives. The very identity denied them in Germany became of central interest to the German occupiers. After two major confrontations vis à vis their identity, German Jews were categorized from the summer of 1942 onwards as 'foreign Jews'. Paul Webster contends that this placed them at best in the company of all 'juifs' and at worst among other human bargaining chips, offered in exchange for French Israélites in order to spare the latter from deportation. Pétain had promised a census in the Free Zone to distinguish immigrant Jews from the French. He is quoted as telling his ministers that the public understood this to be a fair distinction. Laval pointed out that a fundamental difference had already been established between "Juifs français et les déchets expédiés par les allemands eux-mêmes"—"French Jews and waste matter sent by the Germans themselves."[11] The remark illustrates what Ian Ousby has called the hint of "a sliding scale of expendability which, in its full extent, attached no value at all to German Jews, little or none to other foreign Jews, some unspecified value to French Jews, and sentimental value to Jewish war veterans."[12] As unspecified as that value may have been, there were at least remnants of recognition that French Jews were French and thus had priority. Their identity survived at some level collaboration with and pressure from the notoriously anti-Semitic Nazi Reich. German Jews lost on all levels.

The narratives that follow will reveal that the extent and the nature of that loss were not the same for all, nor was the timeline. For that reason I chose *Transit* as the Prologue for this book. First, the novel either depicts or alludes to the four stages I have described—exile, flight, internment and deportation. Like the other texts, it is largely about the period after the Armistice when refugees swarmed the roads that led south to the Free Zone. Thousands of German refugees had already left the country by the time the threat of internment had became reality in June 1940—and earlier for those who were able to leave—but what united all was the common destination of a port or city of exit.

Just as identity is central to the plot and development of characters in *Transit*, in the same way identity plays a large role in almost all narratives, whether in the act of assuming another identity to survive, or in the consequences of being identified as a Jew. One critic places the burden of identity in *Transit* within literary conventions rather than in a Jewish context. He sees the narrator's relationship with Weidel as a conscious choice to reject the latter's

identity[13]: "…Seidler understands that his attempt to assume the identity of the dead man in order to bond his wife to him, was doomed right from the start, and that he cannot catch up with the dead man." No one can catch up with the dead German Jewish writer—just as no one can catch up with the writers who took their own lives during the Dark Years. We stand, like the narrator of *Transit*, in front of a blank page and know that the story is not finished.

The novel is also about exile from the *Heimat*—as other works of *Exilliteratur* are—but it is not exclusively so, as one critic contends when he describes it as "…a confrontation with exile as a human state—with unmistakable glances homeward. Thus, refuge in the French countryside is not a positive end to flight, because the fugitive remains cut off from the homeland, unable to return, to build, to help his country grow."[14] This interpretation divests the story of its political connection to France and moves it into the nebulous, if safer, realm of 'exile as a human state', which is far removed from starving refugees waiting for visas to leave a country described in the words of Seghers' narrator as—"shattered and defiled." (*Transit*, 44)

The silent but ubiquitous presence in *Transit* is a Jewish writer who was driven to suicide by terror of the advancing German army in a city which he thought would provide refuge. (Just like the Baden Jews—in Chapter Three—were relieved when their trains headed west to France.) His shadow dominates the whole narrative. Everything that happens in the story is connected to his fate. The other key character is also a German Jew, and the rival for the love of the writer's wife. She leaves with him, along with other fleeing refugees on board an un-seaworthy vessel that is presumed sunk at the beginning of the story. Nothing changes in the course of the long narration to give the beginning a different ending. Not even the consummate narrative skills of Seghers can change the ending of a story that is dispassionately narrated by an ordinary German factory worker.

Hans Schütz contends that Seghers discovered in exile that she could not run away from her Jewishness. He continues: "Though one cannot find an explicit reference to that fact in her works, Jewish issues keep appearing in her works at the end of the thirties."[15] Seghers never ran away from her Jewishness, not even in the Weimar Republic when it was not necessary to do so. In the thirties in Germany and now later in exile in France, she, like all Jews from Germany were forced to deal with Jewish identity. The stories that follow display the ways in which all German Jews were forced to grapple with their

identity. Like Seghers, they did not run anywhere, except from Nazi Germany and now from occupied France.

No wonder then that the craving for a normal life is central in this novel and in all the narratives. Seghers shows through the simple observations of her narrator how much ordinary people were affected and impeded in their efforts to survive a life on the run, and how much they were impeded in their attempts to leave France. In the words of her narrator: "It was amazing to me how these officials, in the midst of their country's downfall, managed to discover even more red tape so they could properly classify, register, and pigeonhole the people over whom they had lost virtually all power" (*Transit*, 38). He compares it to attempting to register the migration of the Germanic tribes. Seghers expresses the role and necessity of daily, ordinary living at its most acute in food, which in *Transit* has been reduced to pizza slices, a cheap glass of local wine, *Ersatz* coffee or as a luxury, enough beans saved from the *Ersatz* to make one precious cup of coffee. Even the basics are constantly curtailed—not enough coupons for another slice of pizza, a night's sleep invaded by the police searching for refugees without valid papers.

Seghers also portrays how tragically close some came to being rescued and how minute was the difference between rescue and disaster. A large Jewish family is about to leave Marseilles; all their papers are in order but their oldest member is terminally ill. The reader is left in no doubt that their decision to stay with her will cost the whole family their freedom, and probably their lives. In another case it is something as simple as a photo that makes the difference between transit and exit. A Czech conductor is almost allowed to leave the country—all his papers *finally* assembled and in harmony but one of the visa photos has become stuck to the next one. The missing photo is discovered too late—for he collapses with a fatal heart attack and is carted out of the consulate on a stretcher. The photo is a leitmotif that will recur in other writings.

The choice of Weidel is painfully close to Ernst Weiss, a medical doctor and Czech born Jewish writer who had taken his life in a hotel in Paris just as the Germans were entering. Although Seghers had not met him personally until exile, Weiss must have impressed her for she attempted to visit him in his hotel after the evacuation of Paris. It would seem that the death of Weiss affected Seghers deeply. As is the case of the fictional character in *Transit*, Weiss was not aware that a visa for the United States was, in fact, waiting for him. His death assumed, in fact, emblematic significance for his fellow writers.