**Anna Seghers (1900 – 1983)**

Anna Seghers was one of the most important German women writers of the 20th century. Born Netty Reiling on November 19, 1900 in Mainz into a well-to-do Jewish family , she died on June 1, 1983 in East Berlin as Anna Seghers , the controversial icon of German socialist letters. Her work reflects the extraordinarily difficult times in which she lived through its unwavering call for social change and justice. Yet it is not dogmatic. Her prose is sparse, even harsh, yet poetic, her vision has a mythic dimension. In terms of German literary periodization, Seghers's novels and stories have been associated with "Neue Sachlichkeit " (New Objectivity), the artistic style which followed Expressionism after World War I. She contributed major works to German "Exilliteratur" (the literature written by Germans exiled during the Nazi Period). After World War II, her work was categorized as representing Socialist Realism, but she never adhered to the narrow prescriptions dictated by Soviet-style cultural politics. Seghers believed in the transformative power of art and the importance of story-telling in passing on traditions of resistance and struggle.

The Rhine valley with its rich cultural heritage, the Christian ambience of Mainz, and her family's Jewish faith shaped Seghers' literary imagination. Studies at the University of Heidelberg in art history, sinology, literature, and sociology, as well as encounters with left-wing refugees from Eastern Europe, including Laszlo Radvanyi (Johann-Lorenz Schmidt), her future husband, also deeply influenced her. Seghers received her doctorate in 1924, married in 1925 and moved to Berlin, where she had two children and concentrated on writing. She chose the pen name Anna Seghers. In 1928 she received the prestigious Kleist-Prize for her early stories. One of them, *Aufstand der Fischer von St. Barbara (The Revolt of the Fishermen of St. Barbara)*, was made into a film by Erwin Piscator in 1934. That same year she joined the German Communist Party and became an active member of the Association of Proletarian Revolutionary Writers. Her first major novel, *Die Gefährten* (1932, *The Companions*), about the international struggle and sacrifice for revolutionary change, is also her most avantgarde, politically and structurally.

With the Nazis' power increasing, Seghers turned her energies towards antifascism and pulled back from experimentation, but in the literary debates of the late thirties she remained committed to modernism. She had to flee Germany in 1933 and spent the next fourteen years in exile, first in France then in Mexico. During these years she produced some of her best work, such as *Das siebte Kreuz* (1942, *The Seventh Cross*), a gripping novel about one man's successful flight from an early concentration camp, and *Transit* (1944, *Transit Visa*), about the nightmare world of flight and homelessness. The *Seventh Cross* became a bestseller in the US and a Hollywood film.

Return to Germany in 1947 proved disappointing. Despite her outward success in the German Democratic Republic where she served as head of its Writers' Union between 1952 and 1978, Seghers became increasingly disillusioned. Yet she neither protested nor left. She saw no real alternative but to continue writing on behalf of the poor and oppressed whose struggles spanned the ages and the globe.

**Key Works**

*Aufstand der Fischer von St. Barbara* (1928, *The Revolt of the Fishermen* 1930)

*Das siebte Kreuz* (1942, *The Seventh Cross* 1942)

*Transit* (1948, *Transit Visa*, 1944)

*Der Ausflug der toten Mädchen* (1946, *The Excursion of the Dead Girls.* In *German Women Writers of the Twentieth Century* 1978)

*Die Toten bleiben jung* (1949 *The Dead* *Stay Young*, 1949)

*Benito's Blue and Other Stories* (1973)

**References and further readings**

Zehl Romero, C. (2000 and 2003) *Anna Seghers 1900-1947* and *Anna Seghers 1947-1983,* Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag

Fehervary, H. (2001) *Anna Seghers: The Mythic Dimension,* Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press

Wallace, Ian, ed. (1998) *Anna Seghers in Perspective,* Amsterdam: Rodopi

Webaddresses:

http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/seghers-anna (a long entry in "Jewish Women. A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlVdlI-PSTE (trailer from the film *The Seventh Cross* with Spencer Tracy as the lead actor

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1n2Y-uKgPY&feature=related (clip from the film *The Seventh Cross* from the archives of Warner Brothers (they sell the DVD) http://www.wsws.org/articles/2012/mar2012/ber6-m29.shtml (article on a recent screening at the Berlin Film Festival of *The Revolt of the Fischermen*