Prologue

In Santa Monica, nestled among lemon trees and cypresses on a short, winding road overlooking the Pacific, stands the home of Salka Viertel. A stream flows near the property, passing through the magnolias and fig trees on its way to the ocean. Just a short walk, and Viertel can be standing on the wide beach. Especially on Sundays, many people stroll here, lie in the sun, or venture into the cool sea. In the distance, the blue-green hills of the Santa Monica Mountains rise up.

With its dark green-painted wooden beams, half-timbered style, and sloping roof, Viertel's house has a fairy-tale quality that doesn't quite fit into the new, young world of Southern California. An impression that only deepens once you step across the threshold into Viertel's large, cozy living room, filled with pictures and books, a print of Picasso's *Blue Boy* above the fireplace, a gramophone, a piano, and heavy cabinets. And then the scent: soon there will be Viertel's "house specialty," her variation on the Sachertorte, a creation of her own that transforms her California residence into a Viennese coffeehouse.[1]

In mild California, at Salka Viertel's home at 165 Mabery Road in Santa Monica, they come together, the emigrants and exiles, most of them Jewish, from Berlin or Vienna or Munich or Prague: the filmmakers and composers, the writers and actors who, had they remained in Europe, would have been forced to survive in camps or ghettos, or would already be dead. But they possessed connections and capital and foresight and luck, and now they meet here every Sunday, sit by

Salka Viertel's House at 165 Mabery Road, Santa Monica

the fireplace, play the piano, chat on the porch in the shade of the rose bushes or stand on the terrace of the guest house and look out over the Pacific Ocean.

"The beauty of the area is so incomparable that even a hardened European like me surrenders to it," writes Theodor W. Adorno to his parents after arriving in November 1941. "The proportion of mountains and sea is initially very reminiscent of the French Riviera, for example near San Remo or Menton, except that it is not divided up and 'private', but much more expansive and open. However, the shape of the mountains themselves is more reminiscent of Tuscany". But the most magnificent thing of all is the play of colors in the California sky: "A drive along the ocean at sunset is one of the most extraordinary experiences my eyes, which are by no means particularly sensitive, have ever had."[2]

The writer Franz Werfel, also writing to his parents, explains, "The Riviera is

rubbish in comparison."[3]

Los Angeles seems to stretch out endlessly. The city consists of countless low-rise settlements nestled between the Pacific Ocean and mountain ranges. From the coast of Santa Monica to downtown inland, it is thirty kilometers of uniform street grid, broken only by the occasional hill. The distances are long, a car is essential. In 1941, over 1.5 million people live in Los Angeles. Fifty years earlier, it was only 50,000. The film industry, named after the neighborhood of "Hollywood", has lured hundreds of thousands with its promise of luxury, fame, and prestige—or simply of work. The ever-shining sun replaces thousands of expensive spotlights and makes filming much cheaper than in the studios on the East Coast. In addition, Southern California offers the perfect filming location for every setting: mountains, ocean, prairie, desert, or city. Everything is available here.

The city that Adorno and Werfel experienced in 1941 no longer had anything in common with the Mexican town Los Angeles had been until 1850. Before that, there had been a Spanish mission here, built on land belonging to the Tongva, the indigenous people of California. After conquering California, American settlers demolished the Mexicans' adobe houses and forcibly expelled many of the inhabitants. After the construction of a railway line in 1876, the Chamber of Commerce began promoting the region to the rest of the country as a subtropical paradise, with orange trees under blue skies, deserts full of oil, and white families enjoying this exotic, but not *too* exotic, world. The paradise of the promotional brochures was, not least, the result of forced relocations and lynchings.[4]

Los Angeles only become viable with water drawn from distant high mountains. After Irish engineer William Mulholland's aqueduct began supplying the city with fresh water from the Sierra Nevada, diverting it away from local settlements, developers built new neighborhoods at an astonishing pace, marking out plots of land with newly planted palm trees for new owners from all over the country.[5]

The ever-growing city continued to expand. Not upwards, but outwards–this was necessary due to the risk of earthquakes and was also more lucrative for the entrepreneurs. A horizontal order that triggered feelings of alienation among the European emigrants.[6] They were not used to the long distances, nor to the private lifestyle that resulted from them. Here, they did not meet in coffee houses or restaurants, as was customary in Vienna or Berlin, but primarily in private residences. The exchange was often exclusive; income class determined membership. During the week, the film people worked, but on Saturday evenings they went to beach parties, pool parties, garden parties, tennis parties, cocktail parties, and masquerade parties. Servants set up tents, hung lanterns, laid out dance floors, and served at the buffet.[7]

Salka Viertel's salon in Santa Monica was more permeable. Of course, the 51-year-old's house was not open to everyone, but Viertel was less interested in money than in biographies and personalities. Anyone who had a good story, anyone who missed their homeland, was welcome. She surrounded herself with people she found inspiring: musicians, writers, artists, and bon vivants. Viertel was a networker, not a careerist; she enjoyed bringing different people together

and facilitating unlikely encounters. As a Jewish woman with family and friends in the Old World whom she cared about, she felt solidarity with the refugees and helped the new arrivals as best she could.

And many came. The emigration of entire artistic communities from Berlin, Munich, and Vienna made Los Angeles perhaps *the* center of German-speaking culture in the world in the 1940s. Within a few years, more than a thousand German-speaking personalities from the worlds of literature, film, music, philosophy, and architecture settled in Los Angeles. Of course, the prospect of working in the film industry attracted many people, and the consistently good weather and sparse population (compared to New York or Chicago) also played a part in this unprecedented migration. But the most important reason: here they found connection. There was already a community here. It, too, was founded by Salka Viertel.

Viertel, born Salomea Steuermann in 1889 in Austro-Hungarian Galicia, emigrated to California in 1928 with her husband, theater director Berthold Viertel, and their three sons. At that time, here in Santa Monica among the orange groves, there were only a few scattered mud huts and bungalows overgrown with weeds, next to large billboards on which real estate agencies advertised properties for sale. There was little more than the pier on the coast, with its carousel and wooden carved horses, ice cream parlors, and small souvenir shops selling shells, starfish, and chewing gum.

In the years since Viertel's arrival, the small seaside resort for city dwellers had become a popular residential area. The promenade was no longer lined with

plantations, but with Spanish-inspired bungalows and modern Art Deco houses, inhabited mainly by people who earned their living in the film industry[8]–like Viertel. She was employed as a screenwriter at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), the largest of the major film studios, whose films looked like dreams and whose stars were like gods. No one embodied the glamorous style of the studio more perfectly than Greta Garbo, the Swedish superstar who played queens, countesses, and Anna Karenina. Viertel was responsible for Garbo at MGM; she was regarded as a Garbo whisperer, perhaps the only person who maintained regular contact with the elusive actress.

Most recently, the two women had attempted to push through a project close to their hearts despite resistance from their bosses: a film about physicist and chemist Marie Curie, who discovered the elements polonium and radium in her Paris laboratory. However, the men at MGM considered the researcher, who examined soldiers near the front lines in a self-developed X-ray vehicle during World War I, to be too unglamorous to serve as a protagonist.[9]

The fact that Viertel was a close friend of Greta Garbo certainly did not hurt her in becoming one of the best-connected figures in the émigré community. Their guests probably hoped to catch a glimpse of the big star every Sunday. The friendship between the two women was well known to everyone, and some even suspected a romantic relationship—Viertel and her husband Berthold had been living in harmonious separation for many years. As much as Garbo enjoyed spending time on Mabery Road, she often stayed in the background, went swimming in the morning, or retreated to one of the rooms. She was rarely seen at

the large Sunday gatherings.

There one might, on more than one occasion, encounter Thomas Mann, the Nobel laureate and representative of liberal Germany—the “greatest living man of letters,” as he was announced on his well-attended lecture tours—who was having a house built just a few kilometers away, in the hills of Pacific Palisades. Bertolt Brecht and Helene Weigel were also regular guests. The playwright and actress fled from the Nazis via Helsinki, Moscow, Vladivostok, and Manila, arriving at the port of San Pedro six months earlier, in the summer of 1941. Ernst Lubitsch, the great comedy and musical director, who was one of the first Germans to emigrate to Hollywood in 1922, also came to Viertel's. With elegantly erotic ellipses, he undermined self-censorship; most recently, his *Ninotchka* (1939), advertised with the slogan "Garbo Laughs!", was a great success.

They all came to Salka Viertel – and the list goes on, with the aforementioned Theodor W. Adorno, Franz Werfel and his wife Alma Mahler-Werfel, the young screenwriter Billy Wilder, composers Arnold Schönberg and Erich Wolfgang Korngold, writer Lion Feuchtwanger and his wife Marta, actor Peter Lorre, directors Fritz Lang, William (born Willi) Wyler and William (born Wilhelm) Dieterle, agent Paul Kohner, and film stars Marlene Dietrich and Hedy Lamarr.

The political convictions of this privileged group varied. But they could agree on anti-fascism. Many of them had been involved for years in the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, a colorful association of film people who warned against the Nazis and advocated for the US to enter the war—a position that had

long been unpopular. Fritz Lang was one of the founding members of the League. Salka Viertel joined early on (along with Greta Garbo), as did Marlene Dietrich and Peter Lorre. Ernst Lubitsch later resigned his membership because, as he explained to Viertel, he had learned from a reliable source that the League was controlled by “the Communists”. “But Ernst,” Viertel had replied, “all these people do is sit by their swimming pools, drink highballs, and talk about movies, while their wives complain about their Filipino butlers.”[10]

Lubitsch wasn't entirely wrong: the League was founded by Soviet agent Otto Katz, a charismatic cosmopolitan who had charmed his way into the highest echelons of Hollywood.[11] Nevertheless, the influence of the communists remained limited, and the regular rallies in the magnificent Shrine Auditorium mainly offered a wealthy audience the opportunity to get involved and be seen doing so. Director John Ford, famous for his poetic Westerns, said of his membership in the Anti-Nazi League: “If that's communism, I'm in.”[12]

Such a flippant attitude would be unthinkable in just a few years. In fact, membership in the alliance will later prove the undoing of many of the exiles. They had no idea that the FBI was already monitoring many of them, recording their telephone calls, opening their mail and making copies and translations, noting the license plate numbers of the cars parked in front of their houses.[13] Under Director J. Edgar Hoover, the federal agency had evolved into a domestic intelligence service whose agents were trained in espionage and followed directives to document any potentially communist (as well as fascist) activity. They didn't have to be too particular about civil rights in the process. Hoover

received backing for this from the highest authority.

No one among the European exiles would have believed that US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in confidential conversations and in the spirit of checks and balances, had promised FBI Director Hoover the greatest possible autonomy and discretion. Many of them revered Roosevelt as Hitler's democratic opponent, a noble social reformer and humanist. Thomas Mann even visited the President at the White House at the beginning of the year. But behind the scenes, the president was creating facts: he overturned a Supreme Court ruling that had banned secret surveillance. “I am convinced that the Supreme Court never intended [this prohibition] to apply to serious matters of national defense,” Roosevelt wrote in a secret memo. Wiretapping was perfectly acceptable “in matters of national security.” The definition of what constituted a matter of national security was left to FBI Director Hoover[14].

The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) was similarly vigilant. Originally established in 1934 to monitor Nazi activities, this House of Representatives committee, chaired by Texas Democrat Martin Dies, focused primarily on left-wing groups that Dies considered communist. For devout Christians, the sinful cesspool that was Hollywood was an attractive target. Dies visited Los Angeles several times, questioned actors, and pointed out to studio bosses that the Anti-Nazi League was under communist control. But the hoped-for publicity failed to materialize.

At least, at first.

On Sunday, December 7, 1941, at 8 a.m., 353 Japanese aircraft attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor on Oahu, Hawaii. They sank four warships; four more were damaged. The battleship *Arizona* was destroyed by an armor-piercing bomb; the bomb caused an oil fire in the bow, which triggered a chain of explosions. All 1,177 men below deck lost their lives.

Panic broke out in Los Angeles. Was the attack on Pearl Harbor just the beginning? Was the city on the Pacific coast vulnerable to the next attack? Because of its aircraft factories, it would be an obvious target. Army troops and private citizens took up positions in the aircraft factories, while coastal artillery pointed defensive guns toward the sky. Lights were to stay off, and cars were to use only their parking lights. Suspicious aircraft and ships off the coast were reported.[15] But the attack did not materialize.

The next day, President Roosevelt signed the declaration of war. The FBI arrested thousands of Japanese, Germans, and Italians. Hoover, always prepared for anything, had a list of suspicious foreigners ready. It was limited to people without American citizenship. Roosevelt's administration wanted to go even further. The War Department proposed the internment of all persons of Japanese descent, both US citizens and non-citizens alike. This proposal, which even Hoover had considered too radical, was quickly picked up by major newspapers and received the support of prominent generals and politicians.[16]

In February 1942, Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 declared the American West Coast a military area “from which any or all persons may be excluded.” Approximately 120,000 people of Japanese descent, over 80,000 of whom were

American citizens, were forcibly relocated by the army to ten internment camps sealed off with barbed wire. A measure supported by the majority of the population: according to a government survey, three quarters believed that “only a few” or “practically none” of Japanese Americans were loyal to the United States; just as many were in favor of detaining them in camps.[17]

The German refugees fared better. They were not interned, but had to register as enemy aliens, were subject to a curfew from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m., and were not allowed to travel more than five miles from their homes. For Adorno, these conditions were equivalent to “complete confinement, given the truly enormous distances involved here.” He lived in the Brentwood neighborhood, a beautiful area in the west of the city, not far from Santa Monica. “We can't go to Hollywood anymore,” he wrote to his parents, “only as far as Beverly Hills, and with our wonderful car rides, our only source of relaxation, it's all over.” To be counted among the suspects as a refugee irritated him: “It is particularly incomprehensible that these regulations affect emigrants, the most reliable enemies of Hitler in America, along with the Japanese.”[18]

Most newcomers complied without complaint. They quickly got used to hosting dinner parties that included an overnight invitation, or they gossiped on the phone in the evenings.[19]

Thomas Mann, however, who was not yet a US citizen and was therefore also subject to the new decrees, made a prominent request for special arrangements. He wrote to his friend and patron, Agnes E. Meyer, co-owner of the *Washington Post*, who had contacts in the highest circles: “I wanted to ask

you personally a few questions concerning my status as an ‘enemy alien.’ Am I actually one? Of course, I don't mean ‘actually!’ Actually, I'm pretty friendly. But technically? I was ‘expatriated’ by Hitler, so I am not a German citizen.” At that time, Mann held a Czechoslovak passport and asked Meyer to inquire of Francis Biddle, the Attorney General of the United States, “how he views my case and whether, if necessary, he might grant me a kind of safe-conduct and general permission.”[20]

Those who emigrated long before and had American citizenship—such as Salka Viertel, Ernst Lubitsch, Fritz Lang, and Marlene Dietrich—were not affected by these rules. They were actively involved in national defense in various ways. Lubitsch and his *Ninotchka* screenwriter Walter Reisch, for example, were air raid wardens for the posh Bel Air district. One evening, as Billy Wilder later recounted, they patrolled their villa neighborhood wearing helmets and admonished residents to comply with blackout regulations, turn off their lights, and lower their blinds. Both had a strong German accent, and so the residents were met with the Teutonic admonition, “Törn se leit ofl!” Someone opened a window, leaned out, and shouted into the darkness: “I can hear the Krauts! Have they already landed?”[21]

An amusing anecdote that points to a mindset we will encounter again and again in this book: the fear of having been infiltrated without realizing it would soon shape the actions of key players—first in Washington and then in Hollywood. “Have the Germans already landed?”—the punchline of Wilders' anecdote—expresses a new American vulnerability, a possibly fatal loss of

control. The borders are porous, the enemy is already among us. A new surveillance apparatus is needed. Distrust becomes the prevailing attitude.

Of course, the irony of the scene described by Wilder is that those who fled the Nazis were mistaken for Nazis themselves. Their German accent marked them as a stranger, as a threat. It didn't matter that they were deeply concerned about the safety of their neighbors and were fulfilling their civic duty as American citizens. Such subtleties were of no concern to the suspicious mind; it knew only the threat, and the stranger—no matter how at home he felt—was the source of its unease.

During World War II, many of the exiles would still be welcome guests, allies in the fight against the Nazis. But it was precisely those very qualities that first made them appear in the public eye as noble anti-fascists that would soon be construed as incriminating evidence: their political activism, their cultural education, their foreign languages—was what had initially been admired as "cosmopolitan" in fact "un-American"? And weren't those who were already agitating against the Nazis in, say, 1932 a little too early with their anti-fascist stance? Did this background not expose them as Communists who came only to save their own skins, who in truth despised the American system and were merely waiting for the chance to overthrow the established order?

For the time being, such suspicious voices were barely audible. And the ever-blue sky, the palm trees and lemon trees, the coastal roads and rolling hills, the prestige and promise of Hollywood, made Los Angeles seem like a refuge in paradise to many exiles. This golden age lasted for several years. Then the spirit

changed and the mood shifted.

Paranoia set in.

English sample translation by Melody Winkle