Before I read the press release for “The Sun and Her Star: Salva Viertel and Hitler’s Exiles in the Golden Age of Hollywood” by Donna Rickfard (Other Press), I’d never heard of Salka Viertel. While I knew that many Jewish and non-Jewish refugees, writers, and directors worked in Hollywood or New York, her name was completely unfamiliar. Yet, Viertel not only wrote successfully with her first husband, but became an expert on a country far different from their own.

Rickfard feels that women’s accomplishments during the Golden Age of Hollywood have either been lost or ignored. She notes that, while women worked in every studio department, histories of those times rarely mention them. She also found something similar occurs in books about European refugees: they so focus on men that one might believe no woman suffered the pain of exile. As for Viertel, Rickfard wanted her accomplishments acknowledged but to restore her reputation. She writes that Viertel has been a called a number of unpleasable names, including gossipspawn, female songbird and witch, to name just a few. Part of Rickfard’s task is to show the true Viertel: the one who worked hard to create a home for her family and tried to help other refugees in need of work or solace.

In order to understand Viertel, Rickfard places her in a social context. On the islands of Jewish refugees on the outskirts of the Austro-Hungarian empire. After deciding to become an actress, she lived in a variety of cities in Europe, including Berlin. She married Berthold Viertel, a writer and director for stage and film, and gave birth to three children. The decision to move to the United States in 1928 – when Viertel was 39 and her husband 43 – was based on financial rather than political reasons. Unsure of whether or not they would be staying in the U.S., they left their three sons in Europe. However, the boys soon joined them and they made a permanent home in California. Unfortunately, Viertel could not find work as an actress and began writing treatments and screenplays. Among her best known screenplays were “Ann buffalo” (1933), “The Painted Veil” (1934) and “Queen Christina” (1933). At one point she was so successful that she was one of the highest paid screenwriters in Hollywood. She often worked with Greta Garbo and, for a long time, the two were so close that Garbo spent a great deal of time in Viertel’s home, especially when she wanted to escape the press. It was in that home that Viertel held her Sunday open houses to which came not only European refugees, but many successful Hollywood writers, directors and actors. As more refugees tried to escape from Europe, Viertel worked with different groups to raise money for them, in addition to helping them find work in Hollywood. She did this while being the major source of income in the household. Her husband, who was often away working on screenplays, usually didn’t make enough money to support himself so Viertel had to send him funds while he lived in another city or country. The “Sun and Her Star” contains a great deal of detail in its more than 400 pages. Not all the details were of equal importance, particularly some of the very personal facts about Viertel. The book focuses on the story of (Sun) was eclipsed by that of her (her sons who visited her home). Rickfard does an excellent job not only bringing Viertel’s accomplishments to light and proving she was a remarkable woman, but portraying the lives of those refugees who felt lost in the New World and those who found success.