

Forgiveness, History and Narrative: Testimonies of Norwegian Auschwitz Survivors Compared to W. G. Sebald's Austerlitz

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Abstract: This paper will focus on aspects of forgiveness which are linked to, and to some extent informed and shaped by, characteristics and mechanics of narrative. One premise for the discussion is that, since the event or action prompting the need for forgiveness is often part of a narrative, the attempt to forgive (the act of forgiving) will also be imbued with a narrative dimension. Inspired by Charles Griswold's thorough discussion of forgiveness, and also aided by the work of Holocaust scholars such as Susan Suleiman, Shoshana Felman and Inga Clendinnen, the paper will attempt to identify and discuss facets of forgiveness in the testimonies of Auschwitz survivors Samuel Steinmann, Julius Paltiel and Herman Kahan (these first-person narratives are presented in *Tidsvitner: Fortellinger fra Auschwitz og Sachsenhausen [Time Witnesses: Narratives from Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen]*, ed. Jakob Lothe and Anette Storeide, Oslo: Gyldendal, 2006). The second part of the paper suggests that for the German author W.G. Sebald (1944-2001), the possibilities and limitations of forgiveness are connected with the silence about the Holocaust that, according to him, characterized his childhood years. Perhaps partly for this reason, his writings about this vexed issue are more indirect and hesitant than are the narratives of Steinmann, Paltiel and Kahan. Yet the historical event of the Holocaust is, the paper argues, crucially important for Sebald - and not just in his essays but in his fiction as well: it is a kind of empty centre around which the narrative of his novel *Austerlitz* (2001) revolves. The Jewish character Austerlitz's search for his parents - both of whom, it seems, may have been deported - becomes an exploration of the need for, yet also a recognition of the complications of, forgiveness.