

Five Best: Donna Rifkind on Hitler's Exiles in America

From the author, most recently, of *The Sun and Her Stars: Salka Viertel and Hitler's Exiles in the Golden Age of Hollywood*



Lion Feuchtwanger in 1951

PHOTO: BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES

By Donna Rifkind

Feb. 14, 2020 10:47 am ET

Prater Violet

by Christopher Isherwood (1945)

- ① “There are meetings which are like recognitions—this was one of them.” In this brief novel, Christopher Isherwood memorialized his first encounter with the exiled Viennese poet and director Berthold Viertel. “I knew that face,” Isherwood recalled. “It was the face of a political situation, an epoch. The face of central Europe.” Set in the London film community of the 1930s, then teeming with refugees, the book captures Viertel, here called Friedrich Bergmann, in all his mercurial splendor. He charms the young Isherwood into serving as the writer for his latest picture, then spends manic workdays recalling past theatrical

triumphs. When Bergmann fears for his family, trapped in Vienna under martial law, Isherwood dares to offer advice. Bergmann admonishes him: “Your home has never been threatened. You cannot know what it is like to be an exile, a perpetual stranger. . . . I am bitterly ashamed that I am here, in safety.” The friendship between the two men was close and enduring, and both became American citizens; at one point Isherwood occupied the garage apartment of Viertel’s Santa Monica home. “He was my father,” Isherwood wrote. “I was his son. And I loved him very much.”

The Oppermanns

by **Lion Feuchtwanger** (1933)

- ② The author, a German Jew, was in the United States on a speaking tour when Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933. Immediately, Lion Feuchtwanger’s Berlin villa was looted by Nazis, his bank accounts frozen, his large home library destroyed. He moved to France where, in April of that year, he began to write this novel about a fictional German-Jewish family’s subjugation under the Third Reich. What continues to astonish is how early the author predicted the ways in which the National Socialists’ initial curtailing of civil liberties would lead to genocide. The Oppermann family is forced to merge its Berlin furniture company with a non-Jewish competitor. One of their teenage sons is harassed at school by a teacher with nationalist sympathies. Slowly the Oppermanns perceive that the country in which they have thrived for generations is now a “poisoned, hypnotized Germany.” After several internments in the French brickworks camp of Les Milles, Feuchtwanger escaped from Hitler’s Europe in 1940, settled in Pacific Palisades, Calif., and set to work building another substantial home library.

Break of Time

by **Hertha Pauli** (1972)

- ③ In March 1938, after Hitler’s annexation of Austria, the aspiring actress Hertha Pauli left her hometown of Vienna for Paris. There begins her thrillerlike memoir, in which she describes a year spent trying to evade arrest and death at the hands of the Germans. By 1939 she was marooned in southern France, where she took to the roads on foot along with streams of other fugitives. She jumped into ditches as dive bombers roared overhead. Starving, her feet bloodied, she dodged French police as well as the Gestapo on her way to Marseille. There, a poker-faced relief worker from New York named Varian Fry used forged documents to help her and hundreds of others escape to America. Pauli dots her account with vivid portraits of many well-known fellow refugees, including the writers Walter

Mehring, Joseph Roth and Franz Werfel. In the 1950s, she visited the German Dada artist George Grosz, then living in Huntington, N.Y., who told her: “You’ve never arrived here. You are all still in Marseille.”

Exiled in Paradise

by **Anthony Heilbut** (1983)

- ④ The son of Jewish immigrants who fled Germany, Anthony Heilbut grew up in New York. “Exiled in Paradise,” a social history he wrote more than 35 years ago, is still the most immersive account of the German-speaking exiles who came to this country between 1933 and 1941 and of their outsize influence on the culture they found here. Mr. Heilbut begins by examining the irreverent sensibility that had been bred among artists in the cafes, cabarets and theaters of Weimar-era Berlin. By the time those artists reached America, exiles adrift and traumatized, they had been deprived of nearly everything except that irreverence. In the unfamiliar American hierarchies of the universities, film studios, social sciences, visual arts, law, medicine and music, some thrived; many foundered. Mr. Heilbut provides an absorbingly detailed chronicle of some of these immigrant lives—among them Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Thomas Mann, Billy Wilder and Cold War physicists. His dedication for the book reads: “For those who didn’t escape.”

Jigsaw: An Unsentimental Education

by **Sybille Bedford** (1989)

- ⑤ When Berlin-born Sybille Bedford found herself in Sanary-sur-Mer in 1926 at the age of 15, the French fishing village became for her “the nearest thing I’d ever known as home.” Between 1933 and 1940, the town also turned into a way station for scores of antifascist artists and intellectuals. But the leisurely sentences in Bedford’s autobiographical novel invoke a mostly peaceful reverie of elaborate Sunday lunches and town gatherings in a converted garage to view the silent films of Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd. At times the memories turn lurid, most indelibly when the author’s brilliant, beautiful mother slides horrifically into a morphine addiction. In 1940, with help from her neighbors Aldous and Maria Huxley, Bedford made her way to America. (One of her first activities upon her arrival was to drive Thomas Mann’s standard poodle from Princeton to Los Angeles.) For Bedford, who published this book at age 78, the steadfastness of her Sanary memories was a consolation amid the murderous upheavals of the 20th century. “How permanent they felt, these even summers, how reassuring—this will go on; we shall go on.”