



Resistant writing. Lili Körber – literature, politics and exile

Conference of the Käte Hamburger Research Centre global dis:connect (LMU Munich) in cooperation with the Literaturhaus Wien / Österreichische Exilbibliothek, organised by Burcu Dogramaci and Günther Sandner in collaboration with Veronika Zwerger

Date: 14–15 November 2024

Location: Österreichische Exilbibliothek im Literaturhaus Wien

Our conference and the edited volume we plan to publish are dedicated to the writer and political publicist Lili Körber (1897–1982). The accomplished literary scholar and writer, Muscovite by birth and later resident of Vienna, was a member of the Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei (SDAP), the Vereinigung sozialistischer Schriftsteller and the Bund der Proletarisch-Revolutionären Schriftsteller Österreichs. She also expressed her political commitment in her journalism. Körber wrote for left-wing political periodicals such as the *Wiener Arbeiter-Zeitung*, *Bildungsarbeit*, the *Rote Fahne* and the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung (AIZ)*. Together with Anna Seghers and Johannes R. Becher, she accepted an invitation from the Soviet state publishing house to travel to Moscow in 1930. She sought to learn about workers' living and labour conditions by serving for several months as a drill operator at the Putilov tractor factory in Leningrad, a company with a "well-known history of revolutionary resistance during the Tsarist era". (Hertling 1982)

She wrote about her experiences in the autobiographical novel *Eine Frau erlebt den roten Alltag*, which was published by Rowohlt Berlin in 1932 and whose cover was designed by artist John Heartfield. Körber created historical novels by reproducing documents such as pay slips and pages from her employment record book alongside her diary entries, which convey authentic and personal experiences.

Lili Körber's 1934 novel *Eine Jüdin erlebt das neue Deutschland* is one of the first anti-fascist books to treat the transitional period between the end of the Weimar Republic and the establishment of the

Nazi state. It succinctly describes the ideological permeation of society. By October 1935, all of Körber's writings were on the list of banned literature. *Eine Frau erlebt den roten Alltag* was one of the books burnt in 1933.

In her travelogue *Begegnungen im Fernen Osten* (Biblios Verlag, Budapest 1936) and *Sato-San, ein japanischer Held. Ein satyrischer Zeitroman* (Wiener Lesegilde, 1936), a satirical observation of Japanese fascism that can also be read as a parody of Hitler, she covered her 1934 journey to Japan and China. Not even the burning and banning of her books under National Socialism could prevent Körber from writing politically.

Shortly after the "Anschluss", Körber fled Vienna, stopping over in Zurich before reaching Paris, where she wrote for Swiss newspapers and the *Pariser Tageblatt*. From April 1938, the social democratic newspaper *Volksrecht* in Zurich published *Eine Österreicherin erlebt den Anschluss*, in which Körber, under the pseudonym Agnes Muth, again processed her observations in a diary novel. She finally emigrated in June 1941 with the support of the Emergency Rescue Committee via Lisbon to New York, where she worked in a factory and as a nurse. Beyond a few newspaper articles in, for example, the Buenos Aires emigrant newspaper *Das andere Deutschland*, she published the novel *Ein Amerikaner in Russland*, in 1942/43 in the German-language New York 'anti-Nazi newspaper' *Neue Volks-Zeitung*. This text published in 1942-43 could be read as a criticism of Stalinism. In 1949, she wrote her unpublished English-language novel *Farewell to Yesterday*.

In Germany and Austria, Körber fell into oblivion as a result of political persecution, the confiscation and destruction of her books and her emigration. Today, her literary estate can be found in the Deutsches Exilarchiv 1933–1945 in the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek in Frankfurt/Main. Lili Körber has only occasionally been exhumed in recent decades. New editions of some of her books appeared in the 1980s, and published research on Lili Körber dates to the 1990s.

At the conference, we will discuss Lili Körber's oeuvre for the first time from an interdisciplinary perspective and consider it as a corpus exemplifying dis:connectivities. The author will be situated in the contexts of politics, literature, art and gender at a time of political upheaval. We hope that examining Körber as a political activist and writer will also reflect back on the present, which is increasingly characterised by extremism, racism and anti-Semitism.

We welcome proposals for presentations of around 20 minutes. Topics – preferably from a broader perspective, but with reference back to Lili Körber – could include:

- Socialist publishing, political writing
- Contributions to Lili Körber's literary oeuvre between contemporary novel and exile literature
- Artist and political networks before, during and after exile
- Travel literature by professional writers
- Journeys to Russia (see, for example, Grosz (art), Erich Mendelsohn (architecture), Valeska Gert (dance), etc.)
- Writers travelling to Japan and China in the 1930s
- Burnt books
- Jewish socialists
- Anti-Nazi resistance, anti-fascist novels
- Writing under Austrofascism
- (Left-wing) anti-Stalinist and anti-communist journalism and literature
- Exile (Switzerland, Paris, New York)
- Newspapers, magazines, books and publishing houses

Abstracts of no more than 2,000 characters and a short biography should be sent in a single pdf file to Prof. Dr. Burcu Dogramaci (burcu.dogramaci@lmu.de), Dr. Günther Sandner (guenther.sandner@univie.ac.at) and MMag. Veronika Zwerger (exilbibliothek@literaturhaus.at) by 10 April. The conference will be bilingual, with presentations in German and English. Partial reimbursement for travel and accommodation costs might be available. The organisers plan to publish an edited volume of the contributions. Deadline for manuscripts: 31 March 2025.