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Chapter 10

The Literary Interventions of a Radical Writer Journalist

Maria Leitner (1892–1942)

Julian Preece

In a left-wing literary landscape which includes such towering figures as Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), and Anna Seghers (1900–83), the investigative journalist, travel writer, novelist, and author of short stories Maria Leitner (1892–1942) is a minor writer in the best tradition of that term. Yet she was a well-known figure in left-wing circles during the last years of the Weimar Republic and was promoted by the revolutionary press impresario, Willi Münzenberg, whose company controlled a number of newspapers where Leitner's literary work appeared.¹ After 1933, her reportage and fiction continued to appear in Paris-, Prague-, and Moscow-based exile outlets. Between May 1936 and August 1938 Anna Seghers intervened on Leitner's behalf with editors or potential benefactors, attesting to her courage in returning repeatedly to Nazi Germany to gather material.² Leitner developed a narrative aesthetic over the brief period of her publishing career which is both distinctive and related to the literary practice of her more-illustrious leftist contemporaries. Like Brecht, she wrote against genre conventions, turned bourgeois reader expectations on their heads by subverting accepted forms and filling popular formats with progressive content. As archival sources are scant, it is impossible to say for certain what she herself had read, but contemporary novelists, such as Franz Kafka, Vicki Baum, Irmgard Keun, and Isaak Babel appear to be among her models and antimodels.

¹ See Sean McMeekin, *The Red Millionaire: A Political Biography of Willi Münzenberg. Moscow's Secret Propaganda Tsar in the West* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

² See letters to Willi Bredel (12 May 1936 and 6 April 1937) and Hubertus Prinz zu Löwenstein (20 August 1938) in Anna Seghers, *Ich erwarte eure Briefe wie den Besuch der besten Freunde. Briefe 1924-1952*, eds. Christiane Zehl Romero and Almut Gieseke (Berlin: Aufbau, 2008), 29-30, 40-41, 49-50.

First, it may be useful to readers unfamiliar with Leitner's writings to sketch the main details that are known of her life and career.³ She was born in 1892 in the small town of Varaždin in a part of Austria-Hungary which was joined to Yugoslavia after World War I and today is in Croatia. Her parents were German-speaking Jews, her father a small businessman in the construction industry. The family moved to Budapest when Leitner was around four years old. Unable to attend university in her own country, she is believed to have studied in Switzerland before beginning work as a journalist in Budapest.⁴ She then worked as a foreign correspondent in Stockholm during World War One and was obliged to leave the newly independent Hungary for good in 1919 after taking part in the abortive revolution led by Bela Kun. Fleeing first to Vienna and then to Berlin, she was a member of the communist party from this point on. She worked as a translator into German, her first commission being a version of writings by the eighteenth-century satirical painter William Hogarth, which appeared when she was only twenty-two, and her second, which was published nine years later, a volume of Tibetan fairy tales. She also translated Jack London's futuristic dystopia *The Iron Heel* (1908) into Hungarian for an émigré newspaper in New York.⁵ In 1925 Leitner was sent to America for three years by the Ullstein publishing group to file reports on working life for *Uhu* magazine. Her

³ The best source of biographical information on Leitner remains Helga W. Schwarz, 'Maria Leitner', in *Internationalistinnen: Sechs Lebensbilder* (Berlin: Militärverlag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1989), 77–110.

⁴ In her more recent biographical essay, Schwarz attests that Leitner studied art history in Vienna and Berlin. See 'Als Chronistin in stürmischer Zeit', in Julia Killet and Helga W. Schwarz (eds.), *Maria Leitner oder: Im Sturm der Zeit* (Berlin: Dietz, 2013), 9–43 (12).

⁵ See *William Hogarths Aufzeichnungen: Seine Abhandlung, Analyse der Schönheit ergänzt durch Briefe und autographische Erinnerungen*, translated and edited by M. Leitner (Berlin: Bard, 1914) and Maria Leitner, *Tibetanische Märchen* (Berlin: Juncker, 1923). The subject of the latter led to the surmise that Leitner had also studied Sanskrit. It is unclear, however, from the anonymous 'Nachwort' (218–21) to the second volume what her source texts were. As a certain 'Captain O'Connor' is named as the collector of the last three 'Volksmärchen' (220), it seems likely that she translated only from English. Schwarz gives the following information on the Hungarian translation: '*Jack London: Die eiserne Ferse*. (A vassarak.) Roman. Übertragung in das Ungarische von Maria Leitner. In *Uj Elöre*, New York Jg. 19 Nos. 4005–73, 7 September bis 14 November 1923', in Maria Leitner, *Elisabeth, ein Hitlermädchen: Erzählende Prosa, Reportagen und Berichte*, ed. Helga W. Schwarz (Berlin: Aufbau, 1985), 495.

column was headed ‘Unbekanntes aus Amerika’ (Unfamiliar Things from America) and provided the basis of her best-selling book, *Eine Frau reist durch die Welt* (A Woman Travels the World, 1932). She travelled not only through the United States, but in the Caribbean, and around the northern rim of South America, earning her passage with a series of menial jobs.⁶ After returning to Germany, she wrote fiction as well as journalism. Her first book was the novel about working conditions in a New York hotel, *Hotel Amerika* (1930). Between 1929 and 1937 she wrote three other short novels, a novel fragment, and three short stories, all of which appeared in newspapers or magazines. *Sandkorn im Sturm* (Grain of Sand in the Storm, 1929) and *Elisabeth, ein Hitlermädchen. Roman der deutschen Jugend* (Elisabeth, a Hitler Girl. A Novel about German Youth, 1937) were only republished in 1985.⁷ Readers had to wait another twenty-eight years for the inverted romantic fiction, *Mädchen mit drei Namen. Ein kleiner Berlinroman* (Girl with Three Names. A Berlin Popular Novel, 1932) from *Die Welt am Abend*, which finally appeared in a book in 2013.⁸ Four equally remarkable pieces of prose fiction remain available only in their original place of publication: these are the trio of dialectical parables from the short-lived feminist magazine, *Der Weg der Frau* (‘Das Seidenkleid’ [The Silk Dress], ‘Die Schwestern’ [The Sisters], and ‘Die Indianer von Costa Cuca’ [The Indians of Costa Cuca], 1931–2); and the anticolonial novel fragment, *Wehr Dich Akato! Ein Urwald-Roman* (Defend Yourself Akato! A Jungle Novel, 1932–3) from the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*, which was due to appear as a book before the Nazi takeover of Germany disrupted these plans.⁹ As far

⁶ Maria Leitner, *Hotel Amerika. Ein Reportageroman* (Berlin: Neuer Deutscher Verlag, 1930) and *Eine Frau reist durch die Welt* (Berlin: AGIS, 1932).

⁷ See *Elisabeth, ein Hitlermädchen*, 7–86 and 265–465.

⁸ *Mädchen mit drei Namen. Reportagen aus Deutschland und ein Berliner Roman 1928-1933* (Berlin: Aviva, 2013).

⁹ ‘Das Seidenkleid. Erzählung’, *Der Weg der Frau* 1/1 (1931), 7–9; ‘Die Schwestern (Erzählung)’, *Der Weg der Frau* 1/7 (1931), 9–10; ‘Die Indianer von Costa Cuca (Erzählung)’, *Der Weg der Frau* 2/6 (1932), 10–11; *Mädchen mit drei Namen. Ein kleiner Berlin Roman*, *Die Welt am Abend*, 10/161–78 (12

as I have been able to ascertain, nobody has commented on these five publications up to now, thus interpretations of them have not contributed to the numerous pen-portraits of Maria Leitner which have appeared in both German and English over the last three decades. Interest in her biography has been constant, however, and for obvious reasons. There is a tragic drama to her life and the broken progression of her writing career which is expressed nowhere more poignantly than in the sudden interruption of *Wehr Dich Akato!* on 26 February 1933 when the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* ceased to publish. Less than a month after the Nazi seizure of power, as Akato was defending his way of life against outside exploitation, the innovative radical weekly with its famous John Heartfield cover designs was still attempting to unmask the Nazis in their duplicity and barbarism. Then the lights went out. Leitner moved to Prague, then to Paris, returning undercover to Nazi Germany on a handful of occasions to research stories. In 1940, like Walter Benjamin, she failed to get out of France in time. As has recently been established, she died in the relative peace of a psychiatric hospital in Marseilles in March 1942.¹⁰

Leitner's literary writings, whether they appeared between the covers of a book or in the press, served the dual purpose of improving her readers' political judgement and informing them about the material conditions in which many of their fellow citizens lived, especially young working-class women. Leitner was a propagandist for women's rights as well as for a workers' revolution which would benefit both sexes, serving these causes with wit, humour, and a degree of literary sophistication which has gone largely unnoticed by critics. After 1933 her cause was

July to 1 August 1932). *Wehr Dich Akato! Ein Urwald-Roman*, *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* 11/51 to 12/10 (21 December 1932 to 26 February 1933). I am grateful to the librarians at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, in particular the Zeitungsabteilung for advice in consulting these sources.

¹⁰ Julia Killet, 'Maria Leitners Reportagen aus Nazi-Deutschland', in Hiltrud Heintzschel and Inge Hansen-Schaberg, eds., *Politik – Parteilarbeit – Pazifismus in der Emigration: Frauen handeln* (Munich: edition text und kritik, 2010), 209–27, esp. 222–3.

antifascism, but she continued above all to write for women about women.¹¹ To appreciate her prose today, like any other left-wing prose from the period which was written for the purpose of political agitation and education, we must accept the terms in which she wrote, much as anyone who today enjoys devotional poetry or sacral music from earlier centuries accepts the assumptions which underpinned the original production of those art forms.

Leitner's posthumous reception has so far been uneven. She is sometimes given honourable but brief mentions in literary histories, but is more likely to get omitted.¹² More than forty years after her death, Helga W. Schwarz edited a selection of fiction and journalism written mainly from exile which had hitherto been available only in its original format. Schwarz was from the German Democratic Republic (DDR), where, in contrast to the Federal Republic of Germany (BRD), Leitner's two books had been re-issued several times. Until 2013 none of Leitner's books was in print, however, and only *Eine Frau reist durch die Welt* had been republished since the collapse of state communism and the end of the DDR.¹³ In recent years, there have been a number of PhD theses and other items of literary criticism, which include discussion of some of her oeuvre. Of late, *Elisabeth, ein Hitlermädchen* has received the most

¹¹ In the November 1931 of *Der Weg der Frau*, *Hotel Amerika* is selected as 'book of the month'. The editor describes its author as 'eine mutige Frau, die trotzig und tapfer mit dem schweren Leben kämpft', continuing: 'Hart und nüchtern, ungeschminkt und unsentimental ist die Sprache Maria Leitners, ebenso hart und nüchtern wie das Leben der Angestellten im Hotel und so, wie man das Leben der Menschen im Hotel, der Gäste sehen muß: ohne Schminke! Allen Frauen möchte ich dieses Buch empfehlen.'

¹² Her name does not appear anywhere in Hans-Albert Walter, *Deutsche Exilliteratur* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1978–2003), 4 vols. In an otherwise thorough account of German writers exiled in France in the 1930s, she gets the single line: '5.4.1937 Autorenabend: Maria Leitner liest aus ihrem Reportageroman *Eine Frau reist durch die Welt* (SDS)', Albrecht Betz, *Exile und Engagement. Deutsche Schriftsteller im Frankreich der Dreissiger Jahre* (Munich: edition text & kritik, 1986), 305.

¹³ As *Reportagen aus Amerika. Eine Frauenreise durch die Welt der Arbeit in den 1920er Jahren*, ed. and with afterword by Gabriele Habinger (Vienna: Promedia, 1999). A kindle version of *Hotel Amerika* [sic] has been available since January 2012. See also *Hotel Amerika* and *Eine Frau reist durch die Welt*, both (Hamburg: Severus, 2013); 'Sandkorn im Sturm' is included in Killet and Schwarz (eds.), *Maria Leitner*, 50-71 as well as some reportage which first reappeared in Schwarz's volume *Elisabeth, ein Hitlermädchen*.

critical attention next to her undercover reports from Nazi Germany.¹⁴ Until recently, Leitner was certainly more researched than read; it remains to be seen whether the publication of four books of her work in 2013 (by three different publishers) changes this situation. In this chapter I wish to present a preliminary reassessment of her literary achievement as a writer journalist and to offer an explanation for her current posthumous status as a minor exhibit in the museum of twentieth-century German literature.

Leitner's journalism and the critical interest that it has inspired may be two reasons for the eclipse of her literary reputation. The problem is that the material collected in *Eine Frau reist durch die Welt* may not give the most accurate impression of her qualities as a writer.¹⁵ Much of it is rather flat and she fails to convey a clear sense of her own character or writing persona. It may be significant that Leitner plundered these reports as sources for the three short stories that she published in *Der Weg der Frau*. *Hotel Amerika* draws too on her experiences of working in New York's Hotel Pennsylvania, while *Wehr Dich Akato!* is set on the northern coast of South America, from where she had also first sent reports. Her turn to fiction suggests that, for all the aesthetic qualities of 'reportage' in the age of Egon Erwin Kisch, who contributed to some of the same newspapers as Leitner, it was, for her, a preliminary to literary work. The boundaries between the two genres are blurred in any case, especially since fiction published in left-wing newspapers can be counted as a form of journalism, as I will endeavour to show. Even her friend Anna Seghers is lukewarm in her recommendation to Willi Bredel of two 'brauchbare Reportagen' written after an undercover mission to Nazi Germany, saying that 'sie schreibt für

¹⁴ See Anja C. Schmidt-Ott, *Young Love – Negotiations of the Self and Society in Selected Novels of the 1930s* (Hans Fallada, Aloys Schenzinger, Maria Leitner, Irmgard Keun, Marie Luise Kaschnitz, Anna Gmeyner and Ödön von Horváth) (Oxford: Lang, 2002) and Eva-Maria Siegel, *Jugend, Frauen, Drittes Reich. Autorinnen im Exil 1933–1945* (Paffenweiler: Centaurus-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1993).

¹⁵ For an excellent account and more positive appraisal of this book, see Carol Poore, *The Bonds of Labor. German Journeys to the Working World 1890–1990* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 139–51.

meinen Begriff einmal gut, einmal schlecht'.¹⁶ A year later, on 6 April 1937, she again commends Leitner's bravery for returning to the Reich but concedes that there are better writers than her, though also some who are worse and who have received more support, and that if there are weaknesses in Leitner's style these can be addressed by editors.¹⁷ Each time, however, Seghers is referring to her journalism rather than her fiction, which she must know about but does not mention.

A more-telling factor counting against Leitner in the twenty-first century is the hangover from Cold War cultural politics, according to which her writing is viewed through her allegiance to communism. Yet her other sympathies could provide potentially more useful critical paradigms with which to re-assess her achievement, such as Jewish, colonial, or women's studies. Apart from *Wehr Dich Akato!*, all Leitner's fiction has young female central characters who face challenges which are unknown to their male contemporaries. She uses literary means to address women's issues such as abortion and prostitution (which she also treats as a journalist). She also explores Jewish identity and dissects antisemitic prejudice. In *Sandkorn im Sturm*, which is set during the Hungarian revolution in 1918-19, she depicts a raid on a Jewish household which could stand next to classic German accounts of war-time brutality by Grimmelshausen or Hebel, or by the Russian short-story writer Isaak Babel, who chronicled antisemitic and other violence during the Russo-Polish War of 1920-1.¹⁸ Leitner's peasant perpetrator in 'Sandkorn im Sturm', hitherto a supporter of the revolution, explains his actions after that revolution has been crushed:

¹⁶ 12 May 1936, Seghers, *Ich erwarte eure Briefe wie den Besuch der besten Freunde*, 29-30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

¹⁸ The German translation of Babel's *Red Cavalry* was published by the renowned left-wing publishing house Malik three years before *Sandkorn im Sturm* appeared: Isaak Babel, *Budjonnys Reiterarmee*, tr. Dmitrij Umanskij (Berlin: Malik, 1926).

Der Graf hat sein Schloß zurückbekommen, und sein Land gehört uns nicht mehr.
Aber wir dürfen jetzt zu den Juden. Wir können dort nehmen, was wir wollen.
Jetzt ist es erlaubt. Weil die Juden an allem Schuld sind, das haben uns viele
gesagt. Wenn man tun kann, was man will, du, das ist schön.¹⁹

For a Marxist such as Leitner, antisemitism is a policy utilised by those in power to deflect the majority population's attention from the real sources of their problems, in this case the restoration of the old social order. Leitner's insight into the Jewish victims' mental scarring is perhaps more psychologically acute. A middle-class Jewish woman arrives at the inn which is the locus of the narrative in *Sandkorn im Sturm* with her two teenage daughters dressed in sacks. They have been gotten drunk and abused by counter-revolutionary soldiers and their mother asks: 'Wohin soll ich sie schleppen?' and 'Was sollen wir anfangen mit diesen Erinnerungen?'²⁰ The real pain starts after the assault with the trauma of memory. In *Elisabeth, ein Hitlermädchen*, the heroine wishes that the doctor, who carried out the abortion demanded by her Nazi boyfriend, were Jewish so that she could understand more readily why she should hate him. When Erwin refuses to see her in public after she has run away from the 'Arbeitsdienstlager', Elisabeth tells him: 'Ach, du willst mich im geheimen lieben, als ware ich eine Jüdin'.²¹ She senses that 'Jewish' is synonymous with transgressor and outcast. Leitner's membership of a minority facing growing hostility in Europe surely gave her insight into the iniquities of racial segregation in the US (*Eine Frau reist durch die Welt*) and the colonial exploitation of native populations (*Wehr Dich Akato!*). In *Mädchen mit drei Namen* she introduces a young black woman with the very German name of Grete Meyer. Born in Germany to a black mother and a white father, but brought up on the edge of Berlin by her father and stepmother, she speaks only German and has

¹⁹ Leitner, *Elisabeth, ein Hitlermädchen*, 69.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 462.

never been abroad. Abandoned by her father in the big city (like her namesake in the forest in the Grimms' fairy tale), she earns money from men who want her to tell them about Africa. They assure her that she radiates a sense of primeval wildness. After she has seen a film about Africa, she is able to oblige them with tales about her imaginary homeland. Leitner's basic political point in each work is that racial identity is a cultural construct that serves the interests of the powerful.

Yet Leitner was championed in East Germany and other parts of the communist bloc only for her politics. East German editors and publishers had no difficulty presenting her as an orthodox communist. *Eine Frau reist durch die Welt* was used in the Soviet Union itself as a book to teach German. *Hotel Amerika* was republished in 1950, just one year after the DDR was founded; the last of four reprints of *Eine Frau reist durch die Welt* came out in 1988, the year before the Berlin Wall fell. A typical DDR print run of one of Leitner's books was 30,000–40,000. In a non-market economy this is not a sign of commercial popularity, but it is clear that readers and publishers alike held her in esteem throughout the forty years of the DDR's existence. Schwarz, who did more than any other critic or editor to make Leitner's writings better known, followed up her 1985 anthology of previously unpublished journalism and fiction with a biographical essay in the same year that the DDR imploded. Schwarz is painstaking in her unearthing of published references, interviewing surviving witnesses, and tracking down Leitner's disparate publications. Anyone interested in Leitner's work will be in her debt. But on the eve of the DDR's collapse, she depicts her subject as a communist heroine of the antifascist resistance in terms which did not do her subject credit after 1990.²²

²² All six women who are subjects of chapter-length biographies receive the following fulsome praise in Schwarz's introduction: 'Ihren Weg als Revolutionärinnen und Antifaschistinnen gingen sie aus tiefster innerer Überzeugung, aus freiem Entschluß ertrugen sie die daraus resultierenden Verfolgungen und Entbehrungen. Keine von ihnen war vom Schicksal vorherbestimmt, aber ihnen waren die Namen Marx

The contrast with the lack of attention accorded Leitner in West Germany could not be greater. Here not even historians of the women's movement appear to have been aware of her existence.²³ In contrast, other women writers from the Weimar period whose work was first suppressed by the Nazis and then forgotten in both postwar German states, such as Irmgard Keun or Marieluise Fleisser, were rediscovered in the late 1960s or 1970s by Western feminists. The problem with Leitner was that the West could not rediscover her because she was already championed in the East. Her lack of presence until recently in unified Germany was thus a continuation of the neglect she suffered for ideological reasons in the old Federal Republic.

A major reason is an enduring prejudice against literature which could be called 'didactic' or 'functional'. Leitner's writings merit both labels but the questions that I wish to pose are whether or not she was a good didactic writer, whether her functional literature was effective, and what literary means she used to achieve her ends. A recent critical assessment of *Hotel Amerika* as a 'Lehrstück und Handlungsanleitung zugleich' with characters who are 'reine Funktionsträger' is as damning as it is unfair.²⁴ It is nevertheless fairly typical of critical opinion of didactic novels. There is rather more, however, to *Hotel Amerika* than this, as both author and characters have some fun along the way. Leitner's keen understanding of contemporary and classical literature is also plain to see. Writers driven by ideology and motivated solely to get a message across are not usually given to irony or experimentation with narrative form, genre, and tradition, as Leitner invariably is.

While Babel's *Red Cavalry* is one point of comparison for *Sandkorn im Sturm*, it is the genre of 'Dorf und Schlossgeschichten' made popular in the nineteenth century by Habsburg

und Engels seit frühester Jugend ein Begriff und der proletarische Internationalismus eine Selbstverständlichkeit.' Schwarz (1989), *Internationalistinnen*, 7.

²³ She is briefly covered in Gisela Brinker-Gabler, ed., *Deutsche Literatur von Frauen: 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. 2 (Munich: Beck, 1988), 266–8.

²⁴ Cordula Seger, *Grand Hotel. Schauplatz der Literatur* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2005), 416.

writers such as Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach and Ferdinand von Saar which supplies her first novella with her most significant intertexts. As a critical modernist looking back ten years to the aftermath of war and revolutionary violence from the crisis year of 1929, Leitner inverts generic expectations and conventions. Her Jewish heroine Sara is an outsider. Orphaned at the age of eight, she tends geese instead of going to school before beginning work as a maid at the age of ten. She is sent to a post in the town when she reaches thirteen. Extremely pretty, her romance with a student whose room she cleans results not in unwanted pregnancy and social ostracism but in marriage. This gives Leitner the opportunity of allying a representative of the peasantry with a petty-bourgeois intellectual who is also a Marxist. The majority of the story takes place at a village inn owned by Heinrich's unenlightened parents when Heinrich himself has been away at the war for a number of years, their child Martin is already six, and the local castle is in the hands of a revolutionary committee, the count having fled. As in Kafka's *Das Schloss*, which Leitner could have known as it was first published in 1926, the count never appears in person, but the women villagers now use the castle for meetings, at which they discuss questions such as birth control. Yet Sara's lot has not improved – her parents-in-law continue to exploit her while the revolutionary order is under threat. It is then quashed by the sudden arrival of the cavalry. Sara is mentally scarred by her experiences. When the middle-class Jewish mother tells her how her daughters had been stripped half naked and attacked, she responds by laughing. She is the opposite of a sweet-tempered Cinderella. She has earlier recalled having sex with a travelling salesman, apparently against her will and certainly without any pleasure, which leads to her venting her frustration violently on her son. Like Babel, Leitner narrates these violent episodes dispassionately and without psychological explanations.

After Sara has heard the account of the violence done to the Jewish family by the two peasants, she responds by telling the simpleton Andrej, who is also psychologically damaged by war, to 'kill them', promising him sex and money in return. The reader may assume that she meant the two antisemitic peasants and that she is motivated by solidarity with her fellow Jews, but it turns out that she wants to emulate their persecutors by doing away with her own parents-in-law. The reader by this time knows what the twenty-four-year-old Sara has endured, through childhood, adolescence, and seven years of marriage, during most of which her husband has been absent and his parents have treated her as a skivvy. But her opportunism is still shocking. Unlike Babel, Leitner restores order and ethical direction at the end of *Sandkorn im Sturm* when Heinrich returns. He is the voice of revolutionary good sense and can explain the turmoil to the villagers through a simple dialectic which places the onus on them to take responsibility: 'Das Sterben einer alten Welt ist nicht leicht und die Geburt der neuen noch schwerer. Ihr möchtet gern danebenstehen und leben, so gut ihr könnt. Aber das gerade ist nicht möglich. Denn die alte Welt seid ihr selbst und auch die neue!'²⁵ The ending that Heinrich imposes is positively Brechtian, political rather than personal. In his presence Sara attempts to shield their son's eyes from the sight of the disfigured corpse of the leading revolutionary, but Heinrich insists that six-year-old Martin needs to know and that he must see.

In her second prose work and first novel, Leitner shifts her location from rural Central Europe to New York. *Hotel Amerika* is an antibourgeois romantic fiction which chronicles the disillusionment of its heroine Shirley O'Brien with an apparently wealthy suitor called Mr Fish. In terms of genre it could hardly be more different from *Sandkorn im Sturm*. Mr Fish turns out to be an extortionist who was abusing her trust to further his chances with the daughter of the truly wealthy Mr Strong. Leitner's Irish heroine is, like all the other characters, very much a literary

²⁵ Leitner, *Elisabeth, ein Hitlermädchen*, 84.

figure. She may be called after the eponymous heroine of Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), a social novel set during the British industrial revolution concerning the conditions of workers and the unequal relations between the sexes. Shirley's mother Celestina has an even-less-Irish-sounding name and is presumably called after the eponymous antiheroine of Fernando de Rojas's Spanish Renaissance classic, who is a brothel owner and midwife capable of terminating unwanted pregnancies and who also has a liberal attitude to sex and women's sexual needs. As a young working-class woman who finds the courage and the words to speak home truths to the hotel management, Leitner's Shirley is a sister in arms of another pioneering female character, Brecht and Weil's Pirate Jenny from the *Dreigroschenoper*, premiered the previous year. While the waitress Jenny dreams of violent revenge, the laundry worker Shirley acts on her impulses. The final words of the novel are Shirley's:

Und sie sieht noch einmal auf die hellerleuchteten, glitzernden, strahlenden
Wolkenkratzer, die so nahe scheinen.

Einmal wird das alles uns gehören, aber bis dahin müssen wir schwer kämpfen.

Was tut es? Ich bin ja jung und das ganze Leben steht noch vor mir.²⁶

Such sentences, while structurally all important, are by no means typical of the novel as a whole, in which suspense, irony, satire, and intrigue are all prominent.

Leitner's designation of *Hotel Amerika* as 'Ein Reportageroman' signals its rootedness in the everyday world of work, though the generic description was removed after the first edition, presumably because of Georg Lukacs' critique of 'documentary' literature.²⁷ Leitner's classification is also surely an answer to Vicki Baum's bestseller *Menschen im Hotel* published the previous year as 'Ein Kolportageroman mit Hintergründen'.²⁸ 'Kolportageromane' were

²⁶ *Hotel Amerika*, 257.

²⁷ See Siegel, *Jugend, Frauen, Drittes Reich*, 138.

²⁸ Vicki Baum, *Menschen im Hotel: Ein Kolportageroman mit Hintergründen* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1929).

cheap serial novels originally sold in instalments by door-to-door traders. Baum's novel is anything but, she was held up in the second issue of *Der Weg der Frau* (July 1931) as the sort of writer who told her readers how the world was not. The magazine's regular section 'Bücher die uns angehen' more or less declares Baum to be a class enemy:

Wer sich in eine bessere Welt nur hineinträumt, wird sie jedoch nie erringen, und auch die Frau muß einsehen, daß diese Welt erkämpft sein will, und daß ihre Gestaltung ganz anders aussieht, wie die Romanschilderungen der Hedwig Courths-Mahler und Vicky Baum es verheißen.

Leitner was thus writing against a particular strain of fiction, as it was understood at least by critics in the newspapers where she published, which was consumed so avidly by women readers.²⁹

Hotel Amerika shows similarities too with Kafka's first novel, originally published in 1927 under Max Brod's title *Amerika*. In that book's central chapter 'Im Hotel Occidental' Kafka's Karl Rossmann is dismissed as an elevator attendant when he reluctantly leaves his post in order to assist the Irish tramp Robinson who has reappeared drunk to harangue him for earlier abandoning him and his friend Delamarche. Kafka makes similar use of elevators to indicate the height of the hotel building and its technological modernity. Both hotels stand in some sort of allegorical relation to the 'Western'/'American' world of capitalism beyond their walls. Both novels moreover are set among immigrants and new arrivals to the United States. The characters announce their origins in one part of Europe or another. In *Hotel Amerika* they are concerned not to speak, dress, or in any way behave like immigrants. The second-generation Italian Salvatore Menelli flatters his new girlfriend Ingrid, who until recently had lived all her life in a small

²⁹ More sophisticated approaches to Baum's *Menschen im Hotel* are possible. See Jill Smith, 'Working Girls: White Collar Workers and Prostitutes in Late Weimar Fiction', *German Quarterly* 81/4 (2008), 449–70.

Swedish village, by telling her how pretty she looks in her new dress (which she has bought with the large tip given her by the professor after he groped her as she was perusing his photographs of naked women and they heard his wife approaching): ‘wie eine richtig hier geborene Amerikanerin’, he compliments her.³⁰ Leitner panders to her readers’ presumed preferences by making Shirley’s male love interest a ‘German’, giving him the typical name Fritz coupled with a half ‘speaking’ surname ‘Globig’ (*gläubig*) to coincide with his faith in the values of class solidarity.

For Leitner as for Kafka, institutions denote power, which is exercised over people stripped of their individuality.³¹ Hotel employees have numbers rather names. The bellboys, for example, wait somewhere in the bowels of the building to be summoned by a guest’s ring: ‘16 ist im Gedanken versunken. Er denkt daran, daß man nicht denken darf. Sie müssen alle immer in Bewegung sein, wie Flugzeuge, die nie in der Luft halten können, für die Stillstehen Absturz und Tod bedeutet’.³² Leitner politicises the premise of modernist alienation which underpinned mainstream hotel fiction of the era, in which ‘The guest’s situation in a hotel becomes the symbol of modern man’s existential estrangement from everything’.³³ Power is more diffuse than it was in the semi-feudal setting of *Sandkorn im Storm*. Mr. Strong employs detectives on the staff who in turn rely on informers, making him seemingly all knowing and all powerful. The backmailer Fish has little chance against such an apparatus.

³⁰ I cite from the second edition of the novel: Maria Leitner, *Hotel Amerika* (Dresden: Sachsenverlag, 1950), 228.

³¹ Ritchie Robertson, ‘Kafka, Goffman, and the Total Institution’, in Stanley Corngold and Ruth V. Gross, eds., *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2012), 136–50.

³² Leitner, *Hotel Amerika*, 140.

³³ Betthina Matthias, *The Hotel as Setting in Early Twentieth-Century German and Austrian Literature: Checking In to Tell a Story* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006), 7. Matthias misses Leitner, unfortunately, while Seger gives her short shrift on account of her politics, in *Grand Hotel*, 415–19.

The most extreme example in Leitner's fiction of an institution is the 'Arbeitsdienstlager' in *Elisabeth, ein Hitlermädchen*, which is modelled on a concentration camp. This Nazi 'Lager' is anticipated in the depictions of institutions in her fiction published prior to 1933, however. Lina in *Mädchen mit drei Namen* moves through a series of institutional settings, starting off in 'Das Heim für Hausangestellte', she spends time, either voluntarily or involuntarily, in the 'Pflegeamt' (twice), the 'Fürsorgeheim', the 'Arbeitshaus', and finally a 'Kloster', meanwhile working in a 'Tanzpalast' and in a bar called 'Paradies'. Each time she is allotted a role that has she not chosen and is required to live and work according to an imposed set of rules and procedures. There is an ironic symmetry between 'Paradies' and the convent because both insist that she take a new name, which practice gives the novel its title.

Mädchen mit drei Namen is about a young woman from a country town who learns about life in Depression-hit Berlin. Like Shirley, she falls finally into the arms of a young communist who explains the world to her. In particular he wants her to understand that the nuns wanted her to believe that her problems were her own fault and that she should feel guilty for her plight instead of blaming social forces and circumstances. The novel ends with an ecstatic dialogue between the two lovers and the heroine's almost religious transfiguration.

'Du sollst die Fehler in dir selbst suchen und nicht in der Welt, die dich umgibt, nicht in der Gesellschaft, die dich zu einem solchen Leben zwingt. Das ist der Zweck der Übung. Du sollst Buße tun, die Augen niederschlagen und die Welt um dich nicht sehen.'

'Ja, ja.'

'Denn, wenn du nicht in dir selbst die Fehler suchen wirst, sondern in der Welt, die dich umgibt, dann, so befürchten sie, wirst du erst einmal diese Welt verändern wollen. In dieser neuen Welt werden wir uns alles schon selbst verändern.'

‘Ja, ja, ja.’

‘Wollen wir zusammen den Weg suchen? Wollen wir zusammen kämpfen?’

Ja, ich war bereit.

Wunderbar nun wurde mir die Welt.³⁴

The ending is similar too in *Sandkorn im Sturm*, except that here Sara is rescued by her husband returning from the war rather than by a new lover. Each time Leitner subordinates her feminist to her Marxist message, perhaps assuming that her readers will want romantic happy endings. With their communist convictions, the men who appear almost as *dea ex machina* differ sharply from those portrayed in the bourgeois media. Leitner goes one step further in *Elisabeth, ein Hitlermädchen*, as the heroine leaves the dedicated Nazi and SA-member who had made her pregnant and resolves to resist the regime without finding another man to assist her. With its thematisation of the enforced sterilisation of women judged unsuitable to give birth in Nazi Germany, *Elisabeth, ein Hitlermädchen* is Leitner’s most radical novel from the point of view of women’s emancipation.³⁵

Over the summer of 1932 in which *Mädchen mit drei Namen* appeared in *Die Welt am Abend*, the same newspaper also serialised Eva Leidmann’s *Fehlritte eines bayrischen Mädchens* and the anonymous *Sie lassen sich scheiden. Der Kampf um Tisch und Bett*.³⁶ Both are voyeuristic entertainments which stand in some contrast to Leitner’s tale of misadventure and redemption. Leitner also had more serious models, or antimodels. The day before serialisation of *Mädchen mit drei Namen* began on 12 July 1932, *Die Welt am Abend* announced that it had been

³⁴ *Die Welt am Abend*, 1 August 1932.

³⁵ This is recognised in the critical literature as Leitner’s achievement: ‘Das Aufgreifen einer so komplexen Thematik wie die der im “Dritten Reich” in großer Zahl durchgeführten Zwangssterilisationen ist meines Wissens einmalig in der deutschsprachigen Literatur des Exils,’ Siegel, *Jugend, Frauen, Drittes Reich*, 93. Control of women’s fertility is a major issue of concern in *Der Weg der Frau*, however.

³⁶ Leidmann’s work was published as a book under the expanded title *Auch meine Mutter freute sich nicht. Fehlritte eines bayrischen Mädchens* (Leipzig: Zinnen, 1932).

written especially for them and contrasted its contents with the approach of novels on ostensibly similar subjects:

Morgen beginnt der neue Roman: *Mädchen mit drei Namen*.

Die unseren Lesern durch ihre Romane und Reportagen bekannte Schriftstellerin Maria Leitner hat für *Die Welt am Abend* einen Berliner Roman unter dem Titel *Mädchen mit drei Namen* geschrieben, mit dessen Veröffentlichung wir morgen beginnen.

Maria Leitner schildert in diesem Roman, der besonders die Frauen interessieren dürfte, die Erlebnisse eines jungen Mädchens, das aus der Provinz nach Berlin kommt, in die Fürsorge gerät, entflieht, neues Mißgeschick erfährt und zuletzt den Weg findet, der allein eine Rettung aus dem Wirrwarr verheißt.

Ein Frauenschicksal in dieser Zeit wird in Maria Leitners Roman erzählt – packend und spannend. Unter den zahlreichen Frauenromanen, die in letzter Zeit das Schicksal alleinstehender Frauen geschildert haben, nimmt der Roman Maria Leitners einen ersten Platz ein.³⁷

Among these ‘numerous novels about single women’, the newspaper must have counted Irmgard Keun’s bestselling *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* which had appeared just a few months earlier.

There are a number of parallels. Like Leitner’s Lina, Keun’s Doris moves from the provinces to Berlin to look for work, freedom, and adventure. Lina had an apprenticeship in a hat shop and was hoping to be taken on permanently but overheard her employer explain to a third party that she could not afford to keep her on. The eighteen-year-old Doris was a typist who did not know the rules of punctuation and lost her job when her employer misinterpreted her flirtatious strategy for covering up for her shortcomings and made physical advances which she rejected. Both young women have their minds filled with nonsense from the cinema. In an entry which has often been quoted, Doris confides to her diary: ‘ich will schreiben wie Film, denn so ist mein

³⁷ *Die Welt am Abend*, 11 July 1932.

Leben und wird noch mehr so sein', before she decides to decamp to Berlin.³⁸ Keun was a critical and feminist voice when compared with Baum, but, true to her *Neue Sachlichkeit* (liberal) ethos, *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* does not take sides. At the end Doris too has the opportunity to set up house with a politically committed working-class young man, but she does not take it. *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* apparently played the same role for Leitner's second novel that Baum's *Menschen im Hotel* played for her first. This critical interaction with contemporary fiction must also expand our understanding of her 'didactic' range.

Another reason that Leitner has not yet received due recognition is surely the lingering unease about fiction which is only published in newspapers. Not only is it inaccessible today to any but the most dedicated researchers, there is a suspicion that publication in an ephemeral venue is a sign of lack of enduring quality. Newspaper historians in turn easily overlook such features as the serial novel, let alone stand-alone poetry or short fiction, concentrating on editorial policy in what they perceive to be more important areas. This was certainly the case with two histories of the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*, published in the same year on different sides of the Iron Curtain.³⁹ Newspapers do indeed quickly fade and get thrown away, but so do books eventually, which is why new editions need to be produced. The practice of publishing literary work in the mainstream press went out of fashion in the second half of the twentieth century. The liberal *Süddeutsche Zeitung* is now the only German daily which still regularly publishes novels in instalments. On the Left, the tradition of writing fiction for the press has died out completely. *die tageszeitung*, which has been Germany's leading independent left-wing daily since its founding in 1979, has never carried fiction. In Germany as elsewhere in Europe, the

³⁸ Irmgard Keun, *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* (Leipzig: Klett, 2004), 4. First published (Berlin: Universitas, 1932).

³⁹ Literary contributions are mentioned en passant in Gabriele Ricke, *Die Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung. Gegenmodell zur bürgerlichen Illustrierten* (Hannover: Internationalismus Verlag, 1974). See also Heinz Willman, *Geschichte der Arbeiter-Illustrierten Zeitung, 1921–1938* (Berlin: Dietz, 1974).

only magazines which still serialise fiction favour conventional romances of the type that Leitner combated. In contrast, through the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth century, respectable writers of all or no political persuasions often gave their readers a taste of their new works by publishing them first in the weekly or daily press. Of course, there is a distinction to be made between literature that only appeared here and that which made the transition to a book, but there must be numerous explanations for the failure to make that transition. Lack of literary quality is certainly often one; lack of business acumen on the part of the author may be another. In years of economic crisis, such as those which preceded the end of the Weimar Republic, publishers are less inclined to take risks. There is little evidence of Leitner's own motives because she left no papers, and third-party references to her are few and far between. All that we have is the publication data and the published work itself. On the basis of this data and a reading of the work, I would like to advance the theory that she intended some of her literary writing for newspapers only because that is where it could be more effective. It was both a generic and an operational decision.

Had Leitner lived in different times or had more time at her disposal, her career could have developed in different ways. She could have produced an oeuvre. There are few signs, however, that this was her priority. In late 1932 she bagged a book contract for *Wehr Dich Akato!*: each instalment in the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* is prefaced by the phrase 'Copyright AGIS'. With this novel she was thus taking both routes, as established novelists did, in order to maximise income and exposure. In contrast, *Hotel Amerika* appeared only as a book. From exile, cut off from their readers, most German writers encountered difficulties getting their work into print; thus, it hardly can be held against Leitner that *Elisabeth, ein Hitlermädchen* only appeared

in the *Pariser Tageszeitung* in 1937. It is written for a readership from which she was anyway now tragically removed.

This leaves *Sandkorn im Sturm* and *Mädchen mit drei Namen* among her longer works to be newspaper-only publications which appeared at times when we know that it was possible for her to get book contracts. It is possible that she did not seek these contracts because she was first and foremost a newspaperwoman. Journalists may be less likely to be remembered than novelists once they stop writing but what they lack in longevity they can make up for in numbers of readers. When her fiction is read in the context of the different newspapers in which it appeared, Leitner's orientation towards her readers becomes more obvious. She tailors her style to her readership and her topics often complement the news stories favoured by the editors. The three short stories from *Der Weg der Frau*, 'Das Seidenkleid', 'Die Schwestern', and 'Die Indianer von Costa Cuca', are formally experimental, for instance, whereas the tone of *Mädchen mit drei Namen* is light, which accords with the editorial policies of *Die Welt am Abend*. *Mädchen mit drei Namen* has an episodic, repetitive structure, making it possible for readers to dip in and out of the story, as it does not matter too much if one or two of the eighteen episodes are missed. It was directed at women readers. Publishing it in *Die Welt am Abend* appears to have been an end in itself rather than a second best or a preliminary to a book contract. There is a strong visual component to the imagery; indeed, one can imagine the whole story as a comic strip or graphic novel, with illustrations instead of descriptions, and thought and speech bubbles in place of narrative and dialogue. The novel is fast paced with frequent changes of scene which match the ups and downs in Lina's fortunes. If it is a critical reaction to the literary sensation of the season (Keun's *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*), then speed was of the essence. A newspaper offered Leitner a swifter route to publication.

The question remains at the end of this chapter whether Leitner is unjustly forgotten, and whether all her literary work deserves to be re-issued (the three stories and the novel fragment 'Akato' remain unavailable), ideally in one volume. As a Jewish feminist communist, she certainly broaches themes and poses questions that are not often broached or posed by her contemporaries. She wrote moreover for readers in a fresh and uncomplicated style informed by contemporary literary practice. A volume containing all her fiction would run to less than 400 pages. Whenever her writings have been published up to now, they have sold out. The case speaks for itself really.