

**‘You can't change names and feel the same’:
The Kindertransport Experience of Susi Bechhöfer in
W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz***

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Susi Bechhöfer had come to England on the Kindertransport on her third birthday, but this part of her past was erased by her foster parents. This theft of identity as well as its later rediscovery and a quest to find her real parents is taken up by German writer W. G. Sebald in his novel *Austerlitz*. Sebald, as this article demonstrates, used Bechhöfer's biography without her permission for nearly every important moment in his protagonist's life. This comparative approach to both texts seeks to locate Susi Bechhöfer's experience between Kindertransport history and Kindertransport fiction, and W. G. Sebald's novel between artful allusion and stolen story.

‘You can't change names and feel the same.’ With these words, Susi Bechhöfer sums up her quite unique Kindertransport experience. Bechhöfer had come to England on one of the Kindertransports from Germany in 1939, this part of her past, however, had been withheld from her by her foster parents, leaving her with memories that could not be accounted for and propelling her towards a late and profound identity crisis. This true story of a childhood in wartime Germany and Britain, of searching for identity through glimpses later in life of the past, this reflection on history, trauma, and individual and collective memory, all of this inspired W. G. Sebald to write the fictional account of Jacques Austerlitz, who, in the lauded novel of the same title, experiences a very similar fate. Sebald's notes on the life of Susi Bechhöfer, taken in preparation for his *Austerlitz* manuscript, are held at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach and are freely accessible for anyone interested in this connection.¹ However, Sebald's agent has denied me permission to quote directly from these notes, therefore I will have to restrict myself for the most part to close comparisons of the published versions of the two stories.²

In her article on memory objects in the Kindertransport context, published in one of the first convincing interdisciplinary studies on the Kindertransport,³ Mona Körte already briefly pointed to the connection between Sebald's novel – or rather, as the writer would have called it, his long prose work – and Bechhöfer's biography. Rebekka Göpfert, who had come across Susi Bechhöfer's story whilst

preparing her study on the history and memory of the Kindertransport,⁴ and who later edited the German translation of Susi Bechhöfer's biography for publication, also drew attention to the connection in an article in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*.⁵ A 2005 Bavarian radio programme also explicitly compared the two Kindertransport stories of Susi Bechhöfer and Jacques Austerlitz.⁶ This radio programme even included taped assertions by Sebald that 'most of [his] material springs from *listening* – stories like these cannot be made up'.⁷ But the programme made no mention of the fact that Sebald used the story of Susi Bechhöfer without ever having asked her permission.

These connections, however, were mostly ignored in subsequent scholarship on Sebald's text. Where they were invoked, such as by Klaus Jeziorkowski, in an otherwise brilliant (and in part Sebaldesque) article, Sebald was quickly absolved of wrongdoing on the grounds of the literary quality of his work: 'Should she [Bechhöfer, M. M.] try to tell her story herself,' writes Jeziorkowski, clearly ignorant of the details of Susi Bechhöfer's experience and the fact that she had indeed told her story in her biography written together with Jeremy Josephs, 'then it would be something entirely different from Sebald's novel.'⁸ He goes on to argue that this story, in its narrative form that is unmistakably and distinctly in the style of Sebald, cannot belong to Bechhöfer. It is, Jeziorkowski concludes, the sole literary property of Sebald, belonging to him and only to him because of his original aesthetic style of writing.⁹

The availability of Sebald's *Austerlitz* manuscript at the Literaturarchiv Marbach, including the several pages of notes on Susi Bechhöfer's Kindertransport experience, now allows for a more detailed analysis of the connections between this Kindertransport biography and its fictionalisation by the German writer. A comparison of key scenes will also help explore just how 'entirely different', as Jeziorkowski would have it, or, as I will argue, how similar these two Kindertransport stories actually are, possibly providing material for a new discussion of the boundaries between history and fiction and the rules that govern this borderland.

Nearly all stories and histories of the Kindertransport revolve around the same core issues: the initial trauma of separation from the parents; the placement in foster families; the re-definition of identity in a foreign social context; the subsequent fate of the biological parents; and the very late discovery of other *Kinder* who shared the same traumatic experience, sometimes combined with an increasing