

# Anna Seghers' *Transit*: The Puzzle of Identity

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## **Abstract**

The present paper aims at analysing the theme of identity in Anna Seghers' *Transit* (1944). Due to the fact that it deals with the story of a German man who is in exile in order to escape from the Nazi regime, its historical context is relevant. The novel presents Marseille as a chaotic city granting asylum and as the last choice for exiles' way out. It also reflects the official French policy toward exiles, which was characterized by its unlimited requirement of visas in order to remain in the unoccupied France. It will be explained, through the analysis of the narrator's and protagonist's dimensions, that under the arduous condition of exile the conception of identity turns out to be quite controversial. In fact, individual identity is constructed in relation to the collective one. In this sense, exiles have to overcome all the obstacles that emerge from their lack of belonging to social groups in the new land. At this point, it must be noted that exiles' sense of national identity is also affected. They immerse themselves in a slow and inefficient bureaucratic system which will somehow determine their identities. In fact, the main struggle exiles have to face is the one about who they are and where they find themselves. Hence, they subject themselves to a complex process of rediscovery in order to give answer to the principal question identity asks: how they define their place in the world and present themselves to it. After having addressed the basic notions of identity, I will develop the analysis of identity in exile focusing on the main protagonist and on the narrator's voice. Through the analysis of both of them, it will be proved that there is an inability to reconcile the authentic identity and the identification, that is, how they are labelled by the authorities. In other words, I will try to demonstrate that there is a gap between how individuals define themselves and how bureaucracy and society determines the individual.

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## 1. Introduction

They're saying that the *Montreal* went down between Dakar and Martinique. That she ran into a mine. The shipping company isn't releasing any information. It may just be a rumor. But when you compare it to the fate of other ships and their cargoes of refugees which were hounded over all the oceans and never allowed to dock, which were left burn on the high seas rather than being permitted to drop anchor merely because their passengers' documents had expired a couple of days before, then what happened to the *Montreal* seems like a natural death for a ship in wartime. (Seghers 3)

This introductory excerpt in Anna Seghers' *Transit* (1944) portrays the cruel reality undergone by Nazi persecuted exiles. All of them were waiting for visas and ship passages that would take them far from their exasperating everyday in Marseille. However, as it can be observed in the quotation above, the ship passages could become the road to death.

France became a common destination for those Germans that were forced to go in exile. Nevertheless, what French politics offered them was not what they expected. In addition to the rise of Nazism, the French Government enacted laws that led exiles to a dissipating situation. In fact, all exiles were required to obtain official permissions and visas that due to the inefficient bureaucratic system expired too fast (Pfanner).

Marseille, which initially grew into the perfect place for German exiles searching for a way out of Europe, became an authentic trap where the bureaucratic vicious cycle was unavoidable (Prigan 99). Once left behind all they possessed, Nazi persecuted exiles needed to look for new lives. However, their new lives were bounded by official documents and constant police raids. As a result, the quest was a precipice in which refugees were exposed to risk and death (Waine 405).

Furthermore, the French bureaucratic system and the fact that exiles had left behind their people and homeland, gave rise to a conflict in terms of their identities. In the following paper I will analyze this controversial concept of identity in *Transit*. I will focus on the character of Seidler/Weidel, who apart from being a round protagonist is also the narrator. Through the protagonist's struggle, the novel thematizes the conflict between identity and identification. If constructing one's identity is a difficult process in

itself, we will see that exile creates an inability to reconcile exiles' authentic identity and the label applied by bureaucracy.

First of all, I would like to point out that, unfortunately, due to the limited extension of this paper and in order to concentrate on the analysis of identity under the condition of exile, I will leave aspects such as Seghers' biography<sup>1</sup> and the literary background<sup>2</sup> of this period. Consequently, I will begin detailing the historical context of *Transit*. I would like to clarify that I am going to centre on the French situation during Nazism since Seghers' novel is placed in that context. In addition, I would like to point out that I am going to focus on identity in exile and I will not go into details concerning World War II. Then, I will pay attention to the concept of identity. I will explain which elements constitute the individual identity. We will discover that individual identity is really linked to the collective and social one and that the sense of belonging to certain groups is crucial to understand the individual's place in the world. Besides, I will refer to some relevant aspects of national identity that play key roles when constructing identity. Finally, I will analyze the development of identity in *Transit*. For this, I'm going to focus on the protagonist and the narrator, since, as we will see, they experience a complex process in order to reconcile the most determining angles in exile: who they are and where they find themselves.

In other respects, I would like to mention that I have decided to analyze Seghers' novel due to two main reasons. Firstly, because she is a woman author and secondly because as Peter Conrad states, "it is sobering and alarming to rediscover this book: what Seghers saw as an emergency has now become what we call normality" (xv). It seems that human race does not learn from its mistakes and instead of opening borders, we keep sinking more ships like the *Montreal*.

## **2. Escaping from homeland: German exile in France**

France grew into a common destination for German exiles due to various reasons. First of all, France was well known because it had an irreproachable attitude concerning the reception of refugees, asylum seekers and political dissenters of other nations.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about Seghers' biography see García 73-83, Abel 137-230 and Prigan 19-42.

<sup>2</sup> For information on *Exilliteratur* see Stoehr 137-165.

Secondly, the geographical proximity between France and Germany was favourable. This proximity between the two nations was important since many German exiles did not desire to go too far away because they expected to return soon to their homeland (Pfanner).

Apart from this, France offered to German exiles the opportunity to publish and express their ideas freely. Especially Paris was a city where great German literary events developed. In fact, the association called *Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller* had its headquarters there. Additionally, French journalists wrote articles about German exiles and this city facilitated the publication of many German magazines and newspapers (García14). Besides, those exiles who were settled down in different parts of the country and those groups that adhered to the resistance against National Socialism met each other in the French capital (García 15).

However, it was not all a bed of roses. When the first wave of exiles crossed the French borders, many German exiles had to flee so hastily, that they lacked the time to apply for a visa, which was obligatory, in French consulates in Germany. Hence, many of them came across the French border illegally. Once having arrived in France, they were obliged to obtain an official identity card in order to stay there more than two months. However, the process of obtaining the official identity card required a proof of their legal entry in the country. Within this turbulent cycle of bureaucracy, thousands of exiles were expelled and those illegal ones who managed to remain unnoticed, stayed in France thanks to the inefficient bureaucratic system (Pfanner).

Although the control over exiles and refugees became more severe in 1934 and 1935, in 1936 the French official attitude toward the refugees and exiles turned out to be less rigid under Leon Blum's government, especially because Leon Blum was part of the International Popular-Front movement. This movement had antifascist aims which were shared by many German exiles (Pfanner).

Unfortunately, this period described as favourable for those escaping from the Nazi authorities ended with the new French government under the Prime Minister Daladier (Pfanner). The truth is that conservative groups criticized that entering France was too easy for refugees. Additionally, German political exiles were also seen as a threat for the French social stability. It is important to remark as well, that many French citizens were afraid of coexisting with Nazi infiltrators and this fear of foreigners and fascism

was supported and diffused by the French press. As a consequence, part of the French society began to be suspicious of German intellectuals (García 16).

Although at first, during the thirties, German exiles were received with all the honours by French authorities, the situation of German exiles became critical after 1937 and by the end of 1938 there were about 8,000 refugees interned in French camps (Pfanner).

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of June 1940 Nazi troops managed to enter France causing the fall of Paris ("Historia de la II Guerra Mundial"). According to French authorities, the armistice was the best solution since although they were signing their defeat, military forces and the government would be able to carry out resistance (Perks 14). So, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of June 1940 the armistice was signed and by the 25<sup>th</sup> France was formally under German occupation. As a result, three fifths of the country was German territory (Perks 20).

In consequence, French politics experienced severe modifications and one of the most concerning law was the Article 19 of the armistice between Germany and France. This article implied that any German who was living in the unoccupied France and was wanted by the Nazis was to be turned over to them (Pfanner). Indeed, it should be observed that the Vichy Government, which was established in the unoccupied zone and was subject to the German regime, at this point applied the anti-Semite and anticommunist measures as The Third Reich. Moreover, French police captured, tortured and even sent presumed communist exiles to Nazis. Besides, following their xenophobic tradition, "the French, not the German, police arrested most of the 76.000 Jews deported from France" (Kitson 379). Hence, German exiles not only had to escape from German authorities but also from the French ones. If they were in danger in their homeland, exiles would continue to be in danger in their exile in France.

Above all, it must be remarked that thanks to the collaboration of the French citizens and international organisations, the number of victims among exiles was relatively low (García 17). Although France had the obligation to hand over German exiles, organisations like *Emergency Rescue Committee* promoted the way out for many of them (Pfanner). Even when Vichy regime rose to power, the South West of France kept open, lamentably under the Gestapo's attentive gaze, for the exiles (García 17).

In fact, as German troops invaded more countries, Europe in 1938 began to be not too safe to live (Stotehr 164). Moreover, the exile in France reached its dramatic point in

1940 when what had been a shelter changed into a trap: “France became a trap; the only option was to leave by way of Marseille, if one could obtain a transit visa” (Pfanner).

### 3. Identity and exile

Since the thesis I am defending in this dissertation is directly connected to the concept of identity, I find it pivotal to introduce a brief explanation of this complex notion. I will put the main emphasis on the theories of personal and collective, social and national identities and try to place them in the intricate context of exile.

#### 3.1 Individual identity

Paying attention to the etymology of the word, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* asserts that the word “identity” has its roots in Latin. On the one hand, it is composed by the Latin term *idem* which means same and on the other hand, it also comprises the term *identidem*, which signifies to repeat all over again (Onions 459). Hence, it is possible to see that the word “identity” itself presents a dualism in its meaning. In fact, these terms (*idem* and *identidem*) have been straightly related to those of *likeness* and *oneness* (Owens 207). That is, identity lets individuals feel similar to other individuals but at the same time it strongly makes the difference between the individual and the others.

Having mentioned its etymology, it is crucial to understand the principal question identity tries to give answer to. In this sense, Boveland states that:

When we speak of identity we address the question of how we understand our own ‘true’ self, and how we define our place in this world. Our sense of identity allows us to integrate our manifold daily experiences which, at times, are divergent, inconsistent, even contradictory. (14)

Therefore, I comprehend that identity’s principal aim is to establish our place in the world, to define it. Firstly, I would like to point out the difference between “self” and “identity”, two interconnected concepts. According to contemporary psychology, the self is a cognitive representation of individuals’ personality characteristics that are formed by experience or biography (Owens 206). Owens explains that the most



considerable difference between both concepts is that, while the self is a “process and organization born of self-reflection” (206), identity is a tool which helps individuals and groups to not only categorize themselves but also to present themselves to the world. In other words, the self is what we are born with and a representation of our personality traits that we acquire through experiences. In contrast to the self, identity is a mechanism that allows us to identify ourselves in the world. Besides, as stated in the quotation above, all experiences an individual goes through have an impact on the evolution of identity. These experiences, that sometimes are deviating, play a crucial role when we present ourselves to the world. Identity is the tool which helps to integrate all contradictory events when we try to define how we understand our position in our environment.

Continuing with the importance of experiences in terms of identity, it is relevant to point out the discussion developed in the television debate “La identidad” in *Para todos la 2: debate*, where one of the participants, Romeu claims that identity is a combination of all the events that take place in our lives. According to him, identity is what we decide it to be. It is a unification of characteristics, roles, behaviors and statuses (“La identidad 4:13-4:55”).

On the other hand, previously I have mentioned that identity tries to define our place in the world. Consequently, when I refer to the world, inevitably I am referring to the people surrounding the individual as well. Wagensberg argues in that same television debate that the individual identity is related to the collective identity. He makes it clear since his first claim in which he declares that our individual identity is what differentiates us from the others. Wagensberg asserts that we need to feel unique in respect to other people, but at the same time individual identity is created through collective identity (“La identidad 21:12-22:49”). In other words, individuals need to establish a connection with people who are similar to them. Moreover, individuals need to recognize themselves in a certain place and culture. Hence, collective identity is part of individual identity (“La identidad 3:40-4:11”). In line with this, Boveland assures that individual identity “is sustained within a network of a collective identity of a shared culture”(15). Therefore, the group we belong to and the culture we share with them is reflected in individual identity. I understand that all values and beliefs of a group in which the individual takes part are represented in the individual identity.

Summarizing, individual identity is directly linked to our true self. In addition, identity creates in individuals a feeling of likeness and oneness which leads us to think that individual identity is related to the collective and social one. Individuals compare themselves to others in order to find similarities with them but also to differentiate themselves from others. So, human beings' individual identity is shaped by the group they belong to and by a shared culture. Above all, the main object of identity is to find and define individuals' position toward the world.

### 3.2 Notions of social, collective and national identity

In regard to the sociological view, one constructs social identity "from the groups, statuses and categories to which individuals are *socially recognized* as belonging" (Owens 224). Therefore, individuals tend to categorize themselves in certain social groups. It seems that individuals associate themselves with specific groups and they develop a feeling of belonging regarding the social group in which they take part. Hence, social identity reflects the membership in various groups.

Both sociological and psychological research fields agree on the fact that individuals can accept or reject the social definitions they are given (Owens 204). Furthermore, social identity is somehow related to self-esteem. In this sense, people try to lift their self-esteem by being part of a specific group or stressing the qualities of this specific group one belongs to (Owens 225).

According to Tajfel it is possible to appreciate that social identity encompasses two dimensions: the individual and the group dimensions. Membership not only establishes a feeling of belonging but also makes the individual who partakes in a group (or groups) to deliberate the caliber, the distinction and the emotional weight of that membership. Concretely, as mentioned before, individuals have a personal vision with respect to the relation between themselves and the world. But the important aspect here is that their membership in different social groups seems to affect this vision. Finally, it must be noted that social identity may vary because of the social conditions individuals are exposed to (Tajfel qtd. in Owens 225).

Likewise, Alberto Melucci defines collective identity as a process in which people interact with each other in order to create a shared identity and action system. Melucci agrees with Tajfel in the fact that both remark the importance of feeling part of specific

unities. Besides, Melucci claims that there is interaction between the participants of the collective group. These members communicate with each other and are influenced by each other. Finally, as it happens with social identity, in collective identity there is an emotional implication too (Melucci 44-45).

Finally, I find it crucial to introduce a brief explanation of national identity, since without this sense of nationalism exile would not have any meaning. Nationalism could be understood focusing on the aspect of belonging to a land (McClennen 26). Accordingly, nationalism is composed by national identity which is the representation of characteristics that create a cultural link between people and their land. In other words, a particular group shares common traits that are distinctive of a particular land. The most important characteristic that members of a nation share is their common national history. Taking this into account, it goes without saying that national identity is political as well (McClennen 26). Moreover, in concordance with Smith, national identity has some remarkable features that are decisive. First of all, all the individuals in a nation share the feeling of having a homeland or a historic territory. Then, apart from common myths and historical memories, they share common legal rights, obligations and economy. Moreover, the members of a nation also share a common culture (Smith 14). Besides, national identity helps individuals to define their place in the world, to discover their true self (Smith 17).

In fact, as Zeus states, it is obvious that each of us has a natural place and homeland which unconditionally perform a decisive role when constructing one's own identity (10). However, it is exactly under condition of exile, in this case under a situation of questioning and threat, that the connections between people and their land become controversial and hence, their identities are reterritorialised. These circumstances imply setting free from individuals' homeland and creating a new connection with a real or imagined territory (Zeus 12). Indeed, the vision of national identity in exile is quite complex and I will try to shed light upon the concept of identity in exile in the next section.

### 3.3 Identity in exile<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Since for my analysis of identity in *Transit* the relevant context is exile in France, I will not make any reference to the situation of World War II when defining the concept of identity.

Taking into account that all the memories including images, feelings and words constitute our own identity, whenever individuals move to a new territory, they take with them a heavy luggage in which these memories are included (Stroińska 95).

If constructing identity is a complex process in itself, exile makes this development even more complicated. The most significant characteristics of exile are the fact that exile refers to forced displacements (McClennen 19) and that the condition of exile has a beginning but does not have an established end (Evelein 122).

When one is compelled to cross the borders of his/her land, he/she emerges a process of integration in a new political, economic, sociological and climatic context. These conditions expose exiles to a situation where they can or cannot integrate in the new society. In fact, as Stroińska affirms, this displacement can be seen as death or as a rebirth (98). In line with this, Boveland states that exiles break not only with their homeland but also with the cultural and social categorization that this homeland has offered to them (32). In addition, when individuals are forced to abandon their land, they begin to redefine their identity by reconsidering their cultural notions and identities and by wrestling with a new and imposed external labeling and bureaucratic identification (Zeus 10).

Exile also gives rise to namelessness and otherness. In line with this, the notion of namelessness is portrayed, as we will see in the next chapter, in Seghers' *Transit* too. According to Evelein even the narrator's gender is not visible until Seghers uses a gender-specific grammatical construction: "*Fremder*" (135). It is at this moment when it is discovered that the narrator is a male foreigner. Moreover, in *Transit* it can be observed that exile's unstable identity, which is mirrored in his namelessness, develops into a metaphor for exile itself (Evelein 135). As Evelein correctly asserts "what comes to fore is exile as an experience of *thrownness* that affects the very core of one's identity" (135).

#### **4. Anna Seghers' *Transit*: The problem of identity**

In this chapter I will analyze the development of the first-person narrator's and protagonist's identity. As Abel states, the process of fixing identity through passports turns out to be complicated in an exile context. Since individual and collective identities

and the bureaucratic identification play a crucial role, it is arduous to find out which one determines identity: “does the individual determine identification or vice-versa?” (Abel 165). *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “identification” as “the action or process of identifying someone or something or the fact of being identified” (Simpson and Weiner 618). In the case of *Transit*, this process of being identified is directly linked to the official documents that prove who each individual is. Seghers’ *Transit* points out a gap between individual and collective identity and identification.

#### 4.1 A brief summary of the plot

*Transit* deals with the story of an anonymous man in the late 1930s and early 1940s, who, after having escaped from a German concentration camp and from a French working camp, manages to get to Paris. Here, he meets Paul, a German man who was with him in the working camp, and Paul asks the protagonist to do him a favor. Paul asks the protagonist to deliver some documents to a German writer called Weidel. Nevertheless, when the protagonist arrives at the hotel where Weidel is, he discovers that Weidel has committed suicide. As a result, he finds himself with all Weidel’s belongings including the documents required to obtain a Mexican visa. At the same time, the protagonist establishes a close relationship with the Binnet family in Paris. In fact, thanks to his former girlfriend Yvonne Binnet, he obtains the identification documents of a man called Seidler.

When the Nazi troops invade Paris, the protagonist moves to Marseille where Yvonne’s cousin George Binnet lives. Here, he decides to deliver Weidel’s documents to the Mexican consulate, but due to a misunderstanding with the consulate official, it is thought that Seidler and Weidel are the same man, being Weidel the pen name of Seidler. From now on, the protagonist is under three different identities: his own identity, Seidler and Weidel.

In Marseille he discovers a world delineated by bureaucracy where all exiles want to obtain a visa and abandon France. In addition, he falls in love with Marie, the widow of the late Weidel. The protagonist does not reveal to Marie at any point of the story that he possesses the documents of her husband and additionally, Marie does not know that her husband is dead.

Finally the protagonist decides to adopt Weidel's identification officially and he thinks about fleeing France with his Mexican visa. However, in the last moment he decides to stay in France and to return all Weidel's documents to the consulate. Having made the decision to stay in France because he finally finds his place next to the Binnetts and he feels part of the French community, the narrator does not specify whether the protagonist and narrator will live under no official name or whether he continues with the identification of Seidler.

#### 4.2 The narrator: a nameless story teller

In *Transit* it is possible to see a development regarding the narrator's identity and the way in which he narrates the story. In the beginning, the reader finds a narrator with contradictory feelings and his crisis of identity culminates in the last part of the novel where the character's and narrator's level join together.

To begin with, it is essential to mention that the story in *Transit* is related by an autodiegetic narrator. The novel is written in a first person form where the narrator is also the main protagonist. In this case, the narrator is telling his own memoirs and testimony. The first chapter offers the reader information on the end of the story, since until the last part of the novel the narrator is using the flashback technique. This way he tells us what has happened to him up to the point where he is inviting us (the reader) to hear his story.

Furthermore, the beginning of the story reflects a debate in terms of truthfulness. The narrator initiates his narration referring to a ship, the *Montreal*, which has gone down. However, he calls into question the veracity of this piece of news: "That is, if it isn't all just a rumor" (Seghers 3). Therefore, he doubts about the official version in respect of the *Montreal's* sinking. Thereupon, the narrator invites the reader to hear his truth:

Probably you find all of this pretty unimportant? You're bored?-I am too.  
May I invite you to join me at my table? [...] I'd like to tell someone the  
whole story from beginning to end" (Seghers 3-4)

In this quotation we see how the narrator asks the reader to listen to him. He remarks that he is bored and "fed up with such thrilling stories" (Seghers 4). In addition, he is somehow guarantying, in contrast to the *Montreal* news, that the story he is going to reveal is his truth. Consequently, it is possible to perceive that since the very beginning the narrator makes a difference between official versions and his own story. Moreover,

the narrator in *Transit* is the voice of exile. He represents and reveals the story of all the German exiles that were forced to abandon their country. He has committed himself to speaking for those who have no voice.

The narrator has the urgent necessity to reveal his exile experience and he not only makes us participate in the narration but also become witnesses. Therefore, the narrator establishes a direct relationship with the readership. We, the readers, accept this invitation without knowing to whom we are listening. The real name of the protagonist and narrator is not given at any point in the story. This could be seen as the starting point of the whole crisis of identity that our story teller suffers. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, exile can give rise to a nameless state. The narrator in *Transit* is a clear example of it. The reader is informed about some biographical aspects of the narrator such as his flight from a German concentration camp and from a French working camp. He has escaped from not one, but two camps, so it is assumed that he is a person who lives in constant tension and his namelessness stems from a situation of danger. In fact, he is persecuted by both German and French authorities. He has abandoned his homeland in order to find shelter and protection in France and, at this point, we see that his life remains at risk even in the French community.

In addition, the story in *Transit* is related by a reflexive narrator. Indeed, the first paragraphs of the novel are full of questions addressed at the reader: “Aren’t you sick of all these suspenseful tales about people surviving mortal danger by a hair, about breathtaking escapes?” (Seghers 4). It seems that those tales about exiles escaping from danger are so common for the narrator, that at this point they have become a normal issue for him. Furthermore, this reflexive aspect can also be seen in the following quote:

[...]I wondered whether the Binnets would be sensible enough to understand that, even though I was one of these people [Germans], I was still myself. I wondered whether they would take me in without identity papers. (Seghers 10)

This quotation belongs to the part of the story when the protagonist goes to the Binnets’ house in Paris for the first time. The focus is set in the narration on his thoughts and his fears. With the verb “wonder”, which is used two times, the narrator is reflecting on his feelings. He wonders whether he will be accepted by the Binnets or not. The reflection

here occurs due to the fact that he does not hold any identification paper and additionally he is afraid that he will be judged by his national identity.

On the other hand, the narrator asserts his feeling of otherness when he states that “it really is hard to experience war as a stranger among a strange people” (Seghers 12). This statement is another reflection of his crisis of identity. If the fact of not giving us his name throws the narrator to a condition of namelessness, the fact that he does not feel part of the German nation and he is in a new environment makes him feel strange. The narrative strategy of not mentioning his real name makes this strangeness and identity crisis even more visible for the reader. As a result of his strangeness, the narrator has at this point the sense of not belonging to any group; he categorizes himself in the group of strangers. This feeling stems from the condition of exile. As previously mentioned, exiles break with their homeland and past and begin a process of integration in which they will or won’t succeed.

Apart from being a narrator who expresses not only actions but also feelings, he adopts a judging position too. When the protagonist goes to the Mexican Consulate to finally adopt Weidel’s identity, he is required to answer a questionnaire about his life and intentions. Nevertheless, the narrator finds these questions as an empty issue:

I’m sure they[the Mexican Consulate authorities]’d never had a questionnaire so blank and empty on which they tried to capture a life that had already escaped this world and where there was no danger of getting tripped up by contradictions. All the details were in order. What did it matter that the entire thing wasn’t true? (Seghers 182)

The narrator here is judging an action with the introductory “I’m sure...” (Seghers 182). He is clearly remarking that an identification document is not able to reflect one’s real identity. As mentioned in the previous chapter individual identity is created by all memories, experiences, relationships and actions that take place in our lives. A single document or questionnaire cannot reflect all this. Therefore, at this point, the narrator’s individual identity and how he is labeled are contradictory to each other.

Summarizing, it could be said that the reader conforms a determinate image of the narrator as the voice of exile. By not mentioning his real name at any point in the story, he is remarking not only his crisis of identity but also the life of a persecuted man who cannot be discovered by French and German authorities. *Transit* deals with a narrator who is sick of hearing official versions of exiles lives and flights. He defines these



stories as rumors or, at least, as not very truthful versions. He decides to tell his story because he has the necessity to reveal the truth of the condition of exile. Furthermore, the narrator clarifies that identification documents are incapable of reflecting his individual and collective identity. Taking into account this last fact, it is obvious that the narrator's identity is problematic in the sense that he cannot reconcile both identities he represents: on the one hand, his true individual and collective identity and on the other hand how he is labeled and how he is identified because of being German in the context of exile in France during World War II. In the next subchapter I will analyze the main protagonist of the novel and then, I will return to the narrator's aspect in the last subchapter to see if he finally manages to find his place in the world (individual identity).

#### 4.3 The protagonist: from a nameless status to Seidler/Weidel

In order to analyze the identity crisis on the character's level I will focus on three different phases: Firstly, I will focus on the identity of a persecuted man in Germany, who has been a camp prisoner in Germany and in France. Then we will see how he obtains the identification documents of Seidler and finally the ones of Weidel.

In the beginning of the novel we find a protagonist who is anonymous. However, the reader knows that he has escaped from a French work camp: "Toward the end of that winter I was put into a French work camp near Rouen" (Seghers 5). Likewise, we are informed that he also had been in a German concentration camp. The protagonist makes it clear that he does not belong to any political group but he does not support Nazism. Besides, the truth is that regardless the reasons for his internment in several camps, he is in the same situation as other exiles are: under Nazi persecution. Hence, he is socially categorized in the group of exiles and Germans.

In line with this social identity, we are informed about his fear of being judged by his national identity. When he is in Paris, he thinks about going to the Binnets, who are the only people he knows since he had a relationship with Yvone Binnet in the past. Before going to their house, he transmits the fear regarding how the Binnets will embrace him:

All this trouble, all this misfortune that had befallen another people had been caused by *my* people. For it was obvious that they talked like me and whistled the same tunes. As I was walking to Clichy where my old friends the Binnets lived, I wondered whether the Binnets would be sensible enough

to understand that, even though I was one of these people, I was still myself. I wondered whether they would take me in without identity papers. (Seghers 10)

Here, we discover that his roots are inevitably linked to the German nation. The controversy in terms of national identity is visible when he uses italics to refer to “*my people*” (Seghers 10). He is admitting that he is German but at the same time he is distancing himself from them. Somehow he is rejecting the social definition he is given. Hence, we see how the protagonist begins to reconsider the cultural notions that are part of national identity. In addition, since individual identity is related to the collective one, we see that the narrator cannot find himself in the world. He is not able to feel the sense of belonging to the German group. Previously, I have stated that individual identity implies a feeling of likeness and oneness. In this case, the narrator clearly differentiates himself from the Nazi Germans (national identity) but does not find any similarity with the people surrounding him. Hence, his own individual identity is in crisis. The main struggle presented here is “the tension between who the narrator feels himself to be and how he may be seen from the outside” (Abel 168). In other words, we can see the gap between individual identity and the label applied by other people.

It is important to remember that the protagonist has no identification document at this point of the story: “When I escaped from the camp, I’d left all my papers behind the camp, in the commandant’s barrack” (Seghers 32). However, thanks to his former girlfriend Yvone, he obtains the documents of a man called Seidler. It is remarkable that at this moment in the story, the protagonist is looking for these documents, he wants to obtain them. Therefore, while the protagonist is in Paris and since the only people he knows are the Binnetts, he goes to them. It is at this point when our protagonist shifts from an anonymous man to a man called Seidler:

He[Yvone’s husband] came home at midnight with a little piece of yellow paper. It was a refugee certificate that a man had probably given back when he got a different, better set of documents. Seidler was the name of the man whose second-best-certificate ended up being a better one for me. [...] Since now, with my new papers, I was quite a proper refugee (Seghers 33)

Now, the protagonist has a name. Nevertheless, it can be appreciated how the only issue of importance is obtaining the papers. However, these papers “are viewed as separate from the individual” (Abel 175). In other words, the way in which he is identified administratively (identification) is not entirely in line with his individual identity.

On the contrary, there are some aspects of Seidler's individual identity that are reflected in the protagonist's individual identity. Seidler is also a refugee who has been persecuted by the Nazi regime. Since he had obtained better identification documents, the ones of Seidler are now in the hands of the nameless protagonist. But above all, they both are victims of National Socialism. Therefore, it could be said that they both belong to the same group: Nazi persecuted people. So, at least they share this aspect of collective identity.

Even though the protagonist knows that the official document is nothing more than a formal process, he has the feeling that he is losing something that he is not able to name:

I had lost something, lost it so completely that I didn't quite know what it was, I'd lost it so utterly in all that confusion that gradually I didn't even miss it very much anymore. But one of those faces from the past, I was certain, would remind me of what I was. (Seghers 34)

I would venture to say that what he has lost is somehow his identity or at least part of it. "What the protagonist is losing is the connection to his past" (Abel 176). I have explained that individual identity is created in contact to the collective one. That is, we build up our identity by being in contact with other people, by a common culture including values and history and by categorizing ourselves in certain collective groups. The protagonist has broken with his homeland and is far from the "known". Therefore, defining his position in the world at this moment is complicated since he is thrown to a new environment. As stated before, the Binnets are the only ones who are familiar to the protagonist and he finds shelter in them. However, when the Nazi troops invade Paris the protagonist is forced to separate himself from them. The fact that he is losing something may stem from his vision of the Binnets as his family. He asserts that he:

[...] felt attached to the Binnet family much like a child who has lost his own mother and hangs on to the skirts of another woman who, although she can never be his mother, still shows him some affection and kindness. (Seghers34)

The Binnets are the emotional connection to the protagonist's past and home (Abel 175). I think that he is somehow replacing his sense of home with them. If he maintains the link with the Binnets, he will know who he is in reality and he will be able to maintain his individual and collective identity. He is in a new world where defining his place is difficult. The Binnets are the ones who have accepted him since the very

beginning, so they are the ones that recognize him and stay with him for what he is and not for how he is labelled. He is comparing the Binnet family with the fact of having a mother, a family, an anchor. The protagonist sees himself similar to the Binnets, he finds the sense of *likeness* in them.

The mentioned emotional connection to the protagonist's past and home originates through language as well. When, after having looked for the man called Weidel at a Paris hotel, in order to deliver him some documents and letters, and having found out that he has committed suicide, the protagonist has Weidel's letters in his hands, he decides to read them and a connection with his past occurs:

I also felt *this* was my own language, my mother tongue, and it flowed into me like milk into a baby. It didn't rasp and grate like the language that came from the throats of the Nazis, their murderous commands and objectionable insistence on obedience, their disgusting boasts. *This* was serious, calm and still. I felt as if I were alone again with my own family. I came across words my mother used to soothe me when I was angry and horrible words she had used to admonish me when I lied or been in a fight. (Seghers 21)

In this quotation the narration is passionate and emotion transcends action. The vocabulary used is touching: mother, family, serious, soothe, calm etc. All these words evoke a nostalgic sensation, he returns to his past. The protagonist refers to the German language as something that "flowed into me like milk to baby" (Seghers 21). It seems that the protagonist has reached, at least for some time, a sensation of serenity in the middle of the chaos. Besides, the figure of the mother may represent home, shelter and, ironically refugee.

With Seidler's identification documents and with the Nazi invasion of Paris, the protagonist moves to Marseille where Georg Binnet, Yvonne Binnet's cousin, resides. Here the protagonist discovers the nightmare of bureaucracy. If I have said that obtaining Seidler's identification was a conscious decision, we will see that obtaining those of Weidel is unexpected for the protagonist, it comes from authorities. This change in his identification runs parallel to a change of the protagonist's state of mind referring to space; that is, there is a change in the protagonist's thoughts about staying in or leaving France.

At the beginning, he seems to be sure about his future: he will stay in France. While all other exiles are trying to get the transit and exit visas required to abandon France, the

protagonist hopes to find his place in Marseille, he wants to be part of their community. Additionally, he wants to deliver Weidel's belongings to the Mexican Consulate and this way they will give all the items to Weidel's widow. However, in the Mexican Consulate the official thinks that Seidler's pen name as a writer is Weidel and gives him instructions to get all the necessary permits in order to leave.

At this moment, the protagonist's situation changes again. From this moment on, the protagonist has the power to obtain the necessary permits that will allow him to stay or to leave. He refers to this situation as "something that might get me into trouble or even could, no would destroy my life" (Seghers49). Therefore, obtaining Weidel's identification is seen as something related to danger, to a destroyed future. I venture to say that the reason for this danger is linked to the fact that Weidel's identity reflects even a more unknown world. Weidel was a prestigious writer with a great reputation among exiles and had written several reports about the Spanish Civil War. So, using Weidel's identification can become problematic for the protagonist.

Nevertheless, the protagonist finally takes officially Weidel's identification papers when he goes to the Mexican Consulate under the identification of Seidler and he is exposed to a questionnaire in order to verify that he completes all the requirements to get the visa:

She [the Consulate employee] carefully typed out my answers, all the facts of my past, my goal in life. The web of questions was so dense, so cleverly thought out, so unavoidable, that no detail of my life could have escaped the consul, if only it had been *my* life. (Seghers 182)

This quotation undoubtedly is one of the most important passages in order to understand the link between identity and identification. The protagonist claims that the official is typing everything but he calls the questionnaire empty. What the official is writing is a lie, so definitely bureaucracy is unable of reflecting one's identity (Abel 184). This excerpt demonstrates that the protagonist cannot reconcile his individual identity (represented by his real biography) with the biography he writes down on the questionnaire (identification as Weidel). At this moment, the protagonist becomes officially Weidel and his identification as Seidler ends.

The conclusion to be drawn in this subchapter is that the protagonist also goes through an identity crisis. He receives different identification documents that are not able to

portray his individual identity. His beliefs, memories, actions etc. do not correspond to how he is labelled. When he is with the Binnets he feels he belongs to somewhere, he feels secure and he knows they recognize him as he is (individual identity).

#### 4.4 Final reconciliation with identity

To finish with the analysis of the narrator's and protagonist's identity it is important to mention that in the last part of the novel, the character's and narrator's level join together. Although the protagonist is tempted to abandon France in order to be with Marie, Weidel's widow, he finally decides to stay there and to renounce to Weidel's documents. I attempt to say that I see his permanence in France as a final confirmation of his individual and collective identity.

This reconciliation is given through the Binnets. We have seen in the first part of this analysis that the Binnet family is the one who sees the protagonist's individual identity. They do not judge him because of his national identity or because of his being labelled as Seidler. When the protagonist is in Marseille he establishes a strong relationship with Georg Binnet and his family. Once again he finds in this family shelter and security and in this last part, the son of Georg Binnet's girlfriend plays a crucial role. Although the protagonist has paid a ship passage in order to flee France, he decides to remain there. Thereupon, he goes to the Binnet's and when the Binnet's child sees that he hasn't left him, he begins crying:

When he [the Binnet boy] heard my [protagonist] voice he turned around and stared at me wide-eyed. Suddenly he came over and threw himself on me. He was crying, unable to stop. I stroked his head. I was touched, didn't know what to make of his tears.

Claudine said: "He thought you'd left." [...]

"How can you think such a thing? Didn't I promise I'd stay?"(Seghers 248)

It is at this moment when the boy of the Binnets' reminds him of his individual identity. Through the promise the protagonist had done to the boy, he had a strong reason to stay. The reason was not the boy but the compromise done with what the boy represents. The Binnet boy represents a new generation and through the promise made to the child the protagonist is taking a commitment with the Binnets and with France. While leaving may signify continuing with Weidel's identification, staying means continuing to be himself and constructing a new life in his new land.

In fact, the protagonist writes a letter in which he explains that Weidel has decided to return all his documents. Then, he asks the Binnet boy to deliver it in the consulate. It could be said that with the gesture of returning all the permits and metaphorically ‘burying’ Weidel forever, the protagonist’s individual identity buoys up again. Therefore, at this point both the protagonist and the narrator come to the initial state of namelessness.

Nevertheless, this condition will not last much since he manages to continue under identification documents. However, it is not specified if he continues as Seidler or obtains a new identification. At this moment of the story, the protagonist has decided to stay in France and has moved to a small village next to Marseille where Marcel, a member of the Binnetts, lives. He has found a job, a family and documents in order. Even if his documents do not reflect his individual identity, he claims that the mayor of the village “assumed I was a distant relative of the Binnetts” (Seghers 250). Therefore, for the first time in the whole story he is identified as a member of the family. The way he feels as an individual and how he is categorized collectively and socially by other people reconcile.

In fact, even George Binnet tells the protagonist that he had made the best decision: “It’s right you should stay. What are you going to do over there? You belong here with us”(Seghers 249). Until now, we have observed how the protagonist and the narrator feels attached to the Binnetts. Nevertheless, now we see that this attachment is reciprocal. There is a unification concerning the narrator’s collective and social identity. He belongs to the Binnetts and, hence, he has found a family that reflects all the values, behaviours and beliefs of his individual identity (*likeness*).

Finally, when the life of the story reaches the present of the narrator, the protagonist and narrator finds his place. What is more, he recovers the sense of belonging to a group:

If the Nazis overrun this part of France too, then maybe they’ll let me do forced labor together with the sons of the family, or deport us somewhere. Whatever happens to them will happen to me as well. In any case, there’s no way the Nazis would ever recognize me as a countryman of theirs. I intend to share the good and the bad with my new friends here[...].I feel I know this country, its work, its people, its hills and mountains, its peaches and its grapes too well. If you bleed to death on familiar soil, something of you will continue to grow like the sprouts that come up after bushes and trees have been cut down. (Seghers 251)

This quotation is the most transparent evidence of his individual and collective identities. I have mentioned in the previous chapter that exiles set free from their original homeland and try to establish a connection with the new territory. In these lines it is perceptible that the narrator feels part of the French community. He includes himself in their group when he says that what happens to them will also happen to him. As a result, he has taken on a commitment with France and French citizens. He is identifying himself in the social group of French and reaffirming his belonging to the collective group of the antifascist. Additionally, there is a great transition regarding his national identity. In the beginning of the novel he refers to Nazis as *my* people making clear that somehow national identity is inescapable. However, now he claims not to be a countryman of theirs. So, if in the beginning we have seen how the protagonist was afraid of being judged by his national identity, now he is not afraid of dying or getting captured by Nazis because finally he has found a new group to which he belongs. Besides, we see how the narrator is disgusted with Nazis and how he stresses the good qualities of his new friends there. He definitely feels protected and secure as he used to feel with his own family. Additionally, the vocabulary used in the quotation is related to nature: sprouts, bushes, trees etc. These words may reflect his new roots. I would not say that he feels now French, because he uses the verb “know”, referring rather to the intellect, when referring to France. However, I do believe that he sees France as a natural place. He has reterritorialised his identity by establishing connections and assuming responsibilities with France.

## **5. Conclusion**

The period of National Socialism was characterized by being an oppressive regime that not only destroyed lands but also ruined whole lives. *Transit* is a pure reflection of it. All the characters in the novel see Marseille as a transitory place; their sole aspiration is to flee France in order to begin a new life on the other side of the ocean. Nevertheless, as we have observed, the quest for starting from scratch is not a smooth process in exile. All the bureaucratic requirements and governmental measures limit as much as possible the exiles' desires of going elsewhere. However, as it has been explained, the protagonist is not an ordinary man in exile since he does not take for granted that the only possibility is to leave France.



The condition of exile opens a controversial debate about and reflection on identity. The crisis of identity comes when the exile realizes that identity and identification need to be different if they are to survive in this precise context of France. So, this conflict between identity and identification is a dissociation the exile is confronted to every day. Through the analysis of the narrator and protagonist, it has been proved that exile is represented in *Transit* as an impressive intensification of tension between exiles' authentic identities and bureaucratic identification. It has been demonstrated that under the specific conditions of exile in *Transit*, it is impossible to reconcile individual's individual and collective identity and identification.

Individual identity aims at defining our place in the world (Boveland 12) and it is constituted by our experiences, characteristics, roles, behaviours and statuses. In addition, as Wagensberg asserts, we need to feel unique in respect to other people, but at the same time individual identity is created through collective identity (“La identidad min. 3:40-4:11”). When exiles find themselves in a new land, they leave behind those collective groups and people that construct and have an influence on their individual identity. As a result, they have serious problems to understand their position in the world. We have seen how the protagonist in *Transit* categorizes himself in the group of strangers and that he constantly tries to maintain the feeling of *likeness* with the Binnets.

Through this feeling of *likeness* with the Binnets, the protagonist finds a group that offers him the feeling of belonging. Moreover, it is not that he only is affirming his membership but he also is taking on the emotional weight of his membership. The Binnets represent his new family, so the emotional connection toward them is solid and firm. Furthermore, as Tajfel states, individuals have a personal vision with respect to the relation between themselves and the world, and their membership in different social groups affects this vision (Tajfel qtd. in Owens 225). Hence, it could be said that the protagonist's membership in the Binnet family affects his individual identity since he decides to remain in France and renounce to a new life over the ocean, because he feels part of them.

Although the protagonist feels that he is part of the French community, it cannot be claimed that he feels French. National identity is the representation of characteristics that create a cultural link between people and their land (McClennen 26). Even if at the beginning it seems that this link was inescapable for the protagonist, we have seen that

as Zeus states, it is under a situation of questioning and threat, that the connections between people and their land become controversial and hence, their identities are reterritorialised (12). Moreover, it has been shown that the protagonist takes on a commitment with France. This last aspect is important since responsibilities and duties constitute national identity (Smith 14). Therefore, the protagonist is engaging with the French society.

As a result, it must be noted that it is possible to find a new natural place in exile. As the protagonist and narrator has done in *Transit*, exiles have the option to rediscover their vision of the world. Although moving to another land implies separating from all the social, collective and cultural groups established in one's homeland, there is an option to integrate in the new land. In fact, exiles might reconsider all the notions that are implied in their own identities and could recover the sense of belonging to a group. Indeed, the protagonist and narrator of *Transit* achieves the goal of reconciling his individual identity with the collective and social one. He finds similarities with the Binnets and he takes responsibilities with the French nation. Thus, he manages to create a unification of all the aspects of his identity and his last identification. This unification is also seen by the individuals surrounding him, so he finally is externally identified as part of the Binnets and France.

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