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Paper Existences: Passports and Literary Imagination



Figure 1: Passports as Art: the Tunisian pavilion at the Biennale Arte in Venice 2017 issued this individualized document to visitors.

Usually, passports are known as documents issued by state authorities to signify a person's citizenship and his or her belonging to a national community. Thus, they appear mainly as an instrument of political governance and not as a means of individual self-expression or creative imagination. It may therefore seem surprising that references to passports and other identity papers in literature and the arts are fairly common and appear to be closely related to their capacity of opening up alternative spaces subverting and transcending actual political boundaries, which often limit or hinder individual mobility. Especially in literature reflecting non-authorized travels or displacement and exile, where political boundaries assume an existential dimension, passports often become central to the narrative plots and experiments. In dealing with identity papers – their appearance, materiality and functions – literary texts explore not only the conditions of individuality and belonging under the conditions of modernity, they also delineate decentered, transnational, and transformed visions of communities that challenge the model of the nation state and the related concept of identity.

This logic can be discerned clearly in some recent art exhibitions or performances that have shown a remarkable interest in passports. Passport

collections, passport adaptations, or staging that either integrates passports as material objects or imagines contexts in which they unfold or lose their power, could be seen in many places. In 2017, dance choreographer Helena Waldmann brought out a piece called “Good Passports, Bad Passports,” and in the Venice Biennale the same year, the Tunisian pavilion presented itself as a kind of decentered and multiplied booth issuing passport-like documents that could be found at different places in the exhibition area and the city (Figure 1). This in itself was remarkable because it rejected the traditional concept of the Biennale that relies on the idea of an assembly of presentations of nationally framed and, as such, localizable art. A document, called “Freesa,” was issued to visitors who then were asked to mark and validate it with an individual thumbprint. The holder of each document was characterized only in the most general way as a migrant and – by means of a stamp – as “only human,” while “origin” and “destination” were not specified by geographical or political sites. The “Freesa,” which was produced in cooperation with a global company specializing in security documents, also contained information about passports worldwide, for example, the very different range of mobility they allow. Thus, the project titled *The Absence of Paths* raised awareness of the impact passport regimes have on human lives, while at the same time hinting at possible communities beyond the nation.

New books not only thematize questions of identity and belonging in a world of nation states that is increasingly challenged by migrants and exiles, they sometimes also imitate the format and features of passports in their own formal and haptic appearance, as in the case of Janne Teller’s novel *War, What If It Were Here* (2004). Even in journalistic commentaries on the outstanding features of recent book publications, passport-like covers are used to illustrate the assumption that contemporary literature engages in politics (again), meaning that with its own artistic devices it reflects on life stories in their connection with identity politics as well as economic and legal issues.

Considering this remarkable evidence of passport-related art and literature at the present time, the question arises if this phenomenon has a historical dimension as well. So before coming back to an example of a contemporary novel about migrants whose lives are centered on the passport issue, some historical constellations will be sketched out which show that passports have spurred the literary imagination not only in our times of mass migration and reinvigorated nationalisms but already in much earlier contexts. As will be shown, these texts do not just share a topic because they happen to refer to similar political situations. They also establish a dense network of textual references by recurring literary motives and narratives in texts of different times and places – which as such, undermines the notion of literature merely representing preceding facts and realities and

instead enforces the idea that literature can assert its proper realm with textual strategies and “paper work” of its own.

Representation is a key concept governing not only modern states with their claim to encompass and integrate all their citizens; it is also decisive for the concept of modern identity papers. While before the French Revolution passports were typically issued for specific cases of border crossing and travel requirements, they now developed into a universal means of registering and controlling the population.¹ If at the beginning passports carried by travelers above all included information about the issuing authority, they gradually changed into an identity document containing a *signalement* – for example a description of the person’s gender and certain outward characteristics, often also profession and information about his or her date and place of birth – which was closely intertwined with the signs of the issuing nation-state. From World War I on, also passport photographs became obligatory. Since their authenticity is certified by an official stamp, the interleave between signs of the person and the authority becomes most obvious here. The following readings will show how this interleave is weakened, ironized, or even disrupted by texts that foreground the semiotic and textual nature of identification processes.

1 Identification and Reading: Digressive Paths in Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey*

In Lawrence Sterne’s novel *Sentimental Journey*, which was first published in 1768, signs of the impending changes in the regime of identification can already be discerned. Remarkably, in this paradigmatic travel narrative focusing on the inner sentiments and reflections of the traveler rather than giving precise descriptions of famous sights or historic-political contexts, six chapters are titled “the Passport.” The British narrator, having somewhat clandestinely crossed the Channel to come to France, is confronted there with the necessity to present a passport (originally a French word from the Middle Ages meaning a paper permit to pass the gate of a city) as a foreigner. The French-British colonial wars intensified the need to draw clear lines between national affiliations. While the whole undertaking to cross borders and travel to a foreign enemy country already runs counter to

¹ John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport. Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Andreas Fahrmeir, *Citizenship: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2007).

the efforts of drawing clear lines and setting boundaries, the narrator also keeps musing about national stereotypes which, to the traveler, soon appear as untenable prejudices. Having been in Paris for a while, he is informed that he should report to the police and present his passport. It is significant for this prerevolutionary setting that the case that somebody does not have a passport is taken as one, if dangerous, possible state for which there can be relief, if the person has influential friends in the country. The narrator, who at first reacts widely unworried to the situation, does not know anybody in France personally. However, after having realized that he is actually threatened with imprisonment he turns to a nobleman in Versailles. When it turns out that at the *Monsieur le Duc de Choiseul* he has to wait several hours, he drives around in Versailles where a conversation with the coachman reminds him that the day before a bookseller had praised another local nobleman, the Count de B****, for his erudition and especially his appreciation of English literature.² So by deciding “to tell him his story,” he changes his addressee for the passport matter, a choice that also indicates a closer intertwining of the two kinds of paper he is concerned with: books and identity documents. Remarkably, the new orientation comes about only after a transgressive and aimless movement through foreign places and is the result of accidental encounters and conversations. Thus it evokes random and uncontrollable paths undermining the idea of supervised borders and movement control. While the notion of cultural entanglement is embodied by the French count who is an enthusiast of English literature and the British traveler who converses with him in French, making the text itself bilingual – it is generally associated here with an ongoing process of traveling and self-development through encounters and impressions in a foreign land. Interestingly, this digressive mode of movement is also referred to the act of identification. When the narrator finally faces the Count he is expected to tell his vis-à-vis “who he is,” which for him, as he confides to the reader, is always a very “perplexing affair in life.”³ Thus he resorts to the edition of Shakespeare which is lying on the table between them, opens the *Hamlet* volume, and points to the name “Yorik,” who as a character in that play is the king’s jester who, however, only has his (famous) appearance after death, as a skull. When the narrator thus introduces himself as Yorick just by pointing to the text, adding “*Me voici*” (that’s me), this act ironically revives the drama figure conflating “real life” and dramatic imagination, past and present, dead letter

² In the novel autobiographical experiences resonate. In 1762 Lawrence Sterne had traveled to France and was confronted with the necessity to obtain a passport. He was finally granted one thanks to the intercession of a Comte de Bissie. See Arthur Cash, *Lawrence Sterne. The Later Years* (London, New York: Methuen, 1986), 116–29.

³ Lawrence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 85.

and living person. The Count responds to this playful introduction quite affirmatively, since he is more than willing to accept that before him miraculously stands Yorick, the king's jester: "*Et Monsieur, est il Yorick?* cried the Count. – *Je le suis*, said I. – *Vous?* – *Moi – moi qui ai l'honneur de vous parler, Monsieur le Compte – Mon Dieu!* said he, embracing me – *Vous etes* [sic] *Yorick.*"⁴ After this act of identification exposing the blending of real and fictional persons, the Count disappears and after a short while comes back with the passport which was "directed to all lieutenant governors, and commandants of cities, generals of armies, judiciaries, and all officers of justice, to let Mr. Yorick, the king's jester, and his baggage, travel quietly along."⁵ In a final attempt to correct this erroneous ascription, the narrator insists that he is not a jester and that at the British court jesters no longer have a place anyway: "our manners have been so gradually refining, that our court at present is so full of patriots, who wish for *nothing* but the honours and wealth of their country – and our ladies are all so chaste, so spotless, so good, so devout – there is nothing for a jester to make a jest of."⁶ To this the Count only cries out: "*Voila* [sic] *un persiflage!*" implying that the narrator's description of British spotlessness is really an ironic mimicking of a narrow-minded patriotism which denies jest and playfulness and with them also spaces of transgression and encounters which can be opened up by literature.

Thus, at the verge of the development of the European nation states, which engendered a new kind of homogenizing discourse of belonging as a national affair, Sterne's novel not only focuses on a sensitive traveler, his digressive paths, and various border crossings, it also evokes literary modes and spaces of identification that subvert simple and exclusive national categorizations of individuals. Remarkably, the passport, which soon after the publication of the novel gained influence as a means for nations to register people and control their movement, plays an important role here in that it is precisely the perceived necessity and growing pressure to have one that spurs the narrator's imagination and activities. This connection is also reflected in an episode about a bird in a cage which the narrator perceives just after the idea has entered his mind that not having a passport might bring him to the Bastille. The fact that the bird speaks – somebody has taught him the words "I can't get out," which it now repeats over and over again – facilitates identification with it and its state of confinement.⁷ The singing bird in the cage – which is a recurring theme in the literature of sensibility (usually it

4 Sterne, *Sentimental Journey*, 86.

5 *Ibid.*, 88.

6 *Ibid.*

7 At the same time, the bird which has been trained to speak like a human being appears as a parody of the notion of the unmediated voice of the creature.

appears in connection with sensitive women who sympathize with the agony of the imprisoned creature and set it free) – is here explicitly intertwined with the passport issue. Sterne’s Yorick, too, feels that he has “never had [his] affections more tenderly awakened”⁸ than in this identificatory encounter with the captive starling. He also immediately tries to set it free, but when he does not succeed he starts figuring to himself “the miseries of confinement.”⁹ Before this, he had rather lightheartedly imagined himself living in the Bastille with pen and ink and a lot of time to think and write – everything at the expense of the king of France. Now he dismisses this idea as mere “systematic reasonings,” without a real understanding of the mental state of confinement. Interestingly, this self-development indicated by a new sense of compassion with “fellow creatures born to no inheritance but slavery,”¹⁰ then results in his decision to get himself a passport. Thus, two features of the discourse about modern individuality appear closely intertwined: the inward turn toward individual sensitivity, which is supposed to enable him/her to connect to all other feeling (human) beings on the one hand and the turn toward new forms of political organization and social coherence, which rely essentially on the idea of the nation, on the other.¹¹ Confinement obviously can no longer be regarded as exerted by an external power radically opposed to the individual’s freedom of thought and imagination, which can blossom even in prison. Rather,

8 Sterne, *Sentimental Journey*, 71.

9 *Ibid.*, 72.

10 *Ibid.* The hint to slavery may also be read here as a reference to the issue of slavery in the Seven Years’ War. In this war, England succeeded in expanding its slave trade by conquering French slave trade stations. Wolfgang Reinhart, *Die Unterwerfung der Welt. Globalgeschichte der europäischen Expansion 1415–2015* (Munich: Beck, 2016), 445. Considering this context, one could suggest that by transgressing the borders of his own country, Sterne’s traveler is also affected by the colonial dimension of the national enterprises of the time. While European nations develop a system of separated nation states, which claim to be grounded in ethnic homogeneity and specific cultural characteristics, they conceal that they owe their prosperity and feeling of superiority largely to colonial endeavors and the exploitation of people who are beyond any protection by a nation state. He who crosses his country’s borders gets closer to an understanding of this logic by temporarily identifying with the outcasts beyond the national border who at the same time help to define it.

11 In an intriguing reading of the novel, Jesper Gulddal has recently suggested that the topic of borders and travel on a political and geographical level is closely intertwined with the idea of transgression of “intersubjective borders and the associated barriers between genders and classes.” The double feature of the passport, to give and to restrict access, is seen as a model for human contact and exchange which need to be regulated by “porous” borders enabling transgression while at the same time guarding the integrity of the self. However, to state that Sterne “does not appear to be interested in the political aspects of the passport,” seems to reduce the complexity of the text. Jesper Gulddal, “Porous Borders: The Passport as an Access Metaphor in Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*,” *Symploke* 25, nos. 1–2 (2017): 53, 56.

confinement must now be conceptualized as ingrained in the modern individual who is granted freedom and protection only as a member of a state, which requires registering and inscribes the individual's name into documents which are based on uniformity and serialization. In Sterne's novel this scenario only announces itself from afar, since the way he finally receives the passport is still quite distant from the normalized bureaucratic operations that later become standard for the praxis of issuing passports. Also, the passport Yorick receives does not seem to contain a lot of information about the bearer of the document. While this reflects the situation in prerevolutionary times, when passports mostly bore the signs of the authorities or noblemen who issued them,¹² the text also attributes the absence of personal traits in the document to the uneasiness the protagonist articulates about having to reveal his name and identity in public, which then results in the digressive scene with the Shakespearean character. Literature here reflects its potential to introduce and follow a person without identifying him or her unequivocally, thus leaving space for association and uncontrollable dynamics. As identity here is presented as connected to a reading process which implies references to other texts and contexts, literature challenges the claim to identification and control typical for state bureaucracies. Unlike state bureaucracies, literature does not rely on the possibility of definite authentication, which it rather exposes as a phantasm as it interferes with identifying operations such as the issuing of passports.

2 Statelessness and Storytelling: B. Traven's Yorikke

Having looked at Sterne's text from this perspective, it seems not altogether surprising that the name Yorick reappears once more in a piece of literature that explicitly deals with passports – or rather the problems that arise when people do not have any. After a somewhat large leap skipping the nineteenth century, which for different reasons was not primarily a century of passports, I will now focus on the interwar period in Europe, which actually is heavily marked by a tightening of passport regulations and the debates about them.

¹² Valentin Groebner, "Der Schein der Person. Bescheinigung und Evidenz," in *Quel Corps? Eine Frage der Repräsentation*, ed. Hans Belting, Dietmar Kamper, and Martin Schulz (Munich: Fink, 2002), 319.

One of the most impressive literary texts reflecting the changes brought about by the new rule that everybody, not only travelers or other people crossing borders, must possess a passport is B. Traven's novel *The Deathship*, which first came out in German in 1926. As a reminder, B. Traven is not a surname with the abbreviation of a first name, but rather a pseudonym for a writer who has succeeded in carefully masking his real identity by using different names (B. Traven can also be read as "be Traven") – others were Ret Marut, Otto Feige, Traven Torsvan, Hal Croves. This lifelong playing with identities was facilitated by the fact that he had been involved in revolutionary activities as a journalist supporting the council republic in Munich at the end of World War I and was politically persecuted afterwards, changing countries of residence several times. His life, or rather the mysterious aura surrounding it, has fascinated many literary historians who finally seem to have concluded their detective work by finding out that his real name was in fact Otto Feige, the others aliases assuming "fake" identities.¹³

For the purpose of this chapter, it does not matter so much who the author of *The Deathship* and other successful stories of their time really was. Instead, what is of interest here is the subversive character of playing with identities which is very much in accordance with the concerns articulated in the novel. The novel has three parts: in the first we get to know the protagonist, a young sailor who misses his ship after a shore leave in Antwerp. With the ship he has lost not only his workplace but also his sailor's card, which is the only identification paper he ever possessed. At first, he – like Sterne's protagonist – takes it very lightly, as he is confident to be able to find a new ship soon. However, when it turns out that after the war the world has changed dramatically and that without an identity document he cannot get work or a residence permit anywhere, he slowly realizes his fatal situation. Even though he claims to be an American citizen, the American consul refuses to do anything for him because he cannot prove his national identity. No country can rightfully grant him residency, which is why he is constantly deported and repeatedly finds himself in police detention. Everywhere he is exposed to the same interrogation:

"Where do you have your sailor's card?"

"I have lost it."

"Have you got a passport?"

"No."

"Citizen paper?"

"Never had any."¹⁴

¹³ Jan-Christoph Hauschild, *B. Traven – Die unbekanntten Jahre* (Vienna, New York: Springer, 2012).

¹⁴ (Translation mine, D.B.) B. Traven, *Das Totenschiff* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1954), 23.

As a *sans-papier* he is treated everywhere like a criminal and deprived of any possibility to get back into “normal society.” In fact, because there is no way back and no possible place for him in the societies of the nation states, his status in a certain sense is worse than that of a criminal for whom there are at least rules and “dwelling” places like prisons. If Hannah Arendt has analyzed the problem of statelessness as a structural outcome of the reinforcement of the model of the nation state in large parts also of Eastern Europe after the war, it is Traven’s novel that most acutely portrays the consequences of this development by means of literature.¹⁵

In the second part of *The Deathship*, the endlessly repeated deportations from one European state to the next, which already conflate movement with stagnation,¹⁶ come to an end as the protagonist enters a new space and the story changes its scene. In many ways, however, the new space is also the old, since on the ship he is finally admitted to are only seamen like him who do not have appropriate papers and have lost all civil rights. Even before he enters this “deathship,” the protagonist had felt like a nobody and had described his state as that of a man who is socially dead.¹⁷ Now he joins a community of outlaws who do not belong anywhere, are not protected by any government, and in case of death not missed by anybody, which means that they are totally at the disposal of the capitalist forces for which “deathships” present an ideal opportunity for cheap, slave-like laborers. The name of this ship, however, is “Yorikke,” the feminine version of Yorick and, as such, a clear intertextual reference to Sterne and Shakespeare.¹⁸ It is described as a frightfully decrepit vessel which does not operate under any national flag. Although it is definitely not a place chosen voluntarily by any of the seamen, and although they often curse life there as hell, they nevertheless establish close ties with it. By addressing the *Yorikke* as a woman, the narrator makes

¹⁵ For this connection see Burkhardt Wolf, “Es gibt keine Totenschiffe. B. Traven’s Sea Change,” in *DVjs* [Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte] 80, no. 3 (2006): 435–55; Doerte Bischoff, “Kriegszustand: Logiken des Militärischen und die Macht der Pässe in literarischen Reflexionen über Staatsbürgerschaft seit 1918,” *Exilforschung* 36 (2018): Ausgeschlossen. Staatsbürgerschaft, Staatenlose und Exil, ed. Doerte Bischoff and Miriam Rürup, 165–83.

¹⁶ This aspect is stressed by Jesper Gulddal, “Passport Plats: B. Traven’s *Das Totenschiff* and the Chronotope of Movement Control,” *German Life and Letters* 66, no. 3 (2013): 292–307.

¹⁷ Traven, *Das Totenschiff*, 122.

¹⁸ This connection has been frequently noted in research literature, see e.g., Ernst-Ullrich Pinkert, “Travens Mär vom ’einfachen Erzählen.’ Zu den intertextuellen Bezügen in dem Roman *Das Totenschiff*,” in *B. Travens Erzählwerk in der Konstellation von Sprachen und Kulturen*, ed. Günter Dammann (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005), 23–35. However, possible implications of the intertextual references have rarely been explored.

clear that this ship is the only companion for those who can neither get married nor have a family because they are not “legal.”

At the end of the second part, the *Yorikke* is explicitly called a lover whose fate resembles that of the narrator. Thus, although the protagonist of this novel is not directly called “Yorick,” he is closely associated with the personified vessel of that name, which also brings out his own status as a disposable thing rather than a living human being. As a deathship, the *Yorikke* is a floating space where those who do not appear in any official register and who in a broader sense cannot be represented by the normative discourses on citizenship and belonging reside. By focusing on them and their stories, the novel in a way revives the dead by making them part of a narrative and thus rewriting them into the cultural knowledge and memory. Here it resembles Sterne’s text which, by introducing Shakespeare and the figure of the jester (who is present on stage there as a skull) into the context of a French regime of passports and identification, subverts their impact. Although in Travens’s novel the name of the protagonist is mentioned several times at the beginning as “Gerard Gales,” other names, origins, and nationalities that he invents for himself play an increasing role in the course of the narrative.¹⁹ This underscores the notion that his “real” name no longer matters, whereas his invented identities can sometimes be convenient if adjusted to a specific situation. In fact, especially in the first part of the book Gales, who registers all the grotesque incidents in police stations and consulates from a seemingly naïve perspective, appears as a kind of jester or picaresque figure.²⁰ By reproducing the operations of the administrative complex and the effects it has for individuals in his narrative he brings out their absurdities. That his true name gives way to invented identities also corresponds to a self-reflexive episode in the first part of the book where the protagonist is first introduced as a storyteller. When the destitute young man meets an obviously wealthy American couple on the street, he introduces himself telling them a fictive story. This proves to be so interesting and entertaining – for the American the question if it is a true story is not relevant, he praises the narrator for being a “true artist” – that the man rewards him with a considerable tip. The narrator, for whom a little money at this point is also a matter of survival, perceives it as his first earning by storytelling. This little episode reflects the structure of the novel as a whole in that an imaginative narration of supposedly literary quality

¹⁹ Pinkert suggests that Gales’s decision not to reveal his real name on the *Yorikke* should be read as a direct intertextual reference to the passage in Sterne where Yorick confides to the reader that he doesn’t like to be identified by his name in public. Pinkert, “Travens Mär,” 30.

²⁰ The protagonist has been read as a picaro, the ship as a ship-of-fools, however without reference to Sterne as intertext by Thorsten Czechanowsky, “Die Irrfahrt als Grenzerfahrung. Überlegungen zur Metaphorik der Grenze in B. Travens Roman *Das Totenschiff*,” *mauerschau* 1 (2008): 47–58.

appears as a life-saving procedure under the condition of bureaucratic identification, exclusion, and confinement.

This structure is taken up again at the end of the novel when the narrator is the only survivor of an organized shipwrecking involving another deathship in which he and others one day find themselves. The shipwrecking with the calculated deaths of most of the crew is no coincidence but staged by the shipping company for insurance fraud. This is presented as the ultimate consequence of a system that produces people situated outside any law who can then be abused until their deaths. That the story of *The Deathship* – or rather of the phenomenon of deathships in general – can be told at all depends on an unlikely case of survival. The existence of the narration of *The Deathship*, however, is marked as precisely this kind of survivor's story which is framed by the address of a person as "Sir" without further identifying him. It could be a reference to the American in the story who positively reacts to the invented life-story of the paperless sailor. But it could also be a reference to one of the American consuls in different European countries who usually do not listen to individual stories but reduce every person to a paper document and set of normalized and registered information. Thus, the precarious state of the narration that aims at raising attention to the excluded and at questioning prevailing identification practices is underscored. However, by entangling the narrative with famous intertexts such as Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* or Dante's *Inferno*, the literary treatment of paper existences here again evokes at least two possible readings. While the notion of a "man cut of cardboard,"²¹ that is, a person reduced to paperwork, demonstrates the mortifying effects of exclusive national passport regulations, interweavings with texts from different times and languages also open up alternative spaces of imagination and thinking concerning identity formation.

3 Transference and Adaption: Passports in Remarque's Exile Novels

In the literature of exile during and after the Nazi era the topic of passports and visa stamps as existential prerequisites to cross borders and reach safe countries of refuge becomes – not surprisingly – again very prominent. The experience that the life of a person depends on a mere piece of paper, which in decisive moments must bear the correct seals, is expressed in numerous different ways in these

²¹ Traven, *Das Totenschiff*, 25, 47.

texts. Typically, as in the case of Erich Maria Remarque, the literary treatment of passports and citizenship in times of their being a means of social control and exclusion by a totalitarian regime relies on biographical experiences. Remarque, who as a critic of national socialism and author of the famous anti-war novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) had attracted the rage of the fascists already before their coming to power, had moved to Switzerland in 1931 and, after his expatriation by the Nazis in 1938, went to the United States in 1939 where eight years later he was granted citizenship. In his first novel written in European and American exile, *Flotsam*,²² which was first published in sequences in an American journal (*Collier's Weekly*, 1939) and later appeared in German under the title *Liebe deinen Nächsten* with the exiled publishing company Bermann Fischer in Stockholm in 1941, the fate of refugees resembles in many ways that of the *sans-papiers* depicted in Traven's novel. Unlike Gales, the protagonists here once had valid passports for the country of their birth, but after having been expatriated as Jews or political dissidents by the Nazis, they are now stateless and likewise without identity papers. Their stalemated situation resulting from their being pushed off from one country to another is depicted as a paradoxical life on borders which constitute the only home ("*Heimat*") left to them.²³ The fatal situation arises from the fact that for stateless refugees it is extremely difficult to enter and stay in another country since every national state normally grants rights of residence only to its citizens. The following passage, in which the student Ludwig Kern who is seized in Switzerland without a passport after having crossed the border illegally, shows the consequences:

"Why didn't you report to the police after illegally crossing the border?" [the judge] asked. "Then I'd had been put straight out of the country again," Kern answered wearily. ... The judge shrugged. "I cannot help you. It is my duty to sentence you. ...That is the law. We have it to protect our country from being flooded with refugees." "I know." ... "All I can do is to make a recommendation on your behalf to the Superior Court that you be given detention and not a prison sentence. ... it is of great importance for full civil rights. If you are simply placed in detention you will have no prison records." ... Kern looked for a while at the good-natured, unsuspecting man. "Full civil rights..." he said then. "Full civil rights. What would I do with them? ... I am a shadow, a ghost, a dead man in the eyes of society. ...We no longer exist as far as Germany is concerned. And for the rest of the world we exist only as prey for the police."²⁴

22 As a book it was published under the same title in 1941 in the United States by Little, Brown and Company. In the same year a screen adaptation directed by John Cromwell came out with the title *So Ends Our Night*.

23 Erich Maria Remarque, *Liebe Deinen Nächsten* (Frankfurt am Main., Berlin, Vienna: Ullstein, 1974), 180.

24 (Translation mine, D.B.) Remarque, *Liebe Deinen Nächsten*, 254.

Although the Swiss judge suddenly becomes aware of the enormity of the problem that far exceeds the individual case in front of him, he cannot do anything as long as there are no supranational passport regulations, such as by the League of Nations.

However, another narrative thread around the figure of the political exile Josef Steiner, whom Kern meets at the beginning as a fellow *sans-papier* in Austrian police detention, develops in a different direction. Instead of lamenting his fate and trying to get on without papers, Steiner successfully attempts to get a false passport. A Russian acquaintance in a somewhat macabre business-like manner advises him to buy a foreign passport: “I’d like to recommend the dead Austrian. There are Rumanians, too, and they are cheaper. But who knows how to speak Rumanian?”²⁵ After Steiner has purchased the passport, which is issued to a worker called Johann Huber from Graz and has his own photograph inserted, he is full of satisfaction. Looking at the passport with his new identity, he addresses its former holder: “You are dead ... but your passport lives and is valid for the administration. I, Josef Steiner, am alive; but without a passport I am dead for the officials. He laughed. Let’s switch, Johann Huber! Give me your paper life and take my paperless death! If the living do not help us, the dead will have to do it.”²⁶ This implies the idea that in such times a piece of paper cannot only function as a “social weapon by which one may kill men without any bloodshed,”²⁷ as Hannah Arendt once put it, but that it can in fact also be used to give new life to an otherwise practically dead person. Both possibilities underscore the tight relationship between human existence and paper document. There only seems to be one way to regain agency: circumventing the all-encompassing power of state-controlled identification papers by appropriating and imitating them for one’s own purposes.²⁸

In *The Night in Lisbon*, a later novel by Remarque, published in 1962, the motif of surviving in exile with the passport of a stranger is taken up. There the protagonist explicitly admits that the new identity paper is much more than a mere instrument to achieve certain aims: it actually changes the ways he conceives of himself and the world. In fact, the new name has already inscribed itself

25 Ibid., 88.

26 Ibid., 93.

27 Hannah Arendt, “We Refugees,” in *Altogether Elsewhere. Writers on Exile*, ed. Marc Robinson (Boston, London: Faber & Faber, 1994), 118.

28 For the connection of passport forgery and art see Burcu Dogramaci, “Die Kunst der Passfälschung: Exil, Flucht und Strategien der Grenzüberschreitung,” *Exilforschung* 36 (2018): Ausgeschlossen. Staatsbürgerschaft, Staatenlosigkeit und Exil, ed. Doerte Bischoff and Miriam Rürup, 184–209.

into his kind of movement across borders: passing borders as (Josef) Schwarz (black) in German means to cross them illegally. It also connects him to other people with different origins and national affiliations who have been in the possession of the passport before and will be after him (he passes the passport on to a young refugee on his way to Mexico at the end), thus again subverting the idea of clear national distinctions and unambiguous identification.²⁹ Unlike *Flotsam*, the novel *The Night in Lisbon* is presented by a narrating I, however, neither of the two novels foreground self-reflexive moments which would connect the passport stories to the respective narratives themselves and, with that, to the possibilities of literature as such.

4 Mortification and Writing On: The Powers of Paper in Seghers's *Transit*

This is altogether different in Anna Seghers's seminal novel *Transit* – written while Seghers herself was fleeing from the Nazis through France and finally concluded in Mexican exile – in which some of the constellations described resonate in a complex narrative setting. At the beginning, the protagonist is introduced as an emigrant sitting in a pizzeria in Marseille with another refugee with whom he shares his story – which apparently is also the story we read. Remarkably throughout the novel we do not get to know his original name.³⁰ This corresponds with the fact that we hardly learn anything about his life before the time of the Nazis. If he himself feels a loss, he can no longer identify (with) what exactly has been lost.³¹ The experiences that have most strongly shaped his life since then are connected to his time as a detainee in different camps and on his flight. His youth has all gone wrong, as he once says.³² He has a feeling of emptiness, without relations with his past or commitments for the future, thus he really embodies the

²⁹ This aspect is highlighted by Charlton Payne, “Der Pass zwischen Dingwanderung und Identitätsübertragung in Remarques’ *Die Nacht von Lissabon*,” *Exilforschung* 31 (2013): Dinge des Exils, ed. Doerte Bischoff and Joachim Schlör, 343–54. Payne concludes here that the people who find themselves forcefully displaced have to invent alternative networks of circulation in order to survive. Remarque’s novel, it is further suggested, foregrounds a non-genealogical passing on of an identity document which thus brings about cosmopolitical connections.

³⁰ Anna Seghers, *Transit* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2001), 32. “My own name never entered the picture.” English translation cited after Anna Seghers, *Transit* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2013), 27.

³¹ Seghers, *Transit*, 41.

³² *Ibid.*, 88.

flotsam giving the title to Remarque's book in English. When names play a role in connection with his story, they are alien names that he assumes more or less accidentally in the course of the events. One name – we don't even get to know which one it is – he invents when checking into a hotel in Paris, another one, Seidler, he receives after an acquainted French family has managed to get him a refugee certificate somebody else had just returned, obviously after having received "a better set of documents."³³ "Seidler was the name of the man whose second-best certificate ended up being a better one for me. ... We looked up Seidler's village in a school atlas and concluded from its location that, fortunately for me, the village along with the registry of its inhabitants, had probably been burned to the ground."³⁴ Here a pattern can be discerned governing the narration: identification documents, which ensure getting on and surviving in a situation of persecution, are structurally connected to catastrophic events implying loss and destruction. Although Seidler's certificate is not directly connected with the burning of his village, its subversive transmission to another person seems to function better the less the paper refers to any existing place and person, developing a life of its own instead.

Later in the book, a file described as full of the best and useful documents appears to be the file of a dead person.³⁵ This obviously has two opposing implications: first, it indicates that the state bureaucracy has established a highly self-referential and self-fulfilling system in which human beings are substituted by serialized card files and the related documents. Second, it also implies that the means to intervene must also rely on paper – and its potential to be reproduced, circulated or "creatively" appropriated. As long as – as in Traven's dystopian narration – there is a clear-cut distinction between those who have passports and those who do not, the mortifying effects of passports – as Hannah Arendt and Remarque note – do not really become visible because those without are socially dead and therefore, like the crew of the *Yorikke*, invisible for "normal people." As soon as this line between passport holders and *sans-papiers* however is blurred, the deathly nature of exclusionary effects of a certain kind of passport regime comes to the fore.

In Seghers's novel this becomes clear when yet another name is introduced with which the narrator in the course of the events becomes associated. Like in Remarque's novels it is the name of a dead person – whereby his death is explicitly connected with the events of the Nazi persecution. The writer Weidel – like the

³³ Seghers, *Transit*, 33 (English version).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Seghers, *Transit*, 103.

historical Ernst Weiß – had killed himself in a hotel in Paris when the Germans entered the city and he lost any hope (a similar story is, of course, that of Walter Benjamin who committed suicide as a refugee close to the French-Spanish border when he heard of new visa regulations in Fascist Spain). Although the narrator who is given the suitcase of the deceased does not pretend to be Weidel, he is mistakenly identified with him when he appears at the Mexican consulate in Marseille. He goes there because in Weidel's suitcase he found letters indicating that he has a visa to Mexico and that his separated wife to whom he could hand over Weidel's belongings, might also come there. While all other refugees in the cafés and consulates in Marseille are anxiously waiting for paper documents to get out of Europe as soon as possible, the narrator himself seems uninterested and even bored by the monotony of the visa “ceremonies” and the stories of fellow emigrants who seem to circle around the same issues all the time and thus have lost any individual character. It is this attitude which puts him in a position, however, to observe and register what is happening from a distance seemingly without being existentially involved.

I suddenly felt a tiny degree of superiority over the official. Had Weidel still been alive, the official would have had the advantage over him; he would have looked right through him, maybe even would have been amused by him. But now watching the official carefully study the file with a rather excessive attention, I was the one who was amused. A specter among the visa applicants, a shadow who readily relinquished all his rights. I decided that instead of immediately explaining things to him, I would leave him for a moment to his useless activity.³⁶

As a detached observer, the narrator watches and describes for the reader the absurdity and self-referred logic of the visa bureaucracy whose executives do not even realize that they are not dealing with living human beings any more. The administrative acts of identification have assumed the character of a religious ceremony, implying that death is no longer conceived as being in the hands of God but is produced and administered by the bureaucratic complex itself. This becomes especially explicit as the text cites a liturgic formula, part of Christian funeral ceremonies, and transposes it into the very worldly context of visa administration: “I stared at the papers on the desk, which were the last remains of the dead man. Visa to visa, paper to paper, file to file. In perfect and confident hope.”³⁷

³⁶ Seghers, *Transit*, 48 (English version).

³⁷ Translation mine (in the published English edition this aspect is neutralized in the translation as “file by file”). For the German version see Seghers, *Transit*, 56: “Ich starrte auf die Papiere

By implicitly analyzing this logic, the narrator – and with him the narrative – does not succumb to it but opens up a more distanced perspective. In fact, as the narrator does not vehemently contradict the official's assumption that he is Weidel, a name the official supposes to be the *nom de plume* for Seidler, he does finally get involved in the Weidel case. However, as he is not just eager to use (or misuse) this name for himself, he becomes affected by the name and life of the dead man in very different ways. It is not only that he develops a relationship with Marie, Weidel's former wife who still hopes to find him in Marseille, the perhaps most important impulse for him to cling to Weidel's suitcase, his belongings, his papers and in fact his life-story, is an experience he has when first opening his suitcase in the hotel in Paris. It contains, as he notices with surprise, "little more than paper."³⁸ When, out of curiosity, he starts reading it, he is drawn into a story told with such vividness that he gets completely absorbed by it following the actions and delusions of the characters involved including one in which he recognizes himself. Reading, which for the narrator who admits to never have read a book to the end before, is an altogether new and exciting experience. It obviously implies an act of identification and, at the same time, a distanced, analytical perspective which enables the reader to recognize himself and the conditions of the world around him from a new angle. However, the manuscript of the dead writer abruptly ends, and the protagonist is left alone with an unfinished story cut off at the point when the Germans enter Paris. Together with two letters he also finds in the suitcase, this experience – which is also explicitly marked as an encounter with the rich and moving quality of his mother-tongue quite different from what Nazi propaganda had made of it – induces him to turn to the consulate and pursue the "Weidel case" on his own terms.

Thus the novel very artfully interweaves two kinds of papers: identification documents controlled by national administrations on the one hand, and a literary manuscript reflecting on the impact of exclusive categorization and totalitarian control on the individual, on the other. By somehow inheriting Weidel's papers (in both senses of the word), the narrator is confronted with a responsibility: as the only witness to the death of the writer and the only reader of his unfinished manuscript, he now appears as the only one left to tell his story and to remember the conditions of his death. Thus the narrative of *Transit*, as such, appears as the redemption of this responsibility to take up the threat of narration in times of catastrophic destruction, persecution, and death. That the narrator

auf dem Schreibtisch, die von dem Toten übrig waren! Visa zu Visa, Papier zu Papier, Dossier zu Dossier. In vollkommener und gewisser Hoffnung."

38 Seghers, *Transit* (English version), 20.

remains without clear identity and just assumes the name of a dead person accentuates the fact that his story is marked by deep caesurae and breaks. These also are reflected as breaks with tradition – or even civilization – as they imply the absorption and destruction of religious and cultural identification practices by the totalizing momentum of modern bureaucracy. In a certain way, Seghers' narrator is alive and dead at the same time. Like Traven's narrator, he appears as a survivor who bears witness to the lives of those who have been excluded from the social sphere and from human life altogether. By reading the narrator's account of reading Weidel, however, and by taking part in his getting involved in the deathly mechanisms of identification practices as well as his attempts "to tell the whole story. ... 'From the beginning',"³⁹ the readers themselves are also implicated in the story. Because it is marked by caesurae and breaks and cannot be told by those who experienced it and died, it is our story with which we are invited to identify as well.

5 Asylum Laws and the Invention of Life Stories: Abbas Khider's *A Slap in the Face*

If one keeps in mind that the passport is originally a travel document and a means of border control, it is evident that its function is challenged especially by mass migration and exile, which might have been provoked by restrictive passport regimes in the first place. If this is documented in German exile literature of the Nazi-period, as has been shown above with respect to Remarque and Seghers – and one could add other authors such as Joseph Roth, Franz Werfel, Bertolt Brecht, Hans Natonek, Bruno Frank, Theodor Balk or Hans Sahl – it is also a central theme in contemporary German literature reflecting exile in, and migration into, Germany. That this is not an entirely new phenomenon in the history of literature in German but appears in many ways entangled with historical exile literature is reflected in the reappearance of motifs, narrative constellations, and explicit references within the contemporary texts themselves. It is also reflected in the literary field where awards in memory of famous writers of exile are increasingly given to writers of a non-German background. In 2013, Abbas Khider, who was born in Iraq in 1973 and has been living in Germany since the year 2000, was awarded the Hilde Domin Prize for "Literature in Exile." In his acceptance speech he explicitly underscored the potential of literature to cross national borders: "In

³⁹ Seghers, *Transit* (English version), 5.

literature you don't need a visa, a residence permit or a citizenship to arrive."⁴⁰ From this it cannot be inferred, however, that identity documents are not an issue in his novels. Quite the contrary: already in his first novel *Der falsche Inder* (The False Indian), which depicts the flight and odyssey of a young Iraqi through different countries around the Mediterranean Sea, passport controls seem to accompany the refugee's routes all along. As in many of the historical exile texts, the question of their authenticity or forgery has completely given way to the question if they are useful in a certain situation or not. Thus, to move on as a refugee means to adjust to the respective rules of different countries and try to avail oneself of the "correct" papers. That "friends," smugglers, and forgers are involved, is the first lesson a refugee has to learn. This is presented as standard knowledge among exiles in Germany also in Khider's recent (fourth) novel *Ohrfeige* ("box on the ear," also meaning: slap in the face, in a metaphorical sense). "In exile many peculiar problems and mysteries arise which normal people could never imagine. Difficulties of all kinds befall you like natural catastrophes. We are completely exposed to them. To survive and not to become totally insane, we need the mediators, the Mafiosi, the greedy, the smugglers, the corrupt policemen and officials, we need all the bloodsuckers who want to profit from our situation. We need them much more than all the people working for AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL together."⁴¹ Thus, in the midst of the "normal world" of those with correct citizenship and papers live the exiles (widely unnoticed by the former), with a completely different conception of reality: with the permanent threat of police controls and detention, a city like Munich appears like a huge prison. Obviously, freedom and freedom of movement is not granted to everyone, but even in times of intensified global movement of goods and information, the free movement of people, to a large extent, still depends on where somebody happens to be born.

If the German asylum legislation is partly a heritage of this country's history of violent persecution and expulsion in the twentieth century, the bureaucratic ways to categorize and register people haven't changed much. This at least is suggested by the text which presents Germany as a country virtually buried under paragraphs and rules and administered by bureaucrats who usually are not interested in human beings but only in the mindless execution of paragraphs. One of these clerks is "Frau Schulz" who is responsible for Karim, the protagonist, in the foreigners' registration office. In his narrative, he describes her as one of those who decide the way in which he may exist. Entrenched behind her

⁴⁰ https://www.heidelberg.de/hd,Lde/HD/service/18_09_2013+Hilde_Domin_Preis+2013+fuer+Abbas+Khider_.html.

⁴¹ (Translation mine, D.B.) Abbas Khider, *Ohrfeige* (Munich: Hanser, 2016), 28.

computer screen and protected by mountains of files she fidgets about in the air with her sharp pen as if she wanted to stab flies.⁴² This description recalls a very similar passage in Traven's *Deathship* where the protagonist observes that the officials in the consulates constantly play with their pencils, for instance by tapping them on the desk "as if they wanted to nail down a word with every tap."⁴³ Against this attitude of fixing creatures and language to only one controllable meaning – which practically amounts to killing them – the text develops a different relation between language and identity. After Karim has been involuntarily stranded in Germany, he is given a Green identity card and sent to a home for asylum seekers where he meets several other refugees who give him important advice: "if you want to be stuck here for the rest of your life, then tell them the truth. ... I tell you something: you have to invent a completely new life story for yourself."⁴⁴ One of them, Salim, recalls having once made up a highly adventurous story in court, so that, "After my trial I seriously considered becoming a writer."⁴⁵ The connection between the confining situation of the refugee vis-à-vis the asylum laws and the impulse for literary imagination is also taken up in the frame of the novel itself. In the opening scene Karim has just tied Frau Schulz to her office chair and gagged and given her the box on the ear which lends the book its title. Thus she is silenced, which finally gives him the opportunity to speak and tell his story. Ironically, before he starts his narration, he lights himself a special cigarette: "I sit opposite her on the visitor's chair, take a piece of paper from her desk, mix some hash into my tobacco and draw myself a cigarette. I light it and inhale deeply. With relish. ... I enjoy the lightly burning pain in my chest. I feel as alive as I haven't felt for a long time."⁴⁶

Here the abusive use of bureaucratic paperwork opens up new ways of perceiving reality – and of transforming it imaginatively. In fact, at the end of the story, the motif of Karim smoking a joint is taken up again. Salim wakes Karim, who has been sleeping in his apartment, from a hash dream, and tells him to get ready for the smuggler who will get him out of Germany. There is no Frau Schulz anywhere, the whole story turns out to be imagination. Considering this framing of the whole "real life story," Karim appears as a prototypical unreliable narrator. This, however, does not mean that we are to dismiss everything he narrates as not true. Instead, we are confronted with the fact that realities and life stories are constructs following certain rules and possibilities of what can and cannot be

⁴² Khider, *Ohrfeige*, 11.

⁴³ Traven, *Totenschiff*, 23, 45.

⁴⁴ Khider, *Ohrfeige*, 69.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

expressed. These constructs are highly dependent on political, economic and legal discourses and constellations and pertain to only specific people and perspectives. Life itself cannot be captured by any narrative – especially in contexts of violence, persecution, and exile.

This is reflected in two of the stories told within Karim's story. One is about a fellow student who at school in Baghdad had dared to make fun of Saddam Hussein. He was then arrested and never heard from again. Karim presents the story of the defiant boy as his own in face of the German asylum officials – only with a happy end that he escaped seizure. Thus the story he tells about himself is not a false story, it did happen, but the one who experienced it cannot tell it anymore. To understand why Karim fled his country, to understand the whole situation of thousands of asylum seekers, combined, enriched, and transposed stories like this one have to be told. In the literary context they assume a higher reality than the mere reconstruction of single life stories could have. That the latter is always prone to be told and received according to certain prevailing narrative concepts and expectations is reflected in the second internal story. It tells about Hayat, a beautiful, deaf-mute girl who had been Karim's childhood friend in his home town. One day when she had grown into a teenager she is lured into a car by three men who, after raping and killing her, abandon her corpse like a piece of garbage. Karim admits that it is not easy for him to tell this story, for he is deeply traumatized by it. He even relates his own constant uneasiness, his lack of belonging, to this incident at the threshold of his own transition to adulthood. His story thus cannot be any other coming-of-age story, instead he tells about a monstrosity that characterizes his adult body and makes it impossible to perceive him according to the usual categories. Thus he confides to the reader (and to Frau Schulz who definitely would not have a category for him) that he has grown breasts indicating his intense identification with the murdered girl whom he cannot forget. This is certainly a different kind of identification: it transcends borders – here borders of gender – and keeps the killed ones alive in one's compassionate imagination. This kind of identification is also explicitly associated with literature in the text: for her thirteenth birthday, Karim had given Hayat a book she cannot read because she is not allowed to go to school. But she identifies with the girl on the cover who seems to open new spaces and realities – *Alice in Wonderland*. Hayat is not any name, it is the Arabic word for "life" which, as the narrator reflects, has also been adopted by the Turkish language. As a word it had the capacity to cross borders while the reality of "Hayat," life "itself" continues to be defiled in so many places of the world.

The story of Hayat, the deaf-mute girl, does not necessarily have to be true, nor is the narrator's secret about his monstrous body of which he is ashamed, necessarily the "true story" for him to tell when he can finally raise his voice in

the asylum office. However, they show that literature can give a face and a story to those who have been murdered and silenced – not only by real dictators, but also by the power of categorizing who is in and who is out and by the same discourses in which we all construct our truths and stories. It also shows that the attempt to grant asylum according to certain categories of life-stories necessarily misses the pluralities, contradictions, and dynamic qualities of life and that it cannot, of course, account for the traumatic voids and breaks which define the life stories of so many refugees.

6 Conclusion

Literary texts centering on passports reveal the effects of identification practices which, in modernity, tie the individual to a political regime and its economies of control and belonging. By focusing on those who are excluded from certain or all kinds of citizenship – illegal travelers, outlaws, exiles, and asylum seekers – they shed light on the semiological and bureaucratic operations which ensure the self-preservation of the nation state.⁴⁷ The remarkable preoccupation with passports and identity papers that can be discerned in literature from the eighteenth century until the present shows that questions of alternative identifications in and by literature are not necessarily developed in sharp contrast to the functioning of state regulated identity regimes. Instead, it is the playful convergence of identity paper and literary manuscript or book, the performance of their shared features, which typically becomes the focal point for narrative explorations of identity. By revealing processes of reading and transformative adaptation as being involved in identifying operations the texts also bring out associations and intertextual networks which go beyond specific historical or biographical instances, thereby subverting national identification. That the protagonists' name and identity are often disseminated by a plurality of names and by the blurring of fact and fiction does not imply a general arbitrariness but appears as a means to subvert the determining power of identification. Instead, a different mode of literary identification as an ongoing process without definite reference or closure is enacted which does not aspire to represent and control life but aims at imaginatively recollecting and reviving what has been excluded by normative denotations.

⁴⁷ This perspective, observing the “[g]atherings of exiles, and émigrés and refugees” at the frontiers, is also the one Bhabha describes as the starting point of his analyses of the nation from its margins. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), 139.

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