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Universitat Autònoma
de Barcelona

**Exile Literature: an Analysis of the Escape in Anna
Seghers' *The Seventh Cross* and *Transit***

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Author: Laura Ramírez Egea

Supervisor: Jordi Jané i Lligé

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística

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Abstract

In light of previous research, many critics focus on Seghers' political and historical vision through her novels, in relation to the psychological effects that events had on herself and people she knew. However, significantly less attention has been given to the topic of escape.

The purpose of this dissertation is to analyse Seghers' works focusing on fleeing the regime, as well as the diverse cases of refugees and their emotions. By doing so, this paper provides a close insight into the portrayal of the historical reality of refugees who aimed to escape the Nazi regime. The novels analysed are *The Seventh Cross*, a thriller about the persecution of seven fugitives who escaped a concentration camp and *Transit*, a drama set in Marseille, the last open port in Europe that allowed refugees to flee. The analysis aims to show that despite having a common theme, the novels offer diverse illustrations of the fugitive reality through fiction.

Keywords: Anna Seghers, escape, exile, *Exilliteratur*, *Transit*, *The Seventh Cross*, historical realism

1. Introduction

Since 1933 to 1945, a great number of intellectuals aimed to avoid the repression held by the Nazi Party and fled Germany. Despite the circumstances, the expatriates continued to work abroad. In the case of literature, there has not been any precedent of authors departing on such a huge scale. Well-known authors such as Stefan Zweig, Bertolt Brecht or the Nobel-prize winner Thomas Mann, exiled across the Atlantic. The period, called in Germany *Exilliteratur*, was exceptionally prolific. Pfeiler (1957) argues that “exiled writers persisted in their work with such a tenacious devotion and remarkable success” (4). Novels emerged in foreign countries and they were critical about Hitler’s regime, most authors condemned and exposed the restraints of the political government.

As mentioned previously, many writers took their time to denounce the affairs currently happening in their homeland. One of the writers who exiled and wrote about the current situation was Anna Seghers. The writer, born in Mainz into a middle-class Jewish family, left Nazi Germany in 1933 and moved to France. She stood out for being a very much compromised author with the political situation and participated in the *Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller* (protective association of German authors) in Paris. There, she wrote her best-selling novel *The Seventh Cross* (1942). Consequently, after the Nazi invasion in France in 1940, she was forced to flee the European country and sailed to America. In safe-harbour Mexico, she wrote and published her novel *Transit* (1944).

Her novels dealt with topics related to culture, nation, the individual and the role of the writer in society. Seghers, as mentioned by Maier-Katkin in the article “Writing for Memory: Anna Seghers, History, Literature, and Complicity in the Third Reich” (2002), aimed to “connect the lived and experiences of the characters to the predominant historical events” (383). Through her novels, a mixture of the historical reality and fiction is created. In some way, her literature “can be of considerable help in uncovering the complexity of the human condition in a totalitarian regime” (Maier-Katkin, 2002: 383). In other words, she focuses her literature on the impact of Hitler’s regime on common citizens.

Seghers’ style was widely influenced by the realist movement and critical works of Georg Lucáks. The author was a Jewish and communist philosopher, critic and friend of the author. His essay “Realism in the Balance” (1938) proposes a literary continuation of the 19th Century realist movement. Lucáks manifests that this aesthetic which was extremely popular during the 19th Century, was disappearing due to the rise of Modernism. Writers who were following many currents such as Modernism, Expressionism or Naturalism do not reflect properly the socio-historical determinants of reality. Shortly, the new currents are taking away the essence of realism.

In the case of Seghers’ novels, she follows the current of Realism presenting an accurate historical portrait in her writings. Through the perspective of the characters or narrator found in the works, an approach to the locations, communities and current events is given. To put it in another way, Realism aims to represent the world from one specific point, this representation of the historical world intends to be objective, even though the characters might depict a subjective portion of reality. Seghers presents a

fictional story in both of her novels, based on her current time and experience, keeping a subjective vision of reality through the characters that are created.

The purpose of this dissertation is to analyse Seghers' works *The Seventh Cross* and *Transit* focusing on fleeing from Nazi Germany. Both novels are a product of this historical reality, her life is strictly connected to her narrative, as she herself lived some of the narrated situations. Her subjective depictions offer opposite dimensions of the notion of escape. Firstly, the fiction book *The Seventh Cross* illustrates the antifascist resistance while narrating the story of seven imprisoned men who attempt to escape a concentration camp (in German *Konzentrationslager*). Therefore, the act of escaping is filled with a sense of action and suspense. Secondly, *Transit* is settled in Marseille and expresses the need of the population to flee Europe after the advancing German troops in France. The second novel is much more psychological, keeping the action of flight in the background and giving importance to the bureaucratic procedures and diverse circumstances of the characters, such as hope or the ability of waiting. This paper will examine the works mentioned in order to identify the similarities and differences found in the topic of escape.

2. Analysis of The Seventh Cross (1942)

The Seventh Cross is an anti-war narrative written during the Third Reich. It was published in 1942 in the German language but not in Germany, where it was available in 1946 after the Third Reich. It became an immediate best-seller and Hollywood made a film adaptation which was released in 1944. The film was directed by Fred Zinnemann and starred the Oscar-winner Spencer Tracy. Seghers portrays through the

story a reflection of the country, humanity and balances the senses of hope and despair. The author wrote a captivating thriller set in the Nazi Germany, in which she offers a fascinating insight into this dark historical period.

As Seghers' reflection of realism, the novel introduces settings that the author knew by herself. Setting the narrative around an autumnal Mainz, the work portrays the landscapes she had memorised during her childhood. She worked the novel through reality, that is why the locations chosen for the book are the surroundings of the river Rhine or the fictional Westhofen camp. The place is based in the Osthofen camp, which operated from 1933 to 1934. By making a simple name change (Osthofen to Westhofen), Seghers transforms the location into a fictional one but keeping a clear reference. In Osthofen, the vast majority of prisoners were political prisoners mostly related to the antinazi or Communist activities. While the camp portrayed in the novel is focused on political captives, there were other types of camps. For instance, concentration camps aimed for Jewish prisoners to work and extermination camps were the 'final solution' (in German *Endlösung der Judenfrage*) to eradicate Jewish population. Hence, through the creation of a realistic setting, Seghers presents a perfect environment around the action of escape.

The plot action starts with an escape. Seven men look for their freedom and escape the fictional Westhofen camp. The action lasts for a week, and the novel is divided in seven different chapters. Seghers introduces a suspenseful manhunt that carries and exposes the psychology of the escapees, the collaboration of the population and the fear of being captured. Along with an omniscient narrator, the fictional passages are distant and seen from an objective perspective. The characters' viewpoints are not revealed unless the narrator shares them. The narrative is placed around the hope of

George Heisler to escape, through his action, we observe many characters reacting to help Heisler and the movements of the Gestapo following him.

Moreover, the main character, George Heisler represents the opposition to the regime. Seiffert states that through the main character, Seghers depicts the image of every person in the Third Reich (9). Besides being a revolutionary character, he has similar features to the author. The escapee is a Mainz communist and Jew, just like Seghers. What is more, the book is dedicated to Germany's antifascists and could be seen as "a contribution to the fight against the National Socialism" as declared by Steinaecker (2000: 392).

In short, analysing Seghers work, I will discuss the portrayal of desperation when escaping. The novel proves the author to be "a veritable master of suspense" (Steinaecker, 2000: 393). Not only for her portrayal of Heisler, but for the magnificent and thrilling action that surrounds the guards of Westhofen. Additionally, I will portray the decisions of characters, who take different paths in comparison to Heisler. Through her novel, Seghers expressed her views on the German resistance, which she considered to somehow have a chance of succeeding. Therefore, this analysis will be focused on the action of escaping along with the psychological consequences and the power of population.

2. 1. Escaping the Westhofen camp

The initial action of flight portrayed in *The Seventh Cross* takes place during the length of the night. Darkness becomes an ideal period of time for the prisoners to leave the camp. During this sequence, Seghers creates an impressive intriguing chapter. After

crossing the walls that limited the camp, the prisoners were blessed with a foggy day, a natural phenomena that brought them safety. Even though the escapees were able to hear the sirens that alerted the guards, the lights that aimed to illuminate and find the runaway group, were vanished by the dense autumnal fog (Seghers 14). Symbolically, the fog gives the prisoners some sense of shelter, as Heisler feels “it seemed impossible that anyone would ever find him” (Seghers 199). However, the escapees are aware that every step they take in their new freedom could be their last.

Furthermore, sensing danger at each step is due to the pressure exerted by the guards. The prisoners aimed to escape a possible death, as they believed that “they would have killed all of them within the next few days” (Seghers 14). It is argued that they would prefer to die in nature, instead of being killed by a human force. In fact, the aim of this escape is to live and free themselves from the repression held by Nazi dictatorship found in the camp.

After the flight, many escapees start to get caught. Seghers proves that fleeing from the camp is a dangerous and intricate task. To illustrate this idea, both Beutler and Pelzer were captured quickly. Another prisoner who fled and got caught was Belloni, the rest of the escapees were aware of him being caught due to hearing him screaming (Seghers 203). Furthermore, it is mentioned how the clothes hanging on his home were the last belongings that remained of him. Those who continued to flee the guards, tried to find a safe place to stay and aimed to get rid of their clothes. It was a reality that authorities had given a description of the uniform. In consequence, one of the options was to fill the pockets with stones and throw the clothing into the Rhine (Seghers 133). Finding a safe place to stay was an intricate task, helpers could be considered suspects and risked being interrogated by persecutors.

Next, Wallau was an old man who helped the protagonist with the escape plan and was an advisor for the rest of the prisoners. In the story, after Wallau was caught, his family was arrested. His wife and sister were captured while his children were sent to Oberndorf Reformatory, aiming to be reeducated in values according to the state (Seghers 168). Additionally, the escape required psychological resistance to overcome the horrific measures developed by the Nazi regime, as the prisoner was not only risking his own life, but the life of people who surrounded him.

Consequently, as the authorities were swiftly reacting to the flight, many characters began to lose their optimism. The rapid and partly successful hunting affected the expectations of Fuellgrabe. This character started to consider that the prisoners must have been crazy once they decided to flee the camp. He drastically loses hope and has “had enough” (Seghers 203). Fuellgrabe states that “I’m giving up [...] I can’t stand this foolish, crazy running around any more, and in the end you get caught anyway. We are no match for them” (Seghers 203). The runaway considers the Nazi power to be bigger than their skills to escape, as they would eventually get caught. In consequence, his hope now lies on keeping himself alive and that can be obtained by turning himself in.

With a declining situation for the prisoners, the authorities assume that they will succeed in capturing all the escapees. Most of them were caught, including the sixth, called Aldinger, who seemed to be responsible for his death (Seghers 270). Consequently, the guards and the commandant Fahrenberg were optimistic in finding the seventh prisoner.

As days go by, Heisler also considers the possibility of being caught and being brought back to Westhofen, a place where he would inevitably die. However, even if the

probability of passing away or being captured is there, there is also a slight chance of fleeing the country successfully. The latter required time and patience, a period that to Heisler seemed an eternity:

“the waiting is a genuine question of life or death and you don’t know beforehand what the outcome will be and how long will it take - hours or days - then you take the strangest measures to annihilate time. You try to catch the minutes, to destroy them. You set up a kind of dyke against time, and you keep trying to build up your dyke even if time is already flowing over the top of it.” (Seghers 359)

The action of waiting for the situation to improve or to be aggravated depended on time. Shortly, the research became more complex and hiding options were narrowed, as all the prisoners had been caught except for Heisler and the persecutors’ eyes were set on him.

Finally, it is relevant to mention that this flight was necessary for the group of prisoners. Specifically for Heisler, the one who is successful in his escape. Any small gesture or step would mean closure to freedom and distance from the dictatorship: “Even if he had only enough strength left to take one tiny step towards freedom, no matter how ridiculous and useless the step might be, he was going to take it” (Seghers 184). In conclusion, every chance of fleeing the country would be taken by the prisoners, as even a small escape would mean that the totalitarian structure is fractured.

2.2. Heisler's inner self

George Heisler is a character that stands out for being one of the escapees that keeps his faith. When the crosses were created, the fugitives who were captured were "heartened by the assurance that not all the escapees were captured" (Maier-Katkin, 2020: 65). Consequently, the burnt of the seventh cross represents a triumph to the antifascists. One of them made his way outside the country and is closer to freedom.

Emotionally, escaping an institution of such a high scale and avoiding the guards and trackers seemed inconceivable. In the process, readers can observe how Heisler suffers from nightmares that indicate that his subconscious mind reflects one of his biggest phobias. After his nightmare, in which he even passed away, his fears are expressed "I might get a bullet in my stomach. That wouldn't be even more pleasant than the kicks and blows from those thugs at Westhofen" (Seghers 350). The main character is a hunted prey who faces his true fear of dying, first represented in a subconscious dream but later, expressed by himself.

Furthermore, death is a recurrent theme in Heisler's life. While the Nazi party was not in power, the main character felt himself to be alive as he had freedom to move around the country and express himself. However, this changed when restrictions appeared, his freedom vanished:

"When I was still alive in those first years of Hitler's rise to power, when I still did all those things that I considered worth living for, I could let my boys know about my hiding places without worry, this in a time when other sons betrayed their fathers to their teachers. Now I am dead." (Seghers 168)

Considering himself to be dead is a strong statement. The power of fascism reduced him as a person, and he cannot obtain freedom anymore. He even thinks that, as

he is not psychologically alive anymore, it would even be alright to die because there would not be consequences (Seghers 170). Due to the pressure of fascism, he feels his life has ended, not physically but psychologically and spiritually.

Moreover, Heisler is aware that the only way of feeling alive is by escaping. He feels nostalgia towards the time where he could be free, a period he refers to as “That Earlier Time” (Seghers 265). The aim of his escape is none other than obtaining the liberties he had previously and returning to a similar life as the one he had before “Earlier Time, that was the name of the land that started on the other side of the city. Earlier Time, that was the name of his village” (Seghers 265). Metaphorically speaking, his destination is the past, a past he is capable of obtaining somewhere else where his freedom is not taken away. In *The Seventh Cross*, Seghers revokes a free Germany where citizens had freedom of speech.

2.3. Representation of antifascist forces

Heisler’s escape was a success not only for his personal work. His effort was reinforced by the cooperation of the citizens, who acted as community sheltering Heisler. As Maier-Katkin states in her essay “*The Seventh Cross: Dignité humaine and Human Rights*”, Heisler “discovers his own humanity through his contact with many upright Germans” (2020: 75). His escape being assisted by people who surrounded him, gave him a spark of hope and understood that the cruelty displayed not only in Westhofen, has not eclipsed the entirety of the country.

The action of helping an ex prisoner and runaway had severe consequences. Therefore, his helpers were currently in danger as the Gestapo was tying the knots in

order to capture Heisler. To illustrate this idea, the help of people whom he knew “had been turned into a network of living traps. With every hour of police activity, the net around him was tightening and becoming more intricate” (Seghers 194). This chase was becoming narrower and that caused more difficulties for the prisoner when he wanted to flee the country.

Through the figure of George Heisler, the only prisoner who was not caught and whose cross was burnt, readers can observe the desperation of the hunters. The character of Fahrenberg, the commandant of the Westhofen concentration camp, realises at the end of the novel that there should be a slight and small probability of Heisler escaping. This successful escape was not conceived by the Gestapo. However, it is the commandant who perceives this possibility:

“Some hand must have cut him a piece of bread, must have filled his glass. Some house somewhere must have sheltered him. For the first time Fahrenberg lucidly considered the possibility that Heisler might have got away. But this possibility was impossible. [...] Probably jumped into the Rhine or the Main. [...] Neither the Rhine, nor the Main, nor any other river would ever yield his corpse, for this man lived, and he would continue to live. For the first time since the escape Fahrenberg realised that he wasn’t pursuing one single man whose features he knew; whose strength was exhaustible, but rather a faceless, inexhaustible, inestimable power. But he couldn’t bear to think such a thought for longer than a few minutes.” (Seghers 382)

Fahrenberg understands that citizens might have contributed in Heisler’s escape. The commandant considers the flight as a possibility, which leads him to contemplate an external power rising against the ruling government. Through the figure of Heisler, he observes that a large group of people participated in this escape.

In conclusion, the novel offers a message full of hope during the Third Reich. Exposing the possibility of escaping the dictatorship, *The Seventh Cross* gives a spark of hope for the resisters and works as a reminder that the good can win over the evil. Seghers narrates that “a tiny escapade is successful against the omnipotence of the enemy, then it’s been a total success.” (147). Shortly, besides the almighty power the Nazi party can hold, there is still room for hopefulness among ordinary German citizens.

3. Analysis of *Transit* (1944)

In 1944, Seghers published her novel *Transit*. Initially distributed in English and Spanish and four years later, in the German language. The work was written during her stay in Mexico and inspired by her own life-experience. *Transit* narrates an intricate gloomy atmosphere in the French city of Marseille, where exiles from Germany, Spain, among others aim to acquire the correct authorisations to flee Europe. The author and her family lived in a similar situation, after staying in Marseille they obtained the necessary permits to leave the country in March 1941. Consequently, the author and her family secured a passage on a ship sailing to America and settled in Mexico. Seghers portrays a deeper, desperate and bureaucratic image of the action of escaping the Nazi regime.

The narrative, inspired in the 1940’s events, presents a nameless narrator who escaped a Nazi concentration camp and a French camp. Having a first-person narrator allows Seghers to present the circumstances taking place in Marseille from an spectator’s point of view, although the character is not entirely passive, he takes an active role in most circumstances. After arriving in the city of Marseille, readers

observe a wide vision of different and personal situations starred by distinct personalities, detailed-tragedies and psychological hopelessness. The plot wraps the story of the narrator, who is asked to deliver a letter to a writer called Weidel, after finding out he passed away, the narrator goes to Marseille looking for Weidel's wife. The narrator uncovers himself under the name Seidler and is often confused with Weidel, and consequently moves to obtain papers to leave. Through the first passages, it is transparently witnessed the narrator's opposition to the Nazi regime and that, as Aramendi Perez (2017) states "he does not belong to any political group" (17). The plot details the difficulties of obtaining a visa to flight the European continent. Overall, having a narrator that in most cases acts as an spectator, leads the readers to sympathise with the delusion of hope and understand the desire of reaching a new start.

Moreover, the harbour-metropolis of Marseille, was the last open port of the continent. Thus, it was the exiles' last opportunity to flee. Representing an optimistic but despairing location, Seghers illustrates a dusty and cold place. Marseille does not represent a place to remain for a long period, but a transitory location, refugees aim to leave when their permits are ready. Aramendi Perez (2017) declares that:

"All the characters in the novel see Marseille as a transitory place; their sole aspiration is to flee France in order to begin a new life on the other side of the ocean. Nevertheless, as we have observed, the quest for starting from scratch is not a smooth process in exile. All the bureaucratic requirements and governmental measures limit as much as possible the exiles' desires of going elsewhere." (24)

Time not only conditions the city of Marseille, everything in *Transit* seems to be temporary. Even the title carries the name of a brief permit: a transit visa which "gives you permission to travel through a country with the stipulation that you don't plan to

stay” (Seghers 40). In short, this momentary stay in Marseille is fulfilled with hope as it represents the point of departure to a better place, but also the deposit of delusion of those who cannot leave.

Historically, France became an usual destination for German population forced into exile. The French Republic was the main destination for two fundamental reasons: the political refugees were granted shelter and the two countries shared a great frontier. Moreover, most exiles did not go further because they expected to return soon to their homeland. The first big wave of expatriates happened in 1933, the Germans needed a visa but obtaining one from any of the French consulates in Germany seemed easy. Even though a certain amount of refugees precipitately left the country and crossed the border illegally without the permits (Pfanner, 1986).

On the other hand, during 1938’s spring, Hitler annexed Austria and a new large wave of German and Austrian citizens aimed to cross the border. Hereby, refugees looked for the safety given by France. In this case, the government was directed by Daladier, Prime Minister from 1938 to 1940, who issued a large number of regulations against the refugees, and fines in case of illegal entry into French territory. What is more, expatriates did not intend to go back to their homeland but did not plan to stay in France due to the advancing German troops (Pfanner, 1986). Conclusively, sheltered citizens wanted to obtain the necessary permits to flee to the new world, and that became their odyssey.

The following analysis of *Transit* will essentially deal with two main points in relation to escaping the European continent. Firstly, I will discuss the bureaucratic procedure of obtaining a visa with the aim of sailing to the American continent. Secondly, the focus will be set on the psychological and personal approach of the

characters. In this novel, Seghers shows the different motives of refugees and how the act of escaping does not lose importance, but the action is covered by the administrative permits.

3.1 Bureaucratic procedures needed to flee

As stated earlier, Marseille was the last open harbour in Europe with leaving boats to the New World. Therefore, it seemed the only way to escape. However, the new French regulations required many official permissions and visas in order to leave the country. The rules were that many, that Seghers advises in the book to “forget about your destination for a while, for at this moment only the countries in between are what matter, otherwise you won’t be able to leave” (40). As illustrated in the novel, the need of fleeing is taken back, giving the prominence to the acquisition of the correct permits.

Furthermore, focusing on the necessary documents to leave will definitely bring the exile closer to fleeing the country. Apart from all the compulsory documents, the refugees needed to attest and confirm their aim of fleeing the country. “They’ll let you stay here in peace for a certain length of time only if you can prove that you intend to leave” (Seghers 41). Proving the intention of leaving, would have led the refugees to be able to stay in Marseille until their visas were available.

In order to leave France, you had to obtain a visa. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a visa is “an official document or mark made in a passport that allows you to enter or leave a particular country”. Seghers defines visas similarly and offers distinct passages to portray the different permits. First, the transit visa allows you to travel through a country with the condition of not staying. Second, a refugee owns a danger

visa which is “for specially endangered people” (Seghers 13). The protagonist found this type of permit confusing, as he considered everyone in Marseille to be, to a certain extent, endangered. However, that refugee was a writer who published articles positioning himself against Hitler, hence, he was “endangered in a more unusual way than the rest” (Seghers 13). Shortly, visas are a complex topic dealt in the novel, as it is the only permit that gives allowance to leave the country.

In fact, the new system adopted by Daladier, would be considered to be inefficient as many visas expired too fast. Seghers writes in *Transit*: “They gave me my exit visa yesterday. Half a week too late [...] Because my visa expired at the beginning of the week.” (60). Nevertheless, it is stated that many visas could only be secured to those who would be able to verify owning a sufficient amount of money to pay for the passage and the security deposit (Seghers 199). If obtaining the regulated documents was an intricate task, booking a passage ship was not easy. To illustrate this idea, the author states that some of the exiles were in possession of “valid transit visas but hadn’t yet paid for their passage; others had paid-up passages but expired transit visas.” (Seghers 102). In short, it was extremely complicated to be in possession of a not-outdated visa, sufficient money and having a booked passage.

On the other hand, the main character states at the end of the novel the main documents required in order to obtain a valid permit. Seghers narrated how after obtaining all the right papers and the doctor’s certificate, the consul received a telegram asking “for proof of Aryan ancestry” (219). Then, the character should head to the “département of origin”. Finally, citizens who fled Germany needed to obtain many permits to prove their origins along with their intention to leave Marseille.

3.2. Marseille, a common destination for refugees

Through the 1940s, the psychological consequences of a strict regime that does not tolerate a certain ideology or community would suppose a threat to those endangered. Consequently, this necessity of fleeing Germany was expanded, Seghers narrates how large numbers of people arrived in Marseille day by day: “A train just arrived. So many people are still coming here from all parts of the country. From camps, hospitals, from the war” (146). As a result, all those who arrived, wanted to obtain the necessary permits to leave: “The stream for the departure-obsessed swelled steadily hour by hour, day by day. [...] not even the threat of concentration camps, could keep the number of those hoping to leave from surpassing the number of people living here permanently” (Seghers 99). The citizens aiming to depart were increasing, mostly, due to the advancing German military force in France. To clarify, the novel presents a diverse representation of refugees who aimed to escape, both main and minor characters.

Furthermore, Seghers recreates the humane feeling of envy and egoism in the novel. The citizens that temporarily settled in Marseille like to comment and gossip about ships getting lost or not arriving to their destination. The act of gossiping is a clear consequence of feeling left behind. If the refugees do not arrive at their destination, it is alright for those who were not even able to embark. Another important factor that triggered gossiping was the boredom found in the city:

“They were consumed by waiting. And to make time fly, they resorted to gossip. As long as you were talking about departures, people would listen eagerly. They loved to talk about visas bought and sold or letters of transit and new transit countries. But more than anything else they

liked to hear about ships that were seized or never reached their destinations, especially when they were ships that, for whatever reason, had left without them.” (Seghers 127)

“Since there were French officers on board, all the passengers ended up in an African detention camp. How cheerful the teller of this tale sounded! Probably because, just like him, these people couldn't get where they were going either.” (Seghers 79)

In the fragments, the common topic in the city covered ships departing, landing or sinking. Both instances portray the capital sin of envy, the way of escaping the jealousy of others reaching their promised land is by talking about ships wrecking or getting lost. In other words, if gossipers cannot leave Marseille, they will be glad to know that nobody else has that possibility.

3.2.1. Diversity among refugees

Since the sense of belonging and liberty cannot be found back in Germany, the population resorted to a massive flight intending to leave the continent and search for an alternative home. One of the sensations portrayed in the novel is the loss of freedom, the main character comments that “the one thing on earth I was still afraid of was the loss of my freedom” (Seghers 50). The character states in a couple more instances that he aims to “retain his freedom” and he states that there are people in the country “who prefer death to losing their freedom” (Seghers 50). Seghers makes clear that the intention of the characters is not returning to Germany, instead, they aim to find refuge in another continent.

Second, the protagonist reveals that during the time he was held captive, he felt that “his youth was vanishing in concentration camps” (Seghers 71). Therefore, he aims

to leave the country looking for the freedom to relish his youth. Moreover, Seghers wrote:

“I was still there, that I had not gotten lost, not in any war or in any concentration camp, not in fascism, not while moving about, not during any bombardment, not in any disorder, no matter how violent. I hadn't gotten lost, hadn't bled to death; I was here and so was Heinz.” (69)

The narrator is not too late, he is still alive and can look for a better place to inhabit. The figure of Heinz, his one-legged friend who was also sent to a camp and escaped, has a similar objective compared to the narrator. Heinz needs to escape, as he would most likely be prosecuted by the Germans. Therefore, his aim is to flee France in one of the ships. Both characters realise that they have not lost yet to the power of Nazism and they are capable of obtaining a secure freedom.

In addition, Seghers presents the characters of the doctor and Marie. On the one hand, the doctor is someone who aims to flee Europe with the objective of healing people in the New World, to be more precise, in Oaxaca, Mexico (Seghers 74). On the other hand, Marie is Weidel's wife and she does not know that her husband is dead. Apparently, she is in love with the doctor and needs Weidel in order to obtain the necessary permits to leave and start a new life with her new lover. The protagonist is aware that she is looking for her husband, but does not reveal his state or being in possession of her husband's documents.

Both Marie and the doctor have spent a certain amount of time in Marseille. The reason was that Marie was hesitant about leaving. The doctor stated that they could have fled to Casablanca when visas were not needed (Seghers 133), but Marie made several excuses. Consequently, they ended up in a very intricate situation.

The author projected through her novel the figure of the German author and philosopher Walter Benjamin, he fled Paris after the Nazi invasion and killed himself in Portbou, a town close to the border between France and Spain. Seghers references his suicide in Chapter 7: “during the night a man had shot himself in a hotel in Portbou on the other side of the Spanish border” (175). Apparently his decision was made after authorities rejected his entrance in Spain and aimed to return him to France.

Moreover, *Transit* portrays some other situations regarding minor characters. Seghers illustrates cases of intending to leave the country but not being able. One of the exemplifications is an individual who did not have “a certificate of release from a camp” (41) he was held in, so therefore, he was not able to leave the country. Another case, which is more shocking, is the exemplification of a family who wants to leave. Every member of the family was in possession of a functioning visa, but their grandmother was an exception. The medical results declared that the woman would pass away in one week, and consequently, she did not receive any visa. This situation creates a dilemma for the family, as Seghers narrates:

“If they all stay here, then the old woman will die anyway, but their visas will expire, the transit visas will expire, and you know that in France they intern people who have all their visas and transits and don't get out. Anyway, they all ought to be interned, or at least locked up in an insane asylum.” (180)

For the readers, the family seems to be treated as if they were psychologically insane. It can be considered an exceptional situation, as most of them obtained the right permits. However, if they do not leave the country in the following days, they will not be allowed to stay. Seghers presents here an ethical situation in which the decision is very much determined by the personal empathy of the family.

Through different passages, *Transit* is presented as a tale of war which describes with exactitude the needs of the citizens who aimed to flee France: “Back then they were all consumed by one wish: to leave. And they were all afraid of one thing: being left behind. [...] They wanted to get away, to get away from this broken-down country, away from this continent!” (Seghers 127). While hope and sight was set on the New World, refugees in Marseille were living in the border of war and peace. Lastly, the desire of the expatriates lays on unreachable peace that aims to be achieved by obtaining bureaucratic permits.

Towards the end of the narrative, the main character decides not to leave Marseille and stay in France with the Binnets, in a farm where he can start a new life. Apart from his decision, the ship he was going to sail with had sunk: “The Montreal had gone down! It seemed to me as if that boat had left ages ago, a fairy-tale ship sailing the seas forever, its voyage and shipwreck timeless. But the news of its sinking doesn’t keep masses of refugees from pleading for reservations on the next ship” (Seghers 251). While the rest of the refugees continue to buy passages, the main character realises that escaping to America might not give him the freedom he needs. The book ends with an unexpected decision that saves the character from death. For him, this transitory portion of his life could be understood as a spiritual journey in which he discovers that his purpose is not fleeing. Therefore, giving Europe a second chance, he stays in France.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Anna Seghers' literary works follow a common theme related to escaping a totalitarian nation. Through the two novels examined, *The Seventh Cross* and *Transit*, it has been proved that Seghers' narrative projects the author's concerns about

the contemporary events, in relation to the regime itself and deeper subjects. For instance, the notion of freedom is represented through different characters who consider it unapproachable in their homeland and search for it abroad. Through different approaches, these novels show a similar introspection into the historical reality of Germany.

On the one hand, as influenced by Lucáks work “Realism in the Balance”, Seghers creates a fictional environment accurate to her witnessed reality. As stated previously, the novels project a realistic description of locations the author was familiar with, such as the region surrounding Mainz or the city of Marseille. Moreover, through the perspective of different characters, it is portrayed the resistant antifascist community as well as the despair and sorrow found in refugees who cannot flee to the New World.

On the other hand, while both books follow a similar topic, the plot and the narrator carry the stories into diverse episodes. First, *The Seventh Cross* uses an objective third-person narrator, it gives the narrative a dynamic yet thrilling action, which is created around the suspense following the prisoners’ escape. Second, *Transit* is provided with a first-person narrator who acts often as a spectator, since the focus is set on the bureaucratic procedure and desperation of refugees, it is a much more reflective storyteller. In other words, while the first novel offers a suspenseful action, the second is centered in legal permits and the gloomy environment of Marseille.

Lastly, both novels have a common purpose which is looking for freedom and that is achieved in the ending, but in different ways. *The Seventh Cross* ends with a successful escape from one of the prisoners. Heisler’s only option was fleeing, as staying in Germany would mean an inevitable death. Conversely, *Transit* reflects that escaping is not the only option, as the ship that sailed to the New World sank. The

notion *Transit* could be considered a spiritual state in which the character evolves. Therefore, the character stays in France to appreciate a location he initially found to be transitive and sorrowful. In short, the narratives offer different alternatives to the characters, who find freedom in distinct ways.

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