The Austrian-born exile writer and translator Erich Fried had, by the time of his death in November 1988, become one of the leading modern German poets with numerous publications to his credit including volumes of poetry and prose, plays, a novel and many translations from English literature. The development of Fried, from an impoverished refugee living in London in 1945 to a major representative of modern German literature took place largely as a result of his employment with the BBC German Service. The following article examines Fried’s activities at Bush House during this important stage in his career.

When faced with the decision of whether to return to his native country after 1945 the Austrian exile writer Erich Fried chose for psychological and practical reasons to remain in Great Britain. Additionally, Fried attributed his decision to political considerations, for he had recently distanced himself from the Communist-led organizations in London and his feelings were ambivalent: ‘Nach und nach störten mich damals bei den Österreicherem, zu denen ich dort die engsten Bindungen hatte, einige Symptome der Stalin-Ära so sehr, daß ich nicht zurückkommen wollte, um mit ihnen zu arbeiten. Ich hatte aber auch keine Lust, zurückzukommen, um gegen sie zu arbeiten.’

Fried was nevertheless determined to reach the audience of his mother tongue and his attempts to do so in the post-war period reflect the startlingly tenacious will to become a poet which had accompanied him since his first days in exile in Britain. He strove to further his career as a writer by means of his translations and original contributions for the British re-education journals Blick in die Welt and Neue Auslese. Fried also vigorously sought contacts within publishing circles in Europe, aided by the poet Elisabeth Langgässer who recommended Fried to Suhrkamp and Rowohlt – unsuccessfully. She had greater success in convincing the Claassen Verlag of Fried’s merits, but despite a lengthy correspondence with Claassen, during
which Fried regularly made suggestions for German translations from English as well as for publications of his own work, no publications came about.

In her evaluation of letters recently found in Fried’s literary estate Beate Hareter notes: ‘Die literarische Korrespondenz nach Kriegsende spiegelt in erster Linie Frieds andauernde Suche nach geeigneten Publikationsmöglichkeiten [...] wider.’ Hareter’s assessment confirms the picture of Fried conveyed by the correspondence between Fried and both Langgässer and Eugen Claassen. Fried’s efforts, one may conclude, were directed at a release from the series of dull manual jobs in which he was still engaged. In 1945 he was employed ‘in einer Batteriefabrik, schmutzig, eintönig und deprimierend’, but was searching desperately for ‘eine Stellung als Übersetzer, Monitor (eventuell bei einer Zeitung), Kriegsgefangeneninterviewer (schön wär’s!) oder sowas’. Fried’s desire to publish in the German-speaking countries and his wish to remain in London were ultimately reconciled only as a result of his activities with the BBC German Service.

The point at which Fried’s work for the BBC commenced still remains to be identified with any absolute certainty. A recent publication which draws on Fried’s copious literary estate highlights a diary entry of his for 20 November 1941 which reads ‘2½ Broadcasts gesendet’. The mystifying reference by Fried to ‘half’ a broadcast might be taken to indicate that he either cooperated with another writer on the production or translation of a text or that he was one of two speakers reading the German-language text. However, this terse diary entry provides neither an indication of the nature of these broadcasts nor their dates, nor, indeed, is any mention made of the BBC. Given the smoothly functioning lines of communication between Moscow and the Communist-led exile organizations in London, it is equally conceivable that the work was broadcast in the Soviet Union. In a footnote to the extract from Fried’s diary, Jörg Thunecke makes the slightly bold assertion that ‘diese Eintragung ein eindeutiger Hinweis darauf [ist], daß Fried spätestens ab 1941 (zumindest gelegentlich) für die deutschsprachigen Programme der BBC tätig war [...]’ and Thunecke concludes with the suggestion that a ‘Rhymed appeal to Austrians’ – found in the literary estate – might constitute a text written in 1941 for the BBC. In her provisional assessment of Fried’s wartime correspondence, Beate Hareter posits