To many of these people, articulate as they were, the great loss was the loss of language—that they could no longer say what was in them to say” (360). “These people” are the German refugees in New York in the summer of 1939, “accomplished men” (358), who had achieved high professional standing in their native land and who suddenly find themselves stranded because of their poor English. As one of them puts it, “I feel like a child, or worse, often like a moron. I am left with myself unexpressed. . . . My tongue hangs useless’” (358). “The German Refugee” is a powerful confrontation of one of the escapees’ major obstacles to resettlement in the host country, the problem of acquiring the local language as quickly as possible.

Mastering the new language is crucial as an indicator of acculturation, for the formation of a revised identity, and not least for practical purposes. Knowledge of the language has wide implications; not being able properly to understand it bars one from fully appreciating the culture, and vice versa, thus contributing to a feeling of isolation and not belonging. Language therefore assumes a strong symbolical dimension. As the Grinbergs point out in *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Migration* (1989), “[M]igration is such a long process that perhaps it never really ends, just as the emigrant may never lose the accent of his native country” (58). That accent is what Ruth Prawer Jhabvala in her autobiographical essay “Disinheritance” (1979) poetically and poignantly terms “the accent of the soul” (13) for which the escapee continues to long. Still more trenchantly Alice Kaplan emphasizes the “emotional consequences” of a language change, even if it is a voluntary change, as in her case:

There is no language change without emotional consequences. Principally: loss. That language equals home, that language is a home, as surely as a roof over one’s head is a home, and that to be without a language, or to be between languages, is as miserable in its way as to be without bread.\(^1\)

Failure to achieve at least functional competence results in the “phenomenon of linguistic isolation”\(^2\) and concomitantly of economic and social marginalization.
That this difficulty is one that besets an entire category of people is indicated by the generic formulation of the story’s title, “The German Refugee.” At the same time the issue assumes a personal specificity in the names of the four men being taught by the narrator, a student who makes a little money as an English tutor. Karl Otto Alp was formerly a film star, Wolfgang Novak a brilliant economist, Friedrich Wilhelm Wolff had taught medieval history in Heidelberg, and Oskar Gassner had been a critic and journalist in Berlin. Oskar is the story’s central figure because his is the most pressing need. Within three months, by September, he has to give a lecture in the first week of the fall term at the Institute for Public Studies, where he has been offered a job teaching a course, in English translation, on “The Literature of the Weimar Republic.” Journalists, together with lawyers, encountered the greatest trouble in transferring their skills; about half the journalists ended up teaching German language and literature, while the lawyers taught political science or international law. The Institute for Public Studies almost certainly stands for the New School for Social Research in New York. Founded in 1919 as a bastion of intellectual and artistic freedom, it created in 1933 the University in Exile to rescue endangered scholars who had been dismissed from teaching and government positions by totalitarian regimes in Europe. It became a refuge for many eminent, subsequently original thinkers. By 1941 it had twenty escapee professors at various levels on its graduate faculty and a further thirty in other departments.

Oskar’s ongoing travail to write his crucial introductory lecture and to learn how to articulate it punctuate and structure the narrative. His English is execrable: “[H]e misplaced consonants, mixed up nouns and verbs and mangled idioms” (358). To compound his anxieties he has never taught before and is afraid to do so, doubting his competence, especially in a language he speaks so badly. This change of profession robs him of his self-assurance and erodes his identity. The time pressure and the magnitude of what is at stake for him aggravate his nervousness, which in turn further reduces his capacity to learn.

Oskar’s desperate struggle with the language is told in a first-person narration by his tutor, Martin Goldberg. About to enter his senior year in college at age twenty, Martin is at once a contrast and a complement to Oskar. They are alike in their poverty, in their scant knowledge of each other’s tongues, and in being Jewish. But Martin is young, at home in New York, with his future ahead of him; he describes himself as “a skinny, life-hungry kid... palpitating to get going” (357). Oskar on the other hand seems older than fifty with hair turning gray, heavy hands, sagging shoulders, and clouded eyes. His path is downward, while Martin’s leads upward. At the beginning of “The German Refugee” when Martin walks into Oskar’s room, he functions as a frame to the refugee’s story and as an explanatory filter for readers’ perceptions. As the narrative progresses, however, he becomes increasingly involved emotionally in the drama so that he moves from its periphery closer to its core.

It is Martin who summarizes how Oskar had reached the point where he is at the story’s opening. He had come to the United States for a short visit