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*Migrations and Diasporas. German Writers in Mexican Exile  
Egon Erwin Kisch's and Anna Seghers' Promotion of  
Cross-Cultural Understanding*

Abstract

The journalist and popular travel writer, Egon Erwin Kisch, and the well-known novelist and short story writer Anna Seghers were among the many left wing and communist intellectuals for whom Mexico was a haven during the Hitler years. Kisch traveled extensively in Mexico, immersed himself in its history and culture and interpreted Mexico for the other German exiles. On her return from exile Seghers became an important mediator in the GDR of Mexican and South American culture and a strong voice for cross-cultural understanding.

This essay discusses depictions of Mexico in the works of two German-language exiles, the journalist and popular travel writer Egon Erwin Kisch (1885-1948) and the well-known novelist and short story writer Anna Seghers (1900-1983) who on her return from exile became an influential literary figure, particularly in the early years of the German Democratic Republic. They were among the many left wing and communist intellectuals for whom Mexico became a haven during the Hitler years. Seghers' and Kisch's European perspectives and their political convictions shaped their views of their country of refuge – both praised, for example, the reforms begun under President Lázaro Cárdenas – but they were also fascinated by Mexico's rich cultural heritage. In their works, they sought to build bridges between Germany and Mexico and foster intercultural understanding, and one of the major methods they used was storytelling.

During the Hitler years, Mexico became an important refuge for German-language exiles. Under Cárdenas, with strong support from the union leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano, Mexico provided a generous immigration policy to desperate refugees fleeing from Hitler, and this was con-

tinued under Cárdenas' successor Manuel Ávila Camacho. Mexico's policy was especially noteworthy since at this time most other countries severely limited or denied immigration for Jewish and political refugees. The Cárdenas government, which had supported the Spanish Republicans in the Civil War, offered asylum not only to Spaniards fleeing from Franco, but also to other European left wing and communist refugees. Without this policy, many of these refugees would have been trapped in Europe since their political beliefs made it difficult, if not impossible, to obtain visas for other countries such as the United States. By providing refuge, Mexico saved their lives. The Nazis targeted Kisch and Seghers not only because of their political beliefs, but also because they were Jewish. Two of Kisch's brothers, Paul and Arnold, were unable to escape and were murdered in Nazi concentration camps (Betancur, 2000, p. 61), and Seghers' mother was deported to Auschwitz where she died in 1943.

Mexico provided not simply a safe haven, but also a friendly welcome that helped the refugees overcome their cultural dislocation, their sense of otherness in what was, from their European perspective, an unfamiliar and exotic country. In no other exile country did German-language exiles meet with so much understanding, sympathy, respect, and support. Only in Mexico did representatives of the political and cultural establishment take an active part in events put on by the exiles (Von zur Mühlen, 1988, p. 160, p. 168). Left wing and communist exiles felt comfortable in the political climate of Mexico shaped especially by the Cárdenas government that fostered active trade unionism and worker education, carried out land reform, and nationalized the oil industry. Unlike other exile countries, Mexico allowed the refugees «to found organizations, magazines, and a publishing house without interference and occasionally even with support from their hosts» (Stephan, 2000, p. 224). In contrast to their warm welcome in Mexico, north of the border the FBI regarded the refugees in Mexico with deep suspicion and spied on them zealously. The dossier that the FBI compiled on Seghers ran close to one thousand pages (Stephan, 2000, p. 253), and Kisch's was 169 pages long (Stephan, 2000, p. 267).

Both Seghers and Kisch were active in exile organizations and publications. They both contributed pieces frequently to and were on the editorial board of the monthly magazine *Freies Deutschland* (Free Germany) that began publication in November 1941 and continued until mid-1946. It was distributed not only in Mexico (there was a Spanish-language version called *Alemania Libre*), but was also sent to other German exile communities in South America, the United States, as well as to other countries.

Seghers was president and Kisch was vice president of the Heinrich Heine Club, named after the prominent nineteenth-century German-Jewish poet who was forced into exile in France. This club organized literary and cultural events with evenings devoted to different cultures including Mexico and provided a venue where not only exiles, but also Mexican artists, politicians, and intellectuals could meet. Seghers and Kisch were among the founders of the important exile press *El Libro Libre*, published in Mexico. In its four-year existence, it published more than twenty titles, most in German but some in Spanish, a total of over 50,000 copies – a remarkable achievement for a small press (LaBahn, 1986, p. 11). In «Geglüht und gehärtet» (Glowed and Hardened), an essay Seghers wrote in 1942/1943 for the tenth anniversary of the Nazi book burnings and to celebrate the founding in 1942 of *El Libro Libre*, she observes that even after the exiled writers have left Mexico, the place of publication on these books will continue to honor the land in which they could breathe freely (p. 41). Mexico City was the center of German exile life, but there was also a small German exile community in Puebla, many of whose members had come with such Portuguese ships as the «San Thomé» in 1942 (Pohle, 1986, p. 62).

Most exiles stayed in Mexico City, but Kisch, true to his reputation as the «raging reporter», traveled extensively in Mexico and transmitted his views of the country through lectures and readings at the Heine Club. His immediate audience was the German exile community in Mexico, but by also publishing his pieces in the *Free Germany* magazine his views reached exiles in other South American countries and in the United States. He published twenty-four of his pieces as *Entdeckungen in Mexiko* (Discoveries in Mexico) in *El Libro Libre* in 1945, the edition I use here<sup>1</sup>. His goal was twofold; to make Germans appreciate and understand Mexican history and culture as well as its present-day life – he explains, for example, how to make tortillas – and to make Mexicans aware of the great traditions of German culture that the Nazis had perverted, to show them that Hitler was not Germany, the reason he refers frequently to such prominent writers and thinkers as Goethe, Stifter, and Humboldt, and even to Karl May, the popular German writer of Westerns. Kisch's book was translated into Spanish as *Descubrimientos en México* in 1945 and was well received. As Kisch observed, only rarely does a travel book appear in the country it depicts (qtd. in Betancur, 2000, p. 131). One reviewer wrote that it was the most thorough and affectionate book by a foreigner about

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<sup>1</sup> All page references are to this edition and are given in the text.

Mexico that had appeared in Spanish in the last hundred years (qtd. in Betancur, 2000, p. 131). In 1947 Aufbau in Berlin published an expanded version of the book, and this edition further transmitted Kisch's views of Mexico to Germany. Its impact went beyond the German-speaking world since it was quickly translated into such languages as Czech, French, Dutch, Hungarian, and Japanese (Betancur, 2000, pp. 132-133).

When Kisch arrived in Mexico on November 24, 1940 he knew virtually nothing about the country and did not speak Spanish, but he quickly directed his gaze at Mexico and tried to understand it. For Kisch, it was somewhat easier to adapt to his new environment than it was for other exiles. As a journalist and the author of such well-respected travel books as *Paradies Amerika* (1930, *Paradise America*), *Asien gründlich verändert* (1932; *Changing Asia*, 1935), and *Landung in Australien* (1937; *Australian Landfall*, 1937) he had already traveled widely and had experience writing about different cultures. The difference between his earlier travels and his stay in Mexico was that previously he could leave whenever he wished: now he had to stay in Mexico as long as the Nazis were in power. In the pieces contained in his book on Mexico, he gives his German readers a panoramic view of Mexican history and culture, geography, everyday life, social justice, and social reforms. As in his other writing, Kisch, who was considered one of the most prominent journalists of his time, combines detailed reporting with creative storytelling. The reporter's role, he believes, is to witness and to describe what he has seen as accurately as possible, though he is aware that the reporter's gaze can never be entirely objective since it is influenced by social background, feelings and values.

Characteristic of Kisch's writing is his use of humor, parody and irony with which he makes his serious commentary on Mexican culture accessible to a large audience. One such example is his piece on the cultural history of the cactus in which in a parody of a pompous scholarly lecture he traces the importance of the many varieties of cacti to Mexican life from their use as medicine and food to knitting needles. He points out that because of the scale insect that lived on cacti and produced a vivid dye the conquistadors sent cuttings and roots of the cactus back to Spain, and large cactus plantations were created in Algeria and the Canary Islands. Just as the Spanish colonized Mexico, the cactus itself colonized many places in the world. Nowadays, Kisch reports, cacti live in the Diaspora on virtually all continents, a Diaspora that applied to the German exiles themselves. He even draws political lessons from the cactus: it looks like a dusty weed, but then it blooms. For him, this demonstrates that through

evolutionary development the flower of beauty will unfold out of the most wretched of the earth. Another example is his parody of the journalist (by implication himself) in his piece on interviewing the pyramids. He notes wryly how difficult it is to get into conversation with a pyramid. Through his «interviews» with famous pyramids, including the pyramids of Cholula and Teotihuacán, Kisch gives his readers insights into pre-colonial Mexican history and myth. An example of his characteristic self-deprecating humor appears in his piece on the small Native American Jewish community in Venta Prieta. When he asks about the Jews, a man tells him that the «Caballista» over there is one of them. Kisch is puzzled since he thinks that «Caballista» means someone who studies the cabbala before he recalls that it means horseman. Through this amusing incident, Kisch both makes fun of his own shaky knowledge of Spanish and also cautions his audience about how easily a foreigner can misunderstand and therefore inadvertently misrepresent another culture. Another technique Kisch employs for humor is personification. One such example is his description of the spectacular birth of the new volcano at Parícutín that suddenly appeared in 1943 as if it were a newborn baby. The newborn, he writes, cries to heaven; its navel is inflamed; it spits out blood and gall; and spreads an enormous amount of filth. The media thrust microphones in its face, and scientists and doctors measure its temperature and every burp. Kisch talks with the farmer Dionisio Pulido who has become the bewildered owner of a volcano and who wonders what use a volcano is now that his maize field has been destroyed. What use a volcano is, however, quickly becomes clear when a thriving tourist industry grows up around it. When Kisch visits the volcano again on its first birthday, the tourist industry is in full swing: modern hotels have been built; a taxi service takes tourists as close to the volcano as possible; and mules take them even closer.

In his pieces, Kisch outlines Mexican history from pre-colonial times, through the Spanish conquest, the rule and execution of Maximilian, the deposing of Díaz, to the reforms initiated by Cárdenas. Because of his political views, Kisch is particularly interested in those who furthered the progressive aspects of Mexican history such as Hidalgo in the struggle for independence, Juárez, the first citizen president of Mexico, and the peasant leader Zapata. Kisch does not idealize pre-colonial times: he writes, for example, about the central role of human sacrifice in religious rituals. In Mexico, he observes wryly, surgery was more advanced than in Europe, because human sacrifices had given the priests knowledge of human anatomy. When he «interviews» the pyramid in Cholula, he describes «meet-

ing» a mysterious old man, obviously Quetzalcoatl who had been a priest at Tula and had taught his followers to grow maize and fruit, the arts of pottery, and basket and cloth weaving. His fellow priests, however, dismissed such peaceful pursuits as feminine and unwarlike and resisted his attempts to replace human sacrifices with those of flowers, butterflies, and locusts, and before leaving Mexico he was forced to find refuge at Cholula. Kisch intends, however, to make his readers aware of Mexico's pre-colonial sophisticated civilizations: their great cities, their invention of the calendar, their knowledge of astronomy, their impressive art and architecture, as in Monte Albán, for example. When gifts from Moctezuma were sent to Spain, for instance, Spanish goldsmiths could not understand how silver fish with gold scales could have been created. Kisch stresses Mexico's pre-colonial advanced cultures in part to make his readers appreciate them, but in part to undermine Nazi biological racism that deemed people with brown skins inferior.

Kisch gives a scathing account of Spanish colonialism, pointing out, for example, that Cortés had the population of Cholula massacred. He deconstructs depictions of the conquistadors as martyrs who died trying to save the souls of the heathen Aztecs: that they died trying to save Mexican gold for their own enrichment, he notes, is conveniently forgotten. He points out that the conquistadors destroyed temples and thousands of cultural artifacts that demonstrated that the Aztecs had a remarkable culture. Whenever he contrasts Mexicans with Spaniards it is to the latter's disadvantage. When the Spanish saw a storehouse filled with maize they thought it was gold and were overcome by «erections of greed» (p. 16). When corn and tomato seeds were sent back to Spain the Spanish ignored them at first, yet when the scale insect from which the dye cochineal is derived was sent to Spain the Spanish thought it was a seed and planted it, and were perplexed when it did not grow.

In his anecdotal style Kisch ranges over a variety of aspects of Mexican life. He talks, for example, about the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe to the peasant Juan Diego in 1531 and how she became the patroness of the independent movement and a national symbol. In other pieces, he reports on a cockfight and explores Mexican advanced knowledge of herbal and folk medicines. Kisch points out the effectiveness and impact of such medicines. From the sixteenth until the middle of the nineteenth century, for example, Mexico's healing plants dominated European medicines until the development of academic pharmacology (p. 177). That he begins his book with a discussion of maize underscores his focus on the

lives of ordinary people. In this piece, he stresses that the world owes Mexico a great debt for maize. He explains maize's long importance in the Mexican diet, an importance recognized in the Toltec religion according to which human beings were made of maize (p. 14), and sharply attacks speculation with maize: the price of the tortilla, he stresses, determines the life of the masses.

In keeping with his Marxist views, Kisch takes up economic issues and in several pieces his social criticism is strong. He depicts the harsh unsafe conditions under which Mexicans had worked and continue to work, in the silver mines in Pachuca, for example. Around the mines there is no clean drinking water, the mines poison the air, and the mercury used to extract silver has destroyed agricultural land. Although the town's location is beautiful, the houses are places of bleak misery. In his piece on mining for mica, which he writes as a modern fairy tale, without, however, a happy ending, he criticizes the callous disregard for the health and safety of the workers. For example, in the factory where women cut mica into slices, the air is filled with particles. A government poster on the wall tells the workers to wear masks. The employer, however, has put up another poster, contradicting the government one, declaring that masks are not necessary, that mica dust is harmless, and that using masks slows down work. The workers from neighboring villages are forced to live in miserable conditions near the mica deposits since there is no transportation from their homes to the mines. Although the Pan-American Highway runs close by, the native workers do not have cars, and people who have cars do not offer rides to indigenous workers. Kisch contrasts the workers' poverty with the wealth that their labor created for the few, especially for foreign companies. In his view, colonialism did not end with the Spanish defeat because foreign companies, especially from the United States, had control for many years over mining and the oil industry. He also criticizes these foreign companies for their callous environmental pollution.

Kisch sees, however, hope for the future, in particular because of Cárdenas' reforms, such as the redistribution of land and the nationalization of the oil industry. Kisch praises the nationalization of the oil industry, carried out under Cárdenas. Under the previous foreign ownership, allowed by Porfirio Díaz, the workers received pitiful wages and in most of the oil areas there were no hospitals, schools, or clean drinking water. When workers attempted to improve these conditions and insisted on a fair collective contract the oil companies resisted. Cárdenas then expropriated the oil. Foreign oil companies, Kisch reports, also tried to influence

Mexican politics. Kisch stresses that despite initial difficulties, such as an international boycott of Mexican oil, the oil industry began to thrive and the lives of the oil workers improved. Kisch also visited the Laguna community farm in northern Mexico, a pet project of Cárdenas, who following the agrarian reform laws took land away from the *hacendados*, distributed it to the peasants, and founded a bank to give reasonable loans to the small cotton farmers. In his discussion with the Laguna farmers, Kisch does not ignore problems of this controversial project, such as the farmers' need for fertilizers, pesticides and machines, ongoing tensions with the *hacendados*, and the continuing monopoly by American seed companies, but he also points out the vast improvements, particularly in health care brought about by rural medicine and a new hospital, new schools and housing, and the pride of the workers who, freed from their previous serf-like existence, now feel their dignity as human beings. He is also impressed that Mexican industrial workers aligned themselves with the agricultural workers in their struggle for land distribution and against serfdom. Unlike some visitors to Mexico such as the British Catholic novelist Graham Greene, who visited Mexico in 1937-38 and who criticizes in his novel *The Power and the Glory* (1940) «the persecution of the Church under Presidents Calles and Cárdenas» (p. 4)<sup>2</sup>, Kisch praises Cárdenas' reforms not only because he was grateful for the haven in Mexico, but also because he genuinely admires them since they fit in with his own vision of how a society should be structured.

For Kisch, who is aware that he gazes at his host country through the eyes of a European who may not fully understand the complexities of its culture, Mexico represents a land of progressive reforms: he views it as a model of tolerance and movement forward, as a country where the revolution is still in progress. In his pieces, he often contrasts the Mexican situation with the atrocities taking place in Europe about which he was well informed. Unlike Elie Wiesel, for example, who in his Holocaust memoir *Night*, first published in French in 1958, writes that when he and his community from Sighet in Transylvania, then part of Hungary, were deported in 1944 none of them had heard of Auschwitz and other death camps (p. 24)<sup>3</sup>, Kisch was well aware in 1944 in his Mexican exile of these camps. In one piece, Kisch's personified pyramid of Teocalli, virtually

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<sup>2</sup> Page reference is to the 1963 edition, published in New York by Viking Press.

<sup>3</sup> Page reference is to the 1982 edition, published by Bantam in New York.



completely destroyed by the Spaniards, suggests that, given the destruction occurring in Europe, a writer should be sent to interview the many ruins there, rather than focusing on Mexico's pyramids. The most painful moment for Kisch is when he attends Sabbath services in the small and peaceful Native American Jewish community in Venta Prieta, people descended from Spanish Marráños, baptized Jews who remained faithful to their Jewish beliefs, who came to Mexico in the sixteenth century. As Kisch says Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, he suddenly thinks of all the friends, family, and strangers murdered by the Nazis and imagines a procession of millions of people going into the gas chambers, a factory, he writes, that produces corpses. Overwhelmed and distraught by this vision of lost lives and hopes, he is the last to leave the service.

Seghers arrived in Mexico in June 1941 and left in January 1947 with a Mexican passport for East Germany. She was fortunate that she did not have to be concerned about financial matters for most of her exile in Mexico since the English translation of her novel *The Seventh Cross* (1942) was very successful in the United States where it was a Book-of-the-Month Club bestseller and was sold as a film story in 1943 to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Although there is disagreement about the actual amount she received for the film rights, whether it was \$70,000 (Romero, 1993, p. 82) or \$100,000 (Pohle, 1986, p. 63), Seghers clearly had the financial resources to make her life in Mexico much more comfortable than that experienced by most of her more impoverished fellow German-language exiles.

Unlike Kisch, Seghers stayed mostly in Mexico City and did not begin to write about Mexico and other South American countries until she returned to East Germany, later the German Democratic Republic. Although she was grateful that Mexico had given her refuge, she knew little about the country and felt at first very distant from the people and culture. In only one exile work, *Der Ausflug der toten Mädchen* (*The Excursion of the Dead Girls*), which she wrote in 1944, does Mexico play a small role. Ironically this work was first translated into English by the FBI, which had intercepted it, a translation that was actually quite decent (Stephan, 1993, p. 151). At the beginning of the text the narrator describes a desert scene, filled with cacti and surrounded by bare mountains, a moonlike, barren landscape where even the sleeping dog appears to be dead. She contrasts this scene with the lush green of the Rhine around Mainz, an expression of the homesickness for Germany that plagued her during her exile. In her other writing in Mexico her gaze was firmly fixed on Germany. She focused on anti-fascist work, on preserving for the future the best traditions

of German culture that the Nazis were destroying, and on plans to reeducate Germans after Hitler's defeat.

Despite her homesickness and sense of alienation, Seghers nevertheless became fascinated with Mexican culture. Although she felt like a stranger in Mexico, she admired its vivid colors and its lively markets. She also felt comfortable in its political climate. In a letter to her friend Kurt Kersten in 1944, a letter contained in her FBI file, she notes that one can learn every hour there how individuals develop into a people and from a people into a state. At first, she writes, she did not want to be involved with Mexican problems that had nothing to do with what concerned her. Gradually, however, being in Mexico made her begin to appreciate that she did not always have to view the world from only one perspective (Stephan, 1993, p. 162). In a letter to the writer Wieland Herzfelde on December 29, 1944, she wrote that overall she was happy to be in Mexico and have the opportunity to get to know its land and people (Seghers, 1944a, pp. 144-145). She studied Spanish, had Mexican friends, among them the union leader Toledano, the muralists Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Xavier Guerrero and Guerrero's wife, the Cuban-born furniture designer Clara Porset, known both for her modernist designs influenced by Bauhaus and for those inspired by folk culture. Much of what Seghers learned about Mexico, however, came from her close friend Kisch whose work she admired. In several essays such as «Die Galgentoni» (1943) and «Gisl» (1945) she talks about her friendship with Kisch and his wife Gisl. In her obituary for Kisch «Egon Erwin Kisch» (1948), written in the form of a letter to him, she praises his works including «Discoveries in Mexico», calling them important (Seghers, 1948, p. 289). In an interview with Wilhelm Girnus in 1967, twenty years after she returned from exile, she stresses how much she liked Mexico. She learned a lot while she was there and she longs to go back once more (Seghers, 1967a, pp. 441-42). She later reflects in her essay «Brief über ein Buch» (1969, Letter About a Book) that among all the countries she knew, Mexico had made the greatest impact on her. Mexico for her was not a past memory but remained ever present. If she had not been ill she would have liked to return (Seghers, 1969, p. 341).

Like other exiles Seghers had promised Cárdenas and Camicho that on her return home she would work for friendship between Mexico and Germany, a promise she fulfilled. In several essays written in Mexico, she already refers to this goal. In a piece contained in her FBI file, she notes that writers, like trees, take their nourishment from the soil (Stephan,

1993, pp. 127-128). When they return home, she observes in her essay «Aufgaben der Kunst» (1944, The Tasks of Art) they will have experienced an apprenticeship that will enable them to depict foreign people as the earth's contribution to humanity (Seghers, 1994b, p. 173). In «Kulturelle Brücken zu anderen Völkern» (1946/47, Cultural Bridges to Other Peoples) she stresses the importance of understanding other peoples and building bridges to other cultures (Seghers, 1946/47, pp. 209-213). In East Germany Seghers became very active in the peace movement and reached out to other cultures. In «Gruß an Pablo Neruda» (1954, Greetings to Pablo Neruda) she complained that Germans knew little about South American history and culture and that German historians had practically forgotten about South America. Seghers emphasizes that South America has given rise to great people who have made significant contributions to the struggle for freedom. It is important to recognize, she stresses, that the fate of one's own people is inseparably bound to that of other peoples and that respect for one's own culture is linked to respect for the culture of other peoples (Seghers, 1954, pp. 33-34). Seghers was thus convinced that it was essential to make Germans aware of and appreciate South America's rich cultural traditions. In addition to her works on Mexico, Seghers wrote stories about the Caribbean, in which she became interested when on her odyssey to Mexico she was forced to stop in Martinique and Santo Domingo. In the stories «Die Hochzeit von Haiti» (1949, The Wedding of Haiti), «Wiedereinführung der Sklaverei in Guadeloupe» (1949, The Reintroduction of Slavery in Guadeloupe) and «Das Licht auf dem Galgen» (1961, The Light on the Gallows) she addresses slavery and resistance. In a trilogy, published in 1980, *Drei Frauen aus Haiti* (Three Women from Haiti) she examines examples of women's resistance in this country from the conquistadors to the present. In addition to such literary texts, Seghers visited Brazil twice, and was very influential in making works by such South American writers as her friends the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda and the Brazilian novelist Jorge Amado known to readers in the GDR. Through such intercultural work, she hoped to help reeducate Germans after the Nazi years and to influence the development of the GDR (Teraoka, 1996, pp. 8-9). In particular, she used the evolution of Mexican identity, shaped especially in her view by the revolutionary events in the twentieth century, to instill a sense of revolutionary struggle in the newly evolving GDR. She frequently refers to such progressive reforms as the nationalization of the oil industry carried out by Cárdenas and presents them as a model for the new GDR to emulate.

Seghers also presented Mexican art, specifically the work of the muralists, as a model for the GDR of the powerful social role art should play in explaining the past and present and pointing to future change. One of the first pieces she wrote on her return home was «Die gemalte Zeit» (1947, Painted Time), an essay about the work of such great Mexican muralists as Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros, and Guerrero and their impact on ordinary people. In an interview with Wilhelm Girnus in 1967 she notes that when she was living there Mexico was a country that expressed itself predominantly through art (Seghers, 1967a, pp. 441). For Seghers, a trained art historian, her exposure to Mexican murals was important, and these impressions remained with her (Bock, 1990, p. 17). Seghers was familiar with other contemporary Mexican artists and their art. She knew, for example, Rivero's wife Frida Kahlo and her haunting self-portraits through which, using a style drawn from Mexican folk art of *retablos*, the small votive pictures found in Mexican churches, she chronicled her life and suffering. But it was the murals that fascinated her with their artistic talent, their vivid colors, and powerful themes depicting Mexican history from a mythical past to the present and pointing to a future socialist utopia (Bock, 1990, pp. 15-27). In *Freies Deutschland* in 1943, her friend Xavier Guerrero wrote about the development of Mexican murals (Bock, 1990, p. 15), which helped shape Seghers' own understanding of this art form.

In «Painted Time» Seghers observes that if there had been a Hitler in Mexico instead of burning books he would have had to scratch murals from the walls. As a Marxist, Seghers believed that art must have a social function. The Mexican murals were for her of great significance since they represented in her mind an art that effectively connected to a mass audience that could identify with it and learn from it. She stresses, however, that the murals not only satisfy people's thirst for knowledge, but that their vivid colors also appeal aesthetically. Seghers strongly endorses the muralists' goals of making a still at that time largely illiterate people aware of their history. By portraying the various stages of Mexican history from pre-colonial times through independence to the revolution and the present, the murals demonstrate in ways that everyone could understand how a people became a nation and convey to the viewers a sense of human and national dignity. They convey also the sophistication of pre-colonial civilizations. Seghers saw for herself the impact these murals on public buildings had on ordinary people, how they flocked to look at the paintings, and she points out that these murals were not only painted on important public buildings in Mexico City such as the National Palace, but also on

public buildings in out-of-the-way places. Since the Renaissance, she argues, no artistic movement has been so deeply rooted in the people. Despite their occasional artistic failings, they are nevertheless true for all people. For example, the depiction of a farmer dressed in white cotton painted on the murals resembles a real farmer who is looking at the pictures and smiling (Seghers, 1947, pp. 214-220). In her short related piece, «Miguel aus Morelia» (1952), inspired by Xavier Guerrero's biography, she points out how through joining the muralists, Miguel learned how to portray the revolution in his art. She stresses the importance of the close interaction between creating art and political awareness, showing that while the muralists painted they discussed aesthetic and political questions. In their art they drew some inspiration from medieval and Renaissance frescoes, but mostly they were inspired by their own artistic heritage such as the frescoes in the ruined temples and pyramids. They also debated how best to portray politics through their art. In this story, ordinary people watching the painters at work become actively involved in the actual process of painting. They give both praise and criticism, telling the muralists, for example, that they should correct how they painted a mule since mules are not loaded in such a way (Seghers, 1952, pp. 246-249). Seghers does not argue that East Germany should produce similar art, but rather holds the murals up as a model for how artistic endeavors can and should be rooted in the people. Through this model she hoped to shape cultural politics of the GDR and also to express her own notions of the social function of art.

In her short story «Crisanta» (1951), the first fictional work she wrote with a Mexican focus, Seghers emphasizes at the beginning that she wants to convey to her readers how ordinary people in Mexico live, the reason she does not deal with such historical figures as Hidalgo or Juárez, even though, although they are unknown in Europe, they and others like them in Mexico belong in her opinion to the greatest of the great (Seghers, 1951, p. 7). Instead she centers on the life of a poor orphan, Crisanta. Seghers outlines the stages in Crisanta's life, focusing on her hard existence. She was brought up in the home of Lupe González, her godmother, later worked in a tortilleria in Mexico City, a life she loves, and is abandoned by her ambitious boyfriend Miguel who as soon as he learns to read and write wants a better life that does not include her. In despair she begins a downward spiral from which she is rescued and taken home where neighbors help her find work to support her and her illegitimate child.

Seghers communicates here to her German readers a vivid and positive picture of Mexico. She depicts the colorful markets and explains important festivals such as the one for the Virgin of Guadalupe and the national celebration of independence when the bell of Dolóres that announced the beginning of the uprising against the Spanish colonial power is rung. She also admires the Mexican people. She stresses, for example, their generosity and their concern for each other. Despite their own poverty, the González family raises Crisanta as part of their family, and Crisanta spends all her first wages on buying presents for them: she wants to shower them with gifts. The story also expresses hope for change. Seghers discusses the government campaign to promote literacy by opening night schools, and Miguel talks about a successful strike in his factory, a change from past times when González, who works in the Pachuca mines, recalls that when the workers demonstrated they were fired upon. Because of such progressive changes, Crisanta feels hope for her child's future: he will be able to learn to read and write; he will be able to study, he could even become a doctor; he could become anything he wants to be. At the end of the story, Crisanta realizes that her powerful childhood memory of a vivid blue is of being wrapped in the deep blue rebozo belonging to Lupe González who, like Crisanta, represents the strength and warmth of the Mexican people. It is likely that this image was inspired by a famous oil painting in 1929 by Seghers' friend David Siqueiros, entitled «Peasant Mother» which depicts a mother with her child wrapped in such a rebozo (Romero, 1993, pp. 112-113). Seghers employs the color blue here to signify a longing to belong, a longing for home. The story thus concludes with Crisanta's hopes for the future and her sense of belonging and rootedness.

In her story «Die Heimkehr des verlorenen Volkes» (1965, *The Homecoming of the Lost People*), an early version of which stems from 1957, Seghers paints in words what such muralists as Rivero and others painted on public buildings: a mythically depicted pre-colonial Mexican past on the way to a progressive future. She begins her story with a peaceful agricultural people living in harmony with nature on an unspecified peninsula, probably the Yucatan peninsula. This idyllic existence was then destroyed when a war-like tribe conquered them, killed many of them, sacrificed some to the gods, and drove the rest away. Over time, however, both peoples gradually worked together and shared their knowledge, such as their awareness of the calendar, their art and their religious traditions. Their lives became harmonious until the conquistadors arrived. Like Kisch, Seghers harshly condemns the conquistadors for their wanton de-

struction of villages, their greed, their cruel killings, and their enslaving of the native peoples. The people from the peninsula fled from the Spaniards into the forest where over the centuries they forgot their history: only remnants remained in their songs. There they stayed hidden, unaware of events in Mexico such as the expulsion of the Spaniards, how Juárez defended Mexico from French domination, and the revolution. Centuries pass until this tribe was found and resettled on its former lands by the Cárdenas government. Although Seghers is not specific the lost tribe she refers to is likely the Lacandonese, a Mayan tribe, who escaped the influence of western civilization by living isolated in the Chiapas. When Seghers was in Mexico City, the Swiss-born anthropologist, photographer, and journalist Gertrude Düby, herself a refugee, accompanied an expedition sent to this lost tribe and she reported about them to German exiles in Mexico City in 1943, both in the *Freies Deutschland* magazine and at the Heine Club on May 3, 1943. Düby became so fascinated with this tribe that she devoted the rest of her life to studying its traditions. Seghers was familiar with Düby's enthusiastic reports about this tribe (Diersen, 1994, p. 148) and the story reflects her own interest in Mexico's indigenous peoples. Except for the specific time of the end, the story has the timelessness of a fairy tale, and Seghers is intentionally vague about which cultures and tribes she depicts. Although she describes the war-like tribe that conquers the original tribe, she nevertheless idealizes this early period as a golden age, destroyed by the Spaniards. Only centuries later under Cárdenas does a golden age return. In the story she thus reinstates at the end a utopia, a utopia she had hoped to help create in the GDR, an endeavor in which she was deeply disappointed.

Vivid colors, lively markets, and folk art again play a central role in Segher's story «Das wirkliche Blau: Eine Geschichte aus Mexiko» (1967, «Benito's Blue», 1973). In it she underscores both the importance of art in ordinary people's lives and emphasizes the uniqueness and individuality of the artistic personality. Only out of such qualities, she believes, can the efficacy and practical value of art grow (Bock, 1990, p. 16). The story focuses on the potter Benito Guerrero who is famous for the brilliant blue of his pots. It opens with a depiction of the Guerrero family on the way from their village to market in Mexico City. Benito is proud of the pots he creates and has customers who will buy only his pots. Now, however, he is distraught and faces poverty because his characteristic blue dye, manufactured in Germany, is no longer available: with the outbreak of the war German firms have been blacklisted. Through his aunt Eusebia, who

gathers herbs for an apothecary dealing in folk medicine, he learns that his cousin Rubén manufactures a brilliant blue dye out of stones left in the slag heaps from the silver mines. Benito goes on an odyssey to find his cousin, a long journey that takes him through the silver mines of San Mateo until he finally finds his cousin near the mines in San Cristóbal and obtains the blue he needs, a blue now manufactured not by a German, but by a Mexican.

Seghers paints a grim picture of the workers' lives in the silver mines in San Mateo. When he first arrives there Benito is assaulted by the deafening noise of the mine machinery. The workers' huts are poor, and the ever-growing slagheaps threaten to bury them. Benito reflects that the mines will eventually devour this small town that exists only because of them. The hut where his cousin's parents live is already nearly buried by the creeping slagheaps. The landscape is desolate, gray and dusty, and it seems to him as if everything living has been three quarters buried. He is struck also by the poverty of the people, especially his cousin's parents.

In the story, Seghers makes reference to some corrupt politicians and businessmen. As in «Crisanta», however, she also points out progress in the government's literacy program and the changes in attitudes to reading and writing. At first, Benito had been opposed to school for his son Andrés and on market days and when there was other work to do had not let him attend school, despite pleas from the teacher. After his journey, however, his attitude changes. So that his family would not worry about his long absence, Benito, who cannot read or write himself, has people write letters to Andrés and through him can thus communicate with his family. Now that he realizes how important reading and writing are he thanks Andrés' teacher for helping his son to master these skills.

As in «Crisanta» the color blue plays an important role in this story. Benito refuses to consider any other blue but the vivid one he uses. In an interview with Günter Caspar in 1971 Seghers notes that Benito's search for the real blue means more than just a color: it represents his search for something distant, for something that can be reached only with great effort (Seghers, 1971, p. 456). In a later interview with *Neues Deutschland* in 1973, she notes that although Benito does not consider his pottery artistic, it nevertheless becomes true folk art because of his determination to find the right blue. This blue is not simply a color but material and spiritual reality that we all seek. Benito's pottery is a model for all art since it represents the unity of thought and reality (Seghers, 1973, pp. 462-463). The color blue also has significance within the German literary tradition. In



German Romanticism it too is a color of longing, represented in the Romantics' search for the elusive blue flower. At this time in the GDR Romanticism was in disrepute because it did not fit into the state's cultural goals of socialist realism, and Seghers was trying to rehabilitate it.

Exile in Mexico was important for both Seghers and Kisch. It enriched and broadened their worldview, made them appreciate Mexico's rich cultural history and its progressive political traditions, and made them sensitive to Mexico's contributions to the world. It inspired both of them to work for cross-cultural understanding. Kisch worked tirelessly to mediate Mexican culture to German exiles, and German culture to his Mexican hosts, whereas Seghers waited until her return to Europe where through her stories and essays she became both an important mediator of Mexican and South American culture in the GDR and an advocate of using Mexico as a revolutionary model in politics and art. In her pieces on Mexico she expresses not only her admiration for the country and people, but also her own aspirations to shape the GDR.

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