

Research Paper

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A woman in the light and shadow of home and exile

Austrian writer and journalist Hilde Spiel (1911-1990)

We thank the author for her permission to pre-publish the following essay, which is forthcoming in a bilingual anthology featuring Russian and German-language writers of the 20th century¹, such as Hilde Spiel, Karl Kraus, Joseph Roth, Erich Kästner, Ingeborg Bachmann and Christa Wolf on the German side, Maksim Gor'kij, Marietta Šaginjan, Larisa Rejsner, Vasilij Grossman, Aleksandr Solženizyn, and Čingiz Ajtmatov on the Russian side. The prevalent theme is the writers' relationship with the powers that be in the various regimes that governed the two countries.

Hilde Spiel was one of those writers who pursue journalism as their more or less tedious »bread and butter« occupation, or who end up in journalism as their primary profession by force of existential necessity, which, in Hilde Spiel's case, was exacerbated by the difficult literary production conditions in exile. Her critical essays, enriched by English as the native tongue of journalism, earned her special recognition – not least from the »pope of literature« Marcel Reich-Ranicki. Like him, the publicist, who ultimately returned to the German language and her native Austria in 1963, was a staunch fighter against suppressing and white-washing the Nazi past and anti-Semitism, which persisted, or even flared up again, long after liberation from the Nazi regime.

She pursued this cause in a journalistic way, voicing her critical view of German-language post-war journalism by using essays, speeches, and interviews to call out the many journalists who had served Nazi-controlled media before 1945 and continued their careers unperturbed after the war. She also challenged anti-Semitic statements by renowned journalists,

1 Lepilkina, Olga; Pöttker, Horst; Serebriakov, Anatol; Serebriakova, Svetlana (2022): *Macht, Herrschaft, Öffentlichkeit. Deutschsprachige und russische Publizistinnen und Publizisten des 20. Jahrhunderts* [Power, domination, public sphere. German-language and Russian writers of the 20th century]. Cologne: Herbert von Halem.

such as editor-in-chief of the *Salzburger Nachrichten* and legal philosopher René Marčić, who later had a journalism prize named after him. In a 1949 article, the latter wrote the following statement addressed to Hilde Spiel's husband Peter de Mendelssohn:

»Those who mock God and prayer ... should not be surprised if ... they end up in a gas chamber one day. Mendelssohn and his ilk were the ones who conjured up the very world which then persecuted them.«^[2]

Hilde Spiel also produced literary works with recent historical or contemporary references, such as journalists' behavior under the Nazi regime and afterwards. One example is her play *Anna und Anna*, which premiered in 1988 at Vienna's Burgtheater under the direction of Claus Peymann and shone a spotlight on the problematic practice called »inner emigration« or »camouflage«.^[3] She commented as follows:

»In *Anna and Anna*, which is not a key piece – I didn't mean just one particular person, I wouldn't have wanted to do that under any circumstances – I processed certain external circumstances ... in a fictional character. For me, this character represents people who thought they were ... in some sort of inner exile; but who in truth supported the regime by daily subservience and as daily mouthpieces of the publicity the Third Reich relied on. They probably had to print a myriad of lies in the newspapers they worked for, without protest ... and yet they felt no need to take any further action on this resistance they felt against the regime. This strange kind of schizophrenia is something I have never understood, to this day, but it strikes me as quite characteristic of many people, not just in the media«^[4]

(HPö)

She was a driven woman – both by the times she was born into and by her own lofty ambitions. Young Hilde Spiel wanted to be a writer. »I'm twenty-four and I still haven't done anything to earn immortality« (Spiel 1989: 125), she wrote in her memoirs, even though by that time, she had already been ambitiously building her writing career. The young author's impressive literary record included more than forty stories and short stories, three novels, and two novellas.^[5] Most of her stories and short stories, early heralds of her great talent, were printed in the *Neue Freie Presse*. When Hilde Spiel's first novel, *Kati auf der Brücke* (*Katie on the Bridge*, 1933), won a prestigious prize for young writers, the young woman felt she was »on the verge of a true literary existence« (Spiel 1989: 93). Her path could have continued on this trajectory, the course was all set for a literary career in Austria. But fate would have it otherwise: The Dollfuß regime and all its implications cast the first shadows on Hilde Spiel's life.

2 Marčić, René: Strahlungen und Gegenstrahlungen. In: *Salzburger Nachrichten*, 23 December 1949, p. 22 (= Christmas supplement, p. 6).

3 Cf. Pöttker, Horst (2002): Konformität – Opportunismus – Opposition. Zur Typologie von Verhaltensweisen im NS-Regime und danach. In: *medien & zeit*, 17(2-3), pp. 4-11.

4 Hausjell, Fritz (1989): »Those were sentences that really rattled us to the core.« A conversation with journalist Hilde Spiel about the »Year of Reflection« 1988 and the controversial René Marčić Prize for Journalism. In: *medien & zeit*, 4(1), pp. 13-17, pp. 14f.

5 For a summary of Hilde Spiel's early publications, see Strickhausen 1996: 427ff., who recorded most of them bibliographically.

Youth and studies in Vienna

Hilde Spiel was born in Vienna in 1911 as the only child of a Catholic family with Jewish roots. Both father and mother came from Jewish families but had converted to Catholicism. After elementary school, she attended and graduated from Eugenie Schwarzwald's High School for Women. Schwarzwald was to be the first influential figure of Spiel's life. The school was very modern and progressive by the standards of the time. Following the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy, its mission was to instill in its students confidence in the future of the young Austrian Republic and a sense of cosmopolitanism (cf. Strickhausen 1996: 10ff.). Eugenie Schwarzwald, born in Polupanowka on the Russian border of the Habsburg Monarchy and raised in Czernowitz, was one of the first women to earn a university degree, which she completed in Zurich because women could not attend university in the capital of Vienna (cf. Spiel 1989: 56). In Vienna, she opened a school with the emancipatory creed: »Girls were supposed to learn everything that men knew« (Spiel 1989: 56).

Following in Schwarzwald's footsteps, Hilde Spiel studied philosophy, psychology, and ethnology at the University of Vienna, earning her doctorate in 1936 with a dissertation entitled »An attempt at a theory of representation in film«. Since Spiel's family was chronically »short of cash« (Spiel 1989: 90), the young woman financed her studies with student jobs, such as at Paul Felix Lazarsfeld's »Economic Psychology Research Center« and as editor of a women's magazine (cf. Strickhausen 1996: 15ff.). Even at this early stage, she also wrote articles on cultural topics, reportages, travelogues, and reviews for various Austrian newspapers and magazines. Yet quantitatively, the bulk of her work clearly consisted of literary texts (cf. Kiegler-Griensteidl 1999: 58ff.). In the same year she earned her doctorate, Hilde Spiel left Vienna to live in London with her husband, German journalist and writer Peter de Mendelssohn. She did not permanently return to her hometown until 1963.

Commitment for democracy in a corporatist regime

In one of her essays entitled »I like living in Austria«, Hilde Spiel describes her motives for emigrating to England in 1936:

»I went into exile in 1936 because the corporatist regime made me nauseous [...]. That was not my world: A peasant pathos coupled with a willingness to scheme and make pacts with all sides, to pass Satan on the right, to willingly betray democracy rather than perish with it. Freedom was done for, and all that was left was a kind of sloppy bondage riddled with loopholes that I did not want to resort to« (Spiel 1981a: 17).

Horrified and saddened, Hilde Spiel observed the Civil War in February 1934 as well as the slow emergence of the corporatist regime and its »distortion (..) into an imitation of the future Nazi regime« (Spiel 1992a: 35). And when Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg and Hitler concluded their pact in the summer of 1936, Austria's annexation by Hitler's Germany was merely a matter of time (cf. Spiel 1992a: 35). The erosion of Austrian democracy, initially gradual, and Hitler's seizure of power in the neighboring country prompted Hilde Spiel to manifest her democratic political attitude in a formal, institutional setting. In 1933, she joined the Social Democratic Workers' Party (SDAP). She attended protest meetings against Nazi rule in Germany and right-wing political forces in Austria: »Nazis, storm troopers, home guards« (Spiel 1989: 99). After the SDAP was banned, she became involved in the underground. Together with her parents' maid, a long-standing member of the Workers' Party, she collected addresses of families in need whose men had fallen in the Civil War and the bloody fights of 12 February 1934. They compiled entire lists of names of needy people, which were sent to emissaries of the British Labour Party. These envoys had come to Vienna at the behest of Hugh Gaitskell, a lecturer in Political Economy who lived in Vienna at the time. Their mission was to support like-minded people on the continent by providing immediate financial aid. This political commitment was not without risk for Hilde Spiel. As she served as a courier, Hilde Spiel narrowly escaped arrest when a woman nearby was searched while Spiel was on her way to university with a bag full of lists of names. It was not the first time she had dodged the regime's henchmen. After the February battles, a Heimwehr squad raided the »Economic Psychology Research Center«, arresting all of its employees. Hilde Spiel was saved by the lucky circumstance that she happened to be out of the office that day. Her colleagues were held in prison for weeks, some even for months (cf. Spiel: 98ff.). In this context, her decision to join the Social Democratic Workers' Party merits special attention. Despite the fact that becoming a member of an organized group made her »feel a slight shudder at the loss (.) (of her) individuality« (Spiel 1989: 99), she opted for this symbolic act of joining the SDAP and the practical commitment it entailed (cf. Spiel 1992a: 34). »I felt I had to do something to acknowledge who was my adversary« (Spiel 1992a: 34), she said, looking back in old age. Her joining the party was thus also an expression of the great importance and hopes that she and her entire generation had placed in the First Republic. At the same time, however, it was also an expression of protest and disappointment at the fact that the country's dawn of political freedom had been cut short by the Dollfuß government. For Hilde Spiel, Austrian democracy did not die with Austria's annexation by Hitler's Germany in 1938, but earlier, with the Civil War in February 1934 (cf. Spiel 1989: 102). In her memoirs, she reflects:

»We wept that February. What happened four years later was horrific, but a foregone conclusion for anyone who would not close their eyes to reality« (Spiel 1989: 102).

Victims of censorship: The Special Train

Within just a year after the Civil War, Hilde Spiel was unable to find a publisher for her second novel *Der Sonderzug* (*The Special Train*). Its quasi non-existent editorial history offers revealing insights into the political and cultural climate of the authoritarian corporatist state. The novel was rejected, first by Zsolnay Verlag, then also by her new publisher Ralph A. Höger, not for lack of literary merit, but because of its topical political references. The political constellations described in *The Special Train* echoed the Austrian situation and would certainly not have passed the censorship authorities of the corporatist state (cf. Strickhausen 1996: 78ff.). Hilde Spiel commented on the rejection of her novel many years later:

»The rejection of the novel [...] *The Special Train*, which revolved around the Paris February fights of 1934, was due to the political upheaval that occurred in Vienna at the same time following a short Civil War« (Spiel 1981b: 173).

Since February 1934, Austria's cultural scene suffered from limited publication opportunities, performance bans, censorship, and covertly anti-Semitic selection criteria (cf. Bolbecher 1995: 17). For Hilde Spiel, the implications of this cultural-political straightjacketing primarily meant a bitter setback for her hopes as a young, aspiring author. As a writer, the rejection of *The Special Train* was and remained »the greatest disappointment of my life« (Spiel 1989: 118). The publisher Zsolnay Verlag, however, also had other considerations for rejecting her manuscript. The publisher wanted to also sell on the German market, yet by that time, membership in the »Reichsschrifttumskammer« was already a mandatory requirement for publication in Germany – a prerequisite which Hilde Spiel with her Jewish heritage did not meet under National Socialist race laws (cf. Strickhausen 1996: 78). Moreover, the publisher had already become a home for Austria's identitarian authors following the split of the P.E.N. Club in 1933 under the influence of the illegal Austrian NSDAP (see Amann 1996: 106). The political changes in the neighboring country cast their ominous shadows across the border, chilling the political and cultural climate in Austria. As a result of the National Socialist takeover of Germany, many Austrian artists, authors, and publicists lost a large part of their audience; many lost their livelihoods even before they emigrated (cf. Bolbecher 1995: 17). Hilde Spiel's later husband, Peter de Mendelssohn, managed to publish his book about minnesinger Oswald von Wolkenstein in Austria, but only because he published under the pen name Carl Johann Leuchtenberg. In a bitter twist of irony, it was met with enthusiastic reviews by critics in Nazi Germany (cf. Spiel 1989: 117). Hilde Spiel's new publisher only

agreed to a small project, a summer book whose profane title, *Verwirrung am Wolfgangsee* (*Confusion at Lake Wolfgang*), on which the publisher insisted, immediately irked Spiel (cf. Spiel 1989: 119). Soon, she regretted having agreed to »the lightness the publisher wanted«, this »blarney without rhyme or reason« (Spiel 1989: 119), which she considered a betrayal of »great literature« (cf. Spiel 1989: 119). »The title made it sound more like an illustrated magazine, but I was in a bind, had to make money« (Spiel 1992a: 41), she later justified why she had consented to such trivial literature.

Escape from collaborationism and anti-Semitism

The book was the »first compromise, the first adaptation to the political conditions from which Hilde Spiel sought to escape when she chose exile« (Strickhausen 1996: 78f.). In retrospect, Hilde Spiel calls the corporatist regime a »blurry, fuzzy time« (Spiel 1989: 103).

She found herself drawn ever deeper into this moral quagmire. She even had an affair with a fascist, finding herself on forays in Viennese nightlife amongst the new ruling elite (cf. Spiel 1989: 120f.). This »process of blurring, of slow but inevitable corruption«, the »fear of myself changing« (Spiel 1989: 114) ultimately forced Hilde Spiel to leave Austria. The young woman obviously felt the danger of becoming a mindless follower. That's what she wanted to escape: the danger of making ever more and ever greater concessions, like her lighthearted summer book. But dangers also lurked elsewhere. Hilde Spiel watched supporters of the banned National Socialist party, which continued to operate from the underground, committing small acts of terror around the university; time and again, there were attacks on Jewish students, some of them bloody. Hilde Spiel was deeply affected by the murder of Moritz Schlick, a philosophy professor whom she held in high esteem, which the anti-Semitic press immediately exploited as an act of hostility against Jews (cf. Spiel 1989: 103ff.). Even though she does not explicitly mention it in her memoirs, the young woman had to feel that her Jewish heritage could make her a potential victim of such crimes any day. In summary, the political changes in her homeland clearly began to inhibit Hilde Spiel's development as a writer (cf. Neunzig 1999: 25). After *Confusion at Lake Wolfgang* was published, Hilde Spiel did not publish another book in Austria for many years. Her novel *The Special Train* remains unpublished to this day (1), apart from a few excerpts.

Writing in a foreign language

From the fall of 1936, Hilde Spiel lived in London with her husband. The initially voluntary choice to live in England turned into exile when the National Socialists seized power in Austria in 1938. The difficult work conditions for a writer, which Hilde Spiel had already suffered in corporatist Austria, became even worse in English exile, albeit in a different form. The greatest challenge for Hilde Spiel, as for all exiled authors, was the language. The foreign country with its unfamiliar language rendered Spiel's main tool, her German language, utterly useless. Exiled authors were »cheated out of the capital they brought with them« (Spiel 1976a: 39). That is why the young woman eagerly set out to learn English. »It was unclear how Hitler's Reich would end [...] and it would have been a mistake to rigidly stick with German only.« (Spiel 1992a: 41) Switching languages was unavoidable, not least because of the slim chances for exiled authors to get published in England. There were neither exile publishers, as was the case in the Netherlands (Allert de Lange, Querido) or Sweden (Beermann-Fischer), at least until these countries fell under Nazi occupation (see Wiemann 1998: 20ff.), nor was there a German-reading public (cf. Tergit 1973: 135). The lack of publishing opportunities also encouraged Spiel to turn to journalism. From May 1941 to April 1943, Hilde Spiel wrote editorials, mostly book reviews, for the exile publication *Die Zeitung* (cf. Strickhausen 1996: 430). Getting published by an English publishing house likely largely depended on the ›right‹ choice of material. Reviewers preferred historiographical, political, and autobiographical works, as well as novels with current political references (cf. Strickhausen 1992: 370ff.), as Hilde Spiel found out with her Vienna-based novel *The Fruits of Prosperity*, which was rejected by English publishers. »I would probably have written many novels had it not been for the problem that the English were not interested in what I found interesting«, she later said (Spiel 1981c: 407).

English role models

As she appropriated English as a literary language, Hilde Spiel was inspired by contemporary British authors such as W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, or Virginia Woolf, as well as English newspapers and magazines such as *The Observer*, *Sunday Times*, *Listener*, *The New Statesman and Nation*, and *Time and Tide*, whose editorial team consisted of women (cf. Spiel 1989: 155f.). To Hilde Spiel, the essayists of these publications – Desmond Shawe-Taylor, James Agate, or young Philip Toynbee – were »models of critical and contemplative writing« (Spiel 1989: 156). From the great masters of the English essay – English writer Charles Lamb (1775-1834), who is considered the inventor of the essay, William Hazlitt, or Walter Pater –,

Hilde Spiel learned »that simplicity does not equal simplistic, brief does not mean shallow, and transparency is the result of a long process of crystallization« (Spiel 1989: 157). An essential aspect of Hilde Spiel's switch to English is that it fundamentally redefined her relationship with and use of her German mother tongue. Through her English exile, she learned »how to really use German« (Spiel 1992b: 78). She also adopted the descriptive, pictorial, and transparent elements that are considered linguistic virtues in English, as well as »a certain reluctance for abstraction, into which German tends to fall so easily« (Spiel 1972: 94), later using those elements to enrich her native-language writing (cf. Spiel 1972: 94). The necessity to acquire a foreign language thus led her to reinvent her mother tongue as a work tool, which expressed itself most strongly in her German essay writing.

Discovering the essay

From 1940/41, Hilde Spiel wrote her first English-language book – the aforementioned Vienna novel *The Fruits of Prosperity*, which she finished around 1943. In a letter to exiled Austrian lyricist Theodor Kramer, she complained about the laborious process of its creation: »I am making very slow progress because I am writing it in English, and it takes me a month to write ten pages« (Spiel 1995: 15). To the author's great disappointment, however, no British publisher was willing to print the book (cf. Schramm 1999: 70 and Neunzig 1999: 26). It did not appear until 1981 in Hilde Spiel's own German translation (cf. Spiel 1986a: 293). The lack of interest in *The Fruits of Prosperity* on the part of English publishers made Spiel largely abandon literary writing. According to the author, it »kept me from working as a fiction writer, which was, after all, my original goal« (Spiel 1981c: 407). After this setback, she moved on to writing essays in English. In a great, unexpected success for Hilde Spiel (cf. Spiel 1992a: 41.), *The New Statesman* published her essay on Henri Alain-Fournier's novel *Le grand Meaulnes* in the highly prestigious section ›Books in general‹ in 1944 (cf. Schramm 1999: 70). However, her gigs for *The New Statesman* remained very sporadic and limited. Four more of her articles appeared in 1946, but she was only able to place a total of three articles in the years up to 1952 (cf. Strickhausen 1996: 430). Nevertheless, it started a development that was to continue in her work for German-language papers. The need to write in the foreign language English steered Hilde Spiel toward the small form, the essay. In a television interview a few years before her death, she conceded that it was far easier to learn the art of feuilletonistic essay writing (cf. Spiel 1986b). On writing in a foreign language, she said:

»This light, witty, concise English way of writing about things is easier to pick up than the artistic form of expression that conveys the things themselves: Immigrants will often find themselves unable to access formats that require intuitive and individual power of

language, that require the writer to be aware of the deepest layers of dormant images and thoughts« (Spiel 1992b: 77f.).

Hilde Spiel's more or less involuntary transition from narrative to essayistic writing can thus be seen as a direct consequence of her exile situation. Other exiled authors such as Ernst Bornemann or Hilde Spiel's husband, Peter de Mendelssohn, underwent similar developments in their foreign-language exile (vgl. Strickhausen 1996: 280).

The path to becoming a freelance journalist

But other, external conditions also favored Hilde Spiel's path to journalism. From September 1947 to May 1948, she wrote theater reviews for the Berlin edition of the daily newspaper *Die Welt*. This, too, was a twist of fate. Her husband Peter de Mendelssohn was involved in rebuilding the press infrastructure as a British-American press officer in post-war Berlin. His mission was, among other things, to identify politically untainted German journalists to start new newspapers. In August 1947, Mendelssohn became the first editor-in-chief of *Die Welt* and appointed his wife as theater critic. Hilde Spiel's work set new accents for the press as well as for the stage. She also wrote film reviews, book reviews, and various other cultural articles (cf. Siebenhaar 1999: 88ff.). This was the first extended trial period for Hilde Spiel as a journalist, during which she began to leverage her English influences. For the first time, Hilde Spiel's theater reviews blended her Austrian and English style, pairing the light, yet stringent English touch with Austrian grace and musicality (cf. Langenbucher 2000: 361). Hilde Spiel described her stint in Berlin and the resulting reorientation to the German-speaking world as a »switchboard of fate«, since she and her husband »were (re)absorbed by the German language, by the German world, whether we wanted it or not, and (.) never quite (found) our way) back into the realm of the British« (Spiel 1989: 234). It was a reimmersion and reintegration into the world of the mother tongue, which was not without consequences. Immediately after her return to London, Hilde Spiel began setting up a »syndicate for cultural reports from London« (cf. Spiel 1990: 114). From then on, she contributed articles to a number of newspapers, weeklies, and radio stations in former West Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, and the Netherlands on all cultural events in the British capital as a freelance journalist (cf. Strickhausen 1999: 96). These included such respected papers as the *Berliner Tagesspiegel*, the *Zürcher Weltwoche* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (cf. Simhofer 1998: 87ff.). From the fall of 1952, Hilde Spiel also reported on the Salzburg Festival (cf. Strickhausen 1999: 96ff.).

Mother tongue as the only home

Hilde Spiel felt that life in exile, and especially bilingual life, made her »the product of schizophrenia« (Spiel 1972: 93). Shortly after the end of the war, she felt the call of her homeland and used her status as a journalist to travel to Vienna as a »war correspondent« for the *New Statesman* in January 1946 (cf. Schramm 1999: 69ff.). This partially painful reunion with her homeland set in motion the »slow process(es) of disengagement from the English-speaking world« (Spiel 1968: 154) and anticipated the later return to Austria, which, as Hilde Spiel emphasized, was ultimately »inevitable« (Spiel 1968: 154). Her stint in Vienna was followed by a trip to Berlin, but Hilde Spiel continued to live in England for a long time afterwards, all the while writing primarily in German. As for many other exiles, the German language had become the only home they had left after losing their physical homeland (cf. Spiel 1972: 94). For them, regaining their mother tongue was a »gift; I never stopped being happy about it« (Spiel 1972: 93f.). This is also why, from 1946 onwards, she turned back to her German mother tongue and developed an almost exclusively German-language essayistic oeuvre.

»I'm drowning in a sea of newspaper words.«

She had switched languages once again, but retained the presentational format of essays, which she had successfully acquired and tested in England. Although she did write another book, the English-language exile novel *The Darkened Room* (1961), her major literary project was an approximately 500-page historical biography in German, *Fanny von Arnstein oder die Emanzipation. Ein Frauenleben an der Zeitenwende 1758-1818* [*Fanny von Arnstein or the emancipation: A women's life during changing times 1758-1818*] (1962). The fact that she wrote these and many other books parallel to her vast journalistic activity and prolific translation work reveals the great ambition that drove Hilde Spiel's writing career throughout her life. Her promising literary beginnings in Vienna never left her. Throughout her life, Hilde Spiel was accompanied by this conflict between the tedious, time-consuming and, in her mind, inferior daily rut of journalism on the one hand, and her ambitions as a fiction writer, which was relegated to the sidelines by her journalistic workload. She felt as if she were drowning »in a sea of newspaper words« (Spiel 1976b: 254). Moreover, she always suffered from the fact that her journalistic work earned her incomparably more respect and recognition than her literary output. Literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki, for example, never tired of singing the praises of Hilde Spiel as an essayist, while he found little artistic merit in her literary work (cf. Reich-Ranicki 1998: 92). He did, however, recognize the literary quality and literary rank of her journalistic essays, in which he detected »the temperament of a narrator« (Reich-Ranicki 1998: 31). However, it is

precisely this fusion of Hilde Spiel's literary and journalistic talents that makes her journalistic work so great. Time and again, she succeeded in making complicated aesthetic, literary, or philosophical issues transparent to her readership, just as she had learned from her English role models. Journalism benefits greatly from such crisscrossing between genres (cf. Langenbacher 2000: 360ff.). Her »powerful language, intellectual clarity, and keen observation« (Langenbacher 2000: 360) could have also afforded Hilde Spiel a career in literature.

Exile and its consequences...

Hilde Spiel's unexpected great success as an English-language essayist made this genre »stick with her«, also, and especially, in terms of her native German writing. The combination of a new form of presentation, the essay, and her reinvented, anglicized use of the German language proved to be a great asset to Hilde Spiel's writing. This »schizophrenic condition«, the feeling of being torn, which the change of language had triggered in her, ultimately inevitably led her back to her mother tongue. In summary, the new language of her exile, which led her to discover the essay as a form of linguistic expression, and the switch back to her German mother tongue, facilitated by both inner conflict and as external conditions, such as her stint in Berlin, were the driving factors that propelled Hilde Spiel's development into a journalist during her exile. Moreover, the synthesis of Austrian and English influences gave her a unique writing style that made Hilde Spiel the undisputed, multi-award-winning master of the essay. Given the limitations of language as a means to describe the world, Hilde Spiel describes the great enrichment that bilingualism afforded her:

»Each fabric of words [...] is a different kind of filter through which to obtain a distillate of reality. It can't be more than that. But those who sift reality not only through one, but through several filters, ultimately obtain the finest and purest essence« (Spiel 1992b: 78).

About the author

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