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Narrative, History, Fiction: The Example of the Holocaust

Your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen.

I want to begin by showing you a photograph.

The path to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

I don't know the name of the photographer, nor do I know the names of the old woman and the three children who accompany her. What we do know is that this photo was taken in Auschwitz in 1944. Thus a possible title, chosen by the historian Inga Clendinnen in her study *Reading the Holocaust*, is "The path to Auschwitz-Birkenau" (157).

For a viewer with no historical knowledge of the Holocaust, this photo may not seem very significant. For one who is possessed of such knowledge, however, it is charged with meaning. This woman and these three children are walking towards their deaths. A very short

time after this picture was taken, they were all murdered. We note the railway track of the train taking them to Auschwitz; we see the electric fence in the background. With a view to the Nazis' industry of mass murder, Auschwitz was the most destructive of all the concentration camps – situated, as this map shows, right in the middle of the occupied territories.

"From each of the towns on this map, and from hundreds of other towns and villages, Jews were deported to Auschwitz between March 1942 and November 1944, and gassed" (Gilbert 1). Although members of a number of ethnic groups perished in Auschwitz, the overwhelming majority were Jews.

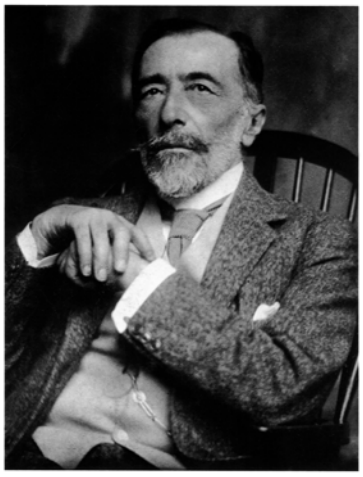
A photograph is not a verbal narrative, but it can have a significant narrative dimension. There is a sense in which a photograph presents a small fraction of a story. "Narrative," which refers to the ways in which stories are presented to an audience, is a constituent element of human action, communication and understanding. It seems that no human culture can emerge without defining itself by means of telling stories. We understand ourselves, our fellows, and our lives by incorporating them into narrative accounts. Investigations into various forms of narrative have contributed to the development of narrative theory. This growing body of knowledge now plays an essential part in a wide range of disciplines.

The disciplinary basis for the project entitled "Narrative theory and analysis" is literary studies. But we will study not only verbal but also filmic fictions, as well as historical narratives. As you perhaps know, my team is one of three research groups here at the Centre for Advanced Study, and we profit from an ongoing exchange of ideas across discipline boundaries. The team working on narrative theory and analysis consists of researchers from the Universities of Tromsø, Trondheim, Bergen and Oslo; and it also includes distinguished scholars from abroad: Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan of the University of Haifa, Susan Suleiman who teaches at Harvard, J. Hillis Miller of the University of California at Irvine, and Jim Phelan who works at Ohio State University. A main premise for our understanding and application of "narrative theory" is that narrative theory and analysis are, and should be, closely interrelated. Although narrative analysis has sometimes been seen as a formalist and rather technical activity, we are committed to the view that how a narrative is structured and

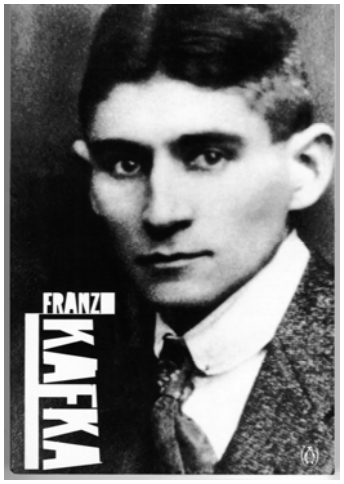
understood – by both its creator and its interpreter – has fundamental interpretative and moral significance.

The main questions and issues we are going to explore are divided into two problem areas. First, we will analyze what is commonly referred to as modernist narrative, concentrating on the fiction of Joseph Conrad and Franz Kafka. Second, we will study the relationship between narrative, history and fiction. Modernist fiction, and not least that of Conrad and Kafka, presents a particular challenge to the study of narrative: it is the product of the epistemic break at the turn of the twentieth century, which generated an aesthetic break and a problematization of the premises of what we term realist narrative. As regards the second problem area, we will concentrate on narrative representations of the Holocaust: the Nazi programme to exterminate the Jewish people.

It is this part of our project that I will briefly present in this talk. Before I proceed to do so, however, I stress that the two parts of the project are united by our concern with, and exploration of, various forms of narrative. I also briefly note that although Conrad and Kafka both died before the outbreak of the Second World War, they came from places in Europe located not very far from Auschwitz. Joseph Conrad, who lived from 1857 to 1924, was born in what is now the Western Ukraine. Franz Kafka, who was born in 1883 and died in the same year as Conrad, was a German-speaking Czech Jew who spent most of his life in Prague.



Joseph Conrad



Franz Kafka

More importantly, in their fictional works both Conrad and Kafka address and explore issues of dominance, violence, power, and the abuse of power. In *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, Dominick LaCapra notes that Kafka's story "Die Verwandlung" (Metamorphosis) from 1915 offers an uncanny prefiguration of problems associated with the Holocaust (29). And in Conrad's story *Heart of Darkness* (1899) there is a passage that calls the Holocaust strikingly to mind:

> "…it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno. … Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.
>
> They were dying slowly – it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation lying confusedly in the greenish gloom." (20)

The speaker here is Charles Marlow, who is a fictional narrator in the service of Conrad as author. Yet although *Heart of Darkness* is a fictional narrative, Conrad based the story on a trip he made to the Belgian Congo in 1890. This link between personal biography and fiction accounts for some of the remarkable authenticity of *Heart of Darkness*. Although the story presents itself as fiction, it is rooted in, and prompted by, a particular historical reality. The "crime" of the Africans is to be at this particular spot at this particular time, the time of the European conquest of Africa in the late nineteenth century. Marlow's sense of an "Inferno," an intertextual reference to Dante's *Divine Comedy* from 1321, involves not just a

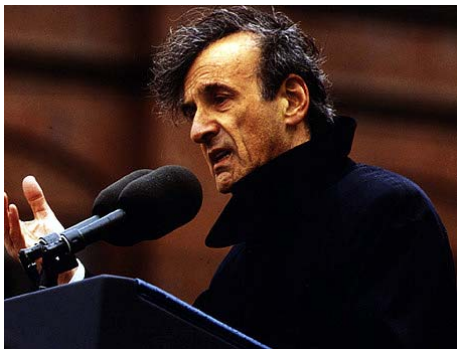
geographical but also a juridico-spatial notion. The "Inferno" Marlow encounters is a *region* which, in addition to mapping a geographical space, also, as the French philosopher Michel Foucault puts it, denotes "the area controlled by a certain kind of power" (68). This point could also be made about the Inferno of Auschwitz.

How can we adequately represent the historical reality of the Holocaust? We cannot, of course, and as a research team we approach this vexed issue with respect, humility, and some trepidation. There is a sense in which the most important witnesses of the Holocaust could never perform that function, because they were murdered. Of the few who survived, "many felt themselves to be disabled, and remained silent" (Clendinnen 32). But some of the Holocaust survivors had the strength, and the courage, to speak, and thanks to them the Holocaust is the best documented genocide in world history.

The survivors of the Holocaust and the Nazi concentration camps who speak and write about their experiences, do so in different ways. Thus, generic labels such as autobiography and memoir are often used in order to describe these stories. Many of the witnesses' accounts, however, do not meet our conventional expectations of established genres. And this comes as no surprise, for how can we speak about such an unspeakable crime? For example, although most of the accounts assume the form of a narrative, these narratives are often fragmented. Characteristically incomplete, they are distinguished by ellipses – blanks in the narrative that need to be filled in by the reader. This can have the positive effect of enhancing our engagement and interest as readers, yet it is also a complicating factor since it is impossible for a reader who has not experienced a Nazi concentration camp to know what that experience was like.

The predominant concern of the Holocaust witness is typically that of narrating and thus representing truth – truth in the sense of recording what actually happened. "If someone else could have written my stories," says Elie Wiesel, "I would not have written them. I have

written them in order to testify. And this is the origin of the loneliness that can be glimpsed in each of my sentences, in each of my silences." "Niemand / zeugt für den / Zeugen" (No one bears witness for the witness), writes the poet Paul Celan.



Elie Wiesel

Paul Celan

And yet, as Shoshana Felman argues in her important book *Testimony*, "by virtue of the fact that the testimony is *addressed* to others, the witness, from within the solitude of his own stance, is the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension *beyond himself*" (3, original emphases).

At this point in time, the last witnesses of the Holocaust are passing away. This fact invests this part of our project with a sense of urgency. As Harald Stanghelle commented in a thoughtful article entitled "De siste vitnene" (The last witnesses) in *Aftenposten* 13 December 2003, "Vi står midt i et tidsskille – uten helt å skjønne hva det betyr for oss" (We are at a dividing point in time – without fully realizing what this means). It is part of our ambition as a research team to explore what this means – and hopefully to arrive at some tentative answers and suggestions.

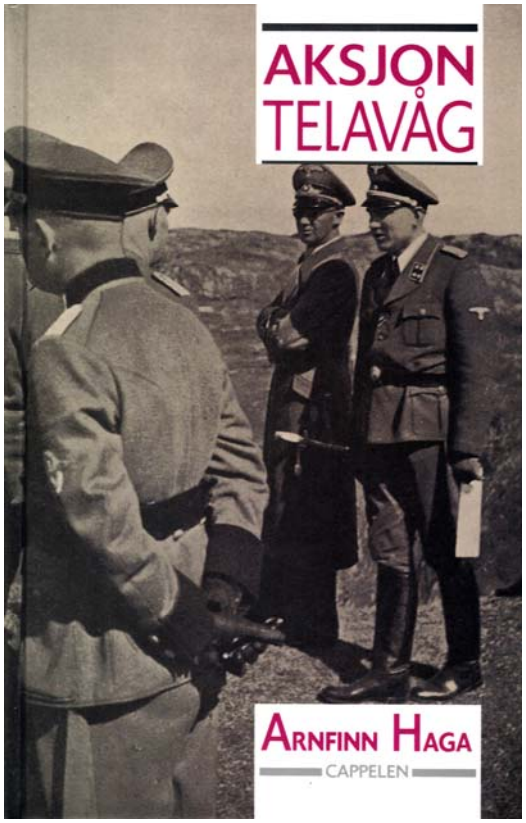
I was reminded of Stanghelle's point when I recently met with a Norwegian survivor of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. Sachsenhausen was not an extermination camp like Auschwitz-Birkenau. Yet although the inmates were not gassed there, conditions were almost unspeakably awful; and as regards the need for, and problems of, bearing witness there are

notable similarities. Simon Øvretveit, who is now 90, kindly granted me permission to record our conversation on video. This video recording forms a narrative – an oral presentation of his journey to, life in and release from Sachsenhausen. It is a contribution to a large and expanding body of work: archives of video-recorded interviews with survivors of the camps. In view of the need for empirical material, the value of these recordings is inestimable. And yet they cannot wholly compensate for what is lost when survivors pass away.

Simon Øvretveit

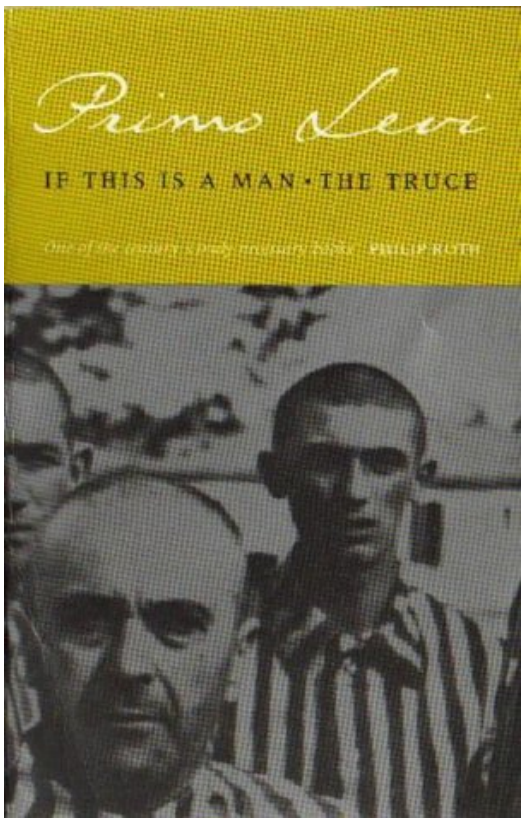
I asked Simon Øvretveit why he was sent to Sachsenhausen. "I lived in Televåg," he replied. This answer makes perfect sense, because on 30 April 1942 all men living in Telavåg, a small coastal village on the island Sotra close to Bergen in West Norway, were arrested and deported to Sachsenhausen. The reason why was that, acting in self defence, two young Norwegians had shot two Gestapo officeres. The Norwegians were hiding in a house in Telavåg, waiting for a boat to take them across the North Sea to the Shetland Islands. As Arnfinn Haga documents in his book *Aksjon Telavåg* (Mission Telavåg), only about half of the men deported to Sachsenhausen survived. The Nazis blew up and burnt down all the houses in the village, and to this day the name Telavåg carries great symbolic significance in

Norway. The Nazis' act of revenge was in accordance with their policy in the occupied territories. As Josef Goebbels put it on another occasion, "Wenn sie uns nicht lieben lernen, dann sollen sie uns wenigstens fürchten" (If they don't learn to love us, they shall at least fear us). In Norway, the person who more than anybody else personified this fear was Reichkommisär Josef Terboven. Terboven came to Telavåg and ordered the destruction of the village; we can see him here, in the middle of the photograph on the cover of Arnfinn Haga's book.



At the end of my conversation with Simon Øvretveit, I asked him a simple question that is difficult to reply to: what, looking back, is it essential not to forget? – The most important thing, he said, "er at det ikkje blir knytta til hatet" – that the experience is not linked to hatred. For Øvretveit, the historical reality of his experience is essential. – In order to know, he said, you have to be told what is true. The witness's concern with truth is understandable, and it is linked to the authenticity of his or her account. In the case of the

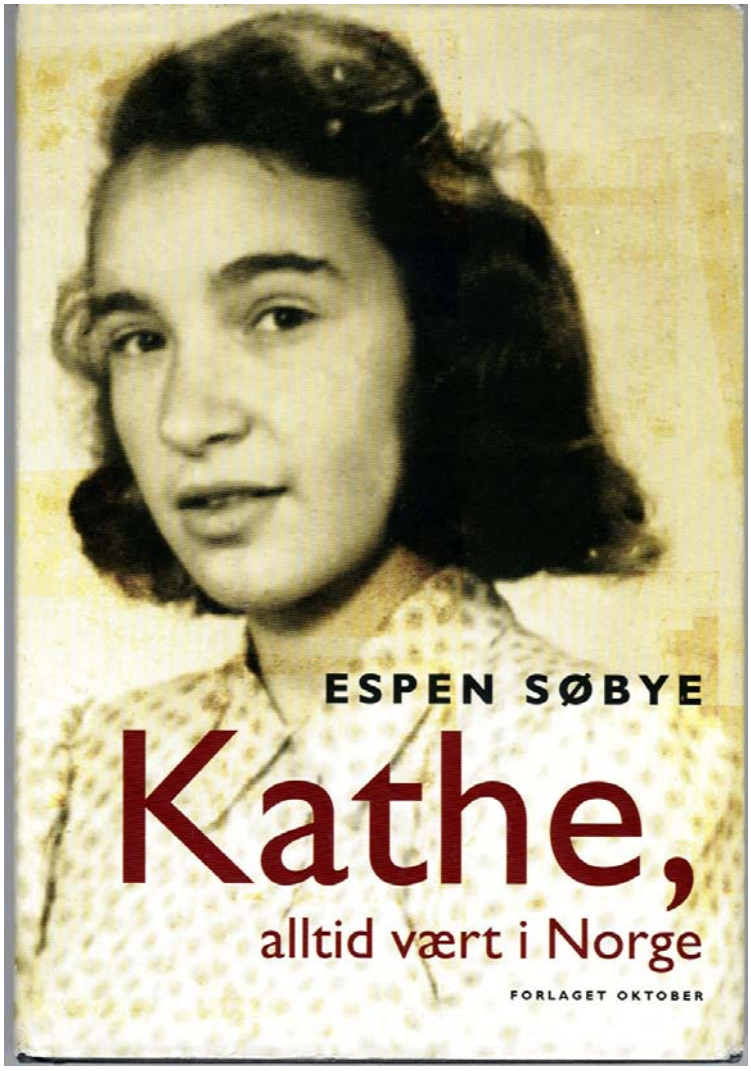
Holocaust, where the events to be reported are particularly gruesome, the issue of truth is further highlighted. Thus, two characteristic features of Primo Levi's written account of his Holocaust experience are authenticity and restraint. Reading his classic memoir *If This is a Man*, we understand, and accept, that this is a story told by a narrator whom we are asked to identify as Levi, and whose information we are asked to trust. Nowhere in *If This is a Man* does this presupposition become clearer than in the last sentence of the book's preface: "It seems to me unnecessary to add that none of the facts are invented" (16).



The stories of Holocaust survivors are not invented stories. And yet even those who *have* experienced the Holocaust, represent it to themselves, and these representations will inevitably vary from individual to individual. To make this point is of course not to argue that some accounts are untrue, but it is to remind us that a complete narrative of the Holocaust can never be constructed. Representation involves *selection* and *ordering*.

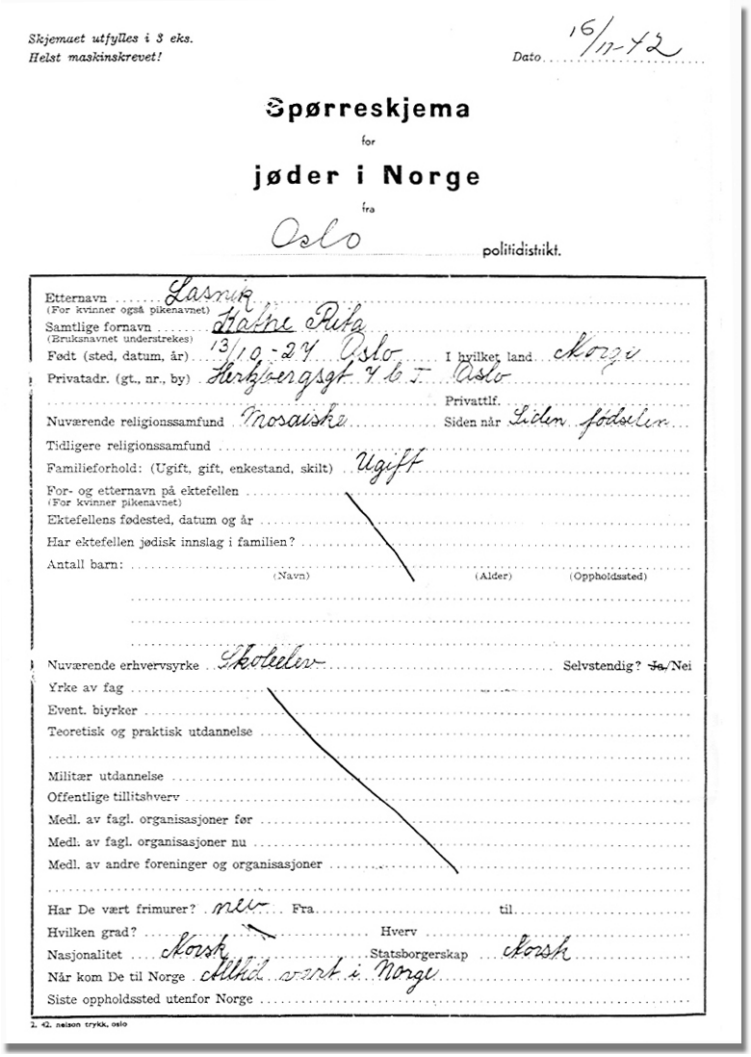
The variety of autobiographical narratives of the Holocaust prepares us for the even greater variation of biographical accounts and of stories which involve elements of fiction. In the remaining part of this talk I want to briefly discuss one example of each of these variants.

In 2003 the Norwegian author Espen Søbye published a book entitled *Kathe, alltid vært i Norge* (Kathe, Always Been in Norway).



This is a traditional biography written in the third person. It documents, as accurately as possible, the life of a Jewish girl named Kathe Lasnik. Relatively speaking, compared to countries such as Poland and Hungary, there were few Jews in Norway in 1940. But in 1942 many of those who lived here were arrested, and in the middle of November 1942 Kathe had to fill in a specially designed form. Replying to one of the questions on this form, “Når kom

De til Norge?" (When did you come to Norway?), Kathe wrote: "Alltid vært i Norge" (Always been in Norway) – and these words form part of the well-chosen title of Søbye's biography. However, on 26 November Kathe and her parents are aboard the *Donau*, a ship built for troop transport, and on her arrival in Germany four days later she is sent directly to Auschwitz. Only eight of the 532 passengers on the *Donau* survived.



Skjemaet utfylles i 3 eks.
Helst maskinskrevet!

Dato 16/11-42

Spørreskjema

for

jøder i Norge

fra

Oslo politidistrikt.

Etternavn (For kvinner også pikenavnet): Lasnik
Samtlige fornavn (Bruksnavnet understrekes): Kathe Rita
Født (sted, datum, år): 13/10-24 Oslo — I hvilket land: Norge
Privatadr. (gt., nr., by): Herbjørnsgt. 7 b I Oslo — Privattlf.
Nuværende religionssamfund: Mosaiske — Siden når: Siden fødselen
Tidligere religionssamfund:
Familieforhold: (Ugift, gift, enkestand, skilt): Ugift
For- og etternavn på ektefellen (For kvinner pikenavnet):
Ektefellens fødested, datum og år:
Har ektefellen jødisk innslag i familien?
Antall barn: (Navn) (Alder) (Oppholdssted)

Nuværende erhvervsyrke: Skoleelev — Selvstendig? ~~Ja~~/Nei
Yrke av fag:
Event. biyrker:
Teoretisk og praktisk utdannelse:
Militær utdannelse:
Offentlige tillitshverv:
Medl. av fagl. organisasjoner før:
Medl. av fagl. organisasjoner nu:
Medl. av andre foreninger og organisasjoner:
Har De vært frimurer? nei — Fra — til
Hvilken grad? — Hverv
Nasjonalitet: Norsk — Statsborgerskap: Norsk
Når kom De til Norge: Alltid vært i Norge
Siste oppholdssted utenfor Norge:

2. 42. nelson trykk, oslo

Now Søbye is a professional biographer, who has no familial relationship with Kathe. While Levi as a survivor of the death machine of Auschwitz can bear witness to the barbarism of the Holocaust, Søbye had to proceed by making interviews and by consulting relevant secondary literature. This reflects the biographer's need for documentation of what happened. In the case of this particular biography, the recorded events of Kathe's life are carefully

documented, as the twenty pages of notes illustrate. And yet precisely since Søbye is keen to document and verify what he writes about Kathe, the difficulties of recording the life of one (out of millions) murdered by the Nazis are highlighted. In the first chapter of his book, Søbye tells us how he, without really planning to, became intrigued by the name Kathe Lasnik. He wrote to the Norwegian State Archive (Riksarkivet), requesting permission to see Kathe Lasnik's file, numbered 84/1. When file 84/1 is given to him by the archivist and Søbye opens it, he discovers that it is empty. "Then I got a sudden impulse," he writes, "to find out as much as possible about Kathe Lasnik."

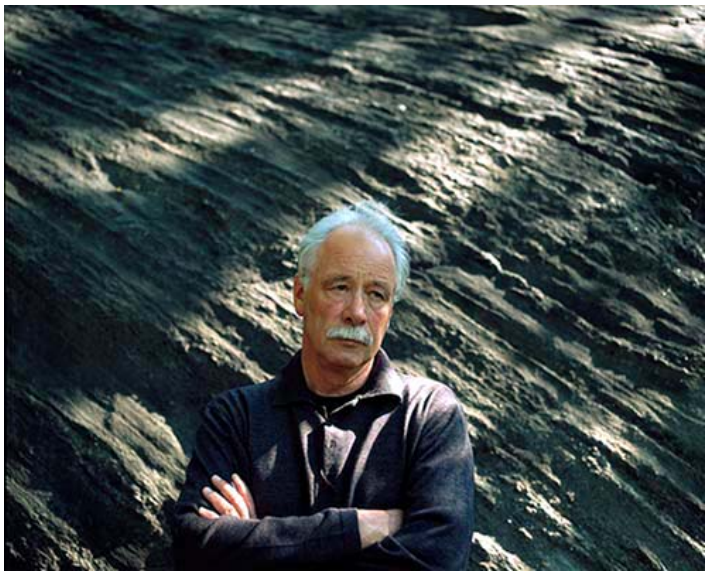
The very limited information about Kathe illustrates the problem of representing the lives of those who were murdered in the Holocaust. In the case of Kathe, Søbye was able to talk with her two sisters, both of whom managed to flee to Sweden in the autumn of 1942. Their names are Jenny Bermann, who moved to Boston in the United States in 1954, and Elise Bassist, who lived in Kfar Saba, a small town to the north of Tel Aviv, since 1994. Kathe's sisters provided Søbye with information which he could then link to more general knowledge about the fates of the Norwegian Jews. The result is a fine biography, recording the life of and also paying homage to an unknown Norwegian girl callously murdered while still in her teens.

Considered as a biographical account of Kathe's life, *Kathe, alltid vært i Norge*, is *one* example of a narrative representation of the Holocaust. Broadly speaking, such narratives can assume various forms. It follows that *genre* is a key issue for the research team. We will discuss the characteristic narrative features – the possibilities as well as limitations – of genres such as the report, the travel story, the fragment, the short story, the novel, and film. The role of memory is a significant factor in all these generic variants of Holocaust narrative.

Of particular interest to the team are narratives which, partly because of the enormous problem of representing the Holocaust, combine different generic features, and which seem to

be situated in the blurred transition zone between historical or documentary narrative on the one hand and fictional narrative on the other. In the concluding part of this talk I will discuss one such narrative, W.G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz*.

Born in the southern part of Germany in 1944, Sebald was literally as well as metaphorically a child of the Second World War. His father was a German soldier, who after Germany's defeat remained a prisoner of war in France for two years. Sebald's father came home a stranger to his three-year old son in 1947, and he never spoke about his war experiences. However, in his father's photo albums Sebald found pictures taken during the Polish campaign in September 1939. As Eric Homberger puts it, "He sensed that something in the grinning German soldiers and boy scout atmosphere of the campaign, ending with the torching of villages not unlike his own Bavarian home in Wertach am Allgäu, hinted at the meaning of the destroyed buildings, silences and absence of memory around him."

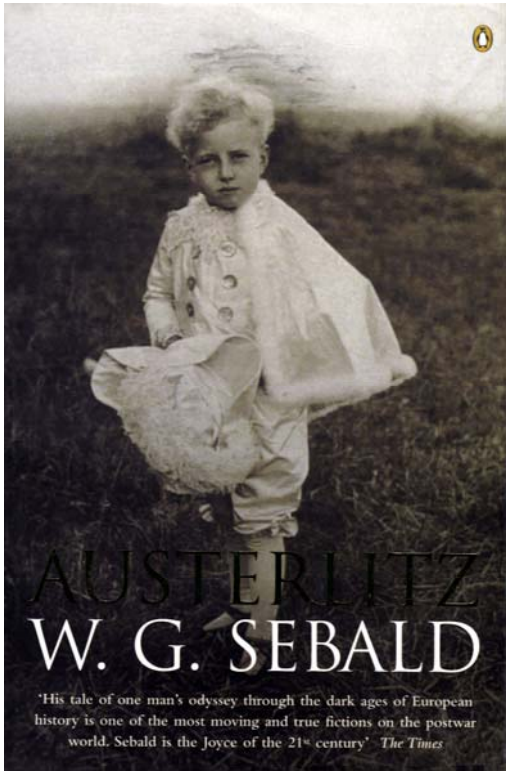


W.G. Sebald

Sebald recalls that his class at the grammar school he attended was shown newsreel films from Bergen Belsen, the concentration camp liberated by the Allied forces in April 1945. There was no discussion afterwards – it seemed that no one knew what to think about what they had just seen, or how to explain it. After having obtained a degree in German literature at the University of Freiburg in 1965, Sebald moved to Britain; and for many years

he taught literature and literary translation at the University of East Anglia. Gradually, almost hesitatingly, he started to write himself. His best known book, *Austerlitz*, was published in 2001. In December of that year he was killed in a traffic accident.

Sebald doubted whether those who had never experienced a Nazi concentration camp could describe what occurred there. He seems to have felt that to try to do so would have been presumptuous, a dubious appropriation of others' sufferings. Sebald's writings are inspired by the Second World War. They reflect his vulnerability and frustration as a child in the immediate aftermath of the war – a war that made the Holocaust possible. He decided, then, to approach his subject obliquely. This is what he does in *Austerlitz* – a strange blend of novel, memoir, and travel account. Sebald's combined distrust of and faith in narrative can serve as a token of the enormity of the challenge facing anyone attempting to understand the horrors of the Holocaust. His writings are narratives *quand-même*, narratives in spite of the daunting inexplicability of the problem to be explored, narratives designed – like those of Conrad and Kafka, to ask difficult questions rather than providing over-simplified answers.



The front cover of *Austerlitz* shows a black and white photograph of a young boy. As we start reading the novel we cannot, of course, know that this is a picture of the novel's protagonist as a child. Yet on page 258 the same photo is reproduced, in smaller format, accompanied by the sentence: "Yes, and the small boy in the other photograph, said Věra after a while, this is you, Jacquot, in February 1939, about six months before you left Prague." The photo we are looking at is thus presented as one of the protagonist, whose name is Jacquot Austerlitz, but we are not in a position to know this when we start reading. There is a curious link between this kind of ignorance on the part of the reader and that experienced by Austerlitz himself. He recognizes [quote] "the unusual hairline running at a slant over the forehead, but otherwise all memory was extinguished in me by an overwhelming sense of the long years that had passed" (259).

I mention this remarkable feature of the title as an indication of how difficult it is to begin discussing this novel. In *Austerlitz*, beginning and ending are intertwined, as are the processes of narrating, listening, reading, and interpretation. This is how the novel begins:

> In the second half of the 1960s I travelled repeatedly from England to Belgium, partly for study purposes, partly for other reasons which were never entirely clear to me, staying sometimes for just one or two days, sometimes for several weeks. On one of these Belgian excursions which, as it seemed to me, always took me further and further abroad, I came on a glorious early summer's day to the city of Antwerp, known to me previously only by name. Even on my arrival, as the train rolled slowly over the viaduct with its curious pointed turrets on both sides and into the dark station concourse, I had begun to feel unwell, and this sense of indisposition persisted for the whole of my visit to Belgium on that occasion. I still remember the uncertainty of my footsteps as I walked all round the inner city… (1)

On a first reading, we might think that the first-person narrator, the "I" who travels "repeatedly from England to Belgium," is identical with Austerlitz. Yet although, as it turns out, there is a peculiarly strong resemblance between the first-person narrator and the novel's main character, this beginning is actually a frame narrative whose main function is to establish a narrative situation in which the two can meet, and in which Austerlitz can talk. Austerliz is introduced like this:

> One of the people waiting in the *Salle des pas perdus* was Austerlitz, a man who then, in 1967, appeared almost youthful, with fair, curiously wavy hair of a kind I had seen elsewhere only on the German hero Siegfried in Fritz Lang's *Nibelungen* film. That day in Antwerp, as on all our later meetings, Austerlitz wore heavy walking boots and workman's trousers made of faded blue calico, together with a tailor-made but long outdated suit jacket. (6–7)

That Austerlitz's name is identical with the novel's title is of course a strong indication of his importance as a character: although we cannot yet link this name to the photograph on the cover, we assume that Austerlitz is the narrative's protagonist. On a second reading, the significance of the railway station becomes much greater. As we read and reread this engrossing, melancholic text, it seems to revolve round, and receive a lot of its narrative energy from, a sustained search for elements of the past perceived by Austerlitz as essential to his own identity formation. The railway station metonymically represents that search, and seen in this light, it is significant that the literal meaning of *Salle des pas perdus* is "hall of lost steps." The railway station's importance is strengthened by a significant structural link between the *Salle des pas perdus* in Antwerp and the Gare d'Austerlitz in Paris:

> Curiously enough, said Austerlitz, a few hours after our last meeting, when he had come back from the Bibliothèque Nationale and changed trains at the Gare d'Austerlitz, he had felt a premonition that he was coming closer to his father. As I might know, he said, part of the railway network had been paralysed by a strike last Wednesday, and in the unusual silence which, as a consequence, had descended on the Gare d'Austerlitz, an idea came to him of his father's leaving Paris from this station, close as it was to his flat in the rue Barrault, soon after the Germans entered the city. (404–05)

Austerlitz's identity search blends into a prolonged search for this childhood and his parents. Details of his origin were suppressed for a long time; it has taken him a lot of energy to retrieve his real name and to find out that although he grew up in the Welsh village of Bala, he is actually a Czech Jew who was sent to Britain when he was only five, as part of a *Kindertransport* in 1939. His father did not survive the war, but his tragic fate – which Maximilian Aychenwald shared with millions of Jews – does not make it less imperative for Austerlitz to search for him. "I imagined," says Austerlitz to the frame narrator who serves as his narratee, "that I saw him leaning out of the window of his compartment as the train left …" (406–7). As Austerlitz connects this railway station with his father, it becomes a catalyst of his memories. And as it is already linked to Austerlitz himself through its name, Gare d'Austerlitz constitutes a second aspect of the title *Austerlitz*.

When I met Austerlitz again for morning coffee on the boulevard Auguste Blanqui, shortly before I left Paris, he told me that the previous day he had heard, from one of the staff at the records centre in the rue Geoffroy-l'Asnier, that Maximilian Aychenwald had been interned during the latter part of 1942 in the camp at Gurs, a place in the Pyrenean foothills which he, Austerlitz, must now seek out. Curiously enough, said Austerlitz, a few hours after our last meeting, when he had come back from the Bibliothèque Nationale and changed

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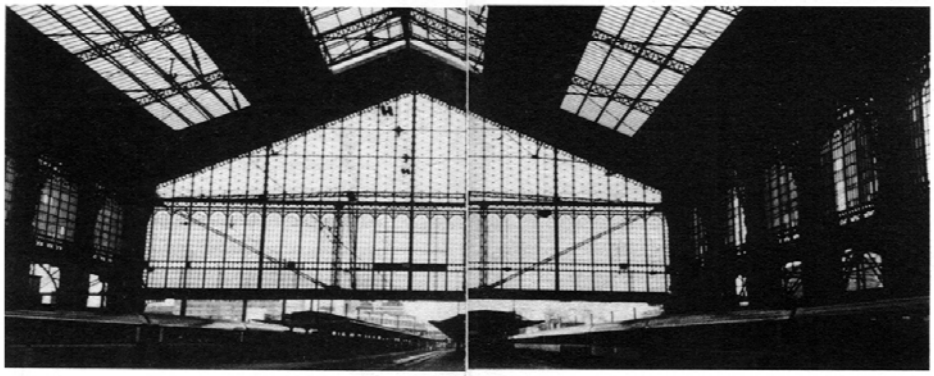

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– 405 –

The passage that I just quoted is accompanied by a photograph of a railway station. In *Austerlitz* the black-and-white photographs, which typically signal a biography or a documentary account, become an integral part of the narrative. Sebald makes the photos part of the fiction by reflecting on them rather than identifying them. As a result, the whole narrative text becomes an extended caption. Since the text is a fictional one, the photographs are to some extent fictionalized. But this process also works the other way, for the photographs anchor the fiction in a specific historical reality.

There is a significant link between the Gare d'Austerlitz and a third aspect of meaning suggested by the novel's title. This railway station in Paris is named after Austerlitz, or Czech *Slakov*, the place in the present-day Czech Republic where Napoleon defeated the Russian and Austrian armies at the battle of 2 December 1805. As a pupil in the Welsh village school, Austerlitz has a history teacher who is fascinated by Napoleon, and who takes a special interest in the battle of Austerlitz: "Hilary could talk for hours about the second of December

1805" (100). The fact that Austerlitz is a geographical location in the country where the protagonist was born accentuates the title's spatial dimension. Yet it also temporalizes it, because Austerlitz, or Slakov, is inseparable from the battle fought there in 1805. Seen from the vantage point of the Gare d'Austerlitz in Paris, Austerlitz in the Czech Republic suggests both an eastward movement and a movement backward in time. This combination of spatial locations with identical names associated with different times and different characters brings the novel's title into closer contact with its plot.

The three aspects identified so far are all related to each other, and the combination of them forms the basis for a fourth aspect of the title *Austerlitz*. Early on in his narrative, the frame narrator mentions that Austerlitz does not tell him much "about his origins and his own life" (7–8). Yet the question of origin is all-important to Austerlitz. Continuing his account of how he imagined seeing his father in the window of a train leaving the Gare d'Austerlitz, Austerlitz specifies that [quote] "I saw the white clouds of smoke rising from the locomotive as it began to move ponderously away" (406).

Austerlitz imagines his father travelling out, *aus*, escaping from the Germans in 1940, and yet, as both Austerlitz, the frame narrator and the reader suspect, ending up in a concentration camp a few years later. The German words *Zug* and *Bahn/Eisenbahn* (synonyms both meaning "train") are semantically loaded for Sebald. On the one hand, they signal travel and possible escape (as in the case of Austerlitz); on the other hand, they are inextricably linked to the transport of Jews to the concentration camps in Germany and occupied Poland. It is significant that the first three and the last three letters of the names Austerlitz and Auschwitz are identical:

terl
Aus itz
chw

There is a curious mirror-image here: while Austerlitz was helped onto a *Kindertransport* in 1939, thus escaping from the Nazis, his father, though possibly managing to flee from Paris the following year, did not survive the war. The sentence I just quoted is ambiguous in a thematically enriching manner: "white clouds of smoke" do not only rise from the carriage Austerlitz imagines his father is in. Smoke also rose from the chimneys of Auschwitz, where Austerlitz's father perhaps died.

There is a strong sense, then, in which Austerlitz's loss of his father is ingrained in his own name. But if Austerlitz's narrative is a gesture of solidarity, an act of homage paid to his father, it is also a sustained reflection on the historical reality of war (and the Holocaust within that war), and on the vulnerability and fragility of European civilization.

The path to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

I want to end by returning to the photograph I showed you at the beginning. Looking at this photo, and knowing that this woman and the three children are in Auschwitz-Birkenau, we sense at least *some* of the difficulty of understanding what happened to them. What we are looking at is so horrible that we want to turn away – our movement towards identification is countered by our need for distance from the unspeakable crimes to which the photograph testifies. Sebald is no doubt right to doubt whether somebody like myself, who has never experienced Auschwitz, can describe what occurred there. And yet both I and my team hope,

and think, that he would have supported our research project: to identify, compare, analyse and discuss those narratives which, however fragmentary or imperfect they may be, enable us to remember what we cannot afford to forget. The task is difficult, but important; and since it is an interdisciplinary venture, the Centre for Advanced Study is a good place to be.

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