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**Magisterarbeit**

**Spaces of Memory in Giorgio Bassani,  
Ruth Klüger and W.G. Sebald**

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For my grandmother.

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For the dead *and* the living we must bear witness.  
Elie Wiesel<sup>1</sup>

All *lieux de mémoire* are objects *mises en abîme*.  
Pierre Nora<sup>2</sup>

Memory is an action: essentially it is the action of telling a story.  
Pierre Janet<sup>3</sup>

The first memorials to the Holocaust period were not made of stone, glass or steel, suggesting perennial endurance. They were made of words. The Yizkor Bikher – memorial books – remembered both the lives and deaths of European Jewish communities according to the most ancient of Jewish memorial media: narrative on paper.<sup>4</sup> For a murdered people without graves, or with empty graves without even corpses to inter, these memorial books often came to serve as symbolic tombstones or memorials of a different kind. The scribes hoped that the memory books would turn the site of reading into memorial space. In need of a cathartic ceremony, a way to literally work through their loss and in response to what has been called “the missing gravestone syndrome,” survivors thus created interior spaces, imagined grave sites, written realms, as the first sites of memory.

Later, of course, physical spaces for remembering were constructed. Memorials in all shapes and sizes were erected to commemorate the suffering caused by the Holocaust. Yet, the term “memorial” today has come to signify more than a stone or a plaque. There are memorial books, memorial days, memorial activities, sculptures, candles, archives, museums, moments of silence, parades, gardens, ruins, even entire cities. To go even further, the entire, seemingly never-ending discussion about memory, forgetting, memorials and monuments, and the so-called memory boom, can be seen as an extension of these realms of memory, or *lieux de mémoire*. Pierre Nora, who coined the by now almost mythical term *lieux de mémoire*, insisted on the overall inclusiveness of his concept: There are *lieux de mémoire*, he writes, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*.<sup>5</sup> According to Nora, society is facing a dichotomous movement characterized on the one hand by history “turning in on itself,” becoming mere historiography, and on the other hand by a “deritualization” and abandoning of memory. This process of deritualization is caused by a preoccupation with modernization and constant renewal, and it can only be balanced by creating artificial realms of memory:

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<sup>1</sup> Inscription in the entrance hall of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

<sup>2</sup> “Between Memory and History. Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations*, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory 26 (Spring 1989), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Psychological Healing*, vols. 1, 2 (New York, 1925), p. 661.

<sup>4</sup> Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin, *From a Ruined Garden The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry* (New York, 1983), p.11.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History,” pp. 7-24.

archives and museums, monuments and sites of preservation, anniversaries and celebrations; even history books and other accounts of times past serve as keepers of the past long gone.

As a result, the memorial operation is endangered of becoming self-contained and detached from our daily lives. Under the illusion that our memorials will always be there to remind us, we rid ourselves of our burden of memory, take leave and return only at our convenience. To the extent that we encourage the idea that our monuments will do our memory-work for us, we become that much more forgetful. Pierre Nora writes: “The less memory is experienced from the inside the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs. (...) Memory has been wholly absorbed by its meticulous reconstitution. Its new vocation is to record; delegating to the *lieu de mémoire* the responsibility of remembering, it sheds its signs upon depositing them there, as a snake sheds its skin.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, it is central for memorials that they endure. Expressed in Nora’s own words, they have the “capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications.”<sup>7</sup> Especially in today’s era of the memory boom, it becomes increasingly important that memorials and sites of memory act as prisms through which to see past, present and future. Ideally, they should continue to engage in an active discussion about past mistakes and challenge dominant discourses of collective memory in a movement intimately linked to the moral imperative of “Never Again.” Confronting the past through memorials is increasingly seen as an essential element of democratization. This is why it is essential that remembrance remain a process and that societies, as the critic James Young has noted, “save their icons of remembrance from hardening into idols of remembrance.”<sup>8</sup> Remembrance and mechanisms of remembrance should engage people in a dialogue about the past, about different conceptions of memory, or even about different memories. It is not just important how the sites speak to us but how they make people speak to each other about what these sites mean to their lives. Memorials can have a transformative effect that is enriched when it is shared. In this context, Young continues: “It may also be true that the surest engagement with memory lies in its perpetual irresolution. In fact, the best memorial to the Fascist era and its victims may not be a single memorial at all – but simply the never-to-be-resolved debate over which kind of memory to preserve, how to do it, in whose name, and to what end.”<sup>9</sup> The ideal memorial, thus, is one that endures within the public consciousness and even places the responsibility of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.19.

<sup>8</sup> James Young, *The Texture of Memory, Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, 1993), p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

remembering on the public. In the end, it is only we ourselves who can carry the burden of memory: the public becomes the memorial.

But how do we remember? How do these various memorials work? What is the relationship of time to space, space to memory, memory to time? How does a particular space shape our memory of a particular time? And how does this memory of a past time shape our understanding of the present moment? All these questions are primarily concerned with the spatial aspect of remembering. The interrelation of space and memory is at the core of this paper. Nora's term *lieux de mémoire* suggests a spatial component, or at least a specific frame of time and space for remembering. The three authors I am examining all use space as a major element for the organization of their books, and all address the problem of commemorating the past without abandoning its memory to fixed structures. The authors use space as an aid to retrieve memories but make clear that, ultimately, space alone cannot contain these memories for us. For the purposes of this study, I am making a distinction between place and space. Places are always historical; they are an accumulation of historical time and open up a window into the past. Space is inextricably linked to place: certain spatial constellations can trigger memories that are related to a place. In general, space is more abstract, it can be traversed, can be inhabited, moved through and worked through. Through space, one can experience and read a place. The city, as it is used in all three texts, presents a case where space and place become interdependent.

All three authors, in one way or the other, insist that remembering has to be active, dialogic, interpretative, intertextual, intermedial; it is a process that continues to engage people in a confrontation with the past. For each author, writing about memory and remembering is either an open and experimental process, or an unfinished work-in-progress that will be modified as time passes. Each of the books I will examine is an example of what I have described as the ideal memorial: Each of them causes the readers to interact with the past, to modify their opinions, and encourages dialogue with other books and other readers. And each book commemorates people and places that have been lost in official records and forgotten in public commemorations.

Giorgio Bassani has remained closest to the site of his own and his characters' suffering and has centered his entire oeuvre on this site: the city of Ferrara. Like no other author he has created his own city of collective memory, which is composed of and developed through the various layers of memory of its inhabitants. By structuring his novels around recurring spatial markers and motives such as walls, doors, gates, tombs and rooms, he recreates the feeling of what it means to be excluded, exiled and displaced within your own

hometown. For him, the memory of the deported and dead is forever inscribed onto the streets of Ferrara. His books are spaces of memory that open up windows onto other spaces of memory: the city of Ferrara, an empty tomb, a garden and even the people, the inhabitants of Ferrara themselves.

W.G. Sebald's characters are all emigrants in one way or another: far from home, they are displaced and nomadic people who experience space as refuge and prison at the same time. Some are absorbed by the structures of cities, where they try to unearth a past that is lost for them or that has been repressed. For instance, Jacques Austerlitz can recapture his lost past only because it is preserved in the physical space: when he coincidentally steps into a waiting room in the railroad station in London, a chain of memories and actions is triggered which eventually leads him to Prague and Paris to rediscover his past. Others create their own private spaces, deep within their memory, in art or in forced forgetting, such as Max Aurach, the painter in *Die Ausgewanderten*, who buries himself under layers and layers of dust and deletes each painting after it is finished. *Austerlitz* and *Die Ausgewanderten* perhaps come closest to a kind of modern memory book, as they commemorate people in a documentary style enriched, like all of Sebald's books, with photographs that give it an air of authenticity.

Space in Ruth Klüger's *weiter leben* fulfills a slightly different function: even though her memoir follows the pattern of the places, or stations, of her own and her family's suffering, she writes from a distance that is temporal as well as spatial (her memoir was first published in 1994, and she has lived in America for the greater part of her life). Compared to other authors of Holocaust memoirs, and also to Sebald and Bassani, she is an iconoclast. She refuses to romanticize the bonds between camp inmates and illustrates with disarming honesty the difficult relationship with her overbearing mother against the backdrop of the camp. She also expresses doubts about preserving sites of memory (like Auschwitz or Dachau) which makes it easy for us to unload and confine our memories. The ghosts of the past, she knows, are not bound to place or time but will always haunt you. Ruth Klüger doesn't need the places; the names, the words, *her* words are enough for her to remember. The death camp becomes speakable: Her book and her poems are her sites of memory, her tool is language, and her reader is forced to rethink, revisit and radically re-evaluate his or her own inner museum of the Holocaust.

The function of place in mnemonic memory, or what has fittingly been called the topography of memory, has been well examined. Every memory, Maurice Halbwachs reminds us, unfolds in a spatial framework. Memory is above all scenic, and it is here in the

arrangement of cities and places that remembrance will re-emerge: “Space is a reality that endures: since our impressions rush by, one after another, and leave nothing behind in our mind, we can understand how we can recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surroundings. It is to space – the space we occupy, traverse, have continual access to, or can at any time reconstruct in thought and imagination – that we must turn our attention. Our thought must focus on it if this or that category of remembrances is to reappear.”<sup>10</sup> *Topos* refers to both a place in geography and a place in narrative or discourse. According to Cicero’s famous legend, the art of memory was invented by the poet Simonides of Ceos after a catastrophic collapse of a building. The poet attended a banquet, where he was to sing lyrical hymns to his host, but included praise to the twin gods Castor and Pollux. Called outside by an anonymous messenger, Simonides briefly left the banquet but found nobody outside the door. At exactly this moment, the roof of the building collapsed, burying all the guests beneath the ruins, disfiguring them beyond recognition. Simonides, who had memorized the position of each guest at the table, was the only person able to identify and name the dead. Thus, Simonides is the founder of a technique of memorizing that connects *topoi* in the familiar environment to stories and *topoi* of discourse. Places are contexts for remembrances and myths of the past; they are lost objects of homesickness and nostalgia. Thus, the writer’s search is twofold: to explore the topography of a place together with the myths and remembrances linked to that topography. Especially interesting for this paper is the *topos* of the city and what it stands for in each of the works examined: an architectural grid of memory that shapes a person’s identity (as in Bassani’s *Romanzo di Ferrara*), a maze in which one has to get lost in order to find one’s past (as in Sebald’s *Austerlitz*), or a ghostly presence that haunts a person’s memory (as in Klüger’s *weiter leben*). Spaces give particular form to our memories; they are mnemonic codes that awaken recall. But these spaces, and especially cities, never stay the same. Over time, they are constantly reworked and modernized. Thus, the topographical landscape presents a fragmented palimpsest of relics and traces of past epochs. Topographical markers like monuments, street names or squares, and even gaps or ruins, remain witnesses to the past and form an ideal crossroads between familiarity and estrangement, memory and forgetting, nostalgia and modernity.

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<sup>10</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter, Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York, 1980), p. 140.

Non le labili nebbie della memoria ne l'asciutta trasparenza, ma il bruciaciccio delle vite bruciate che forma una crosta sulle città, la spugna gonfia di materia vitale che non scorre più, l'ingorgo di passato presente futuro che blocca le esistenze calcificate nell'illusione del movimento: questo trovavi al termine del viaggio.

(Not the labile mists of memory nor the dry transparence, but the charring of burned lives that forms a scab on the city, the sponge swollen with vital matter that no longer flows, the jam of past, present, future that blocks existences calcified in the illusion of movement: this is what you would find at the end of your journey.)  
Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili*<sup>11</sup>

Novels often end with death. Almost all of Bassani's stories, however, begin with the knowledge of death and its foreshadowing. Indeed, like Walter Benjamin's storyteller, Bassani seems to have borrowed his authority from death<sup>12</sup>; he can begin writing only on this condition since he "finds his inspiration in the bard's ritual of grasping cinerary urns and questioning them."<sup>13</sup>

Just like Benjamin's storyteller or chronicler, Bassani starts out from the moment of death, the story's and its character's end: "Not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life – and this is the stuff that stories are made of – first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death."<sup>14</sup> Because Bassani's characters have not had the opportunity to tell the story of their lives at the time of their deaths, and thus pass on their testimony, he assumes the role of the storyteller on their behalf, tells what he knows, and, if necessary, fills in the gaps. His books fulfill the dual function of commemorating the city's missing people and recording their stories in an unofficial history. (In Italian, this duality of recording and remembering is united in one word: *ricordare*.)

As the 1974 title of the single-volume edition of his collected prose, *Il Romanzo di Ferrara*, suggests, the city of Ferrara and its inhabitants are at the center of Bassani's closed literary world. Each novel meticulously maps the city's environment by recording the names of streets and squares, houses and buildings, so that the reader gets an impression of utmost authenticity. But is this Ferrara real or imagined? The reader might never find out for sure. Even though Bassani introduces his readers into the narrative space of Ferrara in what reads like a city tour, this is not what he has in mind. In fact, in chapter 1 of *Il giardino dei Finzi-*

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<sup>11</sup> *Le città invisibili* (Torino, 1972), p. 106. English trans., William Weaver, *Invisible Cities* (Orlando, FL, 1974), p. 99.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1968), p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> Luigi Baccolo, "Bassani dentro la sua Ferrara, città dei morti," *Gazzetta del Popolo*, January 21, 1975: "Bassani (...) trova la sua ispirazione nel rito del vate che abbraccia le urne e le interroga." English translation mine.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," p. 94.

*Contini*, he makes clear that what he is writing is not in *La Guida de Touring*.<sup>15</sup> No travel book would ever describe what he is writing about because it is a tour through a Ferrara that doesn't exist anymore, and maybe has never existed. He fills in the gaps that remain left open by official history or even reality. Bassani's books travel only in the space of memory. Sometimes fiction comes closer to the truth than what is written in history books.

Space is extremely important in all of Bassani's writings. Architecture and spatial relations are in fact the major structural element: Bassani's texts are spaces, part fictional, part realistic, that have been projected onto the page.<sup>16</sup> His narratives unfold according to a concatenation of spaces that function as triggers for memory or that have become realms of memory. He creates a precisely delineated spatial framework that embraces all the stories, and within that framework creates certain key spatial oppositions like inside and outside, freedom and imprisonment or belonging and estrangement. His attention to spatial details such as the furniture in a room, the arrangement of items on a shelf or the exact view from a window is only surpassed by his meticulousness in recording street names, distances and, of course, the passing of time. He describes his settings like a literary geographer, slowly unfolding the grid of his city before our eyes, and restores places that have vanished or never existed. His literary eye works like the lens of a camera, starting with a panorama shot and zooming in on a tomb, a garden or a house. These spaces are often used as exterior symbols of the people who inhabit them and thus commemorate these inhabitants long after they have disappeared. He unearths each of these spaces from the layers of forgetting; each is a place of memory for the dead and the missing. Ferrara's topography, in Bassani's hands, turns into a map of sacred spaces that articulate the author's idea of how a city documents its history.

Many critics have commented on Bassani's attention to space and geographic accuracy in his narratives. Douglas Radcliff-Umstead, for instance, focuses on the motives of exclusion and imprisonment and examines how Bassani portrays all his characters as exiled from each

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<sup>15</sup> Giorgio Bassani, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (Milano, 1980), p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> In this context, I want to refer to an interview in January 1979, "Meritare il tempo," in Anna Dolfi, *Le forme del sentimento – prosa e poesia in Giorgio Bassani* (Padova, 1981): "Io torno a Ferrara, sempre, nella mia narrativa, nello spazio e nel tempo: il ritorno a Ferrara (...) ho dovuto cercare di meritarmelo davanti a chi legge, per questo motivo il recupero di Ferrara non avviene in modo irrazionale, proustiano, sull'onda dei ricordi, ma fornendo di questo ritorno tutte le giustificazioni, le coordinate, oltre che morali, spaziali e temporali, anche per dare poi, per restituire oggettivamente il quadro linguistico e temporale entro il quale mi muovo. [I always return to Ferrara in my narrative, into space and time: (...) I had to try to make myself worthy before my reader of that return to Ferrara, and for that reason the retrieval of Ferrara does not occur in an irrational mode, Proustian, on the wave of memories, but in a mode that supplies that retrieval with all the justifications, with the coordinates, other than moral, spatial and temporal, also in order to objectively restore the linguistic and temporal picture in which I move. Translation mine]" (pp. 84-85). The process of writing for Bassani, like later the process of reading for the reader, is a passing through different, clearly delineated spaces in the city that have been projected onto the page of the book. Bassani gives an almost cartographic description of his city, and thus represents what it can do to shape, determine and shatter the lives of its inhabitants.

other by time and space. Human beings in Bassani's works seem fundamentally alone, excluded from one another.<sup>17</sup> Marilyn Schneider, among other things, examines what she calls mythopoeic spaces and oppositions: center and periphery, private and public, inside and outside. Space, she states, is a metaphor of personal identity and sexual relations.<sup>18</sup> These critics all agree on the ambiguous nature of memory. Each book is pervaded by a profound dichotomy: Ferrara is utopia and dystopia at the same time. They also have indicated that the detailed and almost static descriptions of city, garden, house or room symbolize a going back in time, even a compressing or arresting of time that presents the past as a *tableau vivant*: an immovable image forever fixed in memory.

However, the architectural structure of Bassani's narratives is more than an attempt to stop time or go back in history. He does not merely want to freeze his memories on the page and thus rescue them from time's gnawing decay. The question he asks himself is not simply, What happened when and where? Rather, his books address more complicated questions: Where can I go to commemorate when there is no site of memory? How can I commemorate an absence? How can I create a history that records this absence? Unlike Radcliff-Umstead, who describes Bassani's books as a "journey to the land of motionless childhood,"<sup>19</sup> and unlike other critics, I would suggest that for Bassani, spaces of memory are not just fixed, immobile, cast in stone, marked on a map, or monumental; they are not even necessarily real but hidden and imaginary, even active and living. This chapter will show how Bassani grapples with the questions mentioned above in his novel *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* and the short story *Una lapide in via Mazzini*. An analysis of the *Prologo* of *Il giardino* will show how the memorial tomb is a recurring motive throughout the text and how the book itself functions as the ultimate, living memorial Bassani envisions. In a 1979 interview, he refers to his *Romanzo* as a continued process of remembering and writing which arises from a recognition of the interrelatedness of past and present, and which will only be concluded when its writer dies: "Quindi niente 'ricerca del tempo perduto': il tempo non è perduto, è il mio tempo, la ricerca è solo un tentativo di andare indietro nel tempo per spiegare il me stesso di adesso, ma senza dimenticarlo. (...) L'opera è in *progress*, perché io sono ancora vivo, continuo a vivere ancora. Quanto alla mia insoddisfazione, legata al libro come opera

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<sup>17</sup> Douglas Radcliff-Umstead, *The Exile into Eternity – A Study of the Narrative Writings of Giorgio Bassani* (London, 1987).

<sup>18</sup> Marilyn Schneider, *Vengeance of the Victim – History and Symbol in Giorgio Bassani's Fiction* (Minneapolis, 1986).

<sup>19</sup> Douglas Radcliff-Umstead, p. 90.

conclusa.”<sup>20</sup> Taking a closer look at *Una lapide*, I will examine how Geo Jozs, a concentration camp survivor and witness, turns himself into a living memorial in order to counteract forgetting which spreads like an epidemic among the Ferrarese. For the people, remembering is assigned only to one specific space, the memorial plaque in Via Mazzini, and all of Geo’s appeals to their conscience end in his marginalization.

Before turning to a close study of these two texts, I will lay out in a more general fashion how Bassani in his portrayal of Ferrara does not simply describe how the Jews were excluded, persecuted and systematically deprived of their identity, but tangibly recreates the very atmosphere of hostility for the reader. There are doors that close in the narrator’s face, there are empty streets; people turn away, they don’t want to see or listen; there are walls (physical and psychological) that cannot be overcome, employees who have to leave and customers who stay away; playing tennis, sitting on a park bench, or reading in the library is forbidden. Soon it becomes horribly clear: the very city the characters had been living in wants them to vanish. Bassani chains his characters to the streets and houses of a city that is increasingly perceived as a prison; Ferrara turns into a haunted and haunting place. Not even the home seems safe anymore. Anthony Vidler has analyzed this issue of the home or the hometown turning into a dangerous and hostile place in his book *The Architectural Uncanny*. The city, he states, becomes a topos for the exploration of anxiety and paranoia: “As articulated theoretically by Freud, the uncanny or ‘unheimlich’ is rooted by etymology and usage in the environment of the domestic, or the ‘heimlich,’ thereby opening up problems of identity around the self, the other, the body and its absence: thence its force in interpreting the relations between the psyche and the dwelling, the body and the house, the individual and the metropolis.”<sup>21</sup> The house, and to a certain extent the city, are interconnected with the body they give shelter to. When this shelter is turned into a source of danger and persecution, the tie between the individual and the space it inhabits is severed and sometimes permanently destroyed.

More than in other narratives dealing with the Holocaust, Bassani’s writings deal with the spaces of Jewish life and catastrophe. Significantly, the fate of the Jewish community in Ferrara is inextricably linked to the city’s changing history. Under the reign of the Este family, the Jews had become a vital part of the Ferrara economic community, leading the

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<sup>20</sup> “Meritare il tempo,” p. 83. “Thus, no ‘remembrance of things past’: the time is not lost, it’s my time, the search is only a tentative one of going back in time in order to explain the person I am now, but without forgetting it. (...) The work is in progress, because I am still alive, and continue to live. So much about my dissatisfaction concerning the book as concluded work.” Translation mine.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny – Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, 1992), p. x.

city's financial administration. With their safety guaranteed by the ducal government, the Jewish community prospered in Ferrara, enjoying the rights of worship and ritual and special legal privileges. This favorable period ended with the papal rule that succeeded the Este lords; and all privileges were progressively revoked until by 1624 all Hebrews had to live in the ghetto off Piazza delle Erbe along Via Mazzini. After the victory of Napoleon at Marengo, a long period of reconciliation and prosperity began for the Jews of Ferrara and lasted until the mid-1930s, when the Fascists began their anti-Semitic campaign that culminated in the proclamation of the racial laws in 1938. Again, significantly, the discrimination was first and foremost a spatial one - Jews were excluded from public buildings: universities, clubs, restaurants, theatres and other social spaces. At the same time, their own spaces, like the houses they lived in or the shops they owned, were avoided or attacked. The Jews had to discover that they had become strangers at home. Bassani's texts illustrate the emotional conflict of intense attachment to place and anguished awareness of alienation by observing how these emotions influence the way these people move in space. He unearths a Ferrara that has been deleted from history in order to commemorate a people that has almost been extinguished.

Remembering and forgetting form a constant undercurrent in the narratives. Bassani suggests with his narrative technique that both forces are collective: In *Il giardino*, the authorial persona is often supported by a "we" or an "us," symbolizing the group of the persecuted Jews to which the narrator belongs, or the Jewish collective of the town of Ferrara. This "we" is opposed to the "they," the Fascists or the people who look away. In *Una lapide* the opposition is different and the perspective a little more complex. The narrative voice remains vague and is only marked by a collective "us." Markers like "our town" and "many of us" or "none of us" establish a clear opposition between the town as collective and Geo Josz, the concentration camp survivor as 'other,' who is alienated from the moment he sets foot on Ferrarese ground. After the war, the Ferrarese people want nothing more than to forget and move on, and in the narrative this resistance against remembering is expressed in the opposition between "us," the city, and "him," the survivor who personifies the past. Thus, remembering as well as forgetting are impulses Bassani expresses through his narrative technique. This technique has been widely called "narrazione corale," choral narrative, and it adequately illustrates the process of telling the story of a community, narrated either by a collective (which can include multiple perspectives, which is true of the *Romanzo* as a whole) or by a single narrator who functions as a mediator or mouthpiece for the group or collective. In the *Romanzo di Ferrara*, the inhabitants are given a voice; Ferrara, the city as a

community, becomes the narrator. A place that tells the story of its persecuted Jews, but also of the people who, actively or passively, contributed to the persecution, Ferrara is turned into a city of collective memory. The choral narrative technique also indicates the passive submission of the Ferrarese to the terror of the Fascists. Bassani thus makes the Ferrarese people accomplices to the atrocities, a body of bystanders who did nothing to help the victims. Ferrara becomes an emblematic place, a *pars pro toto* for the history of the persecuted Jews in Italy.

In *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, first published in 1962 and the longest novel in the *Romanzo di Ferrara*, Bassani introduces the reader to the process of retrieving memory via a certain association of spaces: The narrator and some of his friends are taking a day trip to the beach outside of Rome, when, already on the way back, they decide on a whim to visit the famous Etruscan necropolis of Cerveteri. It is 1957. In the car is also Giannina, a nine-year-old little girl, who is not very excited at the prospect of visiting ancient and boring tombs. And yet it is she who poses the question that burns itself into the narrator's mind: "Papà, (...) perché le tombe antiche fanno meno malinconia di quelle più nuove?"<sup>22</sup> The father explains that after more than two millennia, it seems as if the Etruscans have always been dead, whereas we still miss and love the dead people who were close to us. Giannina does not agree with that explanation: "Mi fai pensare che anche gli etruschi sono vissuti, invece, e voglio bene anche a loro."<sup>23</sup> This childish but meaningful remark changes the visit entirely. The narrator perceives the tomb as it supposedly was perceived by the Etruscans, as a place for reference and mourning: "E intanto, deposta volentieri ogni residua velleità di filologico scrupolo, io venivo tentando di figurarmi concretamente ciò che potesse significare per i tardi etruschi di Cerveteri, gli etruschi dei tempi posteriori alla conquista romana, la frequentazione assidua del loro cimitero suburbano."<sup>24</sup> The world, he realizes, has changed a lot. But the way humans mourn their dead has not changed at all, and the peaceful atmosphere of the necropolis suggests that these things will never change. But is that really true? The tombs of the Etruscans remind the narrator of an entirely different tomb that stands neglected in the Jewish cemetery in Ferrara: the monumental tomb of the wealthy Finzi-Contini.

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<sup>22</sup> Giorgio Bassani, *Giardino*, p.5: "Why is it that ancient tombs are not as sad as new ones?" (*The Garden of the Finzi-Contini*, trans. William Weaver [New York and London, 1977], p. 5).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6: "You remind me that the Etruscans were also alive once, and so I'm fond of them, like everyone else" (Weaver, p. 5).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*: "And meanwhile, gladly dismissing any lingering notions of scrupulous philology, I tried to imagine what tangible significance, for the later Etruscans of Cerveteri, the Etruscans after the Roman conquest, there could be in the constant visiting of the cemetery at the edge of the city" (Weaver, p. 6).

It is empty and half-forgotten by the Ferrarese, and only one member of the family, the son who died of lymphogranuloma, is buried there. The rest of the family was arrested in the fall of 1943 and deported to Germany where they died in one of the death camps. Bassani's introduction follows the classical process of association that helps to retrieve a memory via spatial or architectural objects. Memory transcends time and space and unites the remote story of the Etruscan graves to the much closer, much more painful story of the empty grave of the Finzi-Contini. Via a concatenation of spaces that begins in one of the tombs in Cerveteri and leads from there to the cenotaph in the Ferrara cemetery, the narrative zooms in on the house of the Finzi-Contini and the story of Micòl begins. From that initial moment of association, the novel's structure rests on its spatial terminology, as if a door were opening in the narrator's mind onto past memories. Giannina's question about the calming effect time has on the pain and anguish caused by death lies at the core of the book: Humans want to construct a world safe from historical time, and most often this is in burial places and memorials. The eternity of the mausoleum in the Jewish cemetery might have defeated time if historical and political circumstances had permitted burial there in the family mausoleum for the Finzi-Contini. The cenotaph that marks the beginning and the end of the book, for the narrator, is like an open wound that will not close. Because the Finzi-Contini remain unburied, there can be no healing or closure. The book, thus, not only documents the catastrophic end that met the Finzi-Contini family; nor is it simply a nostalgic tale of lost love, friendship and youth in a time of persecution. The book is the only place where the memory of the Finzi-Contini can live on. It is the memorial, or even the memorial tomb, the last refuge they were deprived of when they died at the hands of German executioners.

The imagery of the memorial tomb is a thread that runs through the book. It is also one that constantly finds its double or mirror image, each time endowed with a new layer of meaning. For instance, there are three different cemeteries - the Etruscan cemetery, the Jewish cemetery in Ferrara and the Jewish Cemetery on the Lido in Venice - and they underline the omnipresence of death in all stages of the narrative. The Finzi-Contini have a special relation to death; the narrator even makes it seem as if they make a cult of death and stage their desire for permanence and tradition especially with respect to their dead. The ostentatious mausoleum is described as a misfit and a sign of its owner's megalomania: "una specie di tempio tra l'antico e l'orientale, come se ne vedeva nelle scenografie dell'*Aida* e del *Nabucco* in voga nei nostri teatri d'opera fino a pochi anni fa"<sup>25</sup> - "un vero orrore," as his mother adds

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.9: "a kind of half-ancient, half-Oriental temple of the sort seen in the sets of *Aida* and *Nabucco* in vogue in our opera houses until a few years ago" (Weaver, p. 9).

to the description.<sup>26</sup> The Jewish cemetery on the Lido in Venice has a romantic function. It is the place where Professor Ermanno and his wife got engaged, and it is also an object of scientific study for the Professor - he has written a paper about the cemetery. But it is not only this apparent fascination with death and cemeteries that creates an eerie feeling about the Finzi-Contini family. A *memento mori* is engraved upon everything that belongs to them.

Most of all this is expressed through the spaces the family inhabits. Initially presented as luxurious refuge and protective paradise, in the course of the novel, they turn into spaces of confinement that will eventually foreshadow their death. The garden, with its symbolic importance already suggested by the title, is a space of memory. The trees are more than 500 years old, symbols of eternity and strength. For Micòl as well as for the narrator, the garden is a space of childhood memories and the bittersweet memories of first love and rejection. However, the narrator counters this sense of eternal paradise from the beginning. His melancholic, deeply nostalgic tone that rings through his words is more reminiscent of a cemetery than a garden. The garden becomes a cemetery for the living, permeated by a sense of fatality because from the opening paragraph of the book we know what is going to happen to the park and its inhabitants. The park will be destroyed in the last years of the war, and its inhabitants will perish in a death camp. The narrator's recollections communicate an awareness of death-in-life that manifests itself particularly in the garden's recess. Ultimately, the garden becomes a metaphor of Micòl's fate. The house is another of the tomb's mirror images. In chapter 2, it is introduced in a similar fashion as the tomb and in direct association with it: "Se della tomba di famiglia dei Finzi-Contini poteva dirsi che era un 'orrore', e sorriderne, sulla loro casa, (...) soprannominata invidiosamente la '*magna domus*', su quella no, nemmeno dopo cinquant'anni ci si riusciva, a sorridere."<sup>27</sup> The house is represented as a self-protective refuge where the Finzi-Contini create a private universe, a luxurious ghetto, to avoid the devastation of time and ward off intruders. Throughout the text, the *magna domus* is presented as a mystified object and another symbol of the narrator's desire for Micòl: it suggests eternity, peace, sublimity and exclusiveness. The reader, however, sensitized by Bassani's strange way of introducing the house, knows that it is ultimately not enough to protect its inhabitants. In the end, they are all arrested and deported to meet their certain death.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.10: "a real horror"(Weaver, p.10).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 14: "If the tomb of the Finzi-Contini family could be called a 'horror,' and smiled at, their house,... nicknamed enviously the *magna domus*, at that, no, not even after fifty years could anyone manage to smile" (Weaver, p. 12).

We have known this all along, and yet, we are surprised at the rather abrupt ending: the *Epilogo* very curtly and matter-of-factly lists the end that awaited each of Bassani's characters, like the credits that follow a film. Puzzled, we reflect on the reasons Bassani had for leaving out any gruesome details of the deaths of Micòl and her family. Death, it seems, has defeated life, and yet, his book is a testimony to life and not to death because, as he himself explains, "il motivo centrale del romanzo [é] la ricerca della morte per trovare in fondo ad essa invece il suo contrario."<sup>28</sup>

Among Bassani's *Cinque storie Ferraresi*, the novella entitled *Una lapide in Via Mazzini* is the most nightmarish and haunting. After the war, Geo Josz returns unexpectedly from Buchenwald to his native town, Ferrara, being the only survivor of all those sent to death in 1943. Nobody recognizes him because the unspeakable horrors of the concentration camp have left deep marks on his appearance and personality. The year being 1945, he turns up precisely at the moment a memorial plaque is to be installed on the wall of the synagogue in Via Mazzini commemorating the Jews of Ferrara that were killed in the camps in Germany. Ironically, Geo's name is engraved on the plaque, too, and he wants it to be changed.

Unlike many of Bassani's stories, this one begins with survival. Geo is a survivor, but his return is not a happy one. He is what Avishai Margalit describes as a *moral witness*:<sup>29</sup> Having witnessed and experienced evil and suffering, he believes that the people of Ferrara will listen to his testimony, commemorate the dead and prepare for a better future. Geo feels his mission is to function as a mouthpiece for the dead; Bassani expresses this in the way he introduces him in the story. Geo is the one who steps forward and brings the memorial operation to a halt: He points to the plaque where his name is engraved and repeats the name twice, explaining that it has to be taken away, since he is here and alive. At the moment his name is supposed to be turned into a dead memorial, he arrives to reclaim it, and with the name he reclaims the memory of his fellow camp victims that is in danger of being abandoned to a passive stone marker. This instance marks the beginning of a continuous clash between the opposing realities of Geo and the Ferrarese. Coming from the distant universe of the camp, Geo is a traumatized individual who is permanently displaced and unable to reclaim either present or future in his native city that wants him to forget.

In his essay *In Risposta (VI)*, Bassani describes Geo as the witness who "torna dal regno dei morti in un a città dopo tutto normale." In this, he continues, the poet is similar to

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<sup>28</sup> "Meritare il tempo," p. 85. "The central motive of the novel is the search for death in order to find at its source its opposite." Translation mine.

<sup>29</sup> Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 147-182.

the witness: “Ma anche I poeti, se sono veramente tali, tornano sempre dal regno dei morti. Sono stati di là per diventare poeti, per astrarsi del mondo, e non sarebbero poeti se non cercassero di tornare di qua, fra noi.”<sup>30</sup> The witness, who feels an obligation to tell his story and thus erase his name on the plaque of the dead and fill in the gap, is like the poet, Bassani himself, who fills in the gaps of official memory. This brings us back to Benjamin (and his storyteller) who, in witnessing death, encounters himself and assumes the authority to tell his story. Everyone in the city hopes the dust of time will obliterate those names, but Geo’s unexpected return undermines the monumental effort to consign the past to an easily forgotten memorial. In the course of the story it becomes clear that the people of Ferrara are uncomfortable with Geo’s return. His former neighbors look away in embarrassment, wishing to forget the past and the old sense of guilt. His arrival disrupts the citywide attempts to restore an atmosphere of pre-war normalcy. The people grow weary of the stories he tells of his imprisonment and his family’s cruel death in the gas chambers of Buchenwald:

Durante I mesi residui del '46, tutto il '47, e buona parte del '48, la figura via via più lacera e desolata di Geo Josz non cessò mai di stare dinanzi agli occhi di Ferrara intera. Per le strade, nelle piazze, nei cinema, nei teatri, attorno ai campi sportive, alle cerimonie pubbliche: volgevano il capo, e subito lo scorgevano là, instancabile, sempre con quell’ombra di rattristato stupore nello sguardo. Attaccare discorso: era a questo evidentemente che mirava. Ma il tempo aveva lavorato a suo svantaggio. Adesso non c’era quasi più nessuno che non gli si tenesse alla larga, che non lo sfugisse come un appestato.<sup>31</sup>

They want to forget, move on, and start a new life. He, on the other hand, cannot forget and does not want to forget. He haunts the town’s café’s like a ghost from the past, constantly reiterating the horrific things he has experienced. To counteract this overwhelming desire to start a new life and bury the past, Geo turns himself into a living memorial. When a new dance hall opens only a few hundred yards away from the place where, in '44, five leaders of the underground National Liberation Committee had been shot, he disturbs the festivities by showing photographs of his parents and siblings who were killed in Buchenwald. While everyone else tries to dissociate place from time, Geo, with his constant reminders and stories, insists on making that connection. It is as if he would constantly appeal to the people: never

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<sup>30</sup> Bassani, romanzo, p.382

<sup>31</sup> Giorgio Bassani, “Una lapide in Via Mazzini,” in *Cinque storie ferraresi* (Milano, 1980), p. 91. English trans. William Weaver, *Five Stories of Ferrara* (New York, 1971), p. 106: “During the rest of '46 and '47, and a good part of '48, the more and more tattered and desolate figure of Geo Josz never stopped appearing before our eyes. In the streets, in the squares, at the movies, in the theaters, by the playing fields, at public ceremonies: you would look around and there he would be, tireless, always with that hint of saddened wonder in his gaze, as if he asked only to start a conversation. But all avoided him like the plague. Nobody understood. Nobody wanted to understand.”

forget. But the only thing the people want is to move on in life with the knowledge that the past is safely contained in a memorial they can forget about. Geo, however, is the very personification of the past, and he constantly forces them to interact and face the past anew. The result of his disruptive and macabre behavior is that he is excluded *again* from the Ferrarese society. In the end, the unwelcome witness, now even more of an alien than he was on the night of his deportation, chooses to leave his native town forever. Again, he is a victim - this time a victim of forgetting. What remains of him, ironically, is his name, engraved on the memorial plaque and covered with dust. The people of Ferrara never actually thought of erasing his name. With his disappearance, the desired order and normalcy returns to the city, and forgetting can take over.

Concluding this chapter, I once more return to the thought at its beginning. Bassani's narratives bear the weight of the knowledge of death. They commemorate those without a grave, and in their narrative act, the funerary ritual is performed by the author. Death preserves the memory of life: Their life is told once more, and they once more inhabit the sacred spaces of their fateful history. We visit these spaces alongside the author in turning the pages of his book. And yet one sacred space is missing in all of Bassani's narratives. The death camp, the space around which every narrative revolves in one way or the other, is never mentioned explicitly. In Geo's story, one word carries the whole weight of death camp imagery: Buchenwald. Bassani never experienced the horror and chaos of the death camp. And he is not writing a survival story. Instead, he anchors all his narratives in the aftermath of the Holocaust, emphasizing the survivor's responsibility to bear witness and the writer's responsibility to tell the story of the persecuted. Still, the imagery of the death camp is subliminally present in many of his writings. Marilyn Schneider calls this ghostly presence "a sign itself of unutterability."<sup>32</sup> I would call it, along with Shoshana Felman, a missed encounter with death, or the trauma of survival. The concentration camp becomes the point where Geo's life abruptly stopped and where Bassani's writing reaches a dead end. Indeed, it becomes the point where language fails and reaches its limits. Bassani's own trauma of survival manifests itself in the haunted figure of Geo Jozs, who personifies remembering and speaks against forgetting. The space that has come to be the epitome of the worst sin against humanity, the concentration camp, is superimposed onto Bassani's Ferrara. Throughout the *Romanzo*, the city is endowed with distinct features of death camp imagery: Death,

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<sup>32</sup> Schneider, p. 3.

humiliation, victimage, distrust, betrayal, estrangement, exclusion and imprisonment are themes that are inscribed onto the one-time idyllic Ferrara of Bassani's youth.

It seems fitting that an observation on memory concludes the *Romanzo di Ferrara*. "Laggiù, in fondo al corridoio" is a short essay in which Bassani discusses how he came to write and publish the tales that make up the *Storie Ferraresi*. Acknowledging that the past is not dead, the writer describes the effort to reclaim life from the passage of time:

Il passato non è morto – (...) non muore mai. Si allontana, bensì: ad ogni istante. Recuperare il passato dunque è possibile. Bisogna, tuttavia, se proprio si ha voglia di recuperarlo, percorrere una specie di corridoio ad ogni istante più lungo. Laggiù, in fondo al remoto, soleggiato punto di convergenza delle nere pareti del corridoio, sta la vita, vivida e palpitante come una volta, quando primamente si produsse. Eterna allora? Eterna. E nondimeno sempre più lontana, sempre più sfuggente, sempre più restia a lasciarsi di nuovo possedere.<sup>33</sup>

Memory, thus, is a never-ending process, a running against time that turns each moment, as soon as it has occurred, into the past. Even though the goal seems to move farther and farther away, the writer can overcome the destructive process of history to reconstruct the time that has been lost.

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<sup>33</sup> Giorgio Bassani, "Laggiù, in fondo al corridoio," in *Romanzo di Ferrara*, p. 729: "To recapture the past is possible then. But if one truly wants to recapture it, one has to run down a kind of corridor that every instant becomes longer and longer. Down there at the end of the remote, sunny point where the corridor's black walls converge, there stands life vivid and throbbing as once before when it was first experienced. Eternal then? Eternal, of course. But nonetheless farther and farther away, more and more elusive, more and more unwilling to permit itself to be possessed." (trans. Douglas Radcliff-Umstead, *The Exile into Eternity*, p. 39).

Das Konzentrationslager ist ausschließlich in Form von Literatur vorstellbar, als Realität nicht.  
(Auch nicht, - und sogar dann am wenigsten -, wenn wir es erleben.)  
Imre Kertesz, "Wem gehört Auschwitz?"<sup>34</sup>

Language is the strongest bond there is between an individual and a place.  
Ruth Klüger, *Still Alive*<sup>35</sup>

Ruth Klüger's *weiter leben* is a unique book in many ways. It explores many gaps and the impossibility of filling them: between individual memory and historical narrative, between experience and the language available to describe it and between the happy ending of a survivor story and the tragedy of millions who did not survive. It self-consciously acknowledges and incorporates other accounts, literary as well as factual, of the events it describes. Klüger's text not only powerfully interacts with other Holocaust memoirs but also thematizes the difficulty of being a scholar among scholars and being a survivor at the same time. Finally, the book exists in two versions, or parallel books, one being the German version published in 1994, the other a completely re-written and in parts significantly modified English version published in 2001.

Several facts about the book suggest the importance of space and geography. The book's original German title was planned to be *Stationen* – stations, according to the different stations of her persecution and the long odyssey to liberation.<sup>36</sup> Also, the title of its English paperback edition is *Landscapes of Memory*, which suggests the topographical aspect of remembering. In both, the German and the English versions, the book is organized according to these stations: Vienna, Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, Christianstadt, Bavaria (Germany) and New York are the spatial markers and the sites of Klüger's suffering. Each of these places is characterized not so much by precise geographical descriptions (which we find both in Bassani and Sebald) as by the feelings the author associates with the place.

As indicated in the introduction to my thesis, this chapter will examine how Ruth Klüger recreates the sites of her own suffering *not* in order to memorialize and sanctify them (as Bassani does) but in an attempt to conquer their horror and take away their obsessive mystery. The death camp – a looming but ineffable presence in Bassani and an unnamed but destructive force in Sebald - becomes speakable in Klüger's memoir, and especially in her poems. In the first part of this chapter I will take a closer look at how these poems function as alternative spaces of memory. The early poems of the young girl, written in the immediate world of the camp, provide continuum amidst the chaos; the rhyme, meter and rhythm are the girl's triumph over chaos and speechlessness. The later poems of the grown-up woman, most

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<sup>34</sup> In *Eine Gedankenlänge Stille, während das Erschießungskommando neu lädt* (Hamburg, 1999), p. 146.

<sup>35</sup> *Still Alive* (New York, 2001), p. 205.

<sup>36</sup> Ruth Klüger, *weiter leben* (München, 2001), p. 79.

of them written in America, have in common the ghostly presence of her father and brother whose unresolved deaths haunt her.

Can language bear the burden of experience? Can a place bear this burden? The second part of this chapter will trace Klüger's turning away from the actual sites of her story and towards its written sites. About Claude Lanzmann and his minute recreation of the exact spatial framework of the camp in his film "Shoah" she says: "Du brauchst die Orte. Mir genügen die Ortsnamen."<sup>37</sup> She knows well that language becomes deficient in the face of trauma. But she suggests that words can express the Holocaust experience better than a place, a memorial or a museum: She sets her book against a "museum culture" of the Holocaust that consists of a "canon" of sacred sites that have become tourist attractions. The preservation of these sites for the sake of education and remembrance can have the opposite effect: the sites lose their authenticity. The horror of the concentration camps cannot be understood by just visiting the site of one. The experience is bound to space *and* time and cannot be conserved or recreated: "Das KZ als Ort? Ortschaft, Landschaft, landscape, seascape – das Wort Zeitschaft sollte es geben, um zu vermitteln, was ein Ort in der Zeit ist, zu einer gewissen Zeit, weder vorher noch nachher."<sup>38</sup> In the English version she adds: "Lanzmann's greatness, on the other hand, depends on his belief that place captures time and can display its victims like flies caught in amber."<sup>39</sup> Klüger, however, disagrees.

If we visit a camp today, we always come from our own present, with knowledge about the past but without experience of it. We go there only to find confirmed what we already know. Reading Ruth Klüger's memoir, we will not find this confirmation. She wants us to let go of our memorials and museums and actively follow her process of remembering the past through the present, like a dialogue between generations:

Um mit Gespenstern umzugehen, muss man sie ködern mit Fleisch der Gegenwart. Ihnen Reibflächen hinhalten, um sie aus ihrem Ruhezustand herauszureizen und sie in Bewegung zu bringen. Reibeisen aus dem heutigen Küchenschrank für die alten Wurzeln; Kochlöffel, um die Brühe, die unsere Väter gebraut, mit dem Gewürz unserer Töchter anzurühren. Zaubern ist dynamisches Denken. Wenn es mir gelingt, zusammen mit Leserinnen, die mitdenken, und vielleicht sogar ein paar Lesern dazu, dann könnten wir Beschwörungsformeln wie Kochrezepte austauschen und miteinander abschmecken, was die Geschichte und die alten Geschichten uns liefern. (...) Wir fänden Zusammenhänge (wo vorhanden) und stifteten sie (wenn erdacht).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>39</sup> *Still Alive*, p. 67.

<sup>40</sup> *weiter leben*, pp. 79-80.

Remembering the past, this quote suggests, is an active and dialogic process; it is a conversation with many holes; some of them can be filled in, others create more questions. It is also a process of translation. For Klüger, it is first and foremost a translation of her until-then-unformulated experiences into words - significantly into the words of her native German, addressed to her German friends. Years later, she translates her experiences again, this time into English, and from one generation to the next - for her children and American friends to read. The book as translatable and rewriteable medium presents itself as the best *lieu de mémoire* because writing and reading remain inclusive, interactive and interpretive processes that continue to engage.

With her memoir, Ruth Klüger tries to find a new discourse about Auschwitz that breaks the paralyzing circle of pathos and accusation. Her book is full of funny anecdotes and ironic remarks; the laconic tone and the shocking directness of her descriptions send the reader on a rollercoaster ride that unmask and deflates preconceptions. Part of this new discourse about Auschwitz is her own poetry. The poems, which she memorized and wrote down much later after having escaped, function as an exterior assistant memory and another way of bearing witness. She emphasizes that reading, reciting and writing poems is not a mere pastime, but an essential part of her life and her way of responding to events she experiences. It is almost as if writing poems belongs to her intellectual hygiene – clearing the head, ordering thoughts and putting emotions into words. In the extreme context of the concentration camp, this ordering of thoughts takes on a vital function, becomes a necessity that keeps Klüger and her fellow prisoners mentally sane and, ultimately, fit to find ways to survive in the camp. Thus, she equates reciting and making poetry with keeping the intellectual superiority over the events she experiences: “Wer nur erlebt, reim- und gedankenlos, ist in Gefahr, den Verstand zu verlieren, wie die alte Frau auf dem Schoß meiner Mutter: Ich hab den Verstand nicht verloren, ich hab Reime gemacht.”<sup>41</sup>

“Making rhymes,” as she calls it, is a strategy for survival, but it is also a way of active resistance. She undermines the overwhelming destructive power of the Nazis by developing a counter-narrative; she does not allow their ideology to take possession of her mind but takes on a critical attitude. Forcing her thoughts into the pattern of regularity of meter and predictability of rhyme and repetition, she creates a fictional world where she is in control of events:

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

Man muß die abgenützten Worte auf die Waagschale legen, als wären sie neu, was sie dem Kind ja waren, und dann muß man die Schlaueit durchschauen, die es mir eingab, das Trauma der Auschwitz Wochen in ein Versmaß zu stülpen. Es sind Kindergedichte, die in ihrer Regelmäßigkeit ein Gegengewicht zum Chaos stiften wollten, ein poetischer und therapeutischer Versuch, diesem sinnlosen und destruktiven Zirkus, in dem wir untergingen, ein sprachliches Ganzes, Gereimtes entgegenzuhalten; also eigentlich auch das älteste, ästhetische Anliegen. Darum mussten sie auch mehrere Strophen haben, zum Zeichen der Beherrschung, der Fähigkeit zu gliedern und zu objektivieren.<sup>42</sup>

The poems she composes in the camps are created in the midst of her immediate experience and form an essential part of it. Also interesting are the interpretations and self-critical comments Klüger includes into the book that accompany her poems. She takes up the double function of literary critic and writer and thus enables the reader to see the events from both perspectives: with the eyes of a little child and with the more distanced eyes of a grown-up, reviewing the situation after fifty years.

The poems are the most obvious aspect that distinguishes the two versions of the memoir. All these early poems, written in the immediate context of the camps, are missing in the English version. Similarly, there are no allusions to or quotes from the German classic poets and writers. The poems one finds in the English version are in English, written in America, after her escape and the emigration to New York City. Included in the English version are quotes by W.B. Yeats, Adrienne Rich, Maya Angelou and Emily Dickinson. In this, Klüger incorporates the new world in which she lives - the new language and the new culture she is a part of - into her memoir. She makes clear for her readers that the past is not secluded and shut up in another world in her mind, but still a continuum that is linked with her life today. The poems she includes in the English version are the same attempts at formulating what is haunting her, how “the old reality invades the new one, crossing over the unconscious layers that are straddling both when I least expect it.”<sup>43</sup>

The German version contains more poems than the English version. Obviously, most of the poems significant for the time period the memoir is concerned with are written in German; translating them for the English version would have undermined Klüger’s endeavor to write two original parallel books. But there is another striking difference between the poems included in the two versions of the book: The German version contains, among others, two poems about places, Vienna and Auschwitz, while the English version contains only poems about her father and brother. It is not important for what I want to show whether she has written English poems about specific places and, if so, why she didn’t include them in the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>43</sup> *Still Alive*, p. 82.

English version - because what all the poems, even those about Auschwitz and Vienna, have in common is that they lack spatial specifications. Almost all of them are set in a ghostly in-between world where the dead come and mingle with the living to haunt her wherever she is. Such is, for example, "Halloween and a Ghost," the only poem in the chapter The Camps in the English version. Her sons celebrate Halloween, play trick or treat and dress up as ghosts, along with the other kids who come to the door. Among them, she seems to see her brother:

You are the skipped sentence in the book I'm reading,  
You are the kitchen knife that slips into the thumb.  
Memory: the autonomous twitch of an aching muscle.  
You are the word that is always mistyped  
And, erased, defaces the page.<sup>44</sup>

This poem is one of many she wrote in an attempt to work through the unsolved and unclear death of her brother: "Where there is no grave, we are condemned to go on mourning. (...) By a grave I don't necessarily mean a place in a cemetery, but simply clear knowledge about the death of someone you've known."<sup>45</sup> Actual sites of mourning are missing, and so she creates interior, textual sites, inscribes a symbolic tombstone and, in some way, tries to ban her brother's ghost to the written page. The poems about her father are similar attempts:

Rollt Erinnerung wie Wolle auf der Spule  
Zu Kastanienbaum und Straßenbahn.  
Meine Kinderhand in deiner breiten, kühlen –  
Doch der Faden bricht in rätselhaftem Wahn.  
Wind weht vom stillen Ozean.

Dunkel wird's am Ende eines Spieles,  
Dessen Pfand und Regeln ich vergaß.  
Ohne dich und schluchzend stolpr' ich ziellos  
Über Straßen voll zerbrochenem Glas.  
Auf den Küstenhügeln wächst ein salzig-braunes Gras.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>46</sup> *weiter leben*, p. 36.

These two stanzas are from the poem “Mit einem Jahrzeitlicht für den Vater,“ which she composed while sitting on the swing on a playground in California. Analyzing her poem, Klüger writes that this is how she created her own daughter-father myth, through words on paper, but that this myth still cannot change the most painful fact: that her father’s death remains a gap, an unspeakable moment when the thread is cut mysteriously.

If we now look at the two poems about specific places, we will see that they express the same hauntedness and ghostliness as the poems about her brother and father. The poem “Sand” seems to fulfill a metaphorical rather than a memorial function:

Auf verlassenem Spielplatz wirbelt der Sand.  
Balken torkeln.  
Sengende Sonne über den Schaukeln  
Blendet; blinde  
Stadt, die ein Kind  
Sandigen Auges verbannte,  
mensenleere:

was soll mir dieser Wind  
von einem andern Meer?<sup>47</sup>

Klüger wrote this poem about twenty years after she left Vienna, when she was studying German literature in Berkeley. Rediscovering her German, she also rediscovers the city that was her home and that wanted her to vanish: From the age of seven she was not allowed to sit on park benches or go to the movies, she was excluded from school and confined to the house. She suffered discrimination and persecution. Very much like Bassani’s Ferrara, Vienna is a home that turns into a prison: “Vienna was a city that banished you and then didn’t allow you to leave.”<sup>48</sup> Klüger’s biting irony emphasizes the hopelessness of the situation: they were unwanted and yet had to pay a considerable sum, the *Reichsfluchtsteuer*, to be allowed to leave. Contrary to Bassani, Ruth Klüger never returned to Vienna; only once after the war she visited to meet the remaining family members. She cannot reconcile with the city that wanted her dead; she finds it homely and “unhomely,” in Vidler’s sense, at the same time: “Wien ist Weltstadt, von Wien hat jeder sein Bild. Mir ist die Stadt weder fremd noch vertraut, was wiederum umgekehrt bedeutet, dass sie mir beides ist, also heimatlich

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>48</sup> *Still Alive*, p. 24.

unheimlich. Freudlos war sie halt und kinderfeindlich. Bis ins Mark hinein judenkinderfeindlich.”<sup>49</sup>

This is the Vienna that she wanted to flee from all her life but keeps coming back to in her thoughts and dreams. The dichotomy of fleeing from the site of one’s suffering and the involuntary compulsion to mentally return to this very site pervade the book. Klüger begins her narrative with a description of herself. An eternal fugitive, she flees from apartments and from marriages, and most of all from her memories:

Ein ungeduldiger, zerfahrener Mensch, eine, die leicht was fallen lässt, mit oder ohne Absicht, auch Zerbrechliches, Geschirr und Liebschaften, nirgendwo lange tätig ist und oft auszieht, aus Städten und Wohnungen, und die Gründe erst erfindet, wenn sie schon am Einpacken ist. Eine, die sich auf die Flucht begibt, nicht erst, wenn sie Gefahr wittert, sondern schon, wenn sie nervös wird. Denn Flucht war das Schönste, damals und immer noch.<sup>50</sup>

She knows that all this packing and fleeing is the futile endeavor to run away from memory which will come back to her wherever she is: “Dieses Wien, aus dem mir die Flucht nicht geglückt ist, war ein Gefängnis, mein erstes, in dem ewig von Flucht, das heißt vom Auswandern, die Rede war.”<sup>51</sup>

The memory of Vienna is closely connected to the rudimentary memories she has of her father. The uncertainty about his death, and also about his life (she was too young a child to really know what kind of person her father was) keeps her tied to a never-ending mental struggle with her father. Decades later, she still catches herself in imagined dialogue with him. Vienna is the site of an unresolved dilemma between the recalled memories of her father and the learned knowledge of his death and thus the city becomes a place of traumatic re-enactment: “Is my life running in circles round me? For all my many moves, shall I live forever in the Lindengasse in Vienna...? Everything to do with [my father] is unfinished, nothing was ever resolved.”<sup>52</sup>

The poem called “Auschwitz,” which is found only in the German version, seems to be a different case at first glance. It was composed in the immediate environment of the camp, memorized and written down later, after the escape. As already indicated above, it is the poem

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<sup>49</sup> *weiter leben*, p. 68.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>52</sup> *Still Alive*, p. 33.

that symbolizes Klüger's resistance against the overwhelming power of the Nazis, because in its last stanza not only the prisoners but also the perpetrators are swallowed by the chimney:

Täglich hinter den Baracken  
Seh ich Rauch und Feuer stehn.  
Jude, beuge deinen Nacken,  
Keiner hier kann dem entgehn.  
Siehst du in dem Rauche nicht  
Ein verzerrtes Angesicht?  
Ruft es nicht voll Spott und Hohn:  
Fünf Millionen berg' ich schon!  
Auschwitz liegt in meiner Hand,  
Alles, alles wird verbrannt.<sup>53</sup>  
(...)  
Keiner ist mir noch entronnen,  
Keinen, keinen werd ich schonen.  
Und die mich gebaut als Grab  
Schling ich selbst zuletzt hinab.  
Auschwitz liegt in meiner Hand,  
Alles, alles wird verbrannt.<sup>54</sup>

"Auschwitz" is a poem that marks a specific place, and yet, in its repetitive style and inclusive character, it assumes a metaphorical significance that includes all death camps. The chimney becomes a symbol of the Nazi regime in its entirety, and the five million victims it swallows remind one of the symbolic number of six million Holocaust victims. Just as the word "Auschwitz" has come, fittingly or unfittingly, to be a synonym for the Holocaust, and stands metaphorically for each one of the death camps, Klüger's poem is about the horror of all death camps alike. A camp, it suggests, is a place outside the normal experience and almost a place outside the world. Once swallowed by its universe, every other place is unmasked as an illusion. The people are completely cut off from the rest of the world; they are disoriented and displaced in a Babel of foreign languages, lies, and violence. Thus, the inmates experience a gap that opens between the experience of that place and the language available to describe it. The fact that Klüger's poem tries to bridge that gap is what makes it

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<sup>53</sup> *weiter leben*, pp. 125-126.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

so interesting. She does not attempt to describe the place in its horrible details, but she takes familiar images and motives from traditional poetry and puts them in opposition to images and motives from the camp. The sun is opposed to the fire in the crematoria, clouds in the sky are substituted by smoke. Words like “Stacheldraht” (barbed wire), “Rauch” (smoke) or “Grab” (grave) have become key words in many poems about the Holocaust. It seems as if the clash between the words of traditional poetic language and the camp experience would not keep her from composing poetry - on the contrary, she instrumentalizes this clash. She once ironically calls the poem “Kamin-Gedicht,” playing with the German word that means both chimney and fireplace and thus alluding to the tradition of reciting or reading poems at the fireplace.

Space in Klüger’s poems seems to be something one needs to get away from. Be it Vienna, the city of her childhood, Theresienstadt or Auschwitz, space contains traumatic memories that she can’t flee from. In her book she confronts these spaces, the memories and ghosts they contain, and tries to grasp them in their effusiveness in order to ban them from her thoughts and onto the page. On the last page of *weiter leben*, she sends the book off to Germany, to her friends. It has come full circle; she has reconciled with Germany and lets go of her memoir and with it relinquishes her ghosts to the place where it all began. “Jetzt könnten sie mich ja in Ruhe lassen und mir weiteres Umziehen ersparen,” she says about her ghosts.<sup>55</sup>

The part that is called The Camps in both versions of the book is marked by an introductory chapter that states Klüger’s views on how people today deal with the sites of atrocity that have become memorials and so-called sites of conscience. It is significant that this chapter is almost identical in both versions, which suggests that it presents the central point of her argument: As a part of what she calls today’s “museum culture” of the Holocaust, the camps have become tourist attractions. Reconstructed, renovated and preserved, the barracks, crematoria and showers in the camps have become the destination of a different sort of pilgrimage: a pilgrimage of learning about the past from its very ruins and being reminded that the past is not forgotten; and also a pilgrimage that is supposed to fulfill some sort of moral obligation felt by “every sensitive citizen, not to mention every politician who wants to display his ethical credentials, to have his picture taken at these shrines.”<sup>56</sup> What sounds like an oxymoron – to go to a space that is preserved in order to be reminded of what is not forgotten - in fact contains the deeper problem of how much reconstruction is needed in order

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 284.

<sup>56</sup> *Still Alive*, p. 63.

not to falsify the site's original appearance. In the context of these camp sites, "ruin" seems to be the wrong word. In the course of my research I spoke to a Yale student who had visited several camp sites in Europe and who told me how at Majdanek, the tour guide proudly proclaimed that the camp was in such a state of renovation that it could be re-activated within 24 hours. Whether this is an anecdote or founded on true facts is not important. The mere thought of it is disturbing and plays into the problem Klüger presents. The obsession with reconstruction and "Musealisierung" has led to a paradox between conservation and authenticity: the more these sites are renovated the more their original "honesty" is glossed over with layers of paint and plaster. Ruth Klüger writes:

I once visited Dachau with some Americans who had asked me to come along. It was a clean and proper place, and it would have taken more imagination than your average John or Jane Doe possesses to visualize the camp as it was forty years earlier. Today a fresh wind blows across the central square where the infamous roll calls took place, and the simple barracks of stone and wood suggest a youth hostel more easily than a setting for tortured lives. (...) The museum culture of the camp sites (...) is based on a profound superstition, that is, on the belief that the ghosts can be met and kept in their place, where the living ceased to breathe. (...) The visitor monitors his reactions, examines his emotions, admires his own sensibility, or in other words, turns sentimental. For sentimentality involves turning away from an ostensible object and towards oneself. It means looking into a mirror instead of reality.<sup>57</sup>

Aleida Assmann has analyzed exactly this paradox of authenticity in her essay "Das Gedächtnis der Orte – Authentizität und Gedenken." People who visit the sites of concentration camps in order to see how it really was, she indicates, will find only a staging of their own preconceptions, simply because they come with the learned knowledge of books instead of the experienced knowledge of the prisoner:

Traumatische Orte (...) befinden sich in einem unklaren Zwischenraum zwischen Authentizität und Inszenierung, zwischen Retention und Rekonstruktion. (...) Indem der Ort bewahrt wird, wird er bereits verdeckt und ersetzt. (...) Wer zuviel Gewicht legt auf die Gedächtniskraft des Ortes, läuft Gefahr, den umgestalteten Gedenkort, den Ort der Besucher, mit dem historischen Ort, dem Ort der Häftlinge, zu verwechseln. Der Abstand zwischen dem Ort der Opfer und dem der Besucher muss sinnfällig gemacht werden, wenn das affektive Potential, das der Erinnerungsort mobilisiert, nicht zu einer ‚Horizontverschmelzung‘ und einer illusionären Identifikation führen soll.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp. 66-67.

<sup>58</sup> "Das Gedächtnis der Orte – Authentizität und Gedenken," *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 68.Jg. (Stuttgart, 1994), p. 5.

Throughout her book, Ruth Klüger uses the metaphor of the museum site with a slightly ironic tone as if she would always frame it with imaginary quotation marks. It becomes clear that in the context of the camps, “Musealisierung” is not the right way of remembering. Memory is above all an anti-museum and not localizable; it operates in fragments and it uses the tactics of surprise and rupture that reveal its true power. Of course, the transfer of memory away from its site into other *lieux de mémoire* is problematic. Remembering the Holocaust is remembering an absence. The empty spaces and gaps the Nazi left in the topography of German society, the lack of graves and even corpses to inter, has led to a fixation on the sites of suffering as the only thing that remains. Klüger never questions the need for commemoration. It is important to remember the concentration camps, but it is problematic to turn them into museums. She writes: “Do we expect that our unsolved questions will be answered if we hang on to what’s left: the place, the stones, the ashes? We don’t honor the dead with these unattractive remnants of past crimes; we collect and keep them for the satisfaction of our own necrophilic desires. Violated taboos, such as child murder and mass murder, turn their victims into spirits, whom we offer a kind of home that they may haunt at will.”<sup>59</sup> What we find at such a site we already carry in us: We should let go of the place our memories are chained to. Written realms of memory can function as substitutes and as possibility of displacement of spatial landscape: the actual places are not necessary; the names are enough, the words carry their memory.

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<sup>59</sup> *Still Alive*, p. 64.

Es scheint mir nicht, sagte Austerlitz, dass wir die Gesetze verstehen, unter denen sich die Wiederkunft der Vergangenheit vollzieht, doch ist es mir immer mehr, als gäbe es überhaupt keine Zeit, sondern nur verschiedene, nach einer höheren Stereometrie ineinander verschachtelte Räume, zwischen denen die Lebendigen und die Toten, je nachdem es ihnen zumute ist, hin und her gehen können.

W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*<sup>60</sup>

It is to space – the space we occupy, traverse, have continual access to, or can at any time reconstruct in thought and imagination – that we must turn our attention. Our thought must focus on it if this or that category of remembrances is to reappear.

Maurice Halbwachs<sup>61</sup>

My body is everywhere: the bomb which destroys my house also damages my body insofar as the house was already an indication of my body.

Jean Paul Sartre<sup>62</sup>

In his essay fragment “Die Wiederkehr des Flaneurs,” Walter Benjamin envisions the city as a mnemonic code that awakens and shapes recollection:

Die Stadt als mnemotechnischer Behelf des einsam Spazierenden, sie ruft mehr herauf als dessen Kindheit und Jugend, mehr als ihre eigene Geschichte. Was sie eröffnet, ist das unabsehbare Schauspiel der Flanerie, das wir endgültig abgesetzt glaubten.<sup>63</sup>

This essay and Benjamin’s other writings about Berlin and Paris explore the relationships between metropolitan environment, individual memory and collective history.<sup>64</sup> How does the city form and transform memory? Benjamin offers the labyrinth as one possible model of the relationship between memory and cityscape. Like a labyrinth, the past, too, is convoluted. The dense networks of streets and alleyways are like the knotted, intertwined threads of memory. The open spaces of the urban environment are like the voids and blanks of forgotten things. Lost times are like overlooked places. The city itself becomes the medium for Benjamin’s urban recollections. Memory and the city both constitute labyrinthine figures, without beginning or end, in which one may make endless detours. Movement in memory is like that in a labyrinth, and to journey within a labyrinth is to be a flaneur, one who wanders without destination in a semiotic space. For Benjamin, time is not a linear progression. The past is not left behind as one moves on but continually encountered again, returned to, though

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<sup>60</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Frankfurt am Main, 2003), p. 269.

<sup>61</sup> p. 140.

<sup>62</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York, 1956), pp. 322-325.

<sup>63</sup> p. 277.

<sup>64</sup> See Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis - Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge, 1996), about Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk* and *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*.

approached from different directions. Similarly, texts that thematize memory are not linear narratives because they are themselves labyrinthine, discontinuous and fragmentary. In the texts, this aspect of the work of memory is inscribed in their structure. The book presents a labyrinth (the city) within a labyrinth (memory) within yet another labyrinth (the text).<sup>65</sup>

In this chapter, I want to draw on Benjamin's writings, particularly his theory of the city as a mnemonic code and the image of the flaneur, because they isolate key thematic concerns addressed in W.G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz*. Published in 2001, the novel fixes its gaze on the past and traces the life of Jacques Austerlitz as he uncovers his true identity from the hidden realms of his unconscious. The book is constructed as a nameless narrator's conversation with the title character who, in the beginning, seems very reluctant to talk about personal things, especially his own life. Slowly and in a random, labyrinthine way, we learn that Austerlitz came to England as a child on one of the Kindertransporte in the early 1940s. He grew up in Wales, in the loveless and stifling house of a Calvinist priest who systematically banned from him every memory of his past. Later, when he learns his real name, he seems paralyzed and frightened of what the past might disclose. Austerlitz is a character displaced and alienated from the world he lives in. He wanders endlessly through the city, very much like a Benjaminian flaneur, and by chance happens upon places that function as clues and bring back memories. Thus we find out that he is the child of Jewish parents in Prague, both of whom died in the Holocaust. The book becomes not only a quest for Austerlitz's own identity, but a search for the mother and the father.

As we will see, *Austerlitz* both structurally and stylistically parallels Benjamin's understanding of the city as a space of memory and the discovery site of the personal past. The representation of the city, just like the representation of memory, demands a discontinuous, fragmented literary form and style. In what follows I will outline how Sebald's novel, in its mosaic-like narrative technique, presents the city as an urban labyrinth of memory in which the protagonist has to get lost in order to find his identity. A brief comparison with the earlier work *Die Ausgewanderten* will illustrate how Sebald's characters are exiled and displaced and move through the world like inner emigrants, burdened by consciousness, history, and, overall, memory. They are unable to engage with life, obsessed by questions they cannot resolve. The figure of the narrator in Sebald's books is no less enigmatic: we never learn his name, even though in all books it seems to be the same person, speaking with the same characteristic voice; nor do we know anything else about him apart from his interest in the protagonists' pasts and his gift for listening to people's stories. He is

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

presented as the collector and chronicler of the events narrated; in both books it is he who writes everything down for us to read.

Sebald's narratives follow the discontinuities of the unconscious and the fragmentedness of recollection: His writing defies easy genre classifications; it is a hybrid of several forms that hovers between fiction and fact, essay, autobiography or memoir and travel writing. This sense of *bricolage*, as he himself calls it,<sup>66</sup> is underlined by the photographs, paintings, postcards and sketches he includes in all of his books. These photographs, which appear as visual evidence, at times almost take over the narrative, occupying a whole page or even a double page. In a seemingly random way they punctuate the text and form a visual pattern of their own that, taken out of the context of the narrative, forms a mosaic of places and people. Indeed, it is striking how many of the pictures are of places, buildings, graveyards, monuments or other architectural markers. This indicates that places and the stories they have witnessed are a key element in all of Sebald's works. Photographs, with their fragmentary, snapshot-like character, provide ideal models for the depiction of the urban complex. Their architectural patterns and excerpt-like perspective highlight the fleeting, fluid character of metropolitan existence. They deny a systematic, stable perspective.

The language he uses is a hybrid in a similar way. To a reader today, the style seems strange, a little awkward, even antiquated. At times his native "Allgäuerisch," a southern German dialect that uses antiquated and circuitous sentence constructions, shines through the polished German. His prose wanders, feeling its way through a narrative full of uncertainties. There are almost no paragraphs; the text seems to be one single body of rambling associations and detours in which discourses on architecture, history, modernism, war, nature and time overwhelm larger portions of the narration. Time in Sebald's books seems always slightly out of joint, in Hamlet's words; the reader gets a peculiar sense that the narrative is folding in on itself: entire passages seem suspended in a time vacuum, and the reader completely loses track of how much time has passed between certain events. For some characters, the past constantly invades the present and for others, time seems to have stopped completely.

As James Chandler observes, all of Sebald's books address questions about how to understand one's relation to the past in the light of the treacherous work of memory and forgetting. The reader, in trying to follow seemingly endless sidetracks of association, often gets lost, is confused about who is speaking or what the temporal structure is: "It is seldom an easy matter in a Sebald narrative to tell whether one is moving in the direction of

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<sup>66</sup> James Atlas, "W.G. Sebald: A Profile," *Paris Review*, 151 (Summer 1999), pp. 278-295.

remembering or of forgetting; one is often doing both, and neither, all at once.”<sup>67</sup> This is an important observation. Indeed, in *Austerlitz*, we are overwhelmed by insecurity and vagueness. Sebald makes no typographical distinction between Austerlitz’s words and the narrator’s, presenting their conversations without quotation marks and without paragraphs; the only sign that indicates the switch from Austerlitz’s soliloquies to the narrator is a dash - so inconspicuous that it is easily overlooked. The distinctions between narrator and Austerlitz get blurred; indeed, it is as if the protagonist and the narrator have disappeared into each other’s voices. The narrator remains a complete blank. We realize that it is not so much Austerlitz as the narrator who resists describing his own circumstances, saying only that he was born in Germany but now lives in England. The book presents a double search for identity: that of Austerlitz and that of the narrator. The narrator becomes a medium for Austerlitz’s story – and at the same time he unconsciously makes us aware of his anxiety about his own past. This, of course, is never explicit but is a vague idea that runs as an undercurrent through the whole narrative. We never quite understand why exactly the narrator is drawn to Austerlitz, other than that he feels that they share the same past, but we are similarly spellbound by him and his observations on time and memory.

The out-of-joint, wandering reading experience, moving through the labyrinth of ideas and images in the book, following endless detours and long passages of architectural and historical discourse, is a metaphor for the experience of Austerlitz himself, who wanders errantly, following his own detours and discovering new spaces. Our process of discovery mirrors Austerlitz’s long journey to memory: Sebald makes us experience the cost of his remembering.

It seems strange that, even though he is told his real name when he is a teenager, Austerlitz does not and cannot take any means to find out more about his origins: His stepfather has destroyed everything that would have indicated where he came from. Moreover, Austerlitz has developed his very own system of repression, a “Vermeidungssystem,” as he calls it,<sup>68</sup> which enables him to evade everything that has to do with the Holocaust. As a professor of history, he focuses exclusively on earlier centuries:

Für mich war die Welt mit dem Ausgang des 19. Jahrhunderts zu Ende. Darüber wagte ich mich nicht hinaus. (...) Ich las keine Zeitungen, weil ich mich, wie ich heute weiß, vor unguten Eröffnungen fürchtete, drehte das Radio nur zu bestimmten Stunden an, verfeinerte mehr und mehr meine Abwehrreaktionen und

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<sup>67</sup> James Chandler, “About Loss: W.G. Sebald’s Romantic Art of Memory,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 102/1 (Winter 2003), p. 245.

<sup>68</sup> *Austerlitz*, p. 286.

bildete eine Art von Quarantäne- und Immunsystem aus, durch das ich gefeit war gegen alles, was in irgendeinem (...) Zusammenhang stand mit der Vorgeschichte meiner auf immer engeren Raum sich erhaltenden Person.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, it takes almost a whole lifetime (more than 60 years), a concatenation of coincidences and a mysterious sickness that seems to come out of nowhere for Austerlitz to retrieve his repressed memories that lead him to find out that he came to England as a child and that he was born in Prague. Carol Bere makes this point explicit: “Significant for Sebald is not only memory in an overall generic sense, but also the point at which the cost of not remembering supersedes protective strategies for survival, the moment later in life when early, often horrific repressed knowledge or experience move center stage in a person’s life.”<sup>70</sup>

Austerlitz’s cost of not remembering in the course of his adult life leads to a physical and psychological alienation from the world that surrounds him, a self-imposed loneliness, an isolating obsession with the accumulation of historical knowledge from long-gone epochs and, ultimately, the loss of speech:

Diese Selbstzensur meines Denkens, das ständige Zurückweisen einer jeden in mir sich anbahnenden Erinnerung, erforderte indessen von Mal zu Mal größere Anstrengungen und führte zwangsläufig zuletzt zu der fast vollkommenen Lähmung meines Sprachvermögens, zur Vernichtung meiner sämtlichen Aufzeichnungen und Notizen, zu den endlosen Nachtwanderungen durch London und den immer öfter mich heimsuchenden Halluzinationen.<sup>71</sup>

The loss of the ability to formulate coherent sentences, or even to trust words, causes a sleeplessness that prompts his nightly wanderings through the city of London. Instinctively, he feels that walking around aimlessly in the city will help him overcome his writer’s block:

Wenn man die Sprache ansehen kann als eine alte Stadt, mit einem Gewinkel von Gassen und Plätzen, mit Quartieren, die weit zurückreichen in die Zeit, mit abgerissenen, assanierten und neuerbauten Vierteln und immer weiter ins Vorfeld hinauswachsenden Außenbezirken, so glich ich selbst einem Menschen, der sich, aufgrund einer langen Abwesenheit, in dieser Agglomeration nicht mehr zurechtfindet, der nicht mehr weiß, wozu eine Haltestelle dient, was ein Hinterhof, eine Straßenkreuzung, ein Boulevard oder eine Brücke ist.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>70</sup> Carol Bere, “The Book of Memory: W.G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants* and Austerlitz,” *Literary Review*, 46/1 (Fall 2002), p. 1.

<sup>71</sup> Austerlitz, p. 206.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

The discourse about the city, as Sigrid Weigel has pointed out, is replete with comparisons between the city and language. The city is seen as language, text or web; as allegory, metaphor, montage, and even poetry and memory. A city can be read, its signs and architecture deciphered like a code, which contains its biography.<sup>73</sup> Wandering in the labyrinth of the city, for Austerlitz, is the physical manifestation of his getting lost in the convoluted rules of language, which is caused by the overwhelming force of memory's knocking on the door of his conscience. What he does not know, however, is that these "flaneries" will bring back the memory of the past and that the past is the real reason for his affliction. The flaneur, Weigel points out, is a literary concept in that he is less a representative than a medium of the city-text, which he will then imitate on paper.<sup>74</sup> The city becomes the place of subjectivity and memory, of self-investigation and self-reflection. In this, for Austerlitz, the city also becomes an uncanny place, the place of an unknown other. Its topography develops into the language that communicates between the individual and history. The city is the site of an awakening and a finding of words.

One day his obsessive wanderings through London lead him to the Ladies Waiting Room in the Liverpool Street Station. The architectural structure of the room, and especially the pattern formed by the arches, windows and supports, causes a painful feeling of déjà vu: "Tatsächlich hatte ich das Gefühl, sagte Austerlitz, als enthalte der Wartesaal, in dessen Mitte ich wie ein Geblendeter stand, alle Stunden meiner Vergangenheit, all meine von jeher unterdrückten, ausgelöschten Ängste und Wünsche."<sup>75</sup> What he sees is a vision of himself more than sixty years ago, when he sat in this very waiting room and was being picked up by the priest and his wife. This first overwhelming recollection is followed by a chain of other, similarly coincidental discoveries and recollections that eventually lead him to Prague, his hometown. There he finds his old nanny, Vera, who recognizes him immediately and tells him the story of his parents who were Jews persecuted by the Nazis. He learns that his mother was deported to Theresienstadt, and his father escaped to Paris. Like an archaeological investigator, he travels to all these places because he senses that the places might reveal the story of what happened to his parents. He even re-enacts the train ride through Germany, which marks the passage towards consciousness.<sup>76</sup>

The cities he travels to become the prism through which he can get a glimpse of his past and his parents when they were still alive. Buildings, in particular, function as containers

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<sup>73</sup> Sigrid Weigel, *Topographien der Geschlechter* (Hamburg, 1990), p. 194.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p.212.

<sup>75</sup> Austerlitz, p. 200.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

of memory throughout the book. As a passionate photographer, he takes pictures of all the places and buildings that have helped him in his quest, and the way they are included into the book suggests that the buildings they depict have become inextricably linked to his understanding of his past. In other words, as he is still searching for hints about his parents, the buildings they were living in attain a particular importance.

Four important architectural motives recur throughout the book: the fort, the station, the museum and the library. From the beginning, Austerlitz introduces himself as an architectural historian who studies the history of buildings. He writes essays on train stations and knows all about the history of forts in Europe. In narrating the history of a building, Austerlitz seems to be able to come closest to developing a “metaphysics of history,” which revives memory.<sup>77</sup> For him, a building preserves the story of its past in the unique pattern of its surface. His gift for the observation of architectural patterns is crucial for the retrieving of his memories. Throughout the book, Austerlitz describes and photographs such patterns, and thus creates his very own map of memory: the pattern on the carpet and the wallpaper in his old room in Prague, which brings back memories of him as a child falling asleep to the light of his nanny’s reading lamp; the patterns of light and dark in the windows of the train station in Prague; and, finally, the pattern of the city in its labyrinthine shape.<sup>78</sup>

The four architectural motives have a double function in the book: they are objects of study and sites of remembering. The museum functions as the place of education and illumination. Walking through the Terezin Holocaust museum, Austerlitz for the first time learns about the part of European history that he has made such an effort to ignore: “Das alles begriff ich nun, und begriff es auch nicht, denn jede Einzelheit, die sich mir, dem, wie ich fürchtete, aus eigener Schuld unwissend Gewesenen, eröffnete auf meinem Weg durch das Museum, aus einem Raum in den nächsten und wieder zurück, überstieg bei weitem mein Fassungsvermögen.”<sup>79</sup> In the museum, history, and thus also time, becomes spatial.

The library, interestingly, has the opposite function of the museum. The new national library (he alludes to the Mitterand Library) is satirically described as an edifice dedicated to learning about the past, which – in its structure, style, and location – it obliterates: “Das neue Bibliotheksgebäude, das durch seine ganze Anlage ebenso wie durch seine ans Absurde grenzende innere Regulierung den Leser als einen potentiellen Feind auszuschließen suche, sei (...) quasi die offizielle Manifestation des immer dringender sich anmeldenden Bedürfnisses, mit all dem ein Ende zu machen, was noch ein Leben habe an der

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 290.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 287.

Vergangenheit.”<sup>80</sup> From Lemoine, an employee in the library, we learn that the place on which the new library was erected during the war was a site on which the Germans collected their loot from Jewish houses in Paris. Jewish prisoners, who called the site Les Galleries d’Austerlitz, were forced to sort and organize the loot and load it on trains which departed from the Gare d’Austerlitz towards the cities in the German Reich. The library buried this important part of Paris’s history under its foundations. In Nora’s words, a *milieu de mémoire* is forced to yield to an artificial *lieu de mémoire*. Disenchanted with the library as it is revealed as an artificial site of memory by Lemoine, and a place where he evaded the recent past by occupying himself with the distant past, Austerlitz feels that he has to go back to the real sites of memory. When he happens upon a picture of the archive of the prisoners at Terezin, he realizes “dass dort, in der kleinen Festung von Terezin, in deren nasskalten Kasematten so viele zugrunde gegangen sind, mein wahrer Arbeitsplatz gewesen wäre und dass ich ihn nicht eingenommen habe aus eigener Schuld.”<sup>81</sup>

The train station, a symbol of tragic departure and cruel deportation in post-war European literature, for Austerlitz becomes the place of discovery and remembering. At the Gare d’Austerlitz, which he describes as the most mysterious of Paris’s train stations freighted with historical meaning, he has a vision of his father leaving Paris in time before the Germans reach him, and he resolves to continue the search for his father. The Gare d’Austerlitz supplies the beginning, middle and ending for the novel. It is the place where the quest for his father terminates and takes on a different aspect: Austerlitz resolves to continue searching for clues about his father but also to try to find Marie, the woman he loves.

The role the fort plays in the book is more complicated. Forts prompt a reflection on man’s desire for security and permanence: The greater man’s insecurity, the more elaborate his constructions of defense.<sup>82</sup> Their function is not only to resist enemies, but also to resist time. Significantly, however, the two forts Austerlitz is most interested in - Breendonk and Theresienstadt - have been used as prisons and concentration camps by the Nazis. The security and imperviousness of the fort is perverted and instrumentalized to create the perfect machinery of terror. The places, when he visits them, seem to have preserved their cruel history. This becomes especially clear in his description of Terezin. The streets are empty and threatening; the locked doors in the village, several of which he photographs, seem hostile and forbidding. The only store in the entire place exhibits a strange conglomerate of tokens of the past. The atmosphere is depressing and it seems as if time has stopped here.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 404.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 401.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

With his erudite eccentricity and his meditations on railways, time and modernity, Austerlitz appears early on in the book as a kind of afterimage of Walter Benjamin: vaguely suicidal, laboring away at an unfinishable project, a book about architecture, he is plagued by anxieties created in historical conditions which he can analyze in an intellectual way but never quite come to terms with emotionally. He is a teacher of time, history and memory who has insurmountable difficulties accessing his own past. Like Benjamin, Austerlitz represents the key figure of the lonely wanderer, and he becomes a collector of objects: over the years, he acquires a great collection of photographs, postcards, papers, bills and other documents, and subsequently uses these seemingly disparate memorabilia of bygone times to buttress the reconstructions of his past. The story of Austerlitz, following the traces of memory through the space of the city, simultaneously creates textual spaces which recreate the city in words and images. The photographs, more or less randomly placed into the narrative, are a thread that runs through all of Sebald's books. They rupture the flow of the text and become a new form of shock experience for the reader. Indeed, these photographs also mark the point where Sebald as the author shines through the fictional narrative: since he himself was a collector of photographs, we can never be quite sure whether the pictures are authentic, taken from the photo albums of the people described.

The Holocaust remains a ghostly presence throughout all of Sebald's books, and in this they are an anomaly in so-called Holocaust literature: books that go to the heart of that catastrophic event by hovering on its periphery. None of Sebald's exiled characters experienced the Holocaust directly. Yet as they tell their stories, giving voice to previously repressed memories, it becomes clear that the traumatic impact of the atrocities, to a large degree, has determined or shaped the ways in which their lives have been lived, and also the ways in which they die: "es [ist] letzten Endes schwer zu wissen, woran einer stirbt."<sup>83</sup> The characters, including the mysterious figure of the narrator, are displaced and nomadic people, who, like Austerlitz, each in his own way have developed techniques to avoid confronting the past, but fail to cut the threads of knowledge.

Exile is the topic of *Die Ausgewanderten*, which tells the stories of four emigrants from Germany, who are unable to live with the burden of the past. All of them suffer from depression and recurring nightmares. As in *Austerlitz*, the narrator in *Die Ausgewanderten* is concerned with the painstaking reconstruction of the events that lead to the deaths of three of the protagonists and the fatal sickness of the fourth. The narrator is again mainly a chronicler:

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<sup>83</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Die Ausgewanderten – Vier lange Erzählungen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1994), p. 91.

an observer of the spatial surroundings and an acute listener to the actions recounted. Like Austerlitz, he travels to the places that mark the emigrants' lives and deaths, and he collects everything they left as traces and hints. Most interesting with respect to this study is the part that tells the story of the painter Max Aurach.

Here the narrator figure comes closest to the character of Austerlitz. The episode describes the narrator's first arrival in Manchester and the terrible homesickness and sense of displacement he suffers from. The only thing that seems to help is walking through the city. On one of these trips he finds the Jewish Quarter, which has been razed after the Jewish community moved to the suburbs. This strange absence, similar to the razed Galleries d'Austerlitz, is like a metaphor of the Jews and the Holocaust in the whole book. While wandering through Manchester the narrator discovers the studio of the painter Max Aurach. This is the beginning of an enigmatic encounter with a man who seems to have obliterated his past. Only much later, reading a newspaper article about the now-successful artist, the narrator learns Aurach's story. He came to England in 1939, at the age of 15, while his parents delayed their emigration until 1941, when they were deported and killed.

In his art, Aurach seems haunted by memory. After he finishes a painting, he "deletes" it the next day, washing out the contours of the faces he paints and carving new faces in the layers of existing paint:

Es wunderte mich immer wieder, wie Aurach gegen Ende eines Arbeitstages aus den wenigen der Vernichtung entgangenen Linien und Schatten ein Bildnis von großer Unmittelbarkeit zusammenbrachte, und noch weitaus mehr wunderte mich, dass er dieses Bildnis unfehlbar am darauffolgenden Morgen, sobald nur das Modell seinen Platz eingenommen hatte und er einen ersten Blick auf es geworfen hatte, wieder auslöschte, um aus dem durch die fortgesetzten Zerstörungen bereits stark beeinträchtigten Hintergrund von neuem die für ihn, wie er sagte, letztlich unbegreiflichen Gesichtszüge und Augen seines von diesem Arbeitsprozess oft nicht wenig in Mitleidenschaft gezogenen Gegenübers herauszugraben. Entschloss sich Aurach, nachdem er vielleicht vierzig Varianten verworfen beziehungsweise in das Papier zurückgerieben und durch weitere Entwürfe überdeckt hatte, das Bild, weniger in der Überzeugung, es fertiggestellt zu haben, als aus einem Gefühl der Ermattung, endlich aus der Hand zu geben, so hatte es für den Betrachter den Anschein, als sei es hervorgegangen aus einer langen Ahnenreihe grauer, eingeäschter, in dem zerschundenen Papier nach wie vor herumgeisternder Gesichter.<sup>84</sup>

What he accomplishes with this painful process is to produce a thick layer of ashen dust that covers everything: his paintings, his atelier, himself. Aurach emphasizes that he prefers dust

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp. 239-240.

and its peaceful, unchanging quality to everything: dust blurs contours, softens surfaces and swallows sounds. And yet, the way toward this world of dust is distinctly not a peaceful one. The narrator sees in the finished painting something different, something Aurach may not even be conscious of: the ashen dust and the description of the aura of the finished paintings invokes the Holocaust. It is as if Aurach were painting all the people (including his parents), who died in the concentration camps and, cremated, were denied a grave. In the act of creating his paintings, Aurach is – consciously or unconsciously – making a memorial, through a never-ending process of creation, destruction and re-creation.

With his love for dust that symbolizes his desire for permanence, Aurach suffers from fear of travel. Only once does he venture outside of Manchester and goes on a trip to Colmar, Basel and Geneva. The landscape is so painfully familiar and brings back so many memories that he becomes deeply depressed and anxious. He flees back to England and counters this brief moment of remembering with an almost lifelong period of forgetting, which ends only with the narrator's visits. On the last of these visits, Aurach gives the narrator the handwritten memoir of his mother, Luisa Lanzberg, which documents a Jewish childhood in Germany and a girl growing up in a hostile and oppressive world, trying to keep up the appearance of normalcy. Aurach entrusts the narrator with the memoir because he thinks that these notes are "wie eines jener bösen deutschen Märchen, in denen man, einmal in den Bann geschlagen, mit einer angefangenen Arbeit, in diesem Fall also mit dem Erinnern, dem Schreiben und dem Lesen, fortfahren muss, bis einem das Herz bricht."<sup>85</sup>

The narrator realizes that he has the moral obligation to write down Aurach's and Luisa's story. Fascinated by the handwritten papers, the narrator travels to Bad Kissingen, Luisa's hometown, in order to see the actual setting of her memoir. He finds the synagogue and the Jewish cemetery, which he documents with photographs and architectural descriptions. Like Austerlitz, he tries to penetrate and reconstruct the past and Luisa's story spatially. When he finds the Aurach family grave, he finds it empty except for Lily, the grandmother who committed suicide. All the other members of the family, the tombstone indicates, were deported and died on transports, or in concentration camps.<sup>86</sup> This is reminiscent of the cenotaph Bassani describes in the prologue to *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*. Similar to Bassani, Sebald endows his narrators with the moral obligation of the chronicler and historian: a story that would otherwise be unknown and a person who would otherwise be forgotten are given a record, and a space in history. This, of course, is a slow, labyrinthine process of assembling fragments, following chance connections and admitting uncertainties.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 289.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 337.

At the end of *Die Ausgewanderten*, the narrator describes the process of writing Aurach's story, which turns out to be similar to Aurach's own process of painting: he writes, crosses out, changes, deletes and gets stuck. "Schreiben," Sebald writes, "wird zu einem imperativen Geschäft." Only the writer as listener, medium and witness can create a dialogue between the past and the present and eventually arrive at a "Form der Reflexion auf alle Modalitäten unseres Weltverständnisses."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> W.G. Sebald, "Zwischen Geschichte und Naturgeschichte," in *Campo Santo*, ed. Sven Meyer (München, 2003), pp. 86-98.

According to Svetlana Boym, nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy:

A contemporary Russian saying claims that the past has become much more unpredictable than the future. Nostalgia depends on this strange unpredictability. (...) In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.<sup>88</sup>

The nostalgic preoccupation with a place that maybe never existed is very close to what Bassani and Sebald, and in some way even Klüger, express in their books: "A modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home, at once."<sup>89</sup> Of course, nostalgic memory and traumatic memory are two different sensations. But the idea that in some situations the past is more unpredictable than the future resonates strongly with the experiences of the protagonists in the novels discussed—and, I would add, with those of their authors. To recover the past is, for each of these writers, to return to a space that seems to encapsulate it. This is, however, an impossibility. Spaces only help us to remember; they cannot remember for us. Just as the past is unpredictable, so are the spaces associated with it not as easily accessible as we might expect them to be.

As varied and different as the works of these three authors may seem, they all are united in their acceptance of the fact that memory and its spaces cannot be anything but fragmented, uncertain, even contradictory. These authors don't willfully deny this fact and attempt to return to these spaces as they were; they embrace it, and instead recreate for the reader the very experience of remembering in all its complexity. The journey through the labyrinth of memory is more important than the destination. The wanderings through the city are more important than the direct path to what one is seeking. In a way, wandering becomes what one is seeking; memory lies not in the place but in the way there.

"Because the past returns in this piecemeal and imaginary form," writes Christine Boyer, "the problem is necessarily one of reconstruction."<sup>90</sup> This process of reconstruction is what all three authors are primarily concerned with. And they all suggest that remembering must be a project always in progress, not cast in stone but living. To remember does not mean to return to a place that preserves time – a stone monument, a concentration camp - but to

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<sup>88</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York, 2001, pp. xiv-xv

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50

<sup>90</sup> Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory - Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), p. 322.

move through a physical or fictional space that lets one experience the movement through memory:

We can in our cities continue to puncture holes in their fabric, windows that look back to the past. In these focused and centered apertures we can simulate the art of travel in space and time through architectural compositions and historic preservation. But something will be missing, something closed off, something left out of focus as it has been in every city tableau and in all the arts of verisimilitude. On the contrary, walking through the city of deconstructed images, we are no longer offered a synthetic order that we can readily grasp, nor a reconstruction of a history we can collectively assume. Our sense of an urban totality has been fractured long ago. Thus our personal memories of places visited actually arises from a horizontal juxtaposition of different images, not one of synthetic wholes.<sup>91</sup>

What is a “horizontal juxtaposition of different images” if not a book? Can we read spaces of memory? These books suggest that we can. Sebald’s works provide the best example of such a reading experience since they synthesize image, narrative, documentation, and architectural description. His books, as well as Bassani’s and Klüger’s, are living memorials that can best be activated by their readers. Sebald suggests nothing less when, in “Zwischen Geschichte und Naturgeschichte,” he quotes Andrew Bowie: “History is no longer the past but also the present in which the reader must act.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Andrew Bowie, *Problems of Historical Understanding in the Modern Novel* (Norwich, 1979). Quoted in Sebald, “Zwischen Geschichte und Naturgeschichte,” p. 100.

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