

GOETHE MEDAL 2024

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY CLAUDIA CABRERA

WEIMAR, 28 AUGUST 2024

- Check against delivery -

My life story and my relationship with Germany are connected to a historical event that took place in a hotel on the Rhine – in Bad Godesberg near Bonn. In 1942, my Mexican great-uncle and his wife, a Hungarian Jew, were held prisoner there for over a year by the Nazis, along with more than 100 Latin American diplomats. Among them was Gilberto Bosques, the Mexican consul at the time, who had saved the lives of so many Spanish Republicans and German Jews and communists in Marseille. The Buchenwald concentration camp, just a few kilometres from Weimar, reminds us of the fate that would have awaited them.

Transit is the title Anna Seghers gave to her novel, in which she vividly describes the dramatic circumstances under which Bosques in Marseille was able to help many people gain passage to Mexico at the last moment. I recently had the great privilege of newly translating this novel, which also gave me a completely different understanding of the fate of my two relatives.

Bosques also saved their lives. In 1944, they both went to Mexico together with other prisoners from Bad Godesberg. My great-uncle returned to his country, his family, and his language. For my great-aunt, however, the journey meant exile in a foreign country where she knew no one and did not understand the language.

Despite the painful experience they had had in Germany, years later they both sent their only daughter to, of all places, the German School in Mexico City. Firstly, because my great-uncle, a philosopher, was a great admirer of German culture (“The Nazis are *not* the Germans,” he used to say); secondly, because it gave my great-aunt the opportunity to

reconnect with her European roots and speak German again, which she had learnt as a child in Austria-Hungary.

Almost 20 years later, I followed in my aunt's footsteps: I also went to the German School in Mexico. And it did indeed have a decisive influence on the rest of my life. The German language and culture made me the person I am today. It gave me my profession and many dear people. My husband, an accomplice in many translation projects, is also German. Another gift was the constant dialogue between two very different worlds. I was able to become a bridge between the world my great-aunt was forced to leave and the one she never really arrived in. I, however, feel at home in both worlds. And every day I try to reduce the distance between Germany and Mexico and bring the "foreignness" of the two closer together.

I do this not only by translating books, but also by *transferring* cultural contexts. "Über-Setzen" is the beautiful German word for "ferrying from one shore to the other." For me, this has meant crossing the "linguistic ocean" between Mexico and Germany several times a day for almost 30 years, with every single one of the many, many words and thoughts that I translate or *transfer* from Germany to Mexico.

Therefore, at a time when divisions between people, parties, countries, and cultures are growing and language is constantly being devalued and abused, I would like to remind you of the importance of language as one of our most precious assets for mediation and reconciliation. Goethe did not dedicate his life to the German language for nothing.

Many thanks to all the dear people who are with me here today and also to those who couldn't make it. I wouldn't have made it this far without all of you.

I would like to thank the Goethe-Institut for the great honour of the Goethe Medal.