

Translator's Introduction to "Journey to the Eleventh Reich"

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¶1 Anna Seghers wrote "Reise ins Elfte Reich" in Paris in 1938, and published it in early 1939, in a series of installments for the antifascist weekly *Die neue Weltbühne*, which by then was operating in exile in the same city.¹ In this piece, a droll "we" narrator describes the process of emigration to the Eleventh Reich, a country to which only those who have *no papers* are admitted. A spare handful of links to the real world—Uruguay, Berlin, Ptolemy and Kepler, railways—gives readers some sense of a possible when-and-where, hinting vaguely at escape to Latin America, and also betraying a casual disdain ("But had anyone ever imagined anything particular about, say, Uruguay?").² These details puncture the unspecificity of a text that otherwise feels like a parable.

¶2 When the piece was published, Anna Seghers had not yet left France, though in the wake of the Munich Agreement of 1938, she would surely have felt the impending danger to herself and

her family there.³ I see this piece as a farce in the future perfect. If we imagine reading it in 1939, it is a satire of what those on the cusp of flight *will have* lived through, including a possible return to Berlin at the end of the emigratory ordeal. Even this last section, "Wiedersehen," or "Reunion," as I have translated it, appeared in the weekly with a note that it was to be continued.⁴ In retrospect, the paratext seems less to portend the continuation of the story than the devastation that loomed near.

¶3 A few notes on the translation. Thank you to Deniz Göktürk and Hannes Bajohr for their comments, and to Britta Lange, at whose suggestion I chose to preserve the German word "Reich" (realm, empire), as this maintains the obvious resonance with the Third Reich. Second, though of course any translation is only one of many *possible* translations, we should recall that this instability is already inherent to the source text. In the commentary to the piece, the editorial team of the *Anna Seghers-Werkausgabe* at the Aufbau Verlag notes a curious discrepancy between the available typoscripts and the publication, in the scene in which the emigrés visit the authorities. In the typoscripts, the word "Türhüter," or "gatekeeper," is used to denote the staff presiding over the numerous antechambers, but is replaced with "Sekretär"

1— Silvia Schlenstedt, "Kommentar," in *Erzählungen 1933-1947*, by Anna Seghers, ed. Helen Fehervary and Bernhard Spies, in collaboration with Silvia Schlenstedt (Aufbau, 2011), 382. Story and commentary are in volume II/2 of the *Das erzählerische Werk*, part of a critical annotated edition of Anna Seghers's works, *Anna Seghers-Werkausgabe*, published by Aufbau Verlag.
2— For more on the portrayal of Mexico in *Transit*, see Olivia C. Díaz Pérez, *Mexiko als antitotalitärer Mythos: Das Werk von Anna Seghers zwischen Nationalsozialismus, mexikanischem Exil und Wirklichkeit der DDR*, (Stauffenburg Verlag, 2016), 195-196.

3— Schlenstedt, 382

4— Schlenstedt, 384.

in the published version. The editors point out that "Türhüter" invites associations with Kafka, and thus perhaps reveals how Seghers may have perceived French bureaucracy in her attempts to emigrate.⁵ Frankly, I am glad that "Sekretär" prevailed. "Türhüter" would have sent the story to the dark vaults of the Kafkaverse, while the power of Seghers's prose lies in the use of a less allegorical register. In this way, as in other works of Seghers, the locus of absurdity remains split between the style of representation, and the world being represented.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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5— Schlenstedt, 384.