CHAPTER 8

Salka Viertel’s Transnational Hollywood Network

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Abstract

During the 1930s and 1940s, Salka Viertel was one of the most successful hostesses in Hollywood. Hollywood insiders, European émigrés, and, with Hitler's rise in Europe, German and Austrian refugees gathered at her house for artistic and intellectual entertainment. Considering these regular gatherings as an egocentric network, this contribution examines how Viertel utilized her focal position within this network to mediate between the exiles and her American friends and acquaintances. She provided the newcomers from Europe with useful connections leading to employment, advice how to negotiate the new environment, practical assistance and emotional support. Moreover, she used her connections as a venue for antifascist political activism. Salka Viertel's network proved essential for the integration of German exiles into the film industry and the Hollywood community.

After 1940, when the Nazi-regime's war of expansion made Europe increasingly unsafe for German refugees, Los Angeles emerged as a major enclave of German exile. While this city was infinitely less attractive than other exile destinations, for example New York or Chicago, and had less to offer in terms of cultural infrastructure, its climate and the promise of employment opportunities by its film industry attracted large numbers of exiles to this part of the United States. In the words of Gottfried Reinhardt, whose father Max Reinhardt was among these exiles:

[...] man zog es vor, das unentrinnbare Los bewuβt oder unbewuβt, gemeinsam durchzustehen, und zwar an einem Raum, wo der Film sogar für bisher Nichtfilmschaffende gewisse – reale oder eingebildete – Verdienstmöglichkeiten bot, wo man nicht zu heizen und keinen Wintermantel brauchte und wo man wählte, den Eingeborenen (die in der Mehrzahl ebenfalls Zugereiste waren) überlegen zu sein.¹

Reinhardt alludes to a third reason why exiles flocked to Los Angeles – the promise of a community that would help in enduring the inevitable fate of exile. Moreover, the kernel of such a community already existed in Hollywood since as early as the 1920s, as a number of European directors, writers, musicians and actors had moved there to try their luck in the film studios. The newly arrived exiles could count on the assistance of former friends and colleagues to ease their integration into the new and, for many, alien environment.

One of the most effective resources was Salka Viertel, who as a German speaking émigré and successful screenwriter was able to mediate between the exiles and their host country. Her house at 165 Mabery Road in Santa Monica, which since the 1930s was a favored gathering place for Hollywood insiders and European émigrés, became also a central destination for German exiles. Indeed, Viertel’s name is prominent in every notable study on Hollywood’s German exile community, not because of her success as a screenwriter for some of Greta Garbo’s best known films, but because of her legendary reputation as hostess. Accounts of the intellectual and artistic atmosphere at social gatherings have invited comparisons with the European salon tradition and have earned Salka Viertel the title of “greatest salonière of modern times.”

Viertel’s reputation as a charismatic hostess whose soirees promoted lively conversations on art, music, literature, and politics, indeed, suggests similarities with the salon tradition. However, highbrow exchange was not the only thing carried on at these events. Beginning with the arrival of refugees from Nazi Germany in 1933, the get-togethers at Viertel’s house proved a valuable network. They facilitated cultural exchange between the exiles and members of their host country and presented newcomers with useful contacts and helpful information. They also became a rallying point for antifascist activism.

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2 Salka Viertel had arrived in Hollywood in 1929 with her husband Berthold Viertel, whom Fox had offered a three-year contract to work with the legendary director Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau.

3 Salka Viertel is credited with the screen plays for the films Queen Christina (1933), The Painted Veil (1934), Anna Karenina (1935), Conquest (1937), and the comedy The Two Faced Woman (1941), all starring Greta Garbo.
