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From Special Operations Executive to Sonderkommando:

Sebastian Faulks and the Anxiety of Invention

Sue Vice

The British author Sebastian Faulks is best known for his novels about the two world wars. Such works include what is referred to as his 'French trilogy', of which the first volume, *The Girl at the Lion d'Or* (1989), focuses on inter-war France, *Birdsong* (1993) is set during the First World War, and *Charlotte Gray* (1999) centres on a young woman working alongside the French resistance in the Second World War. Faulks's interest in the extreme events, undercover operations and psychology of war, particularly as it affects British individuals and national culture, is equally evident in his latest novel, *Where My Heart Used to Beat* (2015), in which the protagonist looks back from the vantage-point of London in 1980 to his wartime experience in Italy. In the writer's 2012 novel, *A Possible Life*, which is my concern in the present article, the plot addresses in overt terms, for the first time in Faulks's oeuvre, the world of the wartime extermination camps. While the collaborations of Vichy are anatomised in *Charlotte Gray*, and we learn of the arrest of two young orphan brothers prior to their deportation to Auschwitz, the camp universe remains outside that novel's conceptual frame. In the case of *A Possible Life*, by contrast, the greatest possible confrontation between a British backdrop and the machinery of genocide is presented, in the form of a British soldier's experience of forced labour as part of the Sonderkommando unit in Auschwitz.

A Possible Life is unconventional in consisting of five apparently unrelated novellas. Yet, as the title suggests, each story is highly individual, while at the same time presenting the radically contingent implication that its central character could, at a different historical moment, have had an entirely different existence. Such an idea is reinforced by the

appearance of the same buildings and landscapes in these stories, each of which is set at a different historical moment. Thus, it is implied, the apparent specificity of these biographical stories is fortuitous, even as we read such distinctive narratives as that of a British soldier interned in Auschwitz, a Victorian child of the workhouses making good as a landlord, an Italian scientist in the near future identifying the location of human self-consciousness in the brain, the ambiguous religious revelation of an uneducated French peasant, and a Californian folk-singer achieving stardom.

‘A Different Man’

In the opening section of *A Possible Life*, ‘A Different Man’, on which I will focus here, the life of the protagonist, Geoffrey Talbot, a Latin master at a minor English preparatory school, is interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War. Geoffrey’s wartime work in the British Special Operations Executive in France ends when he is betrayed to the Gestapo by a fellow agent, resulting in his being sent to Auschwitz along with his friend ‘Tiny’ Trembath. Geoffrey’s deportation to Auschwitz constitutes an abrupt geographical dislocation, as well as an ironic linguistic transfer between these very different ‘special’ units. In the camp, Geoffrey’s volunteering his linguistic services as a translator leads to his being co-opted into the Special Force, that is, the Sonderkommando, although that term is never used in the novel, and made to work as a stoker of the crematorium furnace.

In narrative and compositional terms, this transition from SOE to Sonderkommando has the metatextual effect of marking a clash between the different kinds of source material drawn on by Faulks in constructing this narrative world. These texts include Roderick Bailey’s *Forgotten Voices of the Secret War* (2008), an oral history of the SOE; and Andrey Pogozhev’s *Escape from Auschwitz* (2007), a Russian former prisoner-of-war’s memoir of a

break-out from the camp. These two documentary works are blended with a third, a purported eyewitness account, Donald Watt's *Stoker* (1995), by a captured Anzac soldier who was made to work alongside the Sonderkommando members in the role of keeping the crematorium furnace alight. In the present article, I will trace the effects of these various intertextual elements on the construction and significance of the fictional Geoffrey's experiences in the Sonderkommando in Faulks's novel, and their relevance for British memories of the war.

In Faulks's much more expansive story of Charlotte Gray in the eponymous novel, the narrative of Charlotte's assumed identity and acts of subversion in Vichy France has the space to be told with local and personal detail. By contrast, Geoffrey is constructed in the present case in minimalist fashion as a man of his time – or, in more metafictional terms, it is clear that the demands of the time have constructed him. Thus we read that, after his graduation, 'In September 1938, after a series of rebuffs, Geoffrey found himself at a boys' preparatory school in Nottinghamshire, where he was to teach French, Latin and elementary maths'.[1] The date is significant not in terms of Geoffrey's personal biography, but to alert us to where he will be a year hence, on the declaration of war. Likewise, the sense of Geoffrey's lack of agency, as conveyed in the passive constructions of the description of his job – he 'found himself', 'he was to teach' – is not so much a realist character trait as an element crucial to his being swept up in a horrifying war. Such phrasing makes plain Geoffrey's novelistic role as a cipher in those events, and within *A Possible Life* as a whole. While the characters in the other sections of Faulks's novel might have historical or literary forebears – Flaubert's servant-girl Felicité from his *Un Coeur simple* is perhaps the forebear for the French servant Jeanne in 'A Door into Heaven', and Helen Dunmore sees Joan Baez as the

[1] Sebastian Faulks, *A Possible Life*, London: Vintage 2013 [2012], p. 2. All further references in the text.

inspiration for the folk-singer Anya King in 'You Next Time'[2] – Geoffrey is constituted out of a discordant variety of earlier sources.

The effect on *A Possible Life* of the competing discourses represented by each of these sources is compounded by the invented status of those sections of Watt's *Stoker* which represent the Holocaust. In the memoir, Watt recounts his experience of escape from a prisoner-of-war camp in 1944. This was followed by imprisonment in Auschwitz, via a week in Bergen-Belsen, as punishment for his failing to talk under brutal interrogation. While Watt's history of arrest in Greece in 1941 and his transfer to two different prisoner-of-war camps in Germany, where he was held captive until the liberation in 1945, appears in his official records, the period he claims was spent in Auschwitz does not.[3] Nor, as Paul O'Shea points out, is the presence of an 'English-speaking, non-Jewish prisoner, sent to work as a stoker', mentioned in any other account.[4] The only exception to this is the corroboration that appears to be given to Watt's story by Denis Avey. Avey, the author of the best-selling memoir *The Man Who Broke into Auschwitz* (2011), gives an account of his war-experience that includes not just his imprisonment as a POW in the Auschwitz complex close to the Monowitz camp, but his apparently having changed places on two occasions with a Jewish prisoner in order to gain access to Auschwitz-Birkenau. In the summary given of his oral interview deposited at the Imperial War Museum in London, we read that, while he was a prisoner, Avey heard of an Australian POW who worked as a stoker in the crematorium.[5] In the interview, Avey claims that the reason for breaking into Auschwitz was in part to get in

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[2] Helen Dunmore, review, the *Guardian* 20 September 2012.
[3] Konrad Kwiet, 'Anzac and Auschwitz: The Unbelievable Story of Donald Watt', *Patterns of Prejudice* 31 (4) 1997, 53-60.
[4] Paul O'Shea, 'From The Manning to Majdanek: The War History of Private Ernest Maxwell Sawyer, NX1488', unpublished MA dissertation, Macquarie University 1997, p. 258.
[5] Imperial War Museums oral history record for Denis George Avey, interview July 2001, http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80020527, visited 29.12.17. On the details of the discrepancies between the five-hour interview and the published account, see Nicholas Hellen, 'Hero of Holocaust changed key elements of his story', *Sunday Times* November 13 2011.

touch with the Australian stoker, but that he failed to do so. As Russell Wallis argues, such a claim on Avey's part appears to offer independent corroboration of Watt's story, but, given the falsity of the latter, 'can only have been based on a reading of Watt's book *Stoker*', and not on Avey's own experience. It appears that Avey thus 'project[ed] Watt's latter-day claims backwards in time', at the very least making himself appear unreliable as an eyewitness.[6] Far from Avey corroborating Watt's account, the unreliability of each memoir compounds the other.

Like Avey's memoir, *Stoker* was a bestseller, but plans to make a film about Watt's experience, the screenplay to be composed by the Australian writer and director Barrie Kosky, foundered after definitive doubt was cast on the veracity of the account. These published rebuttals include an article by Konrad Kwiet, concluding that the 'stoker story' is 'unbelievable' (52), as well as the verdict by Gideon Greif, the historian of the Sonderkommando experience, that, due to its 'various falsehoods and major errors', Watt's story is 'definitely an invention'.[7] Kwiet's exposé was published as early as 1997, yet *Stoker*'s central premise, that an Allied prisoner-of-war could have been enlisted into the body of Jewish prisoners who made up the Sonderkommando, underlies Faulks's novel of over a decade later. It seems likely that the novelist was unaware of the memoir's contested status. Partly for that reason, it is the very episodes with which Kwiet takes issue that feature most centrally in Faulks's novel. Although Watt claims that he and his fellow stokers worked alongside, rather than as members of, the Sonderkommando team, this simply compounds the inaccuracy of his account, as Paul O'Shea argues, since the stokers did not work separately in

[6] Russell Wallis, *British POWs and the Holocaust: Witnessing Auschwitz*, London: I.B. Tauris 2017, pp. 278-9. See also Tony Kushner, 'Loose Connections? Britain and the "Final Solution"', in Caroline Sharples and Olaf Jensen, eds, *Britain and the Holocaust: Remembering and Representing War and Genocide*, London: Palgrave 2013.

[7] Kwiet, 'Anzac and Auschwitz', p. 52; Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz*, New Haven: Yale University Press 2005, p. 82.

this way.[8] However, Watt's claims of this kind have the effect of implying that the Sonderkommando members are not considered by him in terms of the moral dubiety of the 'grey zone'. Rather, as the use made of *Stoker* in turn for fictional purposes in *A Possible Life* also suggests, the Sonderkommando experience is one taken to be the quintessentially horrifying aspect of Auschwitz, in setting the prisoners to work in disposing of their fellow-inmates' bodies, a labour they carried out under fear of death themselves. Although both memoir and novel show the terrible suffering and psychological breakdown undergone by the Sonderkommando members, it is implied that such an experience demanded the highest standards of personal and ethical resource on the part of the 'stoker' in each case to survive it.

The Special Operations Executive

Sebastian Faulks's interest in the historical experience and significance of the Special Operations Executive preceded *A Possible Life*, as is clear in his introduction to Roderick Bailey's oral history of the organization, *Forgotten Voices of the Secret War*. Despite the non-fiction status of this introduction, Faulks emphasizes the appeal of using Churchill's 'secret army' for novelistic purposes, by reason of such factors as its offering the potential for unconventional and extreme individual action, many examples of which feature in Bailey's anthology. As Faulks concludes, this 'extraordinary organisation' is one that, 'however much you know about it, never loses its power to make you gasp – in admiration, humour, amazement and disbelief'.[9] Indeed, the profusion of remarkable detail in Bailey's collection of testimonies about life as an SOE operative in occupied Europe, including its agents' hair's-breadth escapes, ingenious ruses and acts of inventive sabotage, reveals how hard it must

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[8] O'Shea, 'From The Manning to Majdanek', p. 255.
[9] Roderick Bailey, *Forgotten Voices of the Secret War: An Inside History of Special Operations in the Second World War*, London: Ebury 2008, p. ix.

have been to decide which to retain in such a condensed narrative as the 80-page 'A Different Man'.

Faulks's claim in the introduction to Bailey's *Forgotten Voices* that the SOE 'epitomised all the most memorable aspects of the British war effort', in a 'mixture of cussedness, heroism and amateurishness', underlies his decision to make such events part of the present novel. Yet the narrative of Geoffrey's life is not in the main concerned with this topic. Faulks was clearly struck by the moral incongruity of a British military prisoner incarcerated in the Nazi 'concentrationary universe'. He makes this clear when describing in his introduction the 'terrible dangers' agents faced if they were arrested, since they were not seen as 'regular prisoners of war' but 'faced torture and death in a concentration camp'.[10] Some of the most striking accounts in *Forgotten Voices* are by captured British SOE agents who were incarcerated in just this way, not in prisoner-of-war camps but in concentration camps. The starkness of the ontological contrast between the SOE ethos and that of the Nazis, when placed in such close proximity to one another, is one that must have attracted Faulks's novelistic instinct. It is put in such terms by Robert Sheppard in *Forgotten Voices*, when he describes his arrival in the first of the four concentration camps, which included Mauthausen and Dachau, where he was held prisoner: 'We were entering the world of the German concentration camp, which we didn't know. It was really entering a new life. We were absolutely shocked by the way [the Germans] behaved'.[11] It is this traumatic confrontation of world-views, on to which Faulks's reading of Watt has been grafted, that underlies the premise of his novel's placing a British SOE agent not in a concentration camp, but in Auschwitz-Birkenau itself.

[10] Ibid., pp. ix-x.
[11] Ibid., p. 196.

In *A Possible Life*, the SOE context serves primarily as a backdrop, and as the means for getting Geoffrey plausibly to be in Nazi-occupied Europe. Faulks draws on the historical experiences of SOE members in representing the detail of Geoffrey's joining the organization and his wartime life in France before being sent to Auschwitz. Thus, Faulks describes his high regard for Benjamin Cowburn's memoir *No Cloak and No Dagger* (1960), a work of 'gritty understatement' judged by the novelist to be, 'for my money the best of the SOE memoirs', in which the former operative regularly travelled between Free and Vichy France 'in a hollow compartment beneath the engine of a locomotive'.[12] Geoffrey arrives in France by just such means, in a fashion that is meticulously imagined and described. However, the novel's moral centre lies with a different kind of train, the 'cattle truck' into which Geoffrey and his friend 'Tiny' Trembath are put after they are betrayed to the Gestapo, along with 'thirty others … most of them Russians' (36). This very change of trains signals to the reader the new track the narrative is about to take.

A similar divergence from the SOE narrative, to one more appropriate to imprisonment in an extermination camp, is clear in relation to Faulks's fictive use of the frequent assertions in *Forgotten Voices* on the part of the captured SOE agents in prisons and camps about the importance of behaving with what they refer to as a sense of British 'dignity'. Thus, Robert Sheppard describes how, in Dachau, '[The Germans] wanted us to be beasts and they nearly, nearly reached it … [But] all the way through I wanted to keep my dignity as a British officer'.[13] Despite, or indeed because, of Faulks's clearly high regard for such maintenance of honourable behaviour in thoroughly dishonourable circumstances, since he quotes these

[12] Ibid., p. x.
[13] Ibid., p. 197.

comments by Sheppard in his introduction,[14] in *A Possible Life* the notion of dignity is shown to be a liability in the world of an extermination camp. Geoffrey's friend Trembath invokes the term in a way that is used to demonstrate its irrelevance, at a moment when he is 'impatient' to take action: '"Listen, Talbot … it's important that we don't let ourselves descend to the level of some of these people. They've lost their dignity"' (43).

Just as Geoffrey earlier prevented Trembath from remonstrating with a guard over the summary execution of an old man in the barracks, he reasons otherwise with his friend here, to caution against rash action that is sure to bring terrible reprisals. Sheppard's experience in Dachau informs the debate between Geoffrey and Trembath, in such a way that the two fictional characters take shape from the division in the former SOE agent's comments between his idealism and a pragmatic sympathy for the other inmates. Sheppard describes the camp in the last months of its existence as a 'living cemetery', where starving prisoners were reduced to fighting over bowls of soup. While Geoffrey voices a version of the former agent's words – as Sheppard puts it, '… you cannot reproach these people for behaving like that' - Trembath embodies instead Sheppard's concluding remark: 'It needed tremendous force of character to live through that, to try and keep your dignity'.[15] However, we learn that Trembath's pre-war morality has no place in Auschwitz, as is conveyed by his death in an attempted escape from the camp, related in retrospect by Geoffrey (64). By means of the battle for meaning over the term 'dignity', the novel acknowledges the difference between Trembath's determination to be a figure like that of the real-life Robert Sheppard, and the impossibility of any such wish in Geoffrey's situation as a Sonderkommando member in Auschwitz.

[14] Ibid., p. x.
[15] Ibid., p 299.

Donald Watt, *Stoker*

A Possible Life thematizes in this way its own intertextual history, moving away from the SOE accounts of daring subversion and resolve, to reliance on Donald Watt's memoir *Stoker* in its representation of a world without even Trembath's moral compass. Watt's account is subtitled *The Story of an Australian Soldier Who Survived Auschwitz-Birkenau*, and relates the atrocities he witnessed. It also recounts his own experience in being forced to take part in work as a stoker feeding the crematorium furnace, along with a group of Polish political prisoners. As Watt puts it in describing this labour,

> My job, stoking the fires, was despicable work, and I knew it … We worked at the side of the crematorium, where there were five three-door furnaces … We fed the wood through [the doors] and onto a grate that looked as though it was made from cast-iron bars. The wood came in from the forest of fir trees to the northwest of the camp … The bodies were thrown in through an opening just above the stoking hole … One person had a long pole with a steel plate on the end, which he used to push the bodies through the opening and into the furnace as they built up.[16]

The everyday and apparently down-to-earth view that Watt offers on genocidal atrocity, from the perspective of an Australian POW incarcerated in the camp, must have attracted Faulks's attention for the sake of his own fiction. In the description quoted above, Watt is keen to emphasize the factual detail of his forced labour, which appears in turn in Faulks's novel. We learn that when Geoffrey is put to work as a stoker, in a way that echoes Watt's account, the

[16] Donald Watt, *Stoker: The Story of an Australian Soldier Who Survived Auschwitz-Birkenau*, Sydney, New York, London: Simon & Schuster 1995, pp. 96, 103.

> furnaces at knee-height had to be kept roaring day and night with logs cut from the pine forests … The corpses came in on trucks with chutes at the back … Some stokers were given metal poles and detailed to prod the corpses down into the fire in groups of six or eight at a time, urged on by the screaming SS officers. (53)

Yet even the designation of a 'stoker' in the burning process is not used accurately in Watt's account, since the term was reserved for those who cremated corpses, not those who stoked the fires, as is described in his memoir.[17] Naturally, this error is repeated in *A Possible Life*. Watt's other inaccuracies, as identified by Kwiet and others, include his description of the non-Jewish stoking crew who work separately from the Sonderkommando. Of the latter, Watt says to distinguish them that, 'the other prisoners with the really rotten jobs were the people conscripted into the special squads, or *Sonderkommando*'.[18] Equally, his error about the kind of fuel used to incinerate corpses, which was coke rather than wood, disrupts the very basis of Watt's memoir. But because of its presence in *Stoker*, the historical solecism is adopted for a significant thread of meaning in Faulks's novel. This thread arises once more from a stark ontological contrast: this time between the natural world, including the English countryside, embodied by the pine trees, and their co-option into the process of mass murder. Geoffrey's pre-war awareness of the 'sandy pine' landscape of Norfolk (8), as he travels to his job as a schoolmaster for the first time, possesses an innocence that is thoroughly lost to the post-traumatic 'flash-memories of pine-logs' that assail him after his return to Britain at the war's end (65).

[17] O'Shea, 'From The Manning to Majdanek', quoting Darren O'Brien.
[18] Watt, *Stoker*, p. 96.

In a complex instance of foreshadowing, 'A Different Man' lays the seeds for what will become the triggers for Geoffrey's post-traumatic state in the war's aftermath. As his SOE interviewer puts it, with more aptness than could then have been envisaged, '"You may see things that none of us has ever seen"' (21). In an ambivalent set of correspondences, the militaristic discourse of public school life, with its 'barrage' at cricket against a school that Geoffrey's has failed to 'beat' at anything, and recommendation he receives not to seek promotion but remain a 'foot soldier' (3, 5), strikes a disturbing note in the run-up to war. In the post-war era, such language sounds even more jarring. Yet it appears that the ironic correspondence is meant to establish difference rather than similitude between the militaristic discourse of British educational practice and its extreme expression in the Nazi camps. The world of the public school is not put forward for analysis in terms of its systemic 'soft violence', as Pierre Bourdieu would phrase it. The irony of Geoffrey's post-war 'flash-memories' is not that they reveal a likeness between past and present, but that they emphasize their absolute difference.

As a counterpart to these elements of British life, in the early wartime period of 'A Different Man' we encounter a different kind of self-conscious temporality in the form of individuals' failure to predict accurately what the reader knows to have been the war's outcome. In the light of Geoffrey's eventual fate, such forecasts as that of his employer, the headmaster Mr Little, possess extra irony, as he invokes his own experience during the First World War: '"You'll be all right, Talbot. No trenches this time. It'll be all tanks and movement and high-level bombing"' (7). The 'trenches' that Geoffrey does eventually encounter are those characteristic of a quite different kind of war, designed for the mass burial of the victims of genocide. Geoffrey's thoughts on the war could be viewed as an example of what Michael André Bernstein calls sideshadowing, in imagining a genuinely open play of historical

contingency at any given moment, rather than an insistence on the inevitability of what actually took place. His view early in the war is that, ‘The Scandinavians would offer little resistance, yet the French could be relied on to hold out until British reinforcements came to help’ (6). However, so crucial are the events which he gets wrong to his own story that such a miscalculation merely makes him appear out of touch. Later, he notes that, ‘Europe was entirely under occupation; France had not put up the resistance that Geoffrey, raised on stories of heroic resistance on the Marne, had expected’ (16). Even more significant here is the blurring of third-person narrative with free indirect discourse, making it hard to distinguish what is being reliably established from what is more impressionistic and subjective. Indeed, at times it is precisely subjective impressions which are reported upon. Such a blurring is crucial to the period of his war experience that Geoffrey spends in Auschwitz.

In *A Possible Life*, Geoffrey’s role has a defamiliarizing effect similar to Watt’s, as a British onlooker at extermination in the moment of its occurrence, and without the explanatory narrative of genocidal mass-murder offered by historical hindsight. The reader is enlisted to supply the missing historical framework. Thus, we know before Geoffrey does that the unnamed camp where he arrives and which had ‘obviously been built for some other purpose before the war’, set in ‘marshy land with pine forests all around’ (38), is Auschwitz, although its name is never given.

This reimagining of how the camp might appear to a contemporary onlooker even includes Geoffrey’s awareness of a scene modelled on that shown in one of the four ‘Sonderkommando photographs’, taken secretly in August 1944. The photograph in question depicts the cremation of corpses in the open air at Birkenau: ‘Geoffrey could see what looked

like bonfires in clearings among the trees, attended by further prisoners in striped uniforms … Columns of smoke with an unfamiliar smell emanated from the pyres' (40). Geoffrey's perspective replicates in geographical terms that of the Sonderkommando member, a Greek Jew known as Alex, who is believed to have taken the photographs. However, while Alex's look through the camera viewfinder was motivated by the Sonderkommandos' urgent wish to capture the reality of genocide, at this moment in Faulks's novel Geoffrey's view lacks precisely that awareness. His gaze at this scene registers a radically cognitive version of the 'understatement' admired by Faulks, since Geoffrey cannot judge what he sees in any other way. Such understatement operates here as both technique and epistemology. Antisemitism itself, in particular its eugenic, eliminationist variety, is also misrecognized by Geoffrey, his puzzlement revealed through the free indirect discourse of a rhetorical question: 'What on earth was the point of taking a French seamstress from a back-street in Lyons and transporting her across Europe to be murdered, on the grounds that some distant ancestor might have once plied his trade from Dan to Beersheba?' (49). Both Geoffrey's conception of Jews in the mythical terms of the Bible, and his failure to understand 'the point' of the practical and ideological effort of genocide, constitute a stark reimagining of the racialized basis of Nazi mass-murder, one whose apparent logic might have started to seem dangerously self-evident in the present, over 70 years on.

Stoker supplies another significant feature of Faulks's novel, in the form of Watt's apparent ability to transcend the extreme circumstances of his Sonderkommando duties by mental effort. In Faulks's version, this becomes a further expression of the gulf between German and British sensibility, as well as fitting his novel's overall theme of the migration of selfhood between individual consciousnesses. It is prepared for as early as the psychological examination Geoffrey has to undertake as part of his SOE recruitment, during the course of

which the examiner, Dr Samuels, asks him, '"Are you good at being on your own? Do you have resources? In your head?"' (22). The origin in *Stoker* of the importance for *A Possible Life* of 'inner resources' is readily apparent. For Watt, 'switching off mentally', as he puts it, 'by shutting out the grisly nature of what was happening around me', takes the form of supporting what he frequently terms his 'larrikin' sensibility,[19] that of a specifically Australian kind of authority-flouting maverick. The appearance of this term is a clue to the ideological motivation of Watt's memoir, characterized by Kwiet as an attempt to forge a connection between 'the Anzac legend', one of antipodean courage and comradeship in the face of adversity, 'and the reality of the Holocaust'.[20] In Brian Woodley's description of Watt's memoir, as 'the story of an intrepid Aussie Digger locked up in the engine room of the Holocaust', the significance of the Auschwitz setting, forming the ultimate challenge to the Anzac spirit, is made clear.[21] Looking back at his time as a stoker, Watt describes his habit of '[letting] my mind wander back to the sun and the wheatfields, to the beaches of Melbourne, to the wineries around Mildura, to my motorbikes, to Mum and Dad and my mates'.[22] His ability to summon up such memories is presented as a virtue which is as typically Australian as the landscape itself.

As we have seen, an analogous contrast is established in Faulks's novel between British values, or what Geoffrey thinks of as 'democracy and the RAF' (39), and Nazi brutality, which on many occasions shocks him by reason of its unmotivated cruelty. In Geoffrey's case, the imagery he calls upon to escape the camp's reality takes the form of a construct of British masculinity, as a counterpart to the Australian version invoked by Watt:

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[19] Watt, *Stoker*, pp. 114-15.
[20] Kwiet, 'Anzac and Auschwitz', p. 53.
[21] Brian Woodley, 'Shadow of Doubt', the *Australian*, 29-30 March 1997.
[22] Watt, *Stoker*, p. 109.

> He pushed his mind as far as he could from his surroundings. There was a particular cricket ground that had meant a great deal to him when he was growing up. It had a cedar tree in one corner, near the pavilion, a hedge that ran along the road … It was, for a club ground, remarkably flat and true. (41)

The distance from his circumstances invoked here by Geoffrey is not just spatial and temporal but also moral. We are shown that there is a profound distinction between the status of cricket, the 'true' nature of its ground a virtue in several senses, and the Nazi guards' 'sport' with the camp inmates. Such behaviour includes the episode which Geoffrey describes with laconic irony as the 'game' of the guards taking turns to let fly a leather whip at the prisoners' bodies (41), based on Watt's description of such an incident. It is the toll of the first day of duty as a 'stoker' at the crematorium that makes Geoffrey's internal escape strategy fail: 'That night nothing of England would come to him: no river, almshouse or cricket-ground'. Like Primo Levi and other survivor-witnesses, Geoffrey finds himself ontologically confused, and unable any longer to say which is the real world, that of the camp or of his pre-war ordinary life. As he concludes of the images of England, 'It was these places that had taken on the vague outlines of something he had dreamed' (55).

Faulks's reliance on the details of Watt's account extends to the latter's post-war inability to talk about his time in the camp, as he describes the day of his arrival at a prisoner-of-war camp towards the war's end: 'From that day on, for 44 years, I didn't mention a word about Auschwitz to anybody'.[23] In the case of the fictional Geoffrey, apart from an effort to describe his experiences to a fellow-teacher after the war, his post-traumatic disorder means that cannot share the details of the reasons for his eventual mental breakdown. It is hard not

[23] Ibid., p. 121.

to read Watt's accounting for his silence in this way as an alibi for his suddenly starting to describe the memory of his time in Auschwitz, at a time when the Australian government was offering compensation to those affected. While even Kwiet endorses Watt's right to compensation of this kind for what he did undergo, and which he was duly awarded, this was not for his Auschwitz experiences as recounted in *Stoker.*

Andrey Pogozhev, *Escape from Auschwitz*

Faulks's third intertext, Andrey Pogozhev's *Escape from Auschwitz*, exerts a particular pressure on the plot of *A Possible Life*. No fictional character equivalent to Pogozhev himself appears in the novel. However, Geoffrey encounters Sergei, a prisoner-of-war – in Pogozhev's account, he is the Russian who 'stirred up' the plan to escape - for the first time immediately after his visions of England have failed to sustain him, suggesting that only direct action will now do. Pogozhev was not a member of the Sonderkommando, and describes their different activities during the confusion that took place just before the Russian prisoners' escape. The historical intertexts Faulks chose determine the direction of his plot, and for this reason it is the Russian POWs' escape of November 1942, rather than the Sonderkommando uprising of October 1944, that provides Geoffrey's exit from the camp. Nonetheless, the two events are conflated in Geoffrey's post-war account of his experience to his fellow-schoolteacher Gerald Baxter, as he puts it: '"When we escaped, there was a riot. They managed to blow up a crematorium"' (64). Such poetic licence taken with historical detail suits the detail of the novel's plot, with its focus on Geoffrey's forced labour at just such a crematorium in the camp.

Geoffrey and Trembath discuss the possibility of escape soon after arriving in Auschwitz, but, following Pogozhev's memoir, it is the Russian prisoners-of-war who put such a plan

into practice. Sergei's appearance in the novel marks the conclusion of *Stoker*'s influence, and establishes that the resolution of Geoffrey's plight will take place by different means from those of Watt. A detail from Pogozhev's memoir even amplifies the notion of inner escape which is so significantly borrowed from Watt for Geoffrey's story. For Pogozhev, the 'world of fantasy' allows him to be 'far, far away' in the realm of 'the beloved past'.[24] This is a generalized return to 'events and episodes' from his earlier life. However, Pogozhev's description of the Russian prisoners' 'verbal retelling of novels, humorous stories, anecdotes and fables', as a way to 'transport you to a different world',[25] underlies the depiction of Geoffrey's 'night-time discipline', that is, his efforts to recall entire novels. He considers contributing to the equivalent of the scene described by Pogozhev, that of the Polish prisoners' recitation of 'folk stories, legends or the entire plots of books', including what are in the circumstances such ironically named works as Dickens's *Great Expectations* (52).

As well as these details, Pogozhev's memoir most notably provides the resolution of Geoffrey's plight in the camp. While Watt is simply – if, according to O'Shea, implausibly[26] - returned to a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany in 1944 after seven months in Birkenau, Pogozhev was one of 70 Russian POWs who undertook a mass escape from Birkenau in 1942, a year after his arrival in the camp. Of this number, Pogozhev was one of only four to survive. In *A Possible Life*, Geoffrey flees Birkenau under cover of the break-out by, in the fictive version, the fifty Russians who made up a search-party for the body of a recently executed prisoner outside the camp's fence. Faulks's narrative follows Pogozhev's account closely, yet shapes the memoir's detail to suit his fictive requirements and exigencies. Thus, in the moments before his shelter is toppled, the SS guard in the watchtower looks down at

[24] Andrey Pogozhev, *Escape from Auschwitz*, trans. Vladimir Krupnik et al., Barnsley: Pen and Sword 2007, p. 126.
[25] Ibid., p. 128.
[26] O'Shea, 'From The Manning to Majdanek', p. 265.

the Russians, 'calmly' in Pogozhev's original,[27] and, with even greater dramatic irony, 'complacently' in Faulks's version (59). The sudden eruption of violence, which Pogozhev explicitly likens to a 'volcano',[28] is conveyed by Faulks as, 'there comes a roar of Russian, fifty men hurling iron and rocks and rushing the wooden tower'. Although Faulks prefers a wordless 'roar', in Pogozhev's account we hear the Russian words which are not quoted here:

> Suddenly a voice cut through the silence: 'For the Motherland! Forward!' A discordant 'Hurrah!' exploded, unleashing a hail of rocks, lumps of iron and assorted missiles at the SS watchman.[29]

Faulks's decision to omit the utterances quoted by Pogozhev acts both to retain the consistency of Geoffrey's uncomprehending Anglophone perspective, and also to sidestep the question of Pogozhev's having felt obliged to assert his patriotic credentials in the memoir. However, the phrase does appear, perhaps more fittingly, in the form of Geoffrey's earlier conversation with the novel's Sergei, described as an individual who 'could speak a little English', and rendered in free indirect discourse so that his words are filtered through Geoffrey's consciousness. Sergei 'assured Geoffrey that all the Russians were determined to escape in order to get back to Moscow and help the Motherland repel the Fascist invader' (55). Finally, Pogozhev notes with mournful irony the final words uttered by the historical Sergei, whose surname the memoirist can no longer recall: 'I heard Sergei's voice for the last time, some distance behind: "Don't rush! Don't waste your strength! Run sensibly!"'.[30] All alone as Geoffrey must be, as both a fictional character and a British escapee, the words of

[27] Pogozhev, *Escape from Auschwitz*, p. 146.
[28] Ibid., p. 147.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.

selfless advice issue instead from his own inner voice: 'steady, Talbot, pace yourself; leave something for the later stages' (59).

After an ellipsis in the novel following the narrative of the break-out, we jump forward to 1946 and Geoffrey's return to life at his Nottinghamshire school as a Latin master. The apparent unfurling of events in Geoffrey's narrative of the camp without the benefit of hindsight turns out to be an illusion, since we learn that the apparently present-time relation of events has been a version of a post-war recapitulation of his experiences in a pub conversation with his fellow schoolmaster Gerald Baxter. This notion is made plain when Baxter abruptly asks Geoffrey, without any such story having been told, '"So … after you'd escaped from this wretched POW place, what happened then?"' (63). It seems that the narrative we have just read must have been the tale Geoffrey told Baxter, and it ends at what is clearly the same point, that of the escape. Yet Baxter's understated description of the experience he has just been told about, as 'this wretched POW place', suggests that there has been a miscommunication of some kind: either Geoffrey's inability to tell his story has already taken hold, or Baxter cannot comprehend what he has heard. Nonetheless, we learn how Geoffrey got away from the vicinity of the camp in his answer to Baxter's question. He 'got his bearings' in order to travel west, away from Auschwitz, by following '"the stars"' (63). This detail registers a final debt to Pogozhev, who describes 'the Great Bear' as 'our only guide'.[31] It is hard not read this reference to the 'Great Bear' in patriotic as well as astrological terms, and as revelatory of the particular structures that inform any such documentary account.

Conclusion

[31] Ibid., p. 148.

The section ‘A Different Man’ from Sebastian Faulks’s novel *A Possible Life*, on which my discussion here has centred, is titled thus to convey the great toll taken on its protagonist by his experience in the Sonderkommando. Not only does Geoffrey Talbot return to Britain in an entirely different psychic state. As well as this, the post-war plea, ‘Let somebody else live my life for me, Geoffrey thought’ (82), reveals that he wishes in a more literal sense to be a ‘different man’. The severe psychological effects of what Geoffrey underwent turn at the story’s conclusion into narrative ones. It is no longer post-traumatic stress disorder but, rather, preparation for the novel’s conceit of migrating subjectivity that underlies Geoffrey’s final realisation that, ‘some subtle rearrangement of particles had taken place within him; he felt with joy and resignation that he was not the same man’ (83).

It is to this profoundly literary conclusion that the extremity of the novel’s setting in the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz-Birkenau has tended. Faulks’s reliance on historical intertexts, particularly those of a popular kind, to construct this historical world is a method shared by most Holocaust novels, ranging from William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice* (1979) to John Donahue’s *The Death’s Head Chess Club* (2015). Such fiction uses documentary material as context or inspiration with varying degrees of fidelity, and equally as a way to demonstrate its historical credentials. In relation to the contextual impulse, Faulks’s reliance on *Stoker*, as a memoir that has been shown to be unreliable, does not in itself make a detrimental ethical or literary difference to his novel, given that the imagined nature of Watt’s account of his time in Birkenau feeds fittingly into another fiction. Indeed, Faulks’s judgement that *Stoker* was suitable for his novelistic purposes might redouble our sense of the memoir’s imaginary status.

However, even if we do not agree with Helen Dunmore's verdict that Faulks's representation of the mechanism of genocide goes 'beyond his capacity', [32] it is clear that none of Faulks's intertextual sources focuses on the Sonderkommando members themselves. The topic is all-encompassing in the novel, yet also approached indirectly, by means of accounts of the experience of SOE agents in concentration camps, Russian prisoners-of-war in Auschwitz, and an invented Australian 'stoker'. The Jewish prisoners of the Sonderkommando are only ever in the background of Faulks's novel, because that is their position in his documentary sources. He did not choose to draw upon any of the Sonderkommando's own contemporary writings, nor any of their number's post-war testimonies. What is finally conveyed by the reliance of *A Possible Life* on *Stoker* is that it was chosen because it offers an Anglophone readership a perspective on the world of the camp that matches their own. The reason that it is the only text to do so, and therefore the only one that Faulks could have chosen for the task, is because it is an impossible viewpoint.

[32] Dunmore, review.