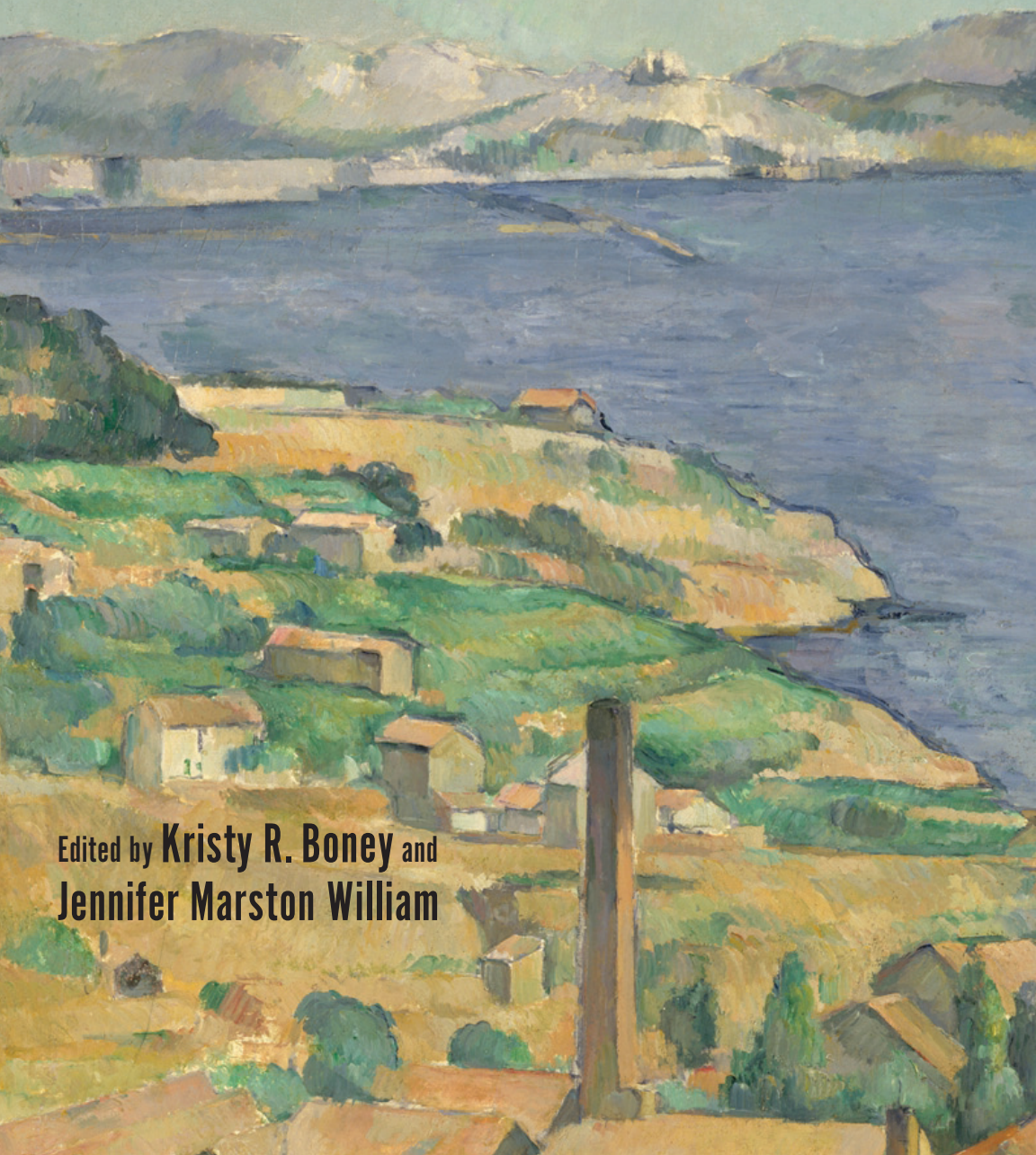


DIMENSIONS OF STORYTELLING IN GERMAN LITERATURE AND BEYOND

"For once, telling it all from the beginning"

Edited by **Kristy R. Boney** and
Jennifer Marston William



Dimensions of Storytelling in German Literature and Beyond

Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture

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CAMDEN HOUSE

Rochester, New York

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First published 2018
by Camden House

Camden House is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mt. Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620, USA
www.camden-house.com
and of Boydell & Brewer Limited
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
www.boydellandbrewer.com

ISBN-13: 978-1-64014-040-0
ISBN-10: 978-1-64014-040-9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

CIP data is available from the Library of Congress.

This publication is printed on acid-free paper.
Printed in the United States of America.

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Acknowledgments

THE EDITORS EXPRESS their sincere appreciation to the following sources of financial support for this volume: The School of Languages and Cultures, the College of Liberal Arts, and the Office of the Executive Vice President for Research and Partnerships at Purdue University; and the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, as well as the Department of Government, International Studies, and Languages at the University of Central Missouri.

Jim Walker, the editorial director at Camden House, has provided invaluable help and support of this project from its beginnings. We are most grateful to him and to Sue Martin for her careful copyediting.

Finally, we take this opportunity to recognize Dr. Helen Fehervary, whose literary scholarship informs and inspires many of the essays in this volume. This book attests to the far-reaching effect that her passion for, and extensive knowledge about, the art of narrative have had on the editors and each of the contributors in our varied scholarly pursuits.

Introduction: The Social, Political, and Personal Dimensions of Storytelling

Kristy R. Boney and Jennifer Marston William

THIS VOLUME'S TITLE QUOTATION, “. . . for once, telling it all from the beginning” (einmal alles von Anfang an erzählen), stems from Anna Seghers's exile novel *Transit*, in which the author told not only her own story but that of countless others who faced political, personal, and bureaucratic obstacles in their attempts to escape peril during the Nazi era. While sitting in a café in the old harbor of Marseilles, the unnamed narrator of *Transit* spins the quintessential tale of exile in 1940s France: “Which view do you prefer? The *pizza* baking over the open fire? Then you'll have to sit beside me. The Old Harbor? Then you'd better sit opposite. You can see the sun go down behind Fort Saint-Nicolas. That won't bore you, I'm sure.”¹ *Transit*, completed by the prolific Seghers in 1942 and first published in English in 1944, and in German in 1948, is a political novel that shows the author's acute awareness of human compassion. It also makes clear that without the vitality of storytelling, the experience of exile becomes more of a fleeting historical moment, too easily left in the past. Storytelling forms the basis of a lasting and powerful historical chronicle.

In *Transit* and so many other literary works in the twentieth century, storytelling is thematized and put forth not only as a way to chronicle events but also as a means of processing the dire situation in which the exiles found themselves—indeed, as a means of psychological survival. Michel de Certeau, in his *The Practice of Everyday Life*, argues that the practice of storytelling defines our society, and that without stories, societies break down.² This is pertinent when considering how fiction can define a society, or help in redefining one. Writers such as Seghers, who experienced the harsh and alienating effects of exile and persecution firsthand, created characters with similar backgrounds who also engage in various forms of storytelling about their trials and triumphs. The resulting *mise-en-abyme*, story-in-a-story structure highlights the enduring tenacity of both oral and written narrative through the ages.

Certeau is not alone in his view of stories as the backbone of our contemporary existence. Jonathan Gottschall, for instance, finds a connection between storytelling and biology, suggesting that our penchant to tell

stories is a compulsive evolutionary—and thus universal—function.³ Storytelling is clearly a constant in human social life, and a perennial topic for scholarly examination as well. A recent notable monograph on the topic is Martin Puchner's ambitious and compelling *The Written World: The Power of Stories to Shape People, History, and Civilization* (2017),⁴ which details how stories have influenced the course of humankind. Also of note is Marco Caracciolo's *The Experientiality of Narrative* (2014),⁵ which focuses on the receptive aspect of fictional stories that often contradict the "rules" of reality, but to which readers nonetheless tend to respond based on their own, real experiential background—an exploration with distinct implications for the study of autobiographical narratives such as those discussed in the pages that follow. With the current volume, we continue this contemporary scholarly trend of exploring the various facets of storytelling with a focus on the ways in which narrative has documented sociopolitical developments and left its mark on cultural history, particularly but not exclusively within the twentieth-century German literary tradition.

This essay compilation is at its heart a tribute to the work of German Studies scholar Helen Fehervary. Her expertise in East German literature and particularly the prose of Anna Seghers continues to inspire many researchers who examine the facets of narrative and storytelling in a number of sociohistorical contexts. While Walter Benjamin, in his famous essay "The Storyteller" (1936), lamented the decline of the storytelling tradition in the age of the modern novel, Seghers and other writers went on to record—in many forms, including novels—the darkest days of the twentieth century in creative and compelling ways. This volume examines a number of those writers and places particular emphasis on the themes of exile, the Holocaust and its aftermath, modernism (and its precursors, for example, Heine), and East German literature. Many contributors explore, either implicitly or explicitly, the tensions between aesthetics and politically conscious writing, as well as individual struggles involving conformity and resistance in a totalitarian state. Writing about storytelling and understanding those documents of the past opens a lens to historical truths. In an increasingly interconnected world of commerce and communication, the stories that chronicle world history play a crucial role in reminding us of our shared humanity.

In the twenty-first century, the humanities have increasingly come under assault. The future of many humanities programs is uncertain at best. Essentially, this amounts to an assault on the right and ability to tell stories about personal and political obstacles. As the above passage from Seghers's *Transit* intimates—with its narrator's choice of view as he settles in for a story, either being lulled by a fire or focusing on a historical site that was a center of the French resistance—storytelling frames our daily lives and, as such, is so much more than an object of scholarly analysis.

Further, while German literature gives us many examples for such a project, this essay compilation reminds us that the implications go far beyond a limited national boundary. One of our goals with this volume is to provide a larger understanding of the dimensions of storytelling as a cross-cultural and social phenomenon, especially pertinent in times of crisis.

A number of essays in this book pay homage to one of the most inventive and productive German-language storytellers of the twentieth century. Anna Seghers (1900–1983), born Netty Reiling, grew up in Mainz and was raised in an Orthodox Jewish family. A student of art history at the University of Heidelberg, she received her doctorate with a dissertation on Jews and Judaism in the work of Rembrandt. Seghers treasured legends, myths, fables, and fairytales from many cultures, and their deep influence on her work is unmistakable. Her stories and novels often gesture toward the storytellers she enjoyed reading most. Coming from a variety of cultural traditions, they included Jean Racine, Honoré de Balzac, Heinrich von Kleist, Georg Büchner, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy, and Franz Kafka.⁶ Seghers, in turn, left her own mark on the writing of many younger generation East German writers, most notably Christa Wolf, Heiner Müller, and Franz Fühmann (see Brockmann, this volume). As Fehervary has asserted in her influential book *The Mythic Dimension*, “Seghers’s prose invokes the form of the chronicle and legend,” and, rather than evoking readers’ identification with her characters, Seghers instead was concerned in her writing with “the truth as related by the storyteller, the credibility and skill of the witness.”⁷

We assert, as the title of part 1 stresses, that Seghers has been unduly neglected in the study of German literary history. She is sometimes dismissed unjustly as a Communist writer who did little more than toe the party line, or she is known solely as the author of the acclaimed antifascist novel *Das siebte Kreuz* (The Seventh Cross, 1942). The essays featured here work to remedy that misconception, continuing the tireless efforts of the past few decades by Seghers experts such as Ute Brandes, Helen Fehervary, Sonja Hilzinger, Christiane Zehl Romero, Silvia Schlenstedt, Alexander Stephan, as they demonstrate the far-reaching, multifaceted richness of her storytelling, which spans seven decades and chronicles some of the most crucial, watershed events of the twentieth century. One way to understand Seghers’s commitment to storytelling—and to differentiate her from a more typical socialist-realist stance—can be found in her 1938/39 correspondence with the Hungarian literary historian Georg Lukács. Lukács asserted in a 1938 essay entitled “Realism in the Balance” that while new modernist writers were nuanced and important, they were not “true” realist writers and lacked revolutionary power. Seghers disagreed and emphasized to the theorist that the “present reality, with its crises, wars, etc. must . . . first be endured, it must be looked in the face, and secondly it must be portrayed.”⁸ Seghers was ever aware of the larger con-

text of art in a political world, and her attempt to connect with the “immediacy of basic experience,”⁹ sometimes through aesthetically and stylistically experimental ways in her writing, aptly illustrates the importance of storytelling in moments of political crisis.

While this volume’s nineteen contributions are diverse and quite wide-ranging, there is considerable thematic overlap among them. The essays explore themes that confront traditional understandings of German history within the twentieth century. Further, they reimagine how storytelling can be used to grasp and process moments of political crisis, but above all, they explore unique topics related to (and related through) storytelling. With these areas of common ground in mind, the book is divided into three parts. Part 1, “Anna Seghers: A Missing Piece in the Canon of Modernist Storytellers,” begins with Christiane Zehl Romero’s close look at Anna Seghers’s formative intellectual time as a student in Heidelberg. Romero argues that, given the available archival material, a rethinking of this period in Seghers’s life is a worthwhile pursuit, and indeed is essential to the process of forming a more complete life narrative of this prolific writer. Seghers’s novel *Die Gefährten* (The Comrades, 1932) reflects on this crucial time in its content and its motifs. Romero attributes the lack of dogmatism in Seghers’s storytelling largely to the influence of Heidelberg’s stimulating intellectual community in the 1920s, which encouraged open interdisciplinary discourse and debate on history, politics, and philosophy.

Peter Beicken discusses the complex narrative structure of Anna Seghers’s 1943 novella *Der Ausflug der toten Mädchen* (The Excursion of the Dead Girls, 1946) by reviewing previous analyses of this masterful piece of Holocaust literature and discussing its visual and cinematic mode of narration. Differentiating this work from the *Erinnerungs-Novelle* (memory-work) tradition, Beicken shows not only how some autobiographical details are fictionalized in the narrative but also how Seghers uses her first-person narrator in the cinematic function of a documentary-style voiceover commentary, thereby exposing the memories of the childhood idyll retrospectively as dystopic in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

Ute Brandes considers Seghers’s immediate postwar stories in the context of *Trümmerliteratur* (rubble literature), a movement that focused on the return home of soldiers and prisoners of war via a terse writing style that signified the utter devastation of postwar Germany. Brandes points out the stylistic and thematic connections between Seghers’s stories and rubble literature, while also considering the sociopolitical implications surrounding them. She explores, for example, how passages that were censored by East German authorities undermined the narrative integrity of some of Seghers’s texts, and she investigates through archival records Seghers’s opinions on the GDR’s socialist-realist doctrine and related issues.

Stephen Brockmann covers the topics of reeducation, “denazification,” and ideological transformations in post-Nazi society, and elucidates how these processes played out in East Germany, as reflected in such works as Seghers’s novella *Der Mann und sein Name* (The Man and His Name, 1952), and her novels *Die Entscheidung* (The Decision, 1959) and *Das Vertrauen* (Trust, 1968). Brockmann expounds on the notion of Seghers’s “subdued optimism” (also alluded to by Jennifer Marston William later in this section with her discussion of the hopeful ambivalence apparent in Seghers’s work). He also elaborates on Seghers’s mentorship of younger-generation GDR writers, such as Franz Fühmann, who wrote about his experiences with being seduced by Nazism. Seghers saw such revelations as “essential for the future of Germany, and of German literature.”

Hunter Bivens also examines Seghers’s novels *Die Entscheidung* and *Das Vertrauen* as chronicles of the GDR’s formative years and as depictions of individual engagement with the developing socialist project there. In particular, Bivens considers the dissonance between form and content of these novels with a focus on the tropes of trust (*Vertrauen*) and contingency/coincidence (*Zufall*), and the tensions between the idealized, aspired dynamic time of building up (*Aufbauzeit*) and the realities of the young GDR’s “flaue Zeit” (time of stagnation). Seghers’s epic style of storytelling and the form of her novels in the socialist context, Bivens argues, reflect the particular conditions under which the GDR came to exist, in a way that was distinct from most other socialist-realist writing of that time.

Benjamin Robinson provides yet another insightful critical perspective on Seghers’s 1959 novel *Die Entscheidung*. As Robinson points out, the novel was criticized by West German critics for its adherence to official socialist doctrine, but he argues that the work in fact can be “read as a bleak depiction of a socialist state.” Robinson examines the aesthetic development that is evidenced in the different expressions of temporality and chronotope in this and Seghers’s earlier novels; *Die Entscheidung* highlights real socialist principles through the use of allegory and its depiction of the characters’ “busy efforts tending toward the riddle of history’s final resolution.”

Using elements of the cognitive approach that has been evolving within literary scholarship in recent years, Jennifer Marston William explores language in Anna Seghers’s works. She discusses how Seghers’s use of conceptual-metaphorical language reflects the situations that her characters experience. William stresses how Seghers’s writing is also political, in that she takes a critical stance toward political events and their ramifications. In particular, William analyzes the use of the conceptual metaphor of emptiness (*die Leere*) that surfaces in much of Seghers’s writing. It is a concept that corresponds with ambivalence, characterizing a simultaneous sense of optimism and pessimism, both on an individual and

a collective level. Ultimately William argues that Seghers's texts, while focusing on the horrors of both nature and modern civilization, suggest that existential feelings of emptiness are mutable and that the human spirit will prevail.

Part 2, "Expressions of Modernity: Using Storytelling Unconventionally," starts farther back in time with a focus on a major forebear to literary modernism, as Robert Holub explores the poet Heinrich Heine's various—and mostly less than successful—attempts at novelistic fiction, with particular concentration on *Buch Le Grand* (1827), in which stories are told and the process of storytelling is self-reflexively thematized. Holub argues that *Buch Le Grand* is successful because Heine does not concern himself with narrative convention but rather highlights the stories and reflects on his own storytelling style. Holub speculates on Heine's reasons for experimenting with forms outside of poetry and provides a balanced account of the celebrated poet's strengths and weaknesses in writing narrative prose.

Kristy Boney brings us back into the early twentieth century as she explores the modernist topographies of writer Franz Kafka and painter Paul Klee and discusses how through different mediums each artist depicted the individual in a fragmented but dynamic existence. Modernist space was shaped by the new perceptions of temporality, and this reality was reflected in the stories told both in words and in pictures. For these two artists in particular, Boney argues that "approaching an external landscape was not a matter for interpretation, but it was a matrix of experience." Kafka and Klee expressed through their work how physical topography becomes inextricably enmeshed with the modern individual's experience.

Weijia Li discusses the "transtextuality" of German-Jewish writer W. Tonn, who infused his stories with a blend of both Western and Eastern mythical and folkloric elements after spending years as an exiled émigré in China. Li details the author's biography and closely analyzes some of Tonn's wartime stories. Despite heavy borrowing in the texts, Li rejects any notion of plagiarism in Tonn's work, arguing instead in favor of "a playful experiment with intertextuality, a type of transtextual relationship between texts," resulting in writing that anticipates postmodernism and "challenges the conventional mode of reading."

Elizabeth Loentz takes us on a different kind of storytelling exploration as she examines student writing of various genres that was published by the Sholem Aleichem Yiddish schools in Chicago in the twentieth century. Her readings of these texts focus not on their literary, rhetorical, or linguistic merits, but on their topics, themes, and content, and how these reflect the interplay of the children and teenagers' own concerns with the pedagogical agendas of the Sholem Aleichem schools in Chicago. Loentz shows how these agendas and the schools' missions varied over time in

response to historical, political, and social changes (the Holocaust, McCarthyism and the Cold War, the founding of the State of Israel, assimilation and Americanization, and so on).

Michaela Peroutková examines the postwar representation of Czech and East German Jews in Jurek Becker's 1976 novel *Der Boxer* and in the 1969 autobiographical story *Alle Farben der Sonne und der Nacht* (All the Colors of the Sun and the Night) by Lenka Reinerová. After summarizing the sociopolitical situation for Jews in Czechoslovakia and in the German Democratic Republic—including the many problems and crises surrounding citizenship, anti-Semitism, and persecution—Peroutková explores the portrayal of how the exiled Jewish protagonists in these literary works experienced their return home after the war, and how they came to grips with their Jewish identity in their respective postwar Communist societies.

The comparative view taken by most of the essays in this section culminates in the essay by Kristen Hetrick, who looks at how the stories of human physical maladies are told in two works of literature published half a century apart and in different parts of the world. While the “quest narrative” that portrays illness as a journey toward enlightenment or self-improvement has been common since the early nineteenth century, Hetrick explores some contrasting twentieth-century literary approaches to depicting cancer patients. The two texts under examination in this essay, Thomas Mann's *Die Betrogene* (1954) and Nadine Gordimer's *Get a Life* (2005), present alternative views of the transformative nature of a cancer experience. Hetrick argues, “While Mann's work is essentially an indictment of the very concept of transformative change through his portrayal of the afflicted protagonist, Gordimer's offers a more nuanced depiction of it than the traditionally dramatic one.”

Part 3, “The Personal Narrative: Storytelling in Acute Historical Moments,” begins with a fitting opening about storytelling and autobiography, as Jost Hermand presents a self-reflexive piece examining his own writing from the 1990s about his experiences in the youth evacuation camps for children in Germany during the Nazi period, a program that has not had a great deal of publicity and has often been misunderstood as a positive initiative of the Nazi regime. Hermand relates his traumatic experiences and memories of the camps where “the master race for the future Europe” was to be trained. In the process of writing and reflecting on his own writing across two languages, Hermand addresses the crucial issues of translation, intention, and effect of autobiographical narration, and the mistrust of the faculty of memory when telling one's own story.

Andy Spencer uses filmmaker Konrad Wolf's wartime diaries as well as an analysis of the 1968 autobiographical film *Ich war neunzehn* (I Was Nineteen) to point out the contradictions between Wolf's public and private utterances regarding enemies of the socialist state (namely of the

Soviet Union), and his expression of these issues in his filmmaking. Spencer illustrates this tension by delineating Wolf's relationship to dissident writer Lev Kopelev, whose shadow, as Spencer argues, hangs over *Ich war neunzehn* and informs Wolf's problematizing of the image of the heroic Red Army soldier. Spencer concludes that the film can be seen not as resolving this tension but as a "playing out of Wolf's dilemma" on screen for the East German public.

In sharing his own scholarly journey, particularly his academic engagement with the German Democratic Republic, Marc Silberman simultaneously tells the story of a nation and a culture. In an "intellectual autobiography of sorts," Silberman gives an overview of the study of East German culture, literature, and history as it has been conducted both in the past and currently. In addition, he ponders the future of East German Studies, particularly how this field fits in with the broader areas of German and European modernism, technology, socialism, and contemporary politics. The transnational perspective, Silberman argues, becomes increasingly important as we move further away from the end of the GDR era but still strive to keep its memory alive.

Luke Springman's essay investigates the mnemonic function of auditory signs and symbols in Christa Wolf's autobiographical novel *Kindheitsmuster*. He looks at how Wolf uses the processes of forgetting and remembering as both an individual and communal way of dealing with the past. Springman argues that by writing her childhood while simultaneously recording the process of doing so, Wolf connects lifeless forms with emotions and is able to attach moral judgments to her memories. Ultimately, she not only indicts herself in terms of the German guilt regarding the Holocaust but also blames the contemporary public sphere, thus placing *Kindheitsmuster* into the canon of cultural memory.

Amy Kepple Strawser's meticulous and smooth English translation of a chapter from Ursula Krechel's 2012 novel *Landgericht* (District Court) touches on themes directly related to those covered in other essays of this volume: the plight of "displaced persons" after the Second World War; expatriation; and storytelling as a means of confronting the personal and collective past. The story is told mostly through the point of view of Kornitzer, a former judge who has found his wife after the war and is trying to come to grips with the postwar present. With narrative techniques such as flashbacks and free indirect discourse, the style is reminiscent of that of Anna Seghers, the storyteller who is most celebrated in this volume. Krechel's text exemplifies *Heimkehrerliteratur* (literature written from the perspective of those returning from war), while also being a touching story of love reunited.

Sylvia Fischer's piece provides a fitting conclusion both to part 3 and to this volume, as it touches on many themes that are addressed throughout. For the first time in print, she shares her interview with Eberhard

Aurich, a freelance writer who was the last leader of the Free German Youth in the GDR, and his partner Christa Streiber, a television editor. Their discussion sheds light on the social and educational functions of literature for youth under Communism, as Fischer and her interviewees discuss what kinds of stories were told to and read by East German youth, and why, and they consider the intended and actual effects of some of this literature. The interview also addresses current trends in storytelling about the GDR, ending with Aurich and Streiber's striking opinion that the literature written between 1949 and 1989 is becoming largely irrelevant for everyone besides scholars of German culture.

* * *

Relying on various analytical lenses, the contributors to this volume conceptualize storytelling as a vital and indispensable way for the modern individual to chronicle lived human experience. Committed to addressing the present, the past, and prospects for the future, the literary writers represented here call attention to the concentric circles of human relationships—to the self and one's beliefs, to the family and one's upbringing, to the community and its expectations, and to the world and its imperatives. By collecting these diverse studies in one volume, we seek to create a collage that celebrates these social, political, and personal dimensions of storytelling and opens up new perspectives on our understanding of history, memory, and humanity. In the digital age, when communication is often reduced to texting, tweeting, and other truncated forms, storytelling may start to seem like a lost art. Yet with every historical turning point, with every crisis and every recovery period, come renewed opportunities to step back and tell it all “from the beginning.” The cautious, grounded optimism of Anna Seghers and others like her who have lived and written through times of autocracy and perilous nationalism should inspire us as readers, writers, artists, and scholars to continue to turn to narrative, not only as an escape from the “real world” in troubled times, but as a way of reconnecting with it. Through it all, storytelling remains. It is a perennial art form, always at humanity's disposal as a tool for helping us to reevaluate where we came from and where we might be—or should be—headed.

Notes

¹ Anna Seghers, *Transit*, trans. James A. Galston (Boston: Little Brown, 1944), 3.

² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

³ Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

⁴ Martin Puchner, *The Written World: The Power of Stories to Shape People, History, and Civilization* (New York: Random House, 2017).

⁵ Marco Caracciolo, *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

⁶ Christiane Zehl Romero, “Anna Seghers,” *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, 1 March 2009, Jewish Women’s Archive, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/seghers-anna>.

⁷ Helen Fehervary, *Anna Seghers: The Mythic Dimension* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 3.

⁸ Georg Lukács and Anna Seghers, “Correspondence,” in *Essays über Realismus* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1948), 171.

⁹ Ibid., 177.

Part I.

Anna Seghers: A Missing Piece in the Canon of Modernist Storytellers

I: Anna Seghers in Heidelberg: The Formative Years

Christiane Zehl Romero

NETTY REILING, as Anna Seghers was called by her maiden name, matriculated at the University of Heidelberg on April 20, 1920. (In this essay I will refer to the student as Netty Reiling, to the writer as Anna Seghers.) She published her first story, which she wrote while still a student, under the name Seghers, and as Anna Seghers she would become one of the most if not the most important German woman writer of the twentieth century. At the time Heidelberg was considered “the secret capital of intellectual Germany.” Among the professoriate many were liberal to left, which was not the norm among German professors either before or after the First World War. They included Max and Alfred Weber, Emil Julius Gumbel, Gustav Radbruch, and Netty Reiling’s teachers Emil Lederer, Carl Neumann, Hermann Oncken, and Karl Jaspers. Among the students there were many who later made a name for themselves, veterans of the First World War like Carl Zuckmayer, Carlo Mierendorff, and Leo Löwenthal, and of course younger ones, like Hannah Arendt (she came after Netty Reiling) and Jürgen Kuczynski, as well as émigrés from Eastern Europe, some of whom would become her friends. Many of them, not only Zuckmayer, left vivid descriptions of the intellectual atmosphere in Heidelberg during their time. He is the only one, however, who gave us his well-known recollections of the young, pretty, and somewhat shy Netty Reiling and his speculations about how she chose the pen-name Seghers—from the Dutch painter and Rembrandt contemporary Hercules Segers (or Seghers), who was being rediscovered and interpreted by an instructor and his students in Heidelberg.¹ Other young intellectuals, most notably Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin, whom Seghers would get to know later on, came to town at different times, one for a few years, the other briefly in search of the all-important *Habilitation* (the next step after a doctorate and the prerequisite for a university career) and the academic employment it promised. Neither received the chance, Benjamin finding Karl Mannheim already in place. The difficulties of securing an academic or other appropriate position loomed as a dark cloud over the young people and their heady intellectual enterprises, especially over those of Jewish descent, who made up a sizeable contingent.

Through László Radványi, the fellow student whom she early on decided to make her life's partner, Netty Reiling was more affected by this insecurity than Seghers would later acknowledge. After finishing his dissertation on chiliasm with Karl Jaspers in 1923, Radványi longed for an academic career to do with philosophy or religion but could not find any work at all to support himself, let alone the wife Netty Reiling hoped to become.² Unpublished letters she wrote to him between 1921 and 1925 show how much this concerned her.³ The marriage she wanted and her parents' at best reluctant consent were impossible without employment. When he finally found something, albeit unsatisfactory, in Berlin (at the Russian Trading Company) and was looking forward to their wedding she reminded him "My dear beloved life . . . do you remember . . . how I once wept in the Frankfurt railroad station, so many people and all with employment?"⁴ What Seghers recalled later and publicly—in a "Talk to Students" from 1952—were contemporary events and revolutions "and while we shared in them, discussing them passionately, we pursued our studies. We loved the arts and scholarship."⁵ This love was genuine, but for many of the young intellectuals it was also refuge and defiance in the face of the harsh realities of looming un- or underemployed. Heidelberg's great reputation rested on the study of the humanities, arts, and social sciences but, as one student, Jürgen Kuczynski, soberly put it in his remembrances, "the knowledge offered us was of relatively little economic value."⁶

Netty Reiling studied in Heidelberg from 1920 to 1924, with a two-semester break for an internship in Cologne, and graduated with a doctorate in Art History. Thus in US academic parlance one could call her a "product of Heidelberg." Yet, apart from scholars specializing in Seghers, who have done careful research on certain aspects of her time there, there is still little awareness of how important Heidelberg was for her and how much she belonged among the German and immigrant intellectuals who made up the vibrant atmosphere of the town at the time.⁷ Her roots lie there along with those of many others of her generation. In the following I propose to pull together and highlight facets of Netty Reiling's Heidelberg experience, which on rethinking the available material warrant more attention and contribute to a more inclusive view of Anna Seghers, whose image and reputation have been and to a certain degree continue to be colored and somewhat distorted by post-Second World War political events.

Netty Reiling was almost twenty years old when she came to Heidelberg. She had just graduated from a girls' prep school in February 1920, and was in a hurry: "I only wanted to study because I was terribly afraid of getting stuck in this backwater Mainz," was Seghers's offhanded comment much later.⁸ She had grown up in Mainz as the only child of a religious and well-established Jewish family. Her father, together with his older brother, owned a respected antiquarian and art dealership; her

mother came from a very wealthy Frankfurt family. By the 1920s, it had become possible for young women from the middle and upper classes to go to university, but it was not yet as much a matter of course as Seghers later presented it. Heidelberg was situated in the province of Baden, where university study became open to women in 1900, earlier than elsewhere in Germany. Women constituted a small minority that grew slightly after the First World War, rising from 12 to 15 percent between 1919 and 1925.

Nor can it have been quite so easy to receive her traditional family's permission. Her female cousins did not go on to university, nor did most of her classmates in Mainz. Perhaps the fact that there were no male heirs to take over the family business helped her. University training and a doctorate might make it easier to carry on what the Reilings had built up over generations, after starting as itinerant traders. Neither her father nor his brother had gone to university.

Seghers never talked about such matters, nor did she explain why she chose Heidelberg or why she studied what she did. She was notoriously reticent about her own biography. The few remarks she later made about her student days came in specific contexts and often had a pedagogical purpose. In general, she did not care to speak about personal matters for public consumption, and famously put off her would-be biographer Christa Wolf with the words: "As far as the biographical questions are concerned: I believe that a writer's experiences and views emerge most clearly from his work, even without a particular biography."⁹

Thus, to understand the role the student years in Heidelberg played for Anna Seghers we must glean as much as we can from her occasional, sometimes mystifying, sometimes educational remarks, various other sources, and above all her future life and writings. It was certainly a larger and more varied role than she later thought important or consciously remembered. Thus, the frivolous-sounding remark about wanting to get away from provincial Mainz, a hometown she otherwise remembered fondly, can be read as masking and revealing a profound truth about Seghers's younger self, namely the overwhelming need to find an environment where she could learn and find a purpose beyond the vague wish to write and to do good. She sought the life of the mind, not the life of society as she knew it in her well-to-do Jewish family circle. At the end of her studies, Netty Reiling, still with her parents and vacationing in fashionable Scheveningen in the summer of 1924, expressed her longing and her existential angst most strikingly in a letter to László Radványi, who had become and was to remain the love of her life: "The place itself is full of tourists, and in the evenings, seen from the beach, is a large bundle of lights with many coffeehouses, something [which] makes me desolately miserable . . . The people here irritate me more than the sea pleases me. Dear heart, do you know the pain of losing consciousness? Here it is more terrible for me than ever. . . . My loneliness is probably to blame for all of

this, I too need surroundings, i.e. an earth that supports me, for I am useless in this society and need human beings to receive and give myself to.”¹⁰

There surely were practical reasons to choose Heidelberg: not quite as close to home as Frankfurt and its new university, but still in the region she loved, it had a great reputation and attracted many Jews, among whom her father had connections. Netty Reiling would also find and befriend some in the sizable group of international, mostly Eastern European, students. Looking back, Anna Seghers remembered her student days as joyous ones: “We were carefree and openhearted then. How ready we were to be happy! We always found something to enjoy, despite the threatening times, despite the problems.”¹¹ The pronoun “we” is important.

Netty Reiling came to Heidelberg to find community and answers to the questions that plagued her in a time of crisis which she, despite her comfortable home, clearly perceived as such. In her novel *Die Gefährten* (1932; *The Wayfarers*) which draws on her time in Heidelberg, Seghers has one of the characters, Steiner, reflect on his communality with the other students there: “They too are looking for answers. A foothold in these stormy times, the meaning of their path ‘between life and death.’”¹² Through him Seghers is speaking for herself as well as for many she knew. The sociologist Karl Mannheim, who became a good friend, characterized the atmosphere in Heidelberg in even more clearly religious terms as one of “waiting for prophets,” an “incredible . . . readiness . . . for some kind of redemption.”¹³ Both Reiling and Mannheim realized that not only they themselves but also so many around them were seekers, which created a common bond between them. When Netty Reiling began to see Mannheim’s career building critically—she had met him through Radványi and later modeled her character Steiner on him—she still felt this bond very strongly, “as if we had spent an unextinguishable common youth in *one* house . . . and would once be buried in *one* graveyard, however differently we passed through the trial of life,” she reminded Radványi in early 1925.¹⁴

A large part of the student body in the Heidelberg of that time had also been seekers, but had already found or were in the process of finding their path, they were “völkisch national” (right-wing nationalist). While Netty Reiling had little to do with them, she could not avoid them altogether because the town and the classrooms were full of people of all stripes and persuasions. She gave an example in a letter to Radványi and could still joke about it: “the whole seminar [which she had invited to her home, i.e. her Jewish parents’ home in Mainz] really came. On the farthest left there was a woman student of Korsch / very nice / as center a chaplain (in a cowl), on the right Hitlergorpins [?], who probably only noticed during dinner that they were at the home of Jews und who now will suffer all their lives from the indelible shame of having been the guests of Jews. It was all very funny.”¹⁵

Retrospectively, and in the context of later times, Seghers presents a more particular and limited experience than she really had. Then the encounter with exiles from failed revolutions in the East becomes the one unforgettable experience. As she says in a post–Second World War foreword to *Die Gefährten*, they struck “us” as “wirkliche, nicht beschriebene Helden” (real, not fictional heroes).¹⁶ By then she had made a clear political choice, but at the time she was like many of the young people around her, who eventually went in very diverse directions, searching for community, answers, and “real heroes” among the large variety on offer. Things were still open and fluid, and the budding Nazis in their midst were only one group, which could be seen with derision.

Netty Reiling was a good student and took her work very seriously: “My studies interested me so much that they occupied me totally. Still, my imagination never stopped working, but did not produce anything. Then one day, when I started to write, it poured from me like a torrent: I wrote, studied, wrote, studied—like a crazy woman, until exhaustion. Then I realized that I could not keep up with both for any length of time: I decided upon writing.”¹⁷ Letters to Radványi, her brief diary, and posthumously discovered stories show that Netty Reiling did indeed experience a creative rush towards the end of her studies and spent the following years experimenting with stories.¹⁸ Writing fiction, she realized, would be her priority, but she concluded her studies with a doctorate and never ceased to be the intellectual she became in Heidelberg, nor even the idea of working as an academic, an idea to which she returned in exile. There was no real break. As soon as she had established herself as a writer of fiction she stepped out as a public intellectual, one who spoke out on important cultural issues, and relied on the considerable knowledge she had acquired in Heidelberg, but did so quietly and unobtrusively.

Already in her academic work as a student—her dissertation *Jude und Judentum im Werke Rembrandts* (Jew and Jewry in the Work of Rembrandt) and two still existing handwritten seminar papers, titled “Römische Soldatengräber im Rheingebiet” (Roman Soldiers’ Graves in the Rhine Area) and “Anfang und Entwicklung der frühromanischen Grabplastik” (Beginning and Development of Early Romanesque Grave Sculpture)—she avoided overly abstract and theoretical language, an avoidance in which some of her professors such as Carl Neumann, her dissertation advisor, may have confirmed her. Perhaps Seghers’s much-admired ability to speak freely, in well-formulated, clear sentences, was also something she picked up from her best teachers. There is no question, though, that she absorbed ideas and theories and transformed them as she saw fit much later for her talks and essays. Even if she did not call herself an intellectual in the narrower sense and used her academic title only at the very beginning of her writing career, she became one in Heidelberg and counted on the interests, ideas, and knowledge she acquired there for the rest of her life.

Netty Reiling received—or better, gave herself—an excellent education in Heidelberg. As many in her cohort, but probably more diligently than most, she chose a large variety of courses. She also internalized the spirit of interdisciplinarity that was in the air in Heidelberg “als geistiges Fluidum” (as spiritual aura), as one of her teachers, Ludwig Curtius, put it.¹⁹ Her approach to art and literature would continue to draw on the synergies between the many subjects she pursued, such as German, Russian, and French literatures, art from diverse periods and regions—East-Asian, Egyptian, and European—and different epochs of history.²⁰ Her studies in art history led her to develop the conviction that art was specific to a time and place and that periods of crisis and war, such as her own, demanded new ways of expression, imperfect and splintered as they might still be. This would become her argument in defense of literary modernism in the famous “Expressionism debate” with George Lukács, but is already present in her student papers.²¹

There are many more aspects in Seghers’s thinking that can be traced to her studies in Heidelberg, such as her global interests and the “long view” she took on historical developments.²² As a counterbalance, she very early formulated her concept of “Gedenksteine” (memorial stones), which she developed as a student in her analysis of the reliefs on Roman soldiers’ graves. She found that these achieved “die Wiedergabe des Menschen als Realität und zwar auf dem höchsten Punkte seiner irdischen Lebensentfaltung” (the representation of the human being as reality, namely at the apex of his development in life).²³ The wish to create such “Gedenksteine” would inform her storytelling as well as her exile project begun in 1935, the so-called “Heldenbuch” (Book of Heroes), in the context of which she uses the term again. The plans for this “Heldenbuch,” which was to unite antifascist writers from many countries, shows the international stature as an intellectual she had achieved by that time. Unfortunately, and through no fault of her own, this project did not come to fruition: it never saw publication and has been lost.²⁴

There was another model of interdisciplinarity available in Heidelberg at the time, and many students demanded and some professors provided it: the infusion of contemporary issues and of politics into the classroom. As yet the atmosphere was one of debate and discussion, certainly among the socially critical and left-wing faculty whom Netty Reiling sought out from the very beginning of her studies, such as Emil Lederer (1882–1939) and Hermann Oncken (1869–1945), who were considered “political professors.” In her first semester she took Lederer’s “Sozialtheorie des Marxismus” (Social theory of Marxism) and Oncken’s “Allgemeine Geschichte im 19. Jahrhundert” (General history of the nineteenth century), and continued studying with both in coming semesters. She was looking for the relevance they offered and later used the models they provided. It would take her many more years to make a clear political commit-

ment herself, but both relevance and debate would become central to her writing and inform her dream of what political discourse could and should be.

Of course, life outside the classroom and personal encounters also played a very large role, and boundaries were quite blurry. We know that Netty Reiling became friends with Philipp Shaffer,²⁵ the Mannheims, György Káldor,²⁶ and Heinz Pflaum,²⁷ that she knew Carl Zuckmayer and met Ernst Toller when he passed through. She may have had contact with Jürgen Kuczynski already in Heidelberg, also perhaps with Walter Benjamin and maybe with Carlo Mierendorff.²⁸ There surely were others. Her most important and transformative encounter was with Laszlo Radványi, who has been mentioned before, but must be introduced here. He was a Hungarian Jew, an “Ostausländer” (“eastern foreigner,” a derogatory term used in the Weimar Republic, e.g., in the debates about Mannheim and his Habilitation, the prerequisite for a university appointment for him). Radványi was a member of the Budapest Sunday Circle around Georg Lukács, and like the others had to flee Hungary in 1919 when Miklós Horthy ousted the revolutionary government in which they had participated and took over the country. She met him in her second semester and they quickly grew close. They exchanged presents, mostly in the form of books such as Kierkegaard’s *Die Krankheit zum Tode*, and Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (in Russian) and Buber’s *Die Legende des Baalschem*, all of which contain tender dedications. These were authors who moved many people of their generation and who impacted Seghers considerably. In their relationship she sometimes called herself his “Mutterkind” (motherchild) and soon came to depend on him for emotional and intellectual support but cared for him in practical matters, a dynamic that lasted a lifetime. Her choice of the penniless intellectual who did not pay back his debts with friends, took little care of his clothes and appearance, and had other faults she noticed even then was quite conscious. Apropos of Heinz Pflaum, who was much more suitable in her parents’ and family’s eyes, she notes in her diary: “Lieber Mensch. Aber jetzt habe ich gewählt, weit weg das schreckliche geliebte, andre Leben.” (Nice guy. But now I have chosen, far away, the terrible, beloved, other life.)²⁹

Radványi was attractive and was one of the “heroes,” but what really captivated Netty Reiling was the heady intellectual baggage he brought with him from the Budapest Sunday Circle where he had been one of the youngest members. She was drawn to the intransigence with which he—and the others—rejected the superficial, rationalistic, and individualistic culture of the West and to the radicalness with which they searched for a profound cultural and moral revolution. For his part, Radványi paid loving attention to her, taking her imagination and intellect seriously. The Sunday Circle had quite a few remarkable women among its members—