



Section
IV

TRANSIT

"How dreary it can get in the time between two firestorms on this trembling earth!"⁶⁶

GENESIS OF THE NOVEL AND BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Anna Seghers fled Paris shortly after the Nazi occupation, in June 1940. Unlike her protagonist in *Transit*, she was accompanied by her two children, Peter and Ruth, on this trip. But *like* her unnamed narrator, she managed successfully to cross from occupied France into the unoccupied, "free" zone in September 1940. Compared to the narrator of *Transit*, Seghers's situation was even more dire and potentially perilous, not only because she was in charge of two children during her flight, but also because she had to secure the release of her husband from the French internment camp Le Vernet. (He was a well-known Communist and therefore on the wanted list in Germany and, after the Nazi occupation of France, in immediate danger of deportation.)

Residing for a time in a town near Le Vernet, Seghers worked tirelessly to fulfill the formal requirements to free her husband from the camp, while at the same time pursuing all the required visas that would enable the whole family to emigrate by boat from Marseille to Mexico.⁶⁷ The Seghers family had quite easily obtained an entry visa to Mexico since Mexico was ruled by a leftist government under Lázaro Cárdenas at the time and provided a welcome to such Socialist and Communist refugees as Seghers and Leon Trotsky. But, in addition to the entry visa for the emigrant's country of destination, there was a thicket of related permits, visas, and authorizations that needed to be obtained in the right order to ensure their simultaneous validity.

In contradistinction to her narrator in *Transit*, Segh-



Refugees aboard the *Capitaine Paul Lemerle*, departing from Marseille to Martinique. This was the ship Seghers and her family took when fleeing from France, and it is also mentioned in *Transit*.

ers did eventually succeed in departing from Marseille en route to Mexico, via Martinique (a French overseas territory) and Ellis Island in the USA. The whole family sailed out of Marseille on the transport ship *Capitaine Paul Lemerle* (a ship also mentioned in *Transit*) on March 24, 1941.⁶⁸ From her arrival in the unoccupied zone, it took Seghers half a year to assemble all the necessary documents and to book passages on the steamer before they could escape from France.

The Seghers family's troubles were not over after the departure of their ship from Marseille. The whole family was put into detention in Martinique, and they were again detained on New York's Ellis Island for health reasons. They finally arrived in Veracruz, Mexico, on June 30, 1940, more than two months after sailing from Marseille. The aura of urgency and authenticity in *Transit* is related to the fact that Seghers personally underwent the struggles with visas, bureaucratic obstacles, municipal regulations, and internment camp policies that her protagonist also deals with in *Transit*. And since she started