

# Time and Memory in W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*

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W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* is a novel made up of a collection of four "life-stories" of several, mostly Jewish, people living in exile in Austria, England and America. The presentations are extremely straightforward, the style of writing is very lean and direct, in a rather slow and elegiac manner, and there are accompanying photos and memorabilia which reinforce the impression that we are reading histories put together by a narrator who happened to be there to hear the stories and to be given the relevant photos and documents. In terms of content, there is no apparent significant contact between the stories, although they all deal with the stories of people "displaced" by history, leading lives utterly different from what they might have intended, yet never overwhelmed by despair in the face of what would seem to be arbitrary and meaningless eruptions of "history" in their lives.

The historical event which casts its great shadow over these stories is the Holocaust, even though *The Emigrants* is not really part of Holocaust literature. Only two of the four protagonists were directly affected by the rise of Adolph Hitler, and one of the four is not Jewish at all. The *Emigrants* is more general than that, taking up motifs of time, absence, nostalgia, memory, and oblivion. The characters in these stories have "wandered out" of the direct effects of the Holocaust, even though their lives were to be lived under the sway of its macrocosmic meaninglessness, leading them to waste away from sorrow and weariness. As a consequence, they, and we, are restricted to looking for "meaning" in whatever relationships we can ascertain among the apparently unrelated (microcosmic) patterns of what these people try to "make" of their lives.

The opening story of *The Emigrants*, "Dr. Henry Selwyn," sets the tone for the entire book. It is 1970, and the narrator (Sebald), who has just started teaching at the University of East Anglia (where the author himself has taught since 1970), is lodging at the home of a retired English doctor in Norwich. The doctor is a somewhat depressive type who keeps to himself in the rather run-down house he shares with his wife, Elli, from whom he seems completely estranged, and with a

housemaid named Elaine.

Although there is no close friendship with the doctor, Sebald is invited to dinner one night. Elli, as is apparently customary, is not present, but her place is taken by a guest, a Mr. Elliott. After dinner, the doctor talks about his friendship, in the years just before World War One, with a 65-year old Swiss mountain guide named Johannes Naegli. Their friendship was close enough for the doctor to mention how hard it had been for him to leave Switzerland in 1913. But in 1914, Naegli disappears in the mountains and is presumed to have died after falling into a crevasse on the Oberaar glacier. Selwyn was devastated enough to feel as if he "were buried under snow and ice," and says that the memory of his friend comes to his mind even fifty-seven years later.

Some time after this, Selwyn comes to visit Sebald, who has by now moved into a house in Norwich not too far from Selwyn's home. In the course of the conversation, he asks Sebald if he ever is homesick. Sebald cannot think of anything to say, but Selwyn goes on to reveal that recently he has been afflicted by attacks of homesickness. Almost as an afterthought, he reveals that he is not really English, but comes originally from a Jewish family named Serewyn, which emigrated at the turn of the 20th century to England from a small village in Lithuania. He and his family were among emigrants supposed to go to New York, but who mistakenly disembarked at London, thinking they had arrived in America, only to discover their mistake too late to return to the ship, which had by then departed for the United States. Selwyn became an Englishman by default. He managed to study medicine at Cambridge University (where there is a Selwyn College), where he concealed his origins, to marry Elli and live a life of tennis and motor holidays until World War Two, thanks to her inheritance and his income.

We learn that, after the war, he felt he could no longer deny his background, and that he wonders if this did not have something to do with his wife's estrangement. Also, he began to suffer more and more from depression, until he had to give up his medical practice in 1960, to spend all his time with the plants and animals in his garden. We next hear that, some time after this conversation, Selwyn had killed himself with a hunting rifle he had brought back after working in India, but had never before used. The story ends fifteen years later, in 1986, with the narrator's chance reading, the result of a purely inadvertent glance while on a trip to Switzerland, of a newspaper article which reported that the body of Naegeli, the Swiss guide and friend of Selwyn who had disappeared in the summer of 1914, had been released by the Oberaar glacier.

This story, the shortest and simplest of the four that make up *The Emigrants*, ends on a note that sounds more like something we would expect of a 19th Century work than of a late 20th Century one: an apparent statement of the ties between life, death and a life after death, all governed by Providence, and now no longer metaphorically meaningful in any large context, but rather a mere historical event that finds itself put into a pattern by chance:

And so they are ever returning to us, the dead. At times they  
come back from the ice more than seven decades later, and  
are found at the edge of the moraine, a few polished bones  
and a pair of hobnailed boots. (E, p 23)

The reference to bones and hobnailed boots, combined with the date of the guide's disappearance, immediately prior to the start of World War One, reminds us both of the passage of time and of the capability of certain events and objects to reveal how immediate a past event can be, even if it took an inadvertent glance at a newspaper to give a pattern to the late Dr. Selwyn's life-story, tying together an event in 1986 with a story told in 1970 in England, about a man who had died in Switzerland in 1914. Also, Naegeli's body turns up 72 years after he disappears, while Selwyn dies 72 years after leaving Lithuania.

After evoking the Biedermeier tradition of 19th Century German literature, particularly Adalbert Stifter, in his language, rhetorical structure and tone, Sebald goes on to reverse it: instead of Providence revealing itself in the smallest of life's details, in Sebald the evocation of details is left to memory, highlighting the human struggle against the ravages of time. This overture-like piece signals other examples of a literary play of connections: the names Naegeli, Elli, Elaine, and Elliott have a similarity that resembles the pattern found among the names in Goethe's *Elective Affinities* (Otto, Charlotte, Ottilie). Also, the first allusion (of several) to Vladimir Nabokov appears, in an interweaving of real and fictional links, a pattern that will be developed in greater complexity in the following stories. After telling his guests at the dinner party about the disappearance of Naegeli 57 years before, Dr. Selwyn suggests to Edwin (Elliott) that they "show our guests the pictures we took on our last visit to Crete." Almost instantly, Elaine wheels in a trolley with a slide projector, and an old wooden-framed screen is set up, after "the large ormolu clock on the mantelpiece and the Meissen figurines, a shepherd and a shepherdess and a colourfully clad Moor rolling his eyes, were moved aside."

The start of the slide show sees the introduction of several more recurring figures Sebald uses in this work, dust, pictures and butterflies:

The low whir of the projector began, and the dust in the room, normally invisible, glittered and danced in the beam of light by way of a prelude to the pictures themselves. (...) Once or twice Edwin was to be seen with his field glasses and a container for botanical specimens, or Dr. Selwyn in knee-length shorts, with a shoulder bag and butterfly net. (E., p. 16)

The narrator then makes a remarkable comment, one that serves to momentarily decontextualize the narration: "One of the shots resembled, even in detail, a photograph of Nabokov in the mountains above Gstaad that I had clipped from a Swiss magazine a few days before." Immediately below this sentence we find one of the many, mostly slightly blurred, photos included with the text. It is not exactly clear if the man in the photo is Selwyn or Nabokov, but it would seem more likely to be the Russian-American author. Nabokov, not so much as novelist but as lepidopterist, appears often enough in this novel, as the "butterfly man," to be considered a kind of playful mascot, and it is also true that Sebald's work may be seen as a more somber version of Nabokov's textual layering, games and shifts of perspective.

We learn that the trip to Crete had in fact taken place some time ago.

Strangely enough, both Edwin and Dr. Selwyn made a distinctly youthful impression on the pictures they showed us, though at the time they made the trip, exactly ten years earlier, they were already in their late sixties. I sensed that, for both of them, this return of their past selves was an occasion for some emotion. (E, pp. 16-17)

Everyone is so absorbed in watching the slides that the last one, a view of the Lasithi plateau, shatters, "and a dark crack fissured across the screen." Sebald says he had in fact forgotten this, and goes on to tell us how it came back to him, in a pattern that will be repeated and developed in later parts of the work, while at the same time making an allusion to a film (*Kaspar Hauser*, by Werner

Herzog) about the appearance in early-19th century Germany of a young man apparently raised totally without contact with society.

This view of the Lasithi plateau, held so long till it shattered, made a deep impression on me at the time, yet it later vanished from my mind almost completely. It was not until a few years afterwards that it returned to me, in a London cinema, as I followed a conversation between Kaspar Hauser and his teacher, Daumer, in the kitchen garden at Daumer's home. Kaspar, to the delight of his mentor, was distinguishing for the first time between dream and reality, beginning his account with the words: I was in a dream, and in my dream I saw the Caucasus. The camera then moved from right to left, in a sweeping arc, offering a panoramic view of a plateau ringed by mountains, a plateau with a distinctly Indian look to it, with pagoda-like towers and temples with strange triangular facades amidst the green undergrowth and woodland: follies, in a pulsing dazzle of light, that kept reminding me of the sails of those wind pumps of Lasithi, which in reality I have still not seen to this day. (E, pp. 17-18)

Almost the same feeling of "they are ever returning to us, the dead" occurs in the second story, "Paul Bereyter." Bereyter was a schoolmaster in Sebald's village. Like Dr. Selwyn, he had very few--perhaps no-- attachments, and he too committed suicide. Sebald gets to see the dead man's photo album, and: "Looking at the pictures in it, it truly seemed to me, and still does, as if the dead were coming back, or as if we were on the point of joining them." Bereyter's father was half Jewish. He was sent to a concentration camp, released, and died not long after. His mother was ostracized because she had married a half-Jew. She committed suicide. Bereyter had to give up teaching and went to France as a private tutor. In 1939 he returned to Germany, perhaps because life in France became too difficult for a German, "or out of blind rage or even a sort of perversion." He was called up and served in the German army in Belgium and Russia, in Romania and France: always, as he wrote under a photograph of himself taken at the time, "about 2,000 km away--but from where?" This sense of being a long way away, but without knowing exactly from where, is thematically connected to Selwyn's family having ended up in London by mistake, instead of in New

York, and to the sentiments of an old German immigrant in New Jersey who appears in the next story. "Ambros Adelwarth."

After the war Bereyter returns to his teaching job. Sebald is in his class, and even as a little boy recognizes his teacher's extraordinary dedication and talent. Bereyter lives in a modern apartment block built on the site where a charming old building once occupied by him and his parents has been pulled down. He hates his new flat, but even after his retirement, when he lives mainly in Switzerland, he pays it regular visits to keep it in order. Then he commits suicide. A model train builder, and a teacher who had used trains and schedules to help his pupils learn, Bereyter dies on the tracks near his town, run over by a train.

This piece, as well as the following two, includes the principal narrator's attempt to find someone who knew the main character when he was alive. Diaries, memoirs and photos come to the fore, and for long stretches the narration is reported in indirect speech. The past is seen at several removes. In the case of Paul Bereyter, Sebald's "informant" is an old woman in Switzerland, a Mme Landau, who knew Bereyter from having lived in Yverdon, the Swiss town he went to after his retirement. She has Bereyter's photo album, and it was she who arranged his burial. Her own memories, with no direct connection to Bereyter, are included in the story, and, fittingly enough, Paul Bereyter had just happened to strike up an acquaintance with her in 1971 because he had noticed her sitting on a park bench in Salin-les-Bains reading Nabokov's *Speak Memory*. He had come there because worsening depression and claustrophobia had made it impossible for him to continue teaching, and he had already made one suicide attempt.

We learn that this part of France was where he had gone to work as a tutor after being forbidden to teach in Nazi Germany. Mme Landau's explanation of this is accompanied by her giving an annotated photo album of Paul's to the narrator. This leads to a second mentioning of the remembrance of the dead.

Mme Landau put before me a large album which contained photographs documenting not only the period in question but indeed, a few gaps aside, almost the whole of Paul Bereyter's life, with notes penned in his own hand. Again and again, from front to back and from back to front, I leafed through the album that afternoon, and since then I have returned to it time and time again, because, looking at the pictures in it, it truly seemed to me, and still does, as if the dead were coming back, or as if we were on the point of joining them. (E, pp. 45-46)

Paul Bereyter returned to Germany in 1939, and worked anonymously in Berlin, until he was forced to join the army, in which he served for six years. His work as a driver in the motorized artillery took him all over Europe, in a kind of mindless wandering. He returned to teaching after the war, but eventually gave it up due to failing eyesight and increasing depression. He moved to Switzerland and spent his days reading and gardening, until his eventual suicide on the railroad tracks outside the town, which is presented under the aspect of rejoining all his family and friends who were destroyed because of their religion during the period of Nazi rule.

The next story in the novel, "Ambros Adelwarth," is about a whole family of displaced people, this time the mainly Catholic relatives of the narrator himself. The title of the story refers to a great-uncle whom Sebald saw only once, in 1951, after he had retired from a career working in famous luxury hotels, then as a traveling companion for Cosmo Solomon, the eccentric son of a rich Jewish New York banking family, and finally, after the son's death, as manager of the family estate.

Just as in the earlier story of Paul Bereyter, the narrator learns how to 'approach' the story of his great uncle from his aunts Fini and Theres, and his uncle Kasimir, whom Ambros had helped when they emigrated to the US in the 1920s, sixty years earlier.

By this time, the three elderly siblings are living in a retirement community in New Jersey. We even see a photo, ostensibly of the narrator, standing on the beach beside the Atlantic coast of New Jersey. Sebald learns that Cosmo Solomon and later, his uncle, had both died in a private mental hospital near Ithaca, New York, Cosmo of depression, and Ambros after shock therapy which he had hoped

would help the depression affecting him in his old age.

We find the same kind of layers upon layers of reporting by different people and about different times, with the same “free indirect style” of narration that puts us back in the immediate moment being related, even if it is long since past. The sanitarium near Ithaca is of course near Cornell University, where Vladimir Nabokov taught, and Sebald’s aunt sees a man with a butterfly net in the woods nearby, whom Ambros Adelwarth describes as “the butterfly man.”

Sebald learns from his Aunt Fini that Adelwarth had died while at a clinic in Ithaca called the Samaria Sanitarium, that was run by a Professor Fahnstock. During a subsequent visit to Ithaca, in 1984, and after inquiring in vain as to what had happened to the clinic, or where it was located, he learns from an old man that the clinic is closed, Fahnstock is dead, and his successor, a Dr. Abramsky has not taken any patients since the 1960s, preferring to raise bees instead.

Sebald finds the sanitarium, now in decay, and wanders around its vast grounds until he meets Dr. Abramsky. He is another version of Dr. Selwyn, except he raises bees instead of growing vegetables. We learn that Ambros Adelwarth’s death had come almost directly as a result of his voluntarily submitting to electroshock treatments that Professor Fahnstock had come to believe in fanatically, associating it with a belief that he could annihilate the diseased personality of his patient. Dr. Abramsky came to see this as a kind of martyrdom, and it led to his abandonment of psychiatry.

The rest of this section consists of a visit by Sebald to Deauville, the French casino resort (on the other side of the Atlantic), where Cosmo and Ambros had stayed in 1913, with Cosmo winning great sums of money gambling (in what he described as a kind of trance). The once grand hotels are now gone or recycled for other purposes, and the sad passage of time is emphasized by a dream Sebald relates, in which he is in the past, together with Cosmo and Ambros. The story ends with directly quoted passages from a diary of a journey Cosmo and Ambros made to Greece, Constantinople and Jerusalem in 1913, echoing the time of Dr. Selwyn’s stay in Switzerland, and ending with a comment on memory by Sebald.



Memory [Ambros] added in a postscript, often strikes me as a kind of dumbness. It makes one's head heavy and giddy, as if one were not looking back down the receding perspectives of time but rather down on the earth from a great height, from one of those towers whose tops are lost in the clouds. (E, p. 145)

The fourth section of the novel, about the fourth emigrant, "Max Ferber," is partly based on the life of the British Jewish painter Frank Auerbach, whose paintings, like Ferber's, are in the Tate Gallery. Sebald meets Ferber in 1966, when he first comes to Manchester. One of the main themes of the novel is re-evoked even in the description of his arrival.

...a blanket of fog that had risen out of the marshy plains that reached as far as the Irish Sea had covered the city, a city spread across a thousand kilometers, built of countless bricks, and inhabited by millions of souls, dead and alive. (E, p. 150)

Ferber left Nazi Germany as a child, after his parents bribed a consular official to get him a visa. He never saw his parents again after they said good-bye in 1939, and he has lived like a recluse in his studio in the midst of the abandoned and decaying remnants of 19th century industrial and mercantile Manchester.

As in the earlier sections, after the war, Ferber received a parcel containing a memoir written by his mother. He knew she had died in a concentration camp. But when she realized she and her husband would never be able to escape Nazi Germany, she wrote a long description of her youth, which we experience as a "flashback." It describes her childhood, and then her teenage years, in a spa town called Kissingen, followed by her work as a nurse during World War I, and her subsequent marriage to Fritz Ferber.

The long memoir is immediately followed by Sebald's visit to Kissingen, in the summer of 1991 which he describes with a considerably less lyrical tone than that of Luisa Lanzberg Ferber, whose memorial he discovers in the now-neglected Jewish cemetery.

I stayed in the Jewish cemetery till the afternoon, walking up and down the rows of graves, reading the names of the dead, but it was only when I was about to leave that I discovered a more recent gravestone, not far from the locked gate, on which were the names of Lily and Lazarus Lanzberg, and of Fritz and Luisa Ferber. I assume Ferber's uncle Leo had had it erected there. The inscription says that Lazarus Lanzberg died in Theresienstadt in 1942, and that Fritz and Luisa were deported, their fate unknown, in November 1941. Only Lily, who took her own life, lies in that grave. I stood before it for some time, not knowing what I should think; but before I left I placed a stone on the grave according to custom. (E, p . 225)

Sebald next describes a visit to Ferber, who was recovering from illness in a Manchester hospital, to wish Ferber well, and to apologize for the long time it had been taking him to edit an English version of his mother's memoir. Interestingly, the visit described took place shortly before the trip to Kissingen that immediately precedes it in the novel, as a kind of microscopic version of the switching back and forth in time that we find throughout the novel. The hospital is approached via streets full of buildings, some even rather new public housing estates, which have been left to decay and collapse, including yet another of Sebald's descriptions of a once grand hotel, now a shell of its former opulence. Sebald's room reminds him of Poland, and of an exhibition of photos, taken by Germans and rediscovered by chance in an antique shop in Vienna in 1987, including some of the Ghetto in Lodz, known as the "Manchester of Poland," during the Second World War. Significantly, in a novel full of photos, these are merely described.

And there were pictures of the ghetto -- street cobbles, tram tracks, housefronts, hoardings, demolition sites, fire protection walls, beneath a sky that was grey, watery green, or white and blue -- strangely deserted pictures, scarcely one of which showed a living soul, despite the fact that at times there were as many as a hundred and seventy thousand people in Litzmannstadt, in an area of no more than five square kilometers.

This contrasts with the vast expanse of Manchester, and ironically recalls all the Jewish immigrants who came to that city in the 19th century. But this portrait is of forced laborers permitted to look up at the camera for a moment's interruption of their work for the Nazi-controlled economy. Sebald concludes this section, and the novel, with a powerful image linking the workers in the ghetto with the forces of destiny.

Behind the perpendicular frame of a loom sit three young women, perhaps aged twenty. The irregular geometric patterns of the carpet they are knotting, and even its colors, remind me of the settee in our living room at home. Who the young women are I do not know. The light falls on them from the window in the background, so I cannot make out their eyes clearly, but I sense that all three of them are looking across at me, since I am standing on the very spot where Genewein the accountant stood with his camera. The young woman in the middle is blonde and has the air of a bride about her. The weaver to her left has inclined her head a little to one side, whilst the woman on the right is looking at me with so steady and relentless a gaze that I cannot meet it for long. I wonder what the three women's names were -- Roza, Luisa and Lea, or Nona, Decuma and Morta, the daughters of night, with spindle, scissors and thread. (E, p. 237)