"[I]n the Barbed-Wire Cages of Democracy"[1].
Fiction and Truth in Robert Neumann's Exile Novel *The Inquest*

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Robert Neumann, an Austrian writer of Jewish origin who had emigrated to the United Kingdom as early as 1933, used his exile experience some ten years later in his novel *The Inquest* written in English (published in 1944), which illuminates in retrospect the life of a (semi-)fictitious[3] fellow exile named Bibiana Santis. The novel describes step by step the British author Shilling's efforts to fathom Santis's past and to uncover the precise reason which caused her presumed suicide. In his research, Shilling time and again comes across people who had to do with Santis, who could have helped her but failed to do so out of laziness and/or fear, among them British politicians, staff members of refugee organisations or fellow exiles. Santis, who is after all the actual protagonist of the novel, and her boyfriend Mario Ventura seem to have been surrounded by a bubble of ignorance and cynicism which prevented them from improving their situation in any way. In this regard, the text may be read at least also as an accusation: "You can be guilty of muddle. You can be guilty of lack of phantasy. You can be guilty of laziness of heart"[4], Neumann makes the anti-Fascist resistance fighter (now refugee) Ventura say towards the end of the novel, and the words sound almost like a summary of the whole situation.

Based on archive materials of the University of London, in particular on copies of interviews with contemporary witnesses prepared by the Research Centre for German and Austrian Studies in the context of its "Oral History Project", this paper will discuss the problem of to what extent the description of flight and exile in *The Inquest* is consistent with historical reality, and if there are discrepancies, which intentions of the author's might be behind them.

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[1] Neumann, Robert: *The Inquest* [1944], New York 1945, p. 204.
[2] Article translated by Übersetzungsbüro 2000, Oldenburg.
[3] Some literary researchers found similarities with the sculptress Anna Mahler as well as with Neumann's then girlfriend Rolly Becker; cf. the related statements made by Richard Dove, who nonetheless points out right from the start that for all that the figure of Bibiana Santis is not meant to be a portrait of a given real person, but rather a figure with some universally valid features; Dove, Richard: "Ein schweres Leben. Robert Neumann in England 1939 – 1945" ["A Hard Life. Robert Neumann in England 1939 – 1945"], in: Jäger, Anne Maximiliane (ed.): *Einmal Emigrant – immer Emigrant? Der Schriftsteller und Publizist Robert Neumann (1897 – 1975)* [*Once an Emigrant – Always an Emigrant? The Writer and Publicist Robert Neumann (1897 – 1975)*], Munich 2006, pp. 82 – 101, here p. 97.
[4] Neumann, *The Inquest*, p. 220.

The novel thrives right from the start on its mystifications. Thus, there is mention of a "famous Santis case"[5] supposed to have occurred in the past, which little by little is revealed to be a failed attempt to assassinate Mussolini. If it is true that the protagonist seems to have been part of the conspiracy, her precise role in it is never made quite clear to the reader throughout the book. Also her many names – "Bibiana or Vivian", "Santis[] or Hermann", possibly also Spiers[6] –, which taken together are some kind of metaphor for the labyrinthine paths of life of the person named by them, first and foremost serve the task of piquing the readers' curiosity about a broken, non-linear exile biography. By presenting this biography as a cluster of various mysteries the biggest of which is the reason for Santis's end, Neumann manages to make a virtue out of his own misery and to create a pleasant peg on which to hang the rather difficult and thankless topic of refugees from the European Continent. It is hardly surprising that the protagonist before crossing the English Channel (seen in retrospect mode) still acts as distributor of anti-Nazi pamphlets in Fascist Berlin and as resistance fighter in the Spanish Civil War amongst others. One of the novel's leitmotifs is the recurrent association of the exiles with the term "[d]riftwood"[7], a term which suggests the idea that most of them have behind them a similarly turbulent past, that they were driven by events from one place to the next and therefore had to travel not only a far distance, but also one with many stops and events. Such associations are supported by the fact that the last work of literature the author Shilling has begun to write is a Ulysses novel of all things[8].

Reality as a rule appeared to be much less dramatic: The persons who agreed to be interviewed for the Oral History Project rarely reported any strong political commitment in the period before their flight[9] (let alone any violent resistance against Europe's Fascist regimes), nor do their descriptions of how they emigrated from Germany, Austria or Czechoslovakia usually bear any resemblance to the hunt across half of the Continent as outlined in the novel. Since several of the contemporary witnesses who had their say in the context of the said project were anyway still under age during the thirties, the persons concerned more often than not got to the United Kingdom simply by way of the

[5] Ibid., p. 10.
[6] Ibid., p. 11.
[7] Ibid., p. 13.
[8] Sylvia Patsch (who mistakenly calls Shilling an Austrian), by the way, takes this to be a reminiscence of the author Hans Flesch-Brunningen, who had just written a novel entitled *Untimely Ulysses*; Patsch, Sylvia M.: *Österreichische Schriftsteller im Exil in Großbritannien. Ein Kapitel vergessene österreichische Literatur. Romane, Autobiographien, Tatsachenberichte auf englisch und deutsch* [*Exiled Austrian Writers in the United Kingdom. A Forgotten Chapter of Austrian Literature. Novels, Autobiographies, Factual Reports in English and German*], Vienna 1985, pp. 49 et seq.
[9] As an example of a politically marked past, see Oral History Project, interview with Gertrud Weingraf, in particular pp. 3 et seq. (University of London, Senate House, Institute of Modern Language Research, Exile Archive, EXS / box 9 / 4).

"kindertransporte" (children's transports) or as students[10]. But even if they talk about their parents' life and flight, there is no mention whatsoever of events such as the Spanish Civil War and only to some limited extent of any Ulyssean wanderings.

An exception to this rule is the description of a life story marked by a long-lasting flight from Prague via Italy, France and Gibraltar to London: The person interviewed reports amongst other things how she was detained under dramatic circumstances at the Italian-French border because she was believed to be a German spy, how in the wake of the German attack on France she had to walk pregnant from Paris as far as the Mediterranean coast and together with two thousand Czech soldiers on the run was taken to the British territory of Gibraltar aboard an overcrowded coal freighter[11]. This description, some passages of which read as if they had directly flowed from Robert Neumann's pen, strikingly proves that such biographies were very possible in Europe at that time – even if in this case there remains the difference that the person interviewed, unlike Bibiana Santis, was busy enough coping with her own fate and had neither any intention nor the means to intervene as it were en route in Spain's fortunes or to commit herself to the resistance against the Nazis. Most of the major difficulties described in the interviews were about organising a permit to exit from the territory controlled by Hitler and/or a visa for the United Kingdom[12]. If both could be procured, there was often a good chance that the merely technical aspects of the exit went to some extent smoothly and without troubles.

Thus, the bottom line is that even if the circumstances of Santis's previous history may not appear to be downright absurd – given that Neumann's friend and fellow writer Lion Feuchtwanger, for instance, could only manage to reach a safe port at the acute risk of his life[13] –, on the other hand they may certainly not be considered to be typical for an exile's life and in their dramatic coincidence clearly point to some hidden compositional intention. This is not merely about arousing interest in topics of the European Continent[14]. In the tradition of the classical "zeitroman" (contemporary novel) of the Weimar Republic, which was designed to allow the most comprehensive possible and as it were panoramic view of the epoch, the

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[10] Cf. Oral History Project, for instance the interviews with Ernst Flesch, p. 5 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 8 / 3), Elisabeth Rosenthal, p. 32 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 9 / 2), and Margarete Hinrichsen, p. 16 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 8 / 4).

[11] Cf. Oral History Project, interview with Eva Sommerfreund, pp. 14 et seqq. (Exile Archive, EXS / box 9 / 4).

[12] Cf. Oral History Project, for instance the interviews with Eric Rose, pp. 2 et seq. (Exile Archive, EXS / box 9 / 2), Stella Rothenberg, p. 8 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 9 / 3), and Erika Young, pp. 8 et seqq. (Exile Archive, EXS / box 9 / 5).

[13] Cf. Weidermann, Volker: *Das Buch der verbrannten Bücher* [*The Book of Burnt Books*], 2nd ed., Cologne 2008, p. 143.

[14] – which for a long time was only poorly developed, although by the outbreak of war some 75,000 refugees had come to the United Kingdom from the German-speaking countries alone; cf. Brunnhuber, Nicole: *The Faces of Janus. English-Language Fiction by German-Speaking Exiles in Great Britain, 1933 – 45*, Berne 2005, p. 16.

author seeks to incorporate into his text anything possibly related directly or indirectly to the general situation. It is therefore coherent for him to not only saddle his protagonist with a long series of dramatic (and usually negative) adventures, but also deal out whatever he cannot pack into her biography onto the shoulders of Ventura – who for example witnesses the torpedoing of the "Arandora Star", carrying internees to Canada – and of Shilling, whose hotel gets bombed out and who despite his British citizenship as a repatriate likewise has to cope with the fate of an exile in disguise after all. Thus, the common fate of this triad of central persons already contains as it were all of the other 'more typical' refugee biographies, each of which perhaps comprises only one or two of the many misfortunes described by Neumann.

There remains the question about the more specific details of the exile condition outlined by the author in *The Inquest*. Was the general attitude in Britain at the time really as precarious as the plot of the novel would suggest? First of all, a glance at the text itself:

Crucial passages in this context are for instance those set in Bloomsbury House, the headquarters of an institution which in reality as in the novel was founded by "[s]ome Quakers, Catholics and Jews"[15] as a place to go for refugees from the Continent. Shilling, who appears there in order to find out something about the person he is interested in, finds himself in a world in which anything seems more important than the clients' welfare. An epitome of the general attitude prevailing according to Neumann not only here, but also beyond, is for instance the following comment made by an administrative assistant (associated with the Quakers) to a young woman placed as a worker in a private household:

> „I called you in because there are complaints against you, I have a letter here from Miss Danby, she says you refuse to dig in the garden on your afternoons off, although she explained to you it is healthier for a girl of twenty-two than going to the cinema, and she says you want the whole 17s. 6d. paid out to you while she thinks it's rather a lot of money for a girl to spend on luxuries, she is right there, so she'd rather give you a shilling a day and put the rest into a post savings account, also she complains she tries to make you learn hymns by heart and some of the Holy Scriptures but you obstruct her although you have been converted only last year and have to make up, she says, for twenty-one years when you have not been a Christian, now Gertrud I want you to understand that we are not quite of Miss Danby's opinion as far as your afternoons are concerned, I don't see why you shouldn't go to the cinema occasionally with some other girl if it is a suitable film not just on a Sunday, but what I want to impress on you Gertrud is your position, you ought to adapt yourself, think Gertrud what they did to your father and mother in Germany, Miss Danby took you out of charity, don't forget that, Miss Danby is your only true friend in the whole world, and if you don't make a success of it Gertrud we might have to tell the Home Office, and once they cancel your permit – well, you know what it means!"[16]

This tirade without a single full stop exposes several parties involved in what happened in the shadows behind at the same time: first of all, the official British policy and administration

[15] Neumann, *The Inquest*, p. 92.
[16] Ibid., p. 115.

(here represented by the "Home Office"), which puts obstacles in the exiles' way by making it seemingly difficult and subject to strict conditions to obtain a work permit[17]. Next comes the employer, who takes advantage of the young woman's situation and makes her toil for her in slave-like conditions trying at the same time to force her own view of the world on her. Last but not least, there is the assistant of "Bloomsbury House" herself, who does not take the side of her ward, but that of the would-be slaveholder and, to make matters worse, mentions the fate of her parents (who presumably perished in Germany) so as to intimidate and threaten the young immigrant with what might happen also to her if she does not perform the function she is supposed to perform and as a result loses not only her work permit, but possibly also her residence permit. Which is coming full circle to the responsibility of politics and administration. The harshest criticism here, however, is that of Bloomsbury or "Charity House", as the institution is mostly called in the novel[18]: Blurting out the Nazis' violent regime as an indirect threat, the assistant somehow associates herself with them – it is not hard to imagine that many similar threats were made in Germany during the period concerned.

Moreover, she is in no way the only employee of the organisation who in her work shows an appalling degree of disrespect for human dignity. In even more detail, the author mentions and discusses the case of an employee (in charge of Jewish immigrants) who is first introduced to the reader by her cutting off a conversation with a woman in need in mid-sentence in order to have her "second breakfast sandwich"[19]. The narrator does not fail to add promptly that this is part of the general practice of the house: "[J]ust let the client go on prattling, and munch your food"[20]. It is hardly surprising that the assistant concerned, with the name Mrs Fine, does not appear overly cooperative when Shilling – who is treated as a refugee because he refrains from revealing that he is English – tries to learn something from her about Santis's fate. For some length of time she even refuses to accept that Santis is dead since she has no official document confirming her death. Of course it turns out that the

[17] In research, the way British policy dealt with the refugees is a controversial issue: Stent for instance draws a comparison with the USA stating that the country on the other side of the Atlantic, "vast, mighty and rich, refused to liberalize its strict immigration quota system in any way, or even to mortgage its quota ahead for a few years", whereas the UK, especially immediately before the outbreak of war, had acted "in the best tradition of British compassion"; Stent, Ronald: *A Bespattered Page? The Internment of His Majesty's 'Most Loyal Enemy Aliens'*, London 1980, p. 21. Kapp and Mynatt (here quoted as an example for many other) display a substantially more critical view of things focussing upon the years from 1933 to 38 and pointing out that the United Kingdom at that time "pursued a policy of highly selective immigration of refugees", whereas "the policy of the French Republic maintained the tradition of sanctuary for the persecuted"; Kapp, Yvonne; Margaret Mynatt: *British Policy and the Refugees 1933 – 1941*. With a Foreword by Charmian Brinson, London 1997, p. 51. A compromise position is taken by Brunnhuber, who likewise talks about "a highly restrictive immigration policy", but at the same time points out that "Britain's significance as a country of refuge for German speakers [...] should not be underestimated"; Brunnhuber, *The Faces of Janus*, p. 16.

[18] Neumann, *The Inquest*, p. 93 and others.

[19] Ibid., p. 93.

[20] Ibid.

protagonist (who for her part had turned to "Charity House") also did not receive any help at this stage of her ordeal. And the narrative voice uses the opportunity to point out once more that the assistant's behaviour is to be seen in a larger context: "[T]his young woman, Mrs Fine", as the text points out,

> was by no means wicked, not malicious, not even given to ill-humour. [...] If she talked to this client as she did [to wit Shilling; this author's note], it was a process divorced from her; she would not listen to it more closely than a barmaid to the electric pianola's hammerings. [...]
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> And as to the pianola's melody, it was not of her own making; it was the melody of the House! It was not out of spontaneous enthusiasm, not out of a nebulous Jewish solidarity extant only in nebulous anti-Semitic brains, that the rich Britishers financing the enterprise tackled the meting-out of Fate to the scum of a Continent. [...] The anti-Jewish tide, staved off this island successfully for centuries, went with the scum's vermin and with its stink. Therefore: keep out the scum! And if you can't keep them out: at least keep them down and keep them on the move.[21]

These harsh accusations against the operators of Bloomsbury House do not have any direct counterpart in the Oral History Project interviews. Whenever the aid organisation is mentioned, it is mostly in a much more neutral tone[22]. A slightly negative echo, however, is noticeable where one of the project participants reports that her mother "spent many hours at a place called Bloomsbury House", where "some very limited financial assistance for refugees" was granted[23]. According to this statement, the necessary effort on the applicant's part seems to have been highly disproportionate to the aid granted; the person interviewed however was not stating any possible reasons for this disproportion.

More outspoken is one refugee in his memoirs written at close distance, whose descriptions of unwelcoming assistants, eternal waiting times etc.[24] are indeed redolent of Neumann's lamentation, in which one reads amongst other things that "those humiliated and burdened ones, The Species, [had] to wait [...] from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M., and sometimes for days on end" and that indeed before the war, in the "heydays of Charity House" they made the people wait "until they turned black in their faces"[25].

Opposed to this is the report of a contemporary witness who likewise had come to the United Kingdom as a refugee, but there got the chance to work herself for the "Jewish Refugee Committee" in Woburn and in Bloomsbury House respectively, and thus as it were also represents the other side. (Neumann's famous Mrs Fine by the way – who got her English name by marriage – is after all also part of the emigrant community, or at least was before

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[21] Ibid., pp. 108 et seq.
[22] Cf.. Oral History Project, for instance the interview with Mimi Glover, p. 26 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 8 / 2).
[23] Cf. Oral History Project, interview with Dorothea Galewski, p. 7 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 8 / 4).
[24] This author is not authorised by law to quote directly from the document concerned or to refer to precise page numbers. For any further information see Erwin Popper, *Memoir*, Exile Archive, EXS / box 1 / 2.
[25] Neumann, *The Inquest*, p. 93 and p. 95 respectively.

they "pick[ed] her out, exalt[ed] her among the others[] [by] taking her as a typist halftime for 27s. 6d."[26], a circumstance which might suggest that Neumann was being diplomatic and refrained from depicting ignorance and cynicism as a British domain.) The person interviewed, without making mention of the dark sides of her place of work, describes the tasks assigned to her there quite matter-of-factly as aid for

> Jewish refugees who had no jobs and no money and who had to be supported. One had to help them reunite with their relatives who might be in a different part of England. It was really general straightforward welfare work. People came for money, people came for housing, people came for help with filling in forms because they couldn't speak English.[27]

Her conclusion is clearly positive: "The work was extremely pleasant. [...] I got on very well with everybody"[28]. If it is hardly reasonable to expect that anyone would openly admit to the latter not having been the case, the fact that the person concerned was so forthright in talking about her good relationships with the clients without having been prompted to do so would go to suggest that the type "Mrs Fine" was at least not omnipresent in reality. In the novel, there is only one slightly less unsavoury character related to "Charity House", a volunteer who shows much more commitment in her dealings with Shilling, albeit largely clueless as to the matter, and also in this case it seems important to the author to sully even her commitment with a foul aftertaste, since her thoughts are much more centred on self-adulation because of her important honorary office than on the situation of the persons in need[29].

An overall view would suggest that Neumann picked up on some actually existing negative aspects of Bloomsbury House and scaled them up through his special literary focus in such a way as to ensure that any possibly more favourable elements could not but be dwarfed by them.

This approach of the author and/or tendency of the novel becomes even clearer when it comes to issues of the prevailing attitude as well as employment options for the immigrants in the United Kingdom – issues commented on much more frequently and in much more detail by the interviewees. The general impression resulting from their statements is quite ambivalent: On the one hand, many of the experiences reported bear resemblance to the situation of the hapless young housemaid described by Neumann who was mercilessly exploited by her employer (see above), and it becomes clear that many of the exiles were virtually pushed to the brink of ruin due to restrictions which made it impossible to build a

[26] Ibid., p. 93.
[27] Oral History Project, interview with Adelheid Schweitzer, p. 20 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 9 / 3).
[28] Ibid., pp. 20 et seq.
[29] Cf. Neumann, *The Inquest*, pp. 97 et seq.

new existence. Thus, besides the difficulties of being allowed to enter the country in the first place[30], the interviewees frequently mention general working bans or only very limited work permits (designed to prevent British citizens being ousted from their jobs)[31], and sometimes they also broach issues of conflicts with their respective employers, mostly private citizens who – just as described by Neumann – jumped at the opportunity of getting a household help who was both inexpensive and docile due to the circumstances[32]. The fact that the literary character Bibiana Santis while still alive was constantly hard-pressed for money and had to accept even a "sixpenny piece" from Shilling in order to light the gas stove in her room[33] is anything but an exaggeration against this background, even if the war cynically had the effect of relieving the economic pressure on many of the refugees over the years, since the native labour force were drafted into the army and the situation required the production of large amounts of military supplies.

On the other hand, there are quite frequent allusions, partly even in the same interviews, to some very pleasant encounters with the local people, which in the best case helped make the exiles' life much easier. There is mention of employers who wanted to help, sought to create an agreeable atmosphere, made presents to their employees etc., there is mention of locals who spoke up with the authorities for immigrants they were acquainted with, and a quite regular pattern was for interviewees of the Oral History Project to report on good friendships and even marriages with British citizens[34]. "I was so lucky with people"[35], says one of them. Seen from this angle, exile appears as a condition in which a person is strongly dependent on chance and the goodwill of those directly surrounding him or her – or to say it in the words of another contemporary witness: "So you see it always was not *what* you do but *who* you know"[36]. By the way, Neumann, too, had social contacts in Britain, for example with the writer Storm Jameson[37].

In the novel, by contrast, the refugees almost invariably encounter people who are unfriendly and anything but helpful. An émigré journalist named Roth, whom Shilling

[30] Cf. Oral History Project, for instance the interview with Peter Gellhorn, p. 12 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 8 / 4).
[31] Cf.. Oral History Project, for instance the interview with Alfred Dörfel, p. 6 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 8 / 3), and Eva Pollard, p. 3 (box 9 / 1).
[32] Cf. Oral History Project, for instance the interview with Mimi Glover, p. 23 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 8 / 4).
[33] Cf. Neumann, *The Inquest*, p. 29.
[34] Cf. Oral History Project, for instance the interviews with Mimi Glover, pp. 30 et seqq. and 34 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 8 / 4), Nelly Kuttner, pp. 30 et seq. (box 9 / 1), Klary Friedel, pp. 36 et seq. (box 8 / 3), and Stella Rotenberg, p. 10 (box 9 / 3).
[35] Oral History Project, interview with Helga Reutter, p. 27 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 9 / 2).
[36] Oral History Project, interview with Adelheid Schweitzer, p. 9 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 9 / 3); terms highlighted in the original.
[37] Cf. Dove, Richard: *Journey of No Return. Five German-Speaking Literary Exiles in Britain, 1933 – 1945*, London 2000, p. 155.

questions about Bibiana Santis, makes the following complaint: "Here they write to you Dear Sir Mr. Roth Esquire, I am your Obedient Servant, for all I care you may croak any day"[38]. Who exactly is referred to with "they" remains unclear, but it would be safe to assume that he is levelling his criticism at British authorities or also at potential employers or business partners. Though Roth, who has meanwhile risen to be a successful entrepreneur (as he does not fail to point out promptly by saying: "They don't write to me like this any longer, though"[39]), himself displays a quite similar mixture of politeness and lack of interest: He tells the story of how Santis wanted to borrow ten pounds from him, then five, than one, and by way of justifying his refusal of such request he laconically pleads some pretended and hardly specified principles[40]. In addition, as far as the presumed cause of Santis's death is concerned, he goes as far as saying: "But for all this – gas? She shouldn't have done that. It isn't done, it attracts attention. It causes inconvenience, am I right? The Police don't approve of it"[41]. In his fear that the displeasure of the authorities might fall back on the entire refugee community and thus ultimately also on him, he seems to be much less affected by the young woman's demise – of which he may have been one of the causes – than by the related circumstances. Exactly as in the case of Mrs Fine, it is of obvious importance to the author to stress that the local people have no monopoly on arrogance.

All the more he feels at ease to criticise also this side. The best example is Deputy Spiers, one of the most unsavoury characters of the whole novel, who at the same time is also represented very much as a caricature[42]. This character is a British politician whom Santis met during her time in Spain, as he was a member of a delegation sent there to get an on-site picture of the civil war. During his conversation with Shilling, it becomes ever clearer that he had enabled her to enter the United Kingdom out of very personal motives – having been in a relationship with her for some time[43] –, but then decided against her because the general attitude changed and he believed that his relationship with her could harm his political career and dropped her in cold blood when after the outbreak of war she ran the risk of being held in an internment camp for enemy aliens[44]. At this stage in turn (meaning: as long as Shilling has not yet informed him of her death), he fears as a typical turncoat would do that she might take her revenge on him for having indeed been detained for some length of time by telling his

[38] Neumann, *The Inquest*, p. 77.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., pp. 78 et seq.
[41] Ibid., p. 78.
[42] Cf. for instance the description of his outward appearance, which in an almost Dickensian manner allows a deep look into his inner life; Neumann, *The Inquest*, pp. 128 et seq.
[43] Cf. ibid. for instance p. 154.
[44] Cf. ibid., pp. 130 et seq. and 133 et seq.

well-to-do current fiancée about her relationship with him. To Shilling, he confesses the ugly truth. As to the political decision to lock up masses of immigrants from countries including Germany and Italy in internment camps in order to keep any possible spies under control, he finds nothing more intelligent to say than: "The aliens. We had to lock them up. It's one of the burdens of Democracy that one has to do such things. In an Authoritarian State there is just a Fuehrer giving an order. Why, if they preferred the other system why didn't they stay there?"[45] The only one who seems to be secretly yearning for the other system is he himself, who in that way would be relieved of the burden to make decisions.

It is safe to assume that Neumann wrote this passage also in order to get his own frustration off his chest since he had been a victim of the internment policy himself, just as had his then girlfriend Rolly Becker, to whom the novel is dedicated. His efforts to get help from his famous fellow writer Stefan Zweig, who was spared, had been unsuccessful – Zweig having declared he was unable to do anything for him pointing out his own precarious position as an Austrian in the UK[46]. H. G. Wells as well refused to help[47].

Very significant is a passage of *The Inquest* which describes a hearing of Ventura before the Aliens Tribunal. In this passage, Neumann makes the president of the tribunal responsible for vetting the immigrants for their ideological reliability say to the person being examined, full of scepticism: "so you have been in jail in Italy? and in Spain you have been fighting against your own kinsmen? as a partisan of the Reds, isn't it? and in Germany they had to put you in prison, too? I see!"[48], – which in his eyes makes Ventura already some sort of criminal. A similar report is available from one of the interviewees who obviously aroused the board's suspicion for the fact that he had opposed Germany's "elected" and therefore, according to the Tribunal, "legitimate regime" – the very Nazi government[49]. Such an attitude, which is seen by Neumann primarily as a lack of a democratic outlook, arguably also indicates that the British in those days were largely ignorant about what really went on in Germany, as is invariably affirmed by historians[50] and also frequently mentioned in other interviews[51]. Even as every day made it clearer how dangerous the Fascist 'Reich' really was

[45] Ibid., p. 132.
[46] Cf. Richard Dove, who supposes that Zweig in his situation was probably right and reports that for all that Neumann bore him an eternal grudge; *Journey of No Return*, p. 174.
[47] Cf. ibid., pp. 155 et seq.
[48] Neumann, *The Inquest*, pp. 215 et seq.
[49] Cf. Oral History Project, interview with Alfred Dörfel, p. 21 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 8 / 3).
[50] Cf. as just one example A. J. Sherman, who points out that even the British government only after Austria's "Anschluss" (annexation) to Germany in 1938 began to perceive the "refugee exodus" as being "a most serious and large-scale domestic as well as international problem"; cf. Sherman, Ari Joshua: *Island Refuge. Britain and Refugees from the Third Reich 1933 – 1939*, second edition, Ilford 1994, pp. 260 et seq.
[51] Cf. Oral History Project, for instance the interview with Margarete Hinrichsen (p. 24), who says: "[T]he ignorance was incredible" (Exile Archive, EXS / box 8 / 4).

– Britain was after all for some time at risk of being invaded by German troops –, many Britons did not know what to think of the refugees, and their situation did anything but improve: The panic that started to spread resulted in the introduction of more and more incisive internment measures. Of significance is this sentence overheard by one of the contemporary witnesses of the "Oral History Project" from one of the British army camp guards: "I never knew there were so many Jews amongst the Nazis"[52].

But of course also with regard to the issue of the 'internments' as such, there is the question of how realistically Neumann composed his literary interpretation. When Shilling, towards the end of the novel, talks to Ventura, the latter engages in an extensive tale of his negative experience in different countries. In this context, the narrative voice also says the following:

> He had come to think not so highly of the intelligence of jailers, these last fifteen years. They put you in the cage, and still allowed you to look upwards without seeing any wires. That June day in Buchenwald when he managed to snatch a whole half-hour off the latrine fatigue and lay on his back, on the bare patch behind the dumps, and looked up to the crows [...]. Or at Huyton; near by up in the blue the Liverpool barrage like flags and bunting. It made you rebellious, looking up without seeing wires; it was not a proper cage![53]

Immediately striking is the parallel mention of a British internment camp (or "transit camp"[54]) and a German concentration camp. Even if the reference in the quotation is, after all, to a certain limited aspect, what immediately comes to mind is the idea that conditions here and there are basically comparable to each other, the more so as everyday camp life especially at Buchenwald – which, unlike British camps, the author was spared and had no personal experience of – is not described in any detail.

Thus, here again Neumann's dramatising and pointed narrative strategy prevails – although in this case rather counterproductively: Despite all the completely unnecessary distress many exiles suffered due to their detainment in places such as the Isle of Man, it is worth noting that Hitler's concentration camps are played down (utterly contrary to the author's intention) by relating them so directly and without further explanation to the prevailing conditions in the United Kingdom. Those among the interviewees who had also been detained or knew people who had certainly do report frequently how shocking such treatment was to them or their friends[55]; in addition, living conditions in the camps during the

[52] Oral History Project, interview with Peter Gellhorn, p. 25 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 8 / 4).
[53] Neumann, *The Inquest*, p. 206.
[54] Dove, *Journey of No Return*, p. 176.
[55] Cf. Oral History Project, for instance the interviews with Eric Rose, pp. 7 et seqq. (Exile Archive, EXS / box 9 / 2), and Ilse Wolff, pp. 11 et seq. (Exile Archive, EXS / box 9 / 5).

first period (which the author focuses upon) must have really been unacceptable[56], but even Huyton was certainly in no way designed for the extermination of its inmates. Later on, i.e. in the internment camps 'proper', conditions were clearly better, subject to the circumstances; thus, in some cases even lectures and similar events could be held[57] (events also witnessed by Robert Neumann, without however being mentioned in his book[58]). Even considering that some of the more positive statements to be found here and there in the "Oral History" interviews may also have been made under the influence of mechanisms of self-protection, it is beyond any doubt that the experience such statements are based upon is hardly comparable to that of German concentration camp detainees.

Nevertheless, Neumann's bitterness at seeing that Hitler's opponents, who had to flee from Germany and Austria, were being victimised once again by British policy is at least as understandable as the local people's panic. Sure enough, the camp situation as such, even if the camp guards were no Nazi henchmen, was in itself a disaster for the detainees. Given this fact, it would be inappropriate to expect a work of literature written in the midst of wartime by a person personally concerned to be penned with the objectivity of a subsequently written historical report. One of the contemporary witnesses in retrospect calls the internments "understandable" saying that for her all is forgiven, "but at that time one wasn't forgiving"[59]. It seems however more than questionable whether it was a good choice for the author to choose out of all characters the obscure Mario Ventura for his attack on the conditions in the United Kingdom – meaning: as an example for all those who suffered –, a character who in his regular bouts of jealousy shows clear signs of insanity and for some length of time is suspected of having thwarted the above-mentioned attempt to assassinate Mussolini out of selfish motives (an accusation he is never thoroughly cleared of)[60]. Anyhow, the reader is bit by bit to understand that Ventura, just as the novel's protagonist, is politically on the correct side and that many innocent people were greatly wronged by the measures imposed – which is certainly a fact hardly to be denied.

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[56] Cf. Oral History Project, for instance the interviews with Peter Gellhorn, p. 25 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 8 / 4), and Ruth Herring, p. 24 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 8 / 2).
[57] Cf. Oral History Project, interview with Hilde Auerbach, p. 4 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 8 / 2).
[58] On the other hand, it should be pointed out that the Camp Journal, on which Neumann had worked together with other detainees, had to be stopped again only after the first issue because the responsible camp commander, – who called the author in to appear in person and formally reprimanded him –, was eager to prevent any critical discussion about the overall situation as it had been presented in the publication; cf. Taylor, Jennifer: "'Something to make people laugh'? Political content in Isle of Man Internment Camp Journals July – October 1940", in: Brinson, Charmian; Richard Dove, Anthony Grenville et al. (eds.): *'Totally Un-English'? Britain's Internment of 'Enemy Aliens' in Two World Wars*, The Yearbook of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Studies, vol. 7, Amsterdam 2005, pp. 139 – 152, here p. 139.
[59] Oral History Project, interview with Adelheid Schweitzer, p. 19 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 9 / 3). Also in this interview, the internment camp is in no way only depicted in negative terms; cf. ibid., p. 18.
[60] Cf. Neumann, *The Inquest*, p. 251 and p. 63.

In order to boost the emotional charge of his narration, Neumann slips into the plot that Santis had become pregnant by Ventura and lost her child even before reaching a halfway acceptable camp. This happened

> [n]ot in Holloway [where she was first detained; this author's note]. Not in that Liverpool boxing ring that day when she slipped in the ankle-deep muck in the single men's lavatory they set aside for two thousand women. Nor when people stoned the buses with these women and children while they were driven through the town. No, the child she lost only later as they lay packed like sardines all night on the bare planks of the open deck [when she was taken to the Isle of Man; this author's note]. There was not a rug nor a rag for her.[61]

What is more, a life behind barbed wire – even apart from such extreme cases – was far from the worst thing that could befall a refugee from the Continent. Before Ventura appears at Shilling's place and has his long conversation with him, the reader is still left to believe that he had drowned at sea: In the beginning, Churchill's government was not satisfied with keeping the "enemy aliens" under control, but started deporting many among them by ship (under extremely precarious conditions) to the ex-colonies, thus putting the persons concerned at the risk of being attacked by German submarines. The event alluded to by Neumann is the famous case of the "Arandora Star", a converted cruise ship, which was torpedoed and sunk in 1940 with hundreds of people losing their lives[62]. The author makes Ventura also suffer through and survive this disaster[63]. The fact that the Italian anti-Fascist is also left with permanent physical damage due to bad treatment by a guard[64] can only seem consistent as seen by Neumann – who thus rounds up his 'collection' of cruel fates in British exile.

One of the interviewees, who got shipped to Québec and more or less claims that the captured high-ranking Nazis also on board were treated better as "officers in the war" than the deported refugees[65], reports among other things on a British major who immediately turned aggressive when he stumbled over the feet of a refugee sitting on the ground[66]. Another one of the contemporary witnesses who was "forced" into "voluntary" exile in Australia[67] states that the guards during the voyage had pillaged the internees' belongings and thrown any items left

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[61] Ibid., p. 218.
[62] Cf. Gillman, Peter and Leni: *'Collar the Lot!' How Britain Interned and Expelled its Wartime Refugees*, London 1980, pp. 185 et seqq.
[63] Cf. Neumann, *The Inquest*, pp. 154 et seq. and 190 et seq.
[64] Cf. ibid., p. 191.
[65] Cf. Oral History Project, interview with Alfred Dörfel, pp. 19 et seq. and 22; quotation p. 20 (Exile Archive, EXS / box 8 / 3). This observation is confirmed by historians: They explain the comparatively good treatment of "military prisoners" by "the War Office's anxiety to secure the best reciprocal conditions for British prisoners of war in Germany"; cf. Gillman, *'Collar the Lot!'*, p. 169.
[66] Cf. Oral History Project, interview with Alfred Dörfel, pp. 20 et seq. (Exile Archive, EXS / box 8 / 3).
[67] Cf. Oral History Project, interview with Peter Johnson, p. 9 and p. 13; quotation p. 9 (German: "gezwungen freiwillig"; Exile Archive, EXS / box 9 / 1).

over into the sea – "[i]ncluding [...] the doctoral theses of many scientists, doctors etc."[68] – ; he moreover reports on a man who had escaped on land during a stop in Cape Town and was "very brutally beaten up" and on another one who jumped overboard in the Indian Ocean and was "of course not rescued"[69]. It is therefore in the context of the deportations that Neumann's purely negative way of presenting things seems to come closest to historic reality.

To sum up, one may say that *The Inquest* is ultimately a representation of how terrible a course an exile biography could take if the person concerned was permanently unlucky – which, however, was very well imaginable. If the previous history of Neumann's refugees on the Continent still appears to be a tad overloaded, the events in the United Kingdom depicted in the tale, also taken in their mass, at least seem to be part of the realm of possibility.

The fact that the author – apart from some rudimentary exceptions[70] – abstains from describing some more pleasant along with the appalling encounters, as is the case in various interviews, is consistent with his intention of arousing and making a contribution to a change of mindset, an improvement of the general situation. In this context, the strategy as elucidated here makes perfect sense and is also legitimate, except perhaps for the concentration camp comparison, although one has to wonder whether Neumann might not have given even more credibility to his novel by having his narrative voice or one of the acting characters expressly *point out* the extraordinary bad luck of Santis and Ventura, instead of pretending that theirs was an average fate at the time. Such a strategic move would hardly have lessened the criticism contained in the novel – after all, it is anything but easy to accept that someone in need gets so little protection from their environment that they stand right on the brink of the abyss if hit by a misfortune –, and it would have given a more stable foundation to the arguments brought forward.

But even so, *The Inquest* is a wrongly forgotten work of literature dealing with a difficult but nonetheless noteworthy issue, a work characterised besides its very artistic structure with numerous twists and turns by the special feature that the problems discussed are consistently related to a more general level, which is why this novel is of a significance that goes beyond the world war period and for all intents and purposes has not lost any of its significance up to the present day. Even if not all of the examples chosen by Neumann may be convincing in the same way, his criticism that the world's democracies have a certain tendency to connive with authoritarian regimes – at least until the final conflict with them – and partly even share some common structures while being eager to appear with a clean

[68] Ibid., p. 11 (German: „[d]arunter [...] die Doktorarbeiten von vielen Wissenschaftlern, Ärzten u.s.w.").
[69] Ibid., p. 13 (German: „sehr arg zusammengeschlagen" / „natürlich nicht gerettet worden").
[70] Cf. Neumann, *The Inquest*, p. 216.

official record[71] cannot completely be discarded even in the twenty-first century, and where the author plays off the sufferings of the emigrants against the interests of a "Wall Street man"[72], a present-day reader may very well feel reminded of some maxims current in our day: "Don't poke your nose into my doing business in private as an Individualist, and I shan't poke my nose into your croaking in private as an Individualist."[73]

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[71] Cf. ibid., pp. 215 et seqq.
[72] Ibid., p. 215.
[73] Ibid.