

# *Austerlitz* and his Author: Evacuation and Exile

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## Abstract

This article explores the interrelated themes of broken attachment, childhood trauma and the nature of memory, particularly associated with the evacuation of children from Europe, and within Britain at the start of the Second World War. The paper is based upon the life and works of the German author W. G. Sebald and, specifically, his novel *Austerlitz*, and, to a lesser extent, some of the author's experience as a result of evacuation from London in 1940. The article also makes reference to recent work on the neurobiology of traumatic memory.

Ka tūhuria e te tuhinga nei ngā ariā taurite ki te motunga o ngā taura here, mate tamariki me te āhua o maumahara hāngai atu nei ki te hūnukutangahia o ngā tamariki mai i Ioripa me te rohe o Ingarangi i te tīmatanga o te Pakanga Tuarua. Ko te pūtaketanga o te tuhinga ko te koiora me ngā mahi a W. G. Sebald; he kaituhi Tiamana, whāia rawahia ko tana pukapuka *Austerlitz*, ā, itiiti nei te pānga ki ētahi o ana wheako ara ake i te wehenga mai i Rānana i te tau 1940. Ka tohu anō hoki te tuhinga ki te mahi onamata whakapā atu ki te mātauranga io koiora o te mate maumahara.

**Keywords:** *Austerlitz*; trauma; traumatic memory; attachment; separation; Second World War; Germany

## Background

In 2009 and 2010, the media was full of reports and articles about the end of the Second World War (WWII) and the evacuation in Britain at the beginning of the war of children from its major cities. While one might wonder why the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of this war seems to have caught such attention, the subject and the presentation on which this article is based has been in my thoughts for at least the past four years. Those of us who were born or were living in Britain or Europe around the time of WWII would, I think, be at least a little aware of the impact of it upon our lives. Certainly, my own experience of

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evacuation as an infant in 1940 to escape the Blitz has had its effects in my life.

Roughly four years ago, when browsing in a bookshop, the assistant serendipitously recommended a new book, on which this article is based: the novel *Austerlitz* by W. G. Sebald. It was serendipitous in that the book spoke so clearly to me, of parts of my own childhood experience, which have been so important in my personal psychotherapy and my practice. It felt like a book I had been born to read. As I discovered when I began to read other of Sebald's books, serendipity or coincidence is very much part of Sebald's writing. I read some critical commentaries, feeling that there was something to know — and to say — about the inner world of the writer and the way that this is demonstrated in the story. I also felt that there were themes in the narrative itself that are relevant to psychotherapy, particularly those of broken attachment, exile, and the nature of traumatic memory. After considerable thought I decided on some questions that might guide me through this exploration. Why did Sebald write this particular book, the only one among his oeuvre that is in any sense a complete story, something approaching a novel? What meaning does he want us to make of it? What meaning does he seem to make of it? How does he create our experience of it? Finally, what, as psychotherapists, can we learn from it? These, then, are the questions that I attempt to explore in this paper. Consideration will be given to some aspects of the author's history, and some attention to the possible psychological results. I introduce the book *Austerlitz* with quotations and some discussion of the psychotherapeutic, neurobiological implications of the experience of the eponymous protagonist, Austerlitz, adding some aspects of my own experience where relevant. I conclude with some discussion of Sebald's life and preoccupations as they are demonstrated in the writing itself and the issues that he raises.

## Winfreid Georg Sebald

Winfreid Georg Sebald, was born in 1944 in a subalpine village in Southern Germany. He was thus part of that first generation of children which had to struggle to deal with the history of German activity in WWII. It is surely not difficult to understand these struggles. How is any post war German child to come to terms with the wholesale murder of defenceless Jews committed by his parents' generation? How do they cope with their German nationhood and identity and the burden of guilt? Sebald's father had been an officer in the Wehrmacht, and had served in Poland, where much of the earliest killing of Jews had taken place by German soldiers. A prisoner of war, he did not return to the family until 1947. He proved to be distant and would never talk about his wartime service. In Sebald's book of prose poems, *After Nature* (1988/2003), the poem "Dark Night Sallies Forth", which describes a family photograph taken in 1943, is clearly autobiographical (p. 85):

Mother in her open coat,  
with a lightness she was  
later to lose; Father, a little aside, hands in his pockets, he, too, it seems, with no  
cares. The date is August 26<sup>th</sup>, 1943.  
On the 27<sup>th</sup> Father's departure for Dresden,

of whose beauty his memory, as he  
remarks when I question  
retains no trace.

Later in the same poem, Sebald also described the moment of his mother's realisation of her pregnancy, placed in the context of the strategic carpet bombing of Nuremberg (p. 86):

During the night of the 28<sup>th</sup>  
582 aircraft flew in  
to attack Nurnberg. Mother,  
who on the next day planned  
to return to her parents'  
home in the alps, got no further than  
Furth. From there she  
saw Nurnberg in flames,  
but cannot recall now what the burning town looked like  
or what her feelings were  
at this sight.  
On the same day, she told me recently  
from Furth she had travelled on  
to Windsheim and an acquaintance  
at whose house she waited until  
the worst was over, and realised  
that she was with child.

Later still, Sebald recalled seeing a painting of Lot and the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah (pp. 86-87):

As for the burning city,  
in the Vienna Art-Historical Museum  
there hangs a painting  
by Altdorfer depicting Lot  
with his daughters. On the horizon  
a terrible conflagration rages  
devouring a large city.  
Smoke ascends from the site,  
the flames rise to the sky and  
in the blood-red reflection  
one sees the blackened  
facades of houses.  
In the middle ground there is a strip  
of idyllic green landscape,  
and closest to the beholder's eye



a new generation of  
Moabites is conceived.  
When for the first time I saw  
this picture the year before last,  
I had the strange feeling  
of having seen all of it  
before, and a little later,  
crossing to Florisdorf  
on the Bridge of Peace  
I nearly went out of my mind.

I have thought about and endeavoured to imagine the likely trauma of this young woman, pregnant with her second child, seeing the beautiful mediaeval city of Nuremburg, incidentally a centre of anti-semitism, destroyed by firestorm, and, in all likelihood, encountering the dazed and blackened refugees that emerged from its ashes. She, however, retained no memory of the emotional quality of that experience. Even as I read the poem again, and hear Sebald's agonised response to that picture, I think of him, that other new generation, newly conceived within a mother who watched the Nuremburg firestorm, and who lived in the psychosis that was Nazi Germany, and think of Sebald's deep connectedness to and understanding of himself and his past, and his growth to maturity in a Germany determined to ignore that traumatised and horrific past.

The determined failure to remember or acknowledge the impact and implications of the Third Reich period (1933-1945) on Germany itself, the persecution of the Jews and the enormous destruction of German cities at the end of the war, became a defining issue for Sebald. By 1944, when Sebald was born, Germany was suffering the devastating effects of the fire-bombing of her principal city and many of her smaller cities, with massive loss of life, infrastructure and history, together with the tremendous losses (some 400,000 casualties) in the battle of Stalingrad. One can ponder about the experience of the young Sebald, in an attachment relationship with a mother at whose state of mind we can only guess, and who seems to have repressed her traumatic memories. As is discussed later, a mother's high stress and anxiety impacts on the neural development of an infant. All of Sebald's writing is connected to memory in one form or another, and to the traumatic historical events that leave their marks on succeeding generations. Surely he is recognising in himself the effects of his mother's distress when he wrote in his poem "Dark Night Sallies Forth" (1988/2002), "early on induced me to imagine a silent catastrophe." (p. 89)

Certainly, the anxiety prevalent in Britain in 1938 at the unfolding events would have affected my mother's capacity, as a very young woman, to mother her children, about whom she was already ambivalent. But the first crucial event for me was the evacuation itself with consequent separation from her, with no contact, which created a very solitary child, unnaturally docile, quiet and shy.

Although the village where the Sebald family lived was relatively untouched by these events, in that they were not actually bombed, few families at that time would have failed to lose a father, son or family member; and, as the end of the war approached, few would

have escaped the dreadful food shortages that afflicted the population. While records suggest that the carpet bombing by the Allies had little of its intended effects on German civilian morale, it is not too difficult to imagine that fear of the repressive regime itself, the Gestapo and Schutzstaffel (the SS), together with the growing suspicion that the war was being lost, would have been a part of the zeitgeist. With her husband away fighting, Sebald's mother's state of mind can hardly be imagined.

In his book *Vertigo*, Sebald (1990/1999) described his return after 30 years to his native village, Wertach im Allgau. His journey there is described in his particular style: circumlocutory, with overtones of deep unease: "Increasingly a sense of trepidation oppressed me, and it seemed that the further down I walked, the colder and gloomier it became." (p. 178)

This was, one suspects, a descent into an unhappy past. Much had changed, although the village he had been born in had "continually returned in my dreams and daydreams." (ibid., p. 185)

He seems to have been a lonely child; there was an older sister, but one does not get much sense of her. His mother is barely mentioned. Sebald was, however, able to form a close attachment to his kindly and compassionate grandfather. His death, when Sebald was 12 years old, was a terrible loss, in response to which Sebald immediately became ill with a serious skin disease which took many years to heal completely. At a later point in his poem "Dark Night Sallies Forth" (1988/2003) he wrote (p. 89):

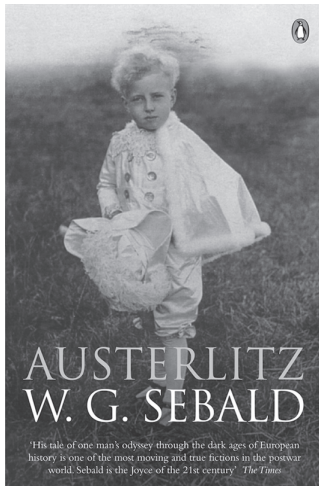
... I grew up,  
 despite the dreadful course  
 of events elsewhere, on the northern  
 edge of the Alps, so it seems  
 to me now without any  
 idea of destruction. But the habit  
 of often falling down in the streets and  
 often sitting with bandaged hands  
 by the open window between the potted  
 fuchsias, waiting for the pain to subside and for hours  
 doing nothing but looking out,  
 early on induced me to imagine  
 a silent catastrophe that occurs  
 almost unperceived ...  
 ... This I have never got over.

It is clear that the "dreadful course of events" could not be discussed anywhere in Sebald's family or, in fact, in Germany as a whole; nevertheless, children know when something is being withheld from them. My own experience of being an infant and evacuee during WWII, was that the everyday event of the British Broadcasting Company's "Radio News" at 6pm every evening left a powerful impression. The six o'clock pips went, the news was signalled by the sombre voice of the newsreader, and everything in the house stopped. No-one spoke, no interruptions were allowed, faces and body language were

clearly very serious. Of course, I didn't understand "the War", but I knew something bad was going on. That these events unknown to me impacted on my foster parents and their responses to me I don't doubt for a moment. Children have been said to live, "in the sea of the mother's unconscious" (attributed to G. G. Jung, source unknown). Sebald wrote that he had no memory of these events, and yet it is clear from this poem that something of this gross defeat, humiliation, horror, and largely unacknowledged guilt and fear in his mother's conscious or unconscious did lodge somewhere in his implicit, emotional memory.

When Sebald was eight years old, the family moved to a nearby town. He recalled seeing at school a short film of the liberation of concentration camps, but no explanation was given, the whole event was hurried and somehow furtive. He had no idea of its meaning. Increasingly as an adolescent he determined to find out about these events and his country's wartime history. He studied initially at the University of Freiburg, but found there a clear determination to maintain silence together with authoritarian attitudes and evidence of the prevalence of Nazi influence. This included staff who were known former Nazis. Frustrated and dismayed, Sebald finally moved to Britain in 1970, although he emphasised that he did not see this as exile. Eventually he became Professor of European Literature and then the first Director of the British Centre for Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia, Norwich. He died tragically in a motor vehicle accident in December 2001. To the end he maintained his dislike of his native Germany and its people. He authored six books, in order of their writing (in German): *After Nature* (Hamish Hamilton, 1988), *Vertigo* (Harvill, 1990), *The Emigrants* (Harvill, 1992), *The Rings of Saturn* (Harvill, 1995), *On the Natural History of Destruction* (Hamish Hamilton, 1999), and *Austerlitz* (Hamish Hamilton, 2001). Later, posthumous collections of his shorter writing, including *Campo Santo* (Hamish Hamilton, 2003) and *Across the Land and Water: Selected Poems, 1964-2001* (Random House, 2012) have also become available.

## *Austerlitz*: The Book and the Protagonist



So now to the book itself: *Austerlitz*. When I picked up the book, I was struck immediately by the photograph on the front cover: a powerful image of a young child in fancy dress, with a curiously bleak expression. At first, reading the story was intriguing, while the style was strange, and rather confusing. I found it difficult to know quite who was speaking, the narrator or his principal character. This was due in part to the fact that the author uses no quotation marks, or even many paragraphs. His style is seamless, apart from the slightly blurry photographs, with no comment or legend, which are dotted through the book, and which sometimes seem to bear no immediate relevance to the story. The book is nonetheless beautifully written, and quite compelling. For example, at the start of the story, the



narrator has arrived in Antwerp, and feeling rather unwell, takes refuge in the Nocturama at the zoo.

It was some time before my eyes became used to its artificial dusk, and I could make out the different animals leading their sombrous lives behind the glass by the light of a pale moon. I cannot now recall exactly what creatures I saw on that visit....The only animal which has remained lingering in my memory is the racoon. I watched it for a long time as it sat beside a little stream with a serious expression on its face, washing the same piece of apple over and over again, as if it hoped that all this washing, which went far beyond any reasonable thoroughness, would help it to escape the unreal world in which it had arrived, so to speak, though no fault of its own. Otherwise, all I remember of the denizens of the Nocturama is that several of them had strikingly large eyes, and the fixed inquiring gaze found in certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness that surrounds us purely by means of looking and thinking. (p. 2)

In these introductory passages, the emotional and metaphysical tenor of the work is beautifully and indirectly suggested.

In the dim mirrored waiting room of Antwerp Railway Station, the narrator notices a young man, with "fair curiously wavy hair" (p. 6). This is Austerlitz. An architectural historian, he is making notes and sketches of the station waiting room. In the ensuing conversation which begins quite abruptly, he reveals metaphysical preoccupations in his work:

he spoke at length about the marks of pain which, as he said he well knew, "trace countless lines through history ... [and] in his studies of railway architecture ... he could never quite shake off thoughts of the agony of leave taking and the fear of foreign places". (p. 16)

Austerlitz acknowledges his impulse to visit the main Parisian railway stations, finding himself "in the grip of dangerous and entirely incomprehensible currents of emotion ... marked by both blissful happiness and profound misfortune". (p. 45)

Railways are of course inexorably connected to Holocaust memories and images, and, in my own history, they feature powerfully. I vividly remember my return to my London home in 1945. We travelled back by train to London, myself and my unknown parents, to a very different family culture and way of living. I was cut off once again from all I had come to know and from loving adults to whom I was attached as well as I could. I am sure this experience was amplified by my implicit memory of that early separation. Each school holiday for many years I travelled, always by train, back to Somerset, blissful happiness, and then returned to London, and grief, if not profound misfortune.

Austerlitz's other primary architectural interest is in fortifications. In strangely emotionally disconnected language he goes on to say:

it is often our mightiest projects that most obviously betray the degree of our

insecurity. The construction of fortifications, for instance — and Antwerp was an outstanding example of that craft — clearly showed how we feel obliged to keep surrounding ourselves with defences, built in successive phases as a precaution against any incursion by enemy powers. (p. 17)

In the interim, the narrator explores the Breendonk fortifications in the vicinity of Antwerp, which had been used by the Germans as a reception and penal camp, and himself has a powerful experience of terror: “No one can explain exactly what happens within us when the doors behind which our childhood terrors lurk are flung open.” (p. 33)

Thus Sebald lays the foundations of his story: the successive layers of defences, railways and railway stations, destruction, Nazi penal camps and persecutions, childhood terrors and, significantly, the “marks of pain” (ibid., p. 16) that run through human history: persecution, alienation, exile and suicide which constitute themes that run through much of Sebald’s writings.

To continue the story, the narrator and Austerlitz meet again a few times, following which the narrator then returns to Germany, and all contact is lost for 20 years. They next meet, by chance, at the bar of the Great Eastern Hotel in Liverpool Street, London. Austerlitz has hardly changed, still carrying his rucksack: “the only truly reliable thing in his life” (p. 55). He resumes the conversation as if there had been no break, with little preamble. This is a man with little sense of the reality of the other:

he had been telling himself that he must find someone to whom he could relate his own story, a story which he had learned only in the last few years and for which he needed the kind of listener I had once been. (p. 60)

He falls silent, gazing into the distance, and then says:

Since my childhood and youth ... I have never known who I really was. He continues: ... the fact that my name alone, and the fact that it was kept from me until my fifteenth year, ought to have put me on the track of my origins, but it has also become clear to me of late why an agency greater or superior to my own capacity for thought, which circumspectly directs operation somewhere in my brain, has always protected me from my own secret. (p. 60)

It is clear that some things are too painful to be allowed into conscious thought.

Austerlitz describes growing up in the home of an emotionally frozen Welsh couple, a Calvinist preacher and his timorous and depressed wife. The house was large, silent, freezing, and had many unused and locked rooms. He recalls the pain of being called by a new name, of having his clothes and rucksack taken away, of lying awake trying to recall faces of people he had left, and having brief happy moments of recall of the faces of his parents, waking in the morning, he said: “to face the knowledge, new every day, that I was not at home now but very far away, in some kind of captivity” (p. 62).

These statements I believe, demonstrate not only Austerlitz’s misery and despair at the loss of his former life and parents, but perhaps something of Sebald’s feelings about



the loss of his grandfather, of coming into consciousness from waking to a sense of dreadful loss.

Eventually Austerlitz is sent to a boarding school, where he eventually makes a good friend, Gerald. Then, aged 15, he is told by the headmaster that his real name is not Dafydd Elias, as he had always understood, but Jacques Austerlitz. At first dazed, slowly he begins to realise that it really is his name. He also discovers, with the help of a teacher, that his foster father “had obliterated every indication of my origin” (p. 105).

There is much more description of his young life, of his friendship with Gerald, of visiting him in his mother Adela’s house on every school holiday, and of the warmth he experienced in Gerald’s small family. After his foster father’s death and funeral, however, he never sees Adela again.

As Sebald wrote of him, it would seem that Austerlitz struggles with object constancy, with retaining his sense of relational warmth or indeed of relationship at all, particularly with mother figures, and with powerful feelings of grief and abandonment. In conversations I have had with some other adult evacuees, we each identified this difficulty with object constancy at some times in our lives, of being unable to hold the sense of a close, warm relationship during separations of any length, and also of a well-developed capacity simply to cut off from old friends after a prolonged absence or when moving away, and a capacity to bury oneself in the present. With great clarity Austerlitz describes his depression, his incapacity to deal with closeness to others, “his life clouded with unrelieved despair” (p. 178), and his insomnia. In his nocturnal wanderings around London he finds himself drawn to Liverpool Street Station, and there, one day, in the disused Ladies’ Waiting Room, he has an extraordinary experience:

in the gloomy light of the waiting room I saw two middle-aged people dressed in the style of the thirties ... not only the minister and his wife ... I also saw the boy they had come to meet. He was sitting by himself on a bench over to one side. His legs, in white knee length socks, did not reach the floor, and but for the small rucksack he was holding on his lap, I don’t think I would have known him. (p. 193)

At this moment, I believe that Austerlitz had remembered himself as a small child, and that this was where he had arrived half a century earlier. This is not an autobiographical memory as such, I suspect, but a traumatic flashback. As he describes his experience, it seems to me that he has a moment of empathy for his small self, and a full realisation of what he has lost. He goes on to describe his feelings:

I felt something rending within me, and a sense of shame and sorrow, or perhaps something quite different, something inexpressible because we have no words for it, just as I had no words all those years ago when the two strangers came over to me speaking a language I did not understand. All I know is that when I saw the boy sitting on the bench I became aware, through my dull bemusement, of the destructive effect of my desolation through all those past years, and a terrible weariness overcame me at the idea that I had never really been alive, or was only now being born, almost on the eve of my death. (p. 193)

The breakdown of those powerful defences comes at a very high price. I think that there are few agonies and griefs quite like that of realising that half of your life or more has been spent out of emotional touch with a large part of your inner self, your memory, imagination and creativity. Austerlitz was four years old when, in 1939, he was part of one of the kindertransport of Jewish children from German-occupied Europe to Britain.

## Psychotherapeutic Reflections

At this point I will digress from the story, and pause to consider what we as psychotherapists know of this man, and his history, a man who “has never known who I really was” (p. 60), and to think about his development and state of mind in the light of his history. We can surmise that, as a Jewish child, he is likely to have had a reasonably good attachment experience with his biological parents. Jewish parents emerge well from a study of parenting in Germany in the nineteenth century, as compared with German families at that period (de Mause, 2002). His experience may have been modified by the kinds of fear and anxiety that his parents would have undergone in the late 1930s, and these are likely to have been absorbed by him unconsciously. Whatever, the experience of being torn from all that represented love, safety and connection together with the terror of strangers, the sense of abandonment, isolation and aloneness, grief and the inability to communicate must surely have been traumatic.

As psychotherapists, we can bring our own understanding of the brain’s functioning to appreciate more deeply the impact of these traumatic events on Austerlitz’s emotional development. For instance, the psychiatrist and psychoanalytic psychotherapist, Daniel Stern (1985) has represented the interactions of the mother and baby that build in the child’s mental representations of interactions with his mother. For me, what shines in this scheme is the enormous complement of unconscious material that mother brings to these interactions: her working models of the infant, her self, her mother, and so on. Much of this material is largely intuitive or implicit. In this way the infant builds their own mental representation of mother, and we know now, of relationship, which is carried implicitly into later life and relationship. Expressed in neurobiological terms, in her book, *The Winter Vault*, Anne Michaels (2009) has expressed this poetically: “Deep in the child’s cranial vault, the mother’s gaze knits up the dangling synapses.” (p. 173) In and through interactions with the mother, neural networks are formed in the child’s brain, determining essential aspects of future attachments and emotional life, as well as dis-attachments. The client brings both experiences to the therapeutic relationship.

Trauma in childhood particularly influences neural networks. Louis Cozolino (2002) has described the role of the brain’s amygdala, the most ancient and, in many ways most primitive part of the brain, in the experience of anxiety and fear. Sensory input of a threatening nature elicits a whole range of activity in the amygdala that affects breathing, heart rate and blood pressure, together with the release into the blood stream and brain of a range of stress hormones and other chemicals designed to activate the flight/fight response necessary for survival. This system is present from birth, and it has been suggested that fear may be the earliest emotion. Later healthy development of the brain involves the neural development of the hippocampus and cortex with connections to the

amygdala which provides a possibility of moderating these reactions. However as Cozolino (2002) has pointed out:

Because the networks of amygdala — mediated memory are dissociable from those of the later developing hippocampal systems — early traumatic memory and overwhelming traumatic memory from later in life can be stored without cortical involvement or control. They will not be consciously remembered, but instead will emerge as intuitive knowledge. (p. 245)

He has written that early trauma results in significantly reduced hippocampal volume and that it “compromises core neural networks” (p. 258) and, in summary, that: “Adaptation to trauma, especially early in life becomes a state of mind, brain and body around which all subsequent experience organises.” (p. 272)

With regard to flashbacks, Cozolino has clarified that, because traumatic memories are stored in more primitive circuits, they are strongly sensory and emotional, non verbal, and experienced as happening in the present. Furthermore, because the amygdala has many connections to the visual centres, visual hallucinations of the kind described by Austerlitz are not uncommon in traumatised individuals and can be accounted for in this way.

Stern (1985) has described the growth of the infant’s sense of self — in different domains of relatedness. The infant’s sense of self develops, he wrote, through stages, involving the sense of the emergent self, of core self, of self with other, and, at around age two or so, the sense of the verbal self. For example, Stern has noted that, at two months, the infant becomes more interactive, smiling, making eye contact responsively. This marks the emergent self. According to Stern, at two to three months, the infant develops a sense of core self, then a sense of self versus other, and then of self with other. As Stern has put it:

They seem to approach interpersonal relatedness with an organising perspective that makes it feel as if there is an integrated sense of themselves as distinct and coherent bodies, with control over their own actions, ownership of their own affectivity, a sense of continuity, and a sense of other people as distinct and separate interactants. (p. 69)

In the second year, and importantly for this exposition, language emerges. Stern wrote:

It makes parts of our known experience more shareable with others. In addition it permits two people to make mutual experiences of meaning that had been unknown before and could never have existed until fashioned by words. It also finally permits the child to begin to construct a narrative of his own life. But in fact language is a double-edged sword. It also makes part of our experience less shareable with ourselves and others. It drives a wedge between two simultaneous forms of interpersonal experience; as it is lived and as it is verbally represented. (p. 162)

## Separation, Loss and Migration

For Austerlitz, on that bench in the station waiting room, and after, that very important, however mixed experience of expressing his distress to others, is rendered completely unavailable. That, together with the shocking separation from his parents; the long train journey; being left alone in the station; then first meeting with this seemingly emotionally frozen couple, and their subsequent awful actions; being spoken to in a language unknown to him; and the impossibility of communicating to them anything that he was experiencing: all would have become locked in his neural networks, consciously unknown. This buried material accounts for his later difficulties of depression, isolation and fear of emotional attachments.

It is useful also to consider the effects of the losses that followed apart from his language, namely his clothes, and particularly his rucksack. One can imagine the possible contents of the rucksack of a four year old boy, and what they might represent in terms of his sense of himself in his connectedness to his home. His rucksack, which he carried with him throughout his life, may be understood as his “transitional object” (Winnicott, 1953/1978): a source of security and comfort and all that remained of his past life. The original rucksack, of course, was removed by his foster parents. Implicit in the trauma, too, would be the attitudes, prejudices and fear of his foster parents, conscious and unconscious, which would have impacted on the young Austerlitz as well as powerful, new and very different cultural input. Something, his lost childhood and language, became buried in his psyche in that process, and it is not until much later that Austerlitz begins to hear snatches of other languages emerging in his mind, at the time when he begins to search for his parents and his Jewish roots.

At this moment I think again of the rucksack and its metaphorical significance to Austerlitz as embodying in some way that narrative. The sense of self will be deeply influenced by and embedded in the prevalent language and culture of his attachment figures. To be suddenly torn from this familiar environment and to be unable to make oneself understood seems unimaginable, and yet this is the experience of exile, and also, for some, of emigration. Rose Tremain, in her novel *The Road Home* (2007) gave a good feeling sense of the experience of the economic migrant.

That the experience of emigration or exile is relevant to the psychotherapeutic community is supported by a paper by Mark Thorpe and Miranda Thorpe, published in 2008. They point out, amongst other things, how an immigrant therapist brings many cultural “knowns” to their work that may mean little to their Kiwi European, Māori or Pasifika clients. I am very aware, for example, that, when obtaining personal histories from clients, I never fail to ask about possible war experience in their family history. I am clear that this is a major part of my personal experience, and cultural background. I find, however, and especially for younger clients, that this seems to be something that has largely slipped away in their family stories. I must say that it is often quite revealing of major depression in the family, and not infrequently lies behind alcoholism.

Writing in the compilation of papers *Lost Childhood and the Language of Exile*, Eros (2004), has said of political exile, that:

the exiled often has to change abruptly his or her identity. Therefore, for many of

these people, a childhood survived in the no-man's-land of their birth was indeed a lost childhood, something they had to forget or repress in order to build up a new identity. (p. 104)

In the case of Austerlitz, this process was actively promoted, indeed forced upon him, by his foster parents for reasons of their own, perhaps with good intention, but with devastating effects. While this case is, of course, fictional, I think it has that ring of psychological truth that makes the book so compelling. Lies, prevarications, and silences were, one is aware, a part of Sebald's childhood and growing up.

## Questions — and Answers?

I find it difficult to read a book such as this, that is, psychologically and emotionally profound and historically valid, without wondering about the author and his experience and how much of that is expressed in the book. So to the questions, I posed earlier: Why did Sebald write the book? What meaning does he want us to make of it? What meaning does he seem to make of it? How does he create our experience of it?

The creation of our experience is illustrated in a delightful, recorded conversation between Sebald (WGS) and Michael Silverblatt (MS) (2001/2007) concerning the opening passages of *Austerlitz*. Silverblatt has just referred to Sebald's wandering prose and gradually unfolding images, in these first pages, with reference to the journey the Nocturama, the animals, eyes, railway station, fortress, and the jail. He suggested that the missing term is "concentration camp".

WGS. Yes.

MS. And that always circling is this silent presence being left out but always gestured toward. Is that correct?

WGS: Yes. I mean, your description corresponds very much to my intentions. I have always felt that it was necessary to write about the history of persecution, of vilification of minorities, the attempt, well nigh achieved, to eradicate a whole people. And I was, in pursuing these ideas, at the same time conscious that it's practically impossible to do this; to write about concentration camps in my view is practically impossible. So you need to find ways of convincing the reader that this is something on your mind but that you do not necessarily roll out.... The reader needs to be prompted that the narrator has a conscience, that he is, and has been perhaps for a long time engaged with these questions. And this is why the main scenes of horror are never directly addressed. I think it is sufficient to remind people, because we've all seen the images, but these images militate against our capacity for discursive thinking, for reflecting upon these things. And also paralyze, as it were, our moral capacity. (p. 79)

I am writing on the premise that it is not really possible to distinguish the narrator of the story from the author himself. Whether the author himself walked around the penal camp at Breendonk is not the issue, though one suspects that he did. However, what is

important is that he is clearly writing from his own emotional life, so powerful is the prose that describes it. Sebald's free associative style demonstrates that very human propensity to talk around a subject, unconsciously avoiding what cannot be named or dealt with — a process with which, as psychotherapists, we are familiar. There are, of course, in the traumatised individual, things that cannot be thought about and, even less, talked about. At the same time, as listeners we are often conscious of our own feelings of unease or even distress. It is Sebald's skill that he uses this literary approach to such good effect in generating unease in the reader. Equally, this statement emphasises the writer's moral concerns surrounding recent German history, which underlie so much of his writing, while, at the same time, making a statement about the impossibility of directly addressing the topic and the images which so dominate our sense of those events.

Sebald experienced growing up in a war torn country with terrible historical realities that could not be talked about. It seems clear to me that the nature of those realities and the very fact of their repression in post war Germany dominated his life, his work and his writing. He seems to have understood this ability to “move on, put it all behind you, rebuild”, which is so notable a feature of post war Germany, as a total failure of responsibility not only to the victims of persecution but also to his compatriots traumatised by needless and questionable carpet bombing of her beautiful mediaeval cities and smaller towns. The overall effect for Sebald caused him to live in Britain, although, significantly, he did all his writing in his native language, and thus primarily for his countrymen and countrywomen, to whom he never reconciled himself.

At the beginning of *Austerlitz* we hear of the narrator's acute discomfort with returning to Europe from Britain; his travel “for reasons which were never entirely clear to me” (p.1); as well as his feelings of unwellness and indisposition which seem to be those of an exile returning to the home which is no longer home, and about which his feelings are, at the least, ambivalent. The racoon “repeatedly washing its apple to help it escape the unreal world in which it had arrived, so to speak, through no fault of its own” (p. 2) might be equated with Sebald's feelings about the circumstances and timing of his birth in Germany and his own need to separate himself from it. These are made clear in the opening passage of *Austerlitz*, and we feel it. That he has anger with his compatriots is understandable. How could any German escape feeling some guilt, however undeserved? In his somewhat wandering style of writing, and his depressive preoccupations as a writer, and his foggy photographs, he is giving us a sense of his own inner life and preoccupations. Much of his writing concerns the “marks of pain”, the fate of the different, the persecuted, the exiles, mostly but not exclusively Jewish, and often of their eventual suicide. Above all, I think that his writing is a clear attempt to make some reparation and to make those marks of pain in recent human history remembered, visible, shareable, understandable, able to be felt and, above all, from which to learn.

I have thought a great deal about this book and Sebald's other writing. Like many, I am sure I have pondered a great deal over the years on the evil of that period of history. This book particularly has clarified something for me. I think that Sebald was caught on the horns of that dilemma which is so movingly described in Schlink's (1997) book, *The Reader*. In that novel a German teenager has an affair with a woman in her thirties. It is an intense affair, and the young man is deeply affected when she suddenly disappears.



He meets her again when, as a law student, he visits a war trial about an atrocity in which she is implicated:

I wanted simultaneously to understand Hanna's crime and to condemn it. But it was too terrible for that. When I tried to understand it, I had the feeling I was failing to condemn it as it must be condemned. When I condemned it as it must be condemned, there was no room for understanding. But even as I wanted to understand Hanna, failing to understand her meant betraying her all over again.

I could not resolve this. I wanted to pose myself both tasks — understanding and condemnation. But it was impossible to do both. (p. 156)

Schlink himself was born in Germany in 1944 and shared many of Sebald's understandable difficulties. It has been said to me that no German should have the effrontery to write about the suffering of the Jews. While it is understandable that Jewish people may feel like this, I think that this is rather like saying that no abuser of children should have his own childhood abuse received with compassion. After all, is abuse, neglect, deprivation, trauma of all kinds not, in the end or, more appropriately, in the beginning, what lies behind so much suffering and evil behaviour? This is clearly what developmental neuroscience is telling us. The capacity to attach and form loving relationships or not, as the case may be, is formed in early life. What seems to me to be most important is to understand fully that what lies behind wars, crimes and persecutions are, more often than not, childhood histories of abuse and trauma, and emotional pain. Neuroscience is raising questions, I believe, about the responsibility and accountability of perpetrators of crime with histories of serious abuse. I realise that these ideas are not likely to receive much public support at present as attitudes to crime seem to be pretty much focussed on punishment. Nonetheless, what this means for me is that I work in therapy with my clients as much as possible to be non judgemental in order to hear, hold and be alongside traumatic experience, with as much compassion as I can muster. This is not always straightforward or easy, of course. Surely we all do what we can to ameliorate the damage in the formation of a new, different kind of relationship and, thus, new neural networks, and consequent behaviours. It is a big job, and takes time. So much of my own learning about people, their strengths and difficulties, feelings and dreams has come from my own training and personal psychotherapy and, of course, my clients — for all of which I am very grateful. It has also come from my passionate reading of good literature over many years, of which *Austerlitz* is a good and poignant example.

I can only hope that, amongst other things, this article may have introduced the reader to what I consider to be a good novel by a thoughtful, tender and compassionate writer and that those who go on to read Sebald's work will do so with as much enjoyment as I have done.

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**Margaret Bannister.** Born in 1938, I was separated from my parents in 1940 as a result of the evacuation of children from London at the start of the Second World War. This was not a total disaster, as I was well loved by my substitute parents. I became a reader at an early age under their care, and this has been a great resource throughout my life. Choosing sciences at Grammar school, I went on to obtain an Honour's degree in Botany, which is a reflection of my love of and delight in the natural world which continues

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