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# Rachel Seiffert's *A Boy in Winter* (2017) and the Literary Construction of Ukraine

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**Abstract:** This article analyses the literary representation of Nazi-occupied Ukraine in Rachel Seiffert's 2017 novel *A Boy in Winter*. It does so by exploring the novel's documentary and fictional influences, from which its concern with the genocide of the Jews and the German colonization of the East is crafted. The alterations and omissions from the historical accounts and the novel's use of modernist literary techniques combine in a way that resembles the methods of other examples of Holocaust fiction, but in this case to create a distinctive allegorical mode. The article concludes by arguing that ultimately the most significant influence on *A Boy in Winter* is a novel from almost a century earlier, Joseph Roth's *The Radetzky March* (1932).

**Keywords:** Rachel Seiffert, Ukraine, marshes, Joseph Roth, Holocaust

Rachel Seiffert's *A Boy in Winter* takes place over four months in the aftermath of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. In this novel from which place-names are conspicuously absent, the prefatory intertitle, "Ukraine, November 1941" (Seiffert 2017: 1), gives the reader crucial geographical and temporal identification. Everything that follows can be understood under that heading, yet also transcends its specific details. In this article, I will trace the varied literary and historical sources on which Seiffert drew to construct this novel about the region known by the occupiers as "Reichskommissariat Ukraine." I will explore the ethical and aesthetic effects of this repurposing for Seiffert's fictional practice and their implications for contemporary Holocaust representation more broadly.

## 1 Towards Ukraine

As Seiffert has stated in interviews and in the novel's afterword, the "direction" of *A Boy in Winter* (hereafter *A Boy*), including its Ukrainian setting, was determined by an unexpected archival discovery (Seiffert 2017: 239). Seiffert recounts how, on a visit

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to a German library for an entirely different project, she was introduced to the history of Willi Ahrem, a Wehrmacht officer whose acts of rescue led to his gaining the status of “Righteous Gentile” after the war. As Seiffert summarises from these biographical sources (Kosmala 2003, 2004), Ahrem was so “dismayed by Hitler’s rise to power” that he evaded fighting for the Nazis by “transferring to the construction corps” (Seiffert 2019).

However, since Ahrem’s posting took the form of overseeing road-building under the Nazis’ Operation Todt in newly occupied Ukraine, he witnessed the round-up of the Jewish population of the town of Nemirov (now Nemyriv) and subsequent atrocities. As Seiffert says of Ahrem’s wartime experience, she was so struck by the horror of this “moral dilemma” (Anonymous 2018), in which his very efforts at evasion placed him “in the midst of this crime,” that she turned to writing *A Boy* as a novel which would pose urgent ethical questions about complicity and defiance (Seiffert 2019). As Seiffert concludes, depicting this era in which “even doing nothing had consequences” (2019) brings the story’s resonance firmly into the present.

Ahrem’s biography is the “basis” for that of the fictional engineer Otto Pohl (Seiffert 2017: 239), and traces of this unusual story are certainly perceptible in *A Boy*. They underlie the portrayal of Pohl’s antipathy to the regime for which he is working and his horror at the occupation’s murderous conduct. The depiction of the setting consists of a “fusion” of topography with history (Bakhtin 1981: 84), so that the distinctive detail of Ukrainian towns, steppes, and their inhabitants is inseparable from the novel’s representation of the Nazi invasion. Although this carefully established combination of “time and space markers” might seem to make *A Boy* well suited to a chronotopic reading, in Mikhail Bakhtin’s term, *A Boy*’s imagery of travel down a road at a historical moment diverges from that of the original usage (Bakhtin 1981: 98). In *A Boy*, the road is not simply a literary device offering a plurality of encounter and incident, since space itself is full of conflicting ethical significance, while time is bound to the moment of an unfolding historical calamity. As is the case for Seiffert’s novella “Lore” from *The Dark Room* (2001), in which a young girl leads her siblings on foot from southern Germany to Hamburg in the aftermath of the German surrender, the obstacles faced by the Ukrainian woman Yasia and the Jewish children accompanying her in *The Boy* are an extreme fusion of “spatial and temporal indicators” (Bakhtin 1981: 84). In the later novel, the war is still raging and encounters between characters full of danger.

Indeed, *A Boy* is not primarily centred on what Seiffert has called “a rare account of a righteous German” (2019), so that the detail of Ahrem’s sustained efforts to save Jewish workers and their families is significantly reduced. Rather, it is the almost accidental acts of rescue on the part of Yasia, a local woman, involving her engagement with the Ukrainian terrain, that are the novel’s focus. While the historical record shows that Ahrem was denounced for his actions and sent back to

Germany, the fate of his fictional avatar is different. Pohl is betrayed simply for expressing oppositional opinions, leading to his early disappearance from the novel. This closes off the definitive acts of salvation which would have made *A Boy* an unrepresentative Holocaust narrative, leading instead to an ambivalent and inconclusive portrayal.

Seiffert's commitment to representing the fate of individuals in Nazi-occupied Ukraine necessitated her undertaking extensive research beyond Ahrem's biography. This includes reliance on what remain the standard English-language studies by those Seiffert calls her "historian heroes," Wendy Lower and Karel Berkhoff (Seiffert 2017: 239). These works underlie the depiction in *A Boy* of the speed and brutality with which Nazi ideology's twin pillars—"the elimination of the Jews and the German colonization of the East" (Lower 2005: 3)—were enacted in Ukraine. The novel thus represents some of the most distinctive occurrences in the Ukrainian experience of invasion. These include the strictures undergone by its inhabitants, the genocidal mass shootings of Jewish Ukrainians, and the construction of the highway known as *Durchgangstrasse IV*, although nameless in *A Boy*, a supply line built by forced labourers which was to stretch from Lwów (German/Yiddish: Lemberg, Ukrainian: Lviv) to Uman (Lower 2005: 144).

However, as the non-specific nature of the novel's title affirms, these factual borrowings are made generic through their anonymity, giving the terrain on which the events unfold an allegorical significance. This is evident from *A Boy*'s opening, set in a small Ukrainian town where the Jewish inhabitants are imprisoned in a brick works prior to their murder. Lower's history suggests that this might situate the novel's events close to the city of Vinnytsia, where incarceration and forced labour in a brick works took place close to a "killing site" (Lower 2005: 96, 153). Yet no specific identification of the town is made in *A Boy*, emphasising instead the terrible irony of an everyday manufacturing location being used as an assembly-point for death.

As well as these biographical and regional histories of Holocaust-era Ukraine, Seiffert has credited more aesthetically oriented influences. These include Joseph Roth's classic novel *The Radetzky March* (1932), its portrayal of the "marshy landscape" that is crucial to *A Boy* culminating in the historical watershed of 1914 (Anonymous 2018). Other literary intertexts include Tadeusz Borowski's short stories in *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (1967), as a *locus classicus* of the portrayal of enforced complicity and perpetrator self-pity, while the structure of Seiffert's novel, with its shifts between subjective viewpoints on a contrastingly perceived reality, bears a debt to modernist techniques. I ask throughout what the effect is of these varied and conflicting sources for *A Boy*, and how their selection and amendment clarifies the purpose of Seiffert's novel in representing the Ukrainian experience of a Nazi campaign of "devastation" more extreme than anywhere else in occupied Europe (Lower 2005: 2).

## 2 Viewpoints

Seiffert's novel takes the form of a multi-perspectival representation of wartime events in this area of the occupied Soviet Union, concluding after the eponymous winter season in "Ukraine, early 1942" (Seiffert 2017: 226). We witness these occurrences from the varied viewpoints of Otto Pohl, the German engineer in charge of constructing the road through the newly conquered territory, and Yasia, a young woman living in the town where Pohl is billeted and whose fiancé Mykola is recruited by the SS to the Ukrainian auxiliary police. *A Boy* also represents, with less consistency in a way that matches their fate, the town's Jewish teacher Ephraim and his sons, the teenage Yankel and his younger brother Momik. Over the course of the novel, the framing arising from Ahrem's historical role as an engineer is left behind, along with the highway he is constructing, in preference for a haphazard route to the marshland in which Yasia, Yankel, and Momik seek refuge. Their flight is represented in imagery that draws on *The Radetzky March*, yet giving the marshes a significance that differs from the representation of their inaccessibility and beauty in Roth's novel or the Holocaust-era histories' emphasis on their status as a site of murder.

In a method that follows the modernist practice of novels like Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), where characters who never meet are nonetheless united by encountering the same sounds and sights, the opening of *A Boy* represents the differences and connections in the protagonists' positions at the onset of the Nazi invasion. This sense of an experience held in common is established at several levels, including the narrative voice, use of free indirect discourse, and the detail of the plot.

In the narration, the existence of varied perceptions on a shared reality is implied by repetition of the same phrasing. This is the case despite the contrasting nature of the characters and extreme divisions between their circumstances, alongside the fact that their paths cross, if at all, only fleetingly. Indeed, the words held in common emphasise the arbitrarily constructed distinctions between the protagonists Yasia, Pohl, and Ephraim. For all three, a beloved partner is referred to possessively, a common experience that ends very differently in each case: Yasia's boyfriend is "her Mykola," Pohl's wife "my Dorle," and Ephraim's wife "his Miryam" (Seiffert 2017: 30, 17, 45). By this means, the human texture of their lives is aligned, to highlight the symptomatic divergence of their fates. Yasia is not reunited with Mykola, a former Red Army recruit "steered" (Lower 2005: 138) into taking part in a mass shooting at which both Ephraim and Miryam are murdered, while Pohl's oppositional conduct and his anguished letters to Dorle at home in Münster lead to his arrest.

In a more elaborate parallel between characters established by shared utterance, we learn that Pohl has taken on the job of engineer to avoid fighting for the Nazi regime, yet his role in the newly conquered Ukraine makes him unwillingly complicit

in atrocities against the region's Jewish population. While the reader might be inclined to echo what Pohl imagines Dorle to say—“*Well, what did you expect?*”—his consciousness undergoes an “awful awakening” through this proximity (Seiffert 2017: 17, 97). He sees the brutal ejection by “soldiers” and the SS from their home of “an old man and an even older woman,” whom the reader knows to be Ephraim and his mother, now defamiliarisingly seen from the outside: “They are herded; they are *herded*—Pohl can find no other word for it” (Seiffert 2017: 9). The transition between Pohl's viewpoint and that of Ephraim is accomplished through each hearing the brutal shouting of an order, its origin unstated:

Pohl hears shouting ... Three soldiers behind them, even more ahead, the two old people are run down the cobbled street.

“*Lauf, Dreckjude!*”

The schoolmaster hears boots on flagstones ... So close to his mother tongue, his mother's Yiddish tones, the old teacher can understand the orders, even before they are repeated in Ukrainian. (Seiffert 2017: 8–9)

The sudden shift between perspectives is akin to a cinematic cut, contrasting Pohl at his boarding-house window with Ephraim below in the thick of events. The fate of Ephraim and his mother, who are recognised on subsequent occasions by Pohl only in the metonymic terms of their clothing, “a frock coat and shawl, the old couple he saw herded” (Seiffert 2017: 118), is entwined with that of the engineer to reveal the latter's status as one who, despite his moral horror, did not act but “*passively watched*” (Bauman 2021: 205). By contrast to Pohl's self-conscious shock at the animalised treatment undergone by people who are “*herded*,” the same phrasing concludes Ephraim's efforts to shield his mother from the soldiers “as they are herded through a doorway” (Seiffert 2017: 12). Such an action related from Ephraim's perspective concludes a catalogue of even worse affronts at the soldiers' hands and “herded” is now simply descriptive.

In a sharing of vocabulary which highlights facets of complicity, the subversion of an ethical code is conveyed by Ephraim's urgent present-tense question about his former pupils who have gone over “hot-foot” to the new regime: “*What has happened to their scruples?*” (Seiffert 2017: 11). By contrast, Pohl's level of unwilling cooperation and his “creeping guilt” are shown by the same term surfacing in his recall of his brother-in-law's words about the Nazi Party badge: “*You can wear the blasted pin and keep your scruples*” (Seiffert 2017: 20–1). Although Pohl considers the idea of fighting in the Party's service “intolerable,” the submission conveyed by his wearing the badge renders internal opposition ineffectual. Unlike the historical model of Ahrem, who undertook life-saving actions among the Jewish labourers over several years,

Pohl's principled refusal to select workers for the road construction simply consigns them all to death. While Ephraim's rhetorical question about his pupils' ethics is horrifyingly answered by his death at their hands, Pohl's lead to his detention and an unspecified fate. The shared focus on "scruples" and the very brief overlapping of Ephraim's and Pohl's worlds is a precursor to the vanishing of both characters from the novel, leaving Yasia alone with Yankel and Momik.

These hints at fatally intersecting circumstances, the experience of one witnessed by another, or ethical dilemmas felt from opposed angles but expressed in a shared vocabulary, appear in a definitive and dramatized form in relation to the onset of the German occupation. The conquering army drives through the town promulgating new laws with a loudhailer, witnessed by the characters in their varied locations. The fragments of significant phrases uttered by a "German voice speaking in Ukrainian" are heard first from Yasia's perspective: "under curfew until further notice. Movement is permitted in daylight hours only" (Seiffert 2017: 26, see Lower 2005: 79). Hearing the announcement interrupts Yasia's journey to market, her family's old horse laden with apples, and she decides instead to make for her cousin Osip's workshop. Ephraim hears the broadcast words from the different circumstances of his imprisonment in the brick works: "the curfew in force, from sun-up to sun-down" (Seiffert 2017: 27, 43). For both Ephraim and Yasia, the concluding utterance is the insistence that anyone infringing the law will be punished, "under the law of occupation" (Seiffert 2017: 40, 43).

The shared perception of sound establishes a connection between Yasia and Ephraim, despite the distinction between their fates, which is realised in the plot. For Yasia, going to Osip's workshop rather than to market is a decisive deviation, and the place where she first shelters Ephraim's sons who have evaded the round-up. Yet different aspects of the "blaring" words repeated by the "motorised invaders" catch their attention (Seiffert 2017: 43, 38). For Ephraim, most prominent is the warning to those "found hiding Jews, or supplying partisan groups," while Yasia, now in Osip's company, hears, "Anyone found flouting this law will be taken prisoner. Will be removed from here" (Seiffert 2017: 43, 40). She is left asking herself, "Who have they come for?"

Ephraim's certainty contrasts with Yasia's unworldliness. His "vehement" rhetorical question to his wife Miryam about the fate of their absent sons, "Who has been kind to us in this town since the Germans came?" (Seiffert 2017: 92), is answered implicitly by the act of hearing shared with Yasia. Her first response on seeing the children arises from an instinctive protectiveness, only belatedly followed by the realisation that the boys are Jewish when she hears their "murmured and furtive" sharing of a "strange tongue" (Seiffert 2017: 143–4). This factor does not lead to Yasia's abandoning the children, despite enhancing her sense of them as a burden. Her rescue actions are shown to arise from a mixture of feeling the alternative to be "shameful," a maternal response to the children's youthfulness, since they are

“pretty too, as boys go,” and avoiding reprisals against her own community (Seiffert 2017: 144, 139). Indeed, Yasia’s is the viewpoint that survives, and the distinction between what she and Ephraim hear while the occupation laws are promulgated sets the scene for her act of almost unwitting rescue that follows.

### 3 The Journey

The journey Yasia is impelled to take to her uncle’s marshland village, once the non-Jewish townspeople have found her to be sheltering Jewish boys, gives this Ukrainian terrain a range of geographical and symbolic effects. As suggested by Ephraim’s exasperated response to Miryam’s regard for her brother Jaakov, now living in Palestine, landscape is a backdrop, yet also an all-important element occasioning a phenomenological response. The marshes are a conceptual contrast to the road which Pohl is constructing, that of the amorphous natural world versus a modern technology designed, as he thinks of it, to “smooth [the Germans’] way through these new and vast territories” (Seiffert 2017: 22).

The road is also a figure for the novel’s shaping of its historical intertexts, and a paradigmatic instance of the transformation in Holocaust literature of documentary material in wider terms. Seiffert’s epigraph from Cormac McCarthy’s *The Crossing* (1994), a novel about a different wartime odyssey, conveys a concern with ethical agency: “He said the wicked know that if the evil they do is of sufficient horror men will not speak against it. That men have only stomach for small evils and only these will they oppose” (Seiffert 2017: vii). Yet it is also a hint at the influence on *A Boy* of McCarthy’s best-known novel *The Road* (2006), about a father and son’s journey on foot through a post-apocalyptic landscape, in which the road itself is, in Bakhtin’s phrasing, a “metaphor made real” (Bakhtin 1981: 84). By contrast, fidelity to the historical detail of the road in *A Boy* makes it metaphorical. Thus, it is the process of widening, asphaltting and the “digging of drainage ditches along the sides” (Seiffert 2017: 144) which has been chosen for the novel from the history of the actual *Durchgangstrasse IV*. The nature of this unforgiving marshy terrain and its resistance to technology is a geographical expression of the Ukrainian obduracy emphasized throughout.

The novel’s symbolism is reliant on the history to which it refers, while at the same time pointing beyond it in the manner of a literary parable within an identifiable context. In this sense it resembles other examples of Holocaust fiction of a historically fabular kind, such as Jiří Weil’s *Life with a Star* (1964) and Piotr Rawicz’s *Blood from the Sky* (1961). If Bakhtin is right to argue that literary symbols such as that of the road, as the enabler of travel, encounter and the forward movement of plot, alter over time, the highway in Seiffert’s novel represents invasion and domination,



in contrast to its fostering the fruitful “chance simultaneity” of a picaresque narrative (Bakhtin 1981: 92). We learn that the road’s purpose is to transfer war material over a landscape about which Pohl says, with critical reference to Himmler, “He hasn’t chosen the best terrain to build a road through” (Seiffert 2017: 99). This hint at a risky insubordination is a significant if low-key version of Ahrem’s real-life resistance. As Kosmala puts it, Ahrem was unable to change anything about the “machinery of extermination,” but responded to what was taking place in his “immediate environment” (Kosmala 2004, 147). This is a course of action on the part of an “ordinary German” (Kosmala 2004: 148) not fully realised in Seiffert’s novel, where Pohl’s resistance has little concrete outcome.

## 4 Geography

The terrain of *A Boy* is introduced from the outset with its characteristic combination of anonymity with specificity. From the viewpoint of Yankel and Momik running through the unnamed town on a foggy morning, we learn that it consists of “timbered” houses with “low roofs,” cobbled streets and “many alleyways” in which the children are trying to find somewhere to “lie low” (Seiffert 2017: 4). The boys’ familiarity with an old and dilapidated settlement contrasts with Pohl’s being awakened on the same morning by the sound of “shrill and coarse” orders in German and Ukrainian in what he considers the unfamiliar “squat and damp place” (Seiffert 2017: 5) to which he has been posted. Pohl is an embodiment of those incomers who experienced “a physical surrounding that simply did not feel like home” (Lower 2005: 101). This displacement symbolises Pohl’s lack of sympathy with the regime’s ambitions, as suggested by his thoughts on the future use of the road, which will be “fit for civilians. *Fit for civilization, not some thousand-year abomination*” (Seiffert 2017: 23).

The sole moment of interaction between Pohl and Yasia, as she attempts to leave town at night with Yankel and Momik, is also one in which the imagery of the road is left behind for that of the marshes. This chance meeting is a menacing variant of Bakhtin’s notion of the positive “contrast” which can occur on such a journey and enables accidental encounters between “people who are normally kept separate by social and spatial distance” (Bakhtin 1981: 243). However, the participants here are already aware of the possibility of distinctions between them, on grounds that are not social but life-threateningly national and “racial”. From Pohl’s perspective, the encounter is one with three “dishevelled and frightened peasant children”. He has a troubled awareness “of the way these peasant children take him in: ashen, unshaven, he is a German” (Seiffert 2017: 188). Yankel’s declaration that they are travelling “*Na bolota*,” using the Ukrainian word for “marsh” that was among the first Pohl learnt,

prompts the latter's uneasily wondering if they are "marsh farmer's children" or "a partisan brood, sent to bring back weapons and food" (Seiffert 2017: 189, 22).

The novel's positing the marshland as a mythic realm of safety prevents Pohl's even entertaining the idea that any of them might be Jewish. Although his dismissing the Ukrainian police who appear in the darkness saves the children's lives almost by accident, the closeness of this contact and "being hauled about" as Pohl pushes them to leave is felt by Yankel not just as a personal affront but an unwelcome clue about the fate of his family and how "soldiers" must have "hauled them too" (Seiffert 2017: 192, 197). His wish "only to get to the marshes," where "no Germans go," and his uncertainty about whether Yasia is "a farm girl" or "a marsh girl" (Seiffert 2017: 193–4), exists at the realist and allegorical levels of the text, supporting the sense of the marshes' moral spatiality.

Indeed, no everyday journey is taken down the road in *A Boy*, its characters shown trying rather to construct, in Pohl's case, or, in that of Yasia and the children, to cross over it. With its signs of the modern technology over which Pohl has presided, "mud [...] ploughed with spade marks and tyre prints," the roadworks bar their small convoy from the "sodden and empty" land Yankel sees with relief when they do reach the other side (Seiffert 2017: 196). He considers the seemingly amorphous and uncultivated landscape beyond the roadworks as frightening yet full of the potential for a "way ahead," "a place for him and Momik well beyond here, because there must be somewhere" (Seiffert 2017: 196, 199). In this scenario, the generic terms—"way," "place"—coexist with Yasia's sense of a particular destination, her uncle's "village [which] is surrounded by marshland" (Seiffert 2017: 201). When the three reach her uncle's home, although they are aware that "such an arrival can only mean bad news," the boys are thought at first by local people not to be Yasia's siblings but her children (Seiffert 2017: 213). Such consanguinity is affirmed by the villagers' decision, at the novel's conclusion, to rename Yankel and Momik as Yevhen and Mirek, so that, "if anyone should come asking, the two of them are marsh boys" (Seiffert 2017: 237). The marshes are posited as non-Jewish in their role as a region of geographical and ethical salvation.

## 5 An Ordinary German

The biographical accounts of Willi Ahrem's rescue actions in Ukraine emphasise the turning-point of his being present at a massacre of Nemirov ghetto inhabitants in November 1941 (Kosmala 2004: 152) when attempting to save a Jewish carpenter who had worked on his construction team. As the interview Ahrem gave to Manfred Wolfson in 1966 makes clear, he had been unable to believe the "outrageous" reports of mass killings until that point (Kosmala 2003: 182). The burden of historical witness undergone by Ahrem is divided in *A Boy* between two characters: Pohl, whose insistence on taking

only a civilian role itself brings him into direct contact with the commission of genocide, and Yasia's fiancé Mykola, who is enlisted to take part in a mass shooting which the reader experiences with dismaying proximity through his eyes.

For Pohl, the equivalent of Ahrem's terrible epiphany is seeing, again through a window, the "shouting and herding" of a round-up in preparation for the selection of forced labourers that he is asked to make (Seiffert 2017: 116). Mykola's perspective on the shooting is further coloured by his forced complicity in the murders. The event of the killing itself is withheld, taking the form of a gap to suggest that Mykola, in a version of what Seiffert describes as Ahrem's "nervous breakdown," has blanked it from his memory (Morris 2017). The conclusion of one chapter—"And then, behind him, Myko hears the Jews driven into the open"—suggests his averted gaze ("behind him") and that others are responsible ("driven") for the actions that he only "hears" (Seiffert 2017: 170). The subsequent chapter opens with further emphasis on the atrocity's audibility: "Afterwards, there is only quiet" (Seiffert 2017: 171).

The shift from Ahrem's role as appalled bystander to Mykola's as a co-operator in the mass shooting raises the ethical stakes of *A Boy* while also necessitating a viewpoint on events at extremely close quarters. Such a change also registers the literary debt to Borowski's stories of unwilling complicity on the part of the Auschwitz kapo Tadek in *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*. Mykola is represented with an ambivalence that befits his trajectory, as a Red Army deserter who places himself in the hands of the SS and is made to do their bidding. In Lower's words, "Ukrainians who were still haunted by the terror of 1930s Stalinism" nonetheless did not all "uniformly embrace the Nazis as 'liberators'" (2005: 10). This is dramatized in *A Boy* by means of debates on the part of Yasia's family, whose opinions on how to react to the invasion arise from their positions as "male or female, old or young" (Lower 2005: 31), and, in the world of the novel, their relationship to Mykola and his enlistment (Seiffert 2017: 10).

The novel's reinterpretation of its sources turns the role adopted by Mykola into that of a reluctant rather than an eager accomplice. The detail in *A Boy* of the propaganda leaflets dropped by German planes is characteristic of the individual effects of the occupation borrowed by Seiffert from the more impersonal histories. Thus Lower's describing that, "In addition to bombs, German propaganda leaflets fell from the sky and littered the fields and roadways" (Lower 2005: 34) is transformed into Yasia's subjective perception. By contrast to an earlier episode when Yasia threw herself to the ground to shelter from the Luftwaffe, we learn: "But they dropped no bombs that day, the Germans; only showers of paper" (Seiffert 2017: 34). Yasia's continues to be the perspective through which these Ukrainian-language leaflets are evaluated, since her "Collective school" training enables her to read them aloud to her father: "*We have no quarrel with men who were drafted, with any who lay down Soviet arms of their own free will now*" (Seiffert 2017: 34). Yasia's reaction is an emotional "tight[ening]" of "her

chest": "Each damp leaflet a free pass for Red Army deserters. If Mykola found one, he had only to present himself" (Seiffert 2017: 34). This is an individualised version of the more distanced account given by Lower of "local women and children" in the Zhytomyr region who, "trusting that the leaflet was a ticket to safety," "collected and distributed them to Red Army deserters" (Lower 2005: 34).

However, there is no element in *A Boy* of the explicitly anti-communist and antisemitic rhetoric of such leaflets, as quoted by Lower ("Beat the Jew-Commisars, his mug asks for a brick!"), which contributed, in the Germans' estimate, to the surrender of over 72,000 Red Army soldiers (Lower 2005: 34–35). Such alteration supports the novel's project of giving historical material a fabular import. While there is terrible irony in the fact that the work for which Mykola "presents himself" is that of mass murder, the absence of a summons on prejudicial grounds establishes that his motivation is not of this kind.

Indeed, Mykola argues to Yasia that he wishes simply to earn money until the new occupiers vanish as the Soviets did: "We just have to live to see them gone again" (Seiffert 2017: 82). He communicates his decision to join the police in the similarly pragmatic terms of wishing only to protect his "livelihood" (Lower 2005: 90): Mykola "would be staying in the new police barracks for the winter, and even beyond that" (Seiffert 2017: 83). What Mykola claims as the reassuring fact that "most of the auxiliaries" were "Ukrainians just the same as him" who would be "giving the orders" (Seiffert 2017: 83) is the very factor that Yasia finds perturbing. When she attempts to visit Mykola in the barracks and is challenged by a man with a "Kievan" voice, we learn that she considers it "Strange to find policemen doing a soldier's job: Yasia didn't like it." Yasia is even more uncomfortable at the idea of the Jews imprisoned in the nearby brick works, a space so constricted that it is "hardly ... possible" to envisage (Seiffert 2017: 85–6).

*A Boy* does not shy away from acknowledging the equivocal attitude of the non-Jewish townspeople towards their Jewish neighbours. Their viewing the Jews' being marked out by armbands is depicted not as an occasion for empathy or solidarity but as a salutary revelation of how numerous they really are: "*I always said so,*" as an unidentified voice puts it (Seiffert 2017: 57). Mykola's representation in this context is overdetermined, uniting facets of a disillusioned Soviet soldier and Ukrainian collaborator who is also Yasia's fiancé. He is a fictive embodiment of Lower's observation that the Germans "needed indigenous helpers" to "exploit" the newly conquered territory, and indeed they "found a sufficient number of Ukrainian volunteers to carry out their anti-Jewish measures" (Lower 2005: 51, 90). A strong sense is maintained in Seiffert's novel that Ukrainians—by contrast, as Lower argues, to such instances as the massacre that took place in Poland's Jedwabne—did not plan or enact "the mass murder of their Jewish neighbors independently of the Germans" (Lower 2005: 59).

Nonetheless, Yasia's increasingly uneasy sense in *A Boy* of Mykola's position is matched by moments where his motivation and response to his duties are shown from his perspective. Mykola's initial return to Ukraine as a deserter is conveyed in terms of his relief at nearing the "wet and welcome smell" of marshland, into which he throws his pistol, but also his ability to explain away his own misdeeds: that same weapon, he thinks, "had fetched him bread when he needed it," the passive construction disguising the reality of his threatening to kill (Seiffert 2017: 149–50).

However, the imagery of active complicity in the murder of the Jews is split off in *A Boy* in the form of another character, Taras, whose utterances at the scene of the shooting Mykola heeds without giving his assent:

"So? Better a bastard than pitiful."

That was Taras.

"Better to be a bastard any day."

Most agreed with him: *Better them than us*. (Seiffert 2017: 152)

A version of these words—"Better him than me"—haunts Mykola when he is faced with a nameless Jewish man whom the reader knows to be Ephraim (Seiffert 2017: 158). We see that Mykola has been drawn into what Zygmunt Bauman calls the "rational action" of those in the Holocaust world who placed their own survival above all else, including the lives of others, thus compromising their "moral duty" (Bauman 2021: 118, 143). Mykola's is a variant of the reactions by the novel's local non-Jewish townspeople and their attempt to reassure themselves that, "It's only the Jews they're after" (Seiffert 2017: 56). In this way, the details of this stark historical episode, its "momentum too strong for people to resist," as Seiffert puts it (Morris 2017), are relevant to contemporary dilemmas of coercion and acquiescence. They cast light on the response not only of Mykola but of Pohl and Yasia, and even, uncomfortably, Ephraim. He scorns the idea of following his brother-in-law's journey to Palestine by preference to staying in "this land" where his forebears have "endured" for "centuries, earning their place among the sod and silt and wheat fields" (Seiffert 2017: 89).

Our last sighting of Ephraim is through Mykola's eyes. He is viewed wholly from the outside as "a bruised man, his frock coat torn ... half-carried by his helper," from whose "appalled" and "anxious" questions Mykola "turns away" as the two men are rushed to their deaths (Seiffert 2017: 156–59). This brief yet intimate interaction between characters, like that of Pohl with Yasia and the children, has the status of a narrative knot where a difference in fate is dramatized through the exchange of looks, questions and sudden physical proximity. The focus on Mykola requires a change in intertext, and *A Boy* shows signs here of its debt to the title story in *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, with its first-person perspective of a prisoner-

functionary on mass murder. In Borowski's story and Seiffert's novel alike, a neophyte has alcohol thrust upon him to dull the existential horror of having to respond to shouted German orders amid the seemingly endless numbers of victims whose fear he "hates" (Borowski 1967: 20; Seiffert 2017: 165). After shouting orders, Mykola's throat "burns" with the effects of "the noise he makes, not just the drink," showing the bodily effects of a disavowed ethical self-disgust reminiscent of Tadek, who describes how "the strong vodka burns the throat. My head swims, my legs are shaky, again I feel like throwing up" (Borowski 1967: 23; Seiffert 2017: 158).

The conclusion of the action in which Mykola is made to participate is the last we see of him. The novel implies that his several roles, culminating in that of a Ukrainian *Hilfspolizei* recruit, are consigned to the past while the future lies with Yasia and the children. Yet Mykola and what he represents persists in a troubling recall, as Yasia in her uncle's marsh village watches a local woman supply partisans with alcohol. Her fear that this woman will betray them, as did a neighbour in Osip's yard, by "tell[ing] the bandits about the Jew boys in the cow byre," is allayed by her awareness of "familiarity" in this scenario of men who just want "something warming" (Seiffert 2017: 224). She is reminded of her father, "and Myko's grandfather too. But then she thinks of Mykola. Yasia holds the small one closer" (Seiffert 2017: 224). Yasia's "but" conveys the ambiguity of her unspoken emotions for Mykola. Her feeling torn between longing and misgiving about what has become of her fiancé arises as if through telepathic awareness of the role of drink in Mykola's actions. Yasia's holding Momik "closer" in response is similarly ambivalent, poised between expressing a version of the love she had for Mykola and protectiveness against the threat to the children that he represents.

## 6 The Marshland

As a model of a novel about pivotal historical events, Roth's *Radetzky March* concludes just after the 1914 assassination of Franz Ferdinand. It does not represent, despite its vantage-point of 1932, the fulfilment of its characters' prophesies "from a time that is yet to come," as one character puts it, of the outbreak of a war that will cause the Austro-Hungarian Empire's disintegration into "filthy little states," in the words of another (Roth 2016: 259, 144). *A Boy* ends even less definitively, in relation both to the larger sweep of events whose outcome the reader already knows—the Nazis will be defeated, having committed crimes that "can't be made right again" (Seiffert 2017: 237)—and to the fictive details of the fate of the novel's characters.

The hints that Yankel might seek out the partisans, or the "bandits", as Yasia's uncle calls them (Seiffert 2017: 222), remain undramatized. Indeed, the narratorial observation, from Yasia's perspective on the marsh village, that "Here, at least, there is

no one to run from. Only the partisans” (Seiffert 2017: 221), is equivocally phrased. It is unclear if Yasia’s “only” is reassuring or cautionary, whether it implies that the partisans are the sole presence apart from the villagers or that they represent the sole danger. She thinks of the peaceful moment which concludes the text as “a quiet meanwhile” before “times to come, that can’t be guessed at yet” (Seiffert 2017: 237). This marks the novel’s effort to preserve the “unfulfilled and unrealized possibilities” of the past rather than seeing it as “an already predetermined future” (Bernstein 1994: 4).

*The Radetzky March*’s strongest influence on *A Boy* consists of its invoking spatial imagery for historical purposes. Roth’s novel uses the Austrian monarchy’s territories at the border with Russia as a figure for the necessary parochialism of the edges of empire, by contrast to the capital of Vienna. Here it is the railway, rather than the road, that both separates and connects the seat of power from its “almost legendary” margins (Roth 2016: 303). The novel’s nostalgic look back at Austria in the years before the First World War is enhanced by the summertime depiction of the Ukrainian marshland, its “unending blue-green” extent admired on a “violet and golden” evening (Roth 2016: 1–7), yet balanced with awareness of the imperial hubris such an extensive territory must entail.

*The Radetzky March* transforms space into time in describing the edgelands’ distance from “modern ideas,” so that the protagonist’s father, Franz von Trotta, is said to hail from “a province that was historically rather than geographically remote” (Roth 2016: 178, 291). The marshes in Seiffert’s novel also serve to depict the end of an empire by returning to the time of its flourishing. The role of the marshland in *A Boy* is to convey the distinctive nature of this Ukrainian region that defies submission to another’s will, as suggested by Pohl’s perception of a place where, by contrast to the town, there would be “no German welcome” (Seiffert 2017: 26). However, the defeat of the Nazis’ imperial ambitions is not shown, residing even further beyond the novel’s remit than that of the Habsburg dynasty’s end in Roth’s.

In Seiffert’s novelized topography, the marshes have an ethical significance that differs from Roth’s, arising from their inaccessibility. Although Yasia greeted the invaders with bread and salt, her identification by the townspeople at market as a “marsh girl” (Seiffert 2017: 58) suggests the potential for oppositional action. Like Yankel and Momik’s uncle Jaakov, whose attempts at cultivating the arid land of Palestine Ephraim imagines will produce only “blistered palms and dry wells,” Yasia’s father laughs at his brother-in-law’s life as a subsistence farmer in “a small and sodden” village and using “[a] plough that was already old in Egypt” (Seiffert 2017: 88, 57). Yet geological resistance to human intervention is presented as a hopeful feature in both locations.

Following such an implication, the marshes in Seiffert’s novel represent an anti-modern force. This topography defies the Nazis’ efforts at exploitation while its

occupants are immune to the townspeople's submission and complicity. The road for which Pohl is responsible itself founders on the inhospitable terrain:

But still, wherever they dig, up comes water ... It seeps in underfoot, and then it rises, rises, until the labourers are ankle-deep in mire and water. But still they work on, because the schedule demands it. (Seiffert 2017: 96)

Pohl's perspective on the drainage work gives a relentless agency to the "miry water" (Seiffert 2017: 97), as his repeated reference to its "still" coming up or "rising" suggests. The human toll of the marshes' resistance to the imposition of modern engineering continues the notion of Pohl's naivety, as we learn through his sudden awareness of the inhuman conditions under which the "labour gangs" must work bare-handed for long hours, and, as he thinks, "perhaps they are even under-fed" (Seiffert 2017: 95).

Indeed, the engulfing quality of the mud itself, as Pohl sees, making the men's "boots slick, their sleeves and trousers sodden" so that "they return to the encampment mud-caked, their clothes mud-stiffened" (Seiffert 2017: 96), prefigures their deaths by erasing the difference "between flesh and earth, organic and inorganic matter" (Chenoweth 2004; see also Baker 2021, 46–9). Pohl's wondering "on whose authority" the workers are "made to put in such long hours" (Seiffert 2017: 96) registers a nascent awareness of the "extermination through labour" policy in which he takes a part. The impressionistic rendering of Pohl's internal disquiet and absence of heroic action makes him, by contrast to the political "awakening" of his historical original, Willi Ahrem, which began with his horror at the events of the so-called *Kristallnacht* pogrom of 1938 (Kosmala 2004: 148), well suited to the novel's mode of allegorical documentary and its status as a contemporary "call for caution" (Morris 2017).

## 7 Conclusion

Karel Berkhoff's history of wartime Ukraine, another documentary source formative to Seiffert's portrayal, recounts the use of "legalizing" techniques to enable the rescue of Jews. These include adoption and, once the crucial consent of village elders had been gained, that of baptism, with its corollary of renaming (Berkhoff 2004: 85–7). A novelized version of both these strategies concludes *A Boy*, where the benevolent judgement on the part of these elders culminates in Momik "laugh[ing] out loud in his surprise" at the cold baptismal water poured onto his forehead (Seiffert 2017: 235–36), conveying his welcome of this new ascription.

This instance of historical specificity within a nameless location arises from the distinctive method in Seiffert's novel of combining historical, biographical and literary intertexts with literary invention. Holocaust fiction, especially when written



by non-witnesses, invariably draws on such a combination of documentary and creative precedents. Thus, among the rare examples of other anglophone Ukraine-set fiction about the war, Tara Lynn Masih's Young Adult novel *My Real Name is Hanna* (2019) acknowledges the influence of Esther Stermer's testimony *We Fight to Survive* (1960) for its plot about the eponymous Hanna, who lived underground with her family in a network of caves for nearly two years; Graham Hurley credits such testimonies as Ziama Trubakov's *The Riddle of Babi Yar* (2013) as influencing his 2021 thriller *Kyiv, 1941* (Hurley 2022); while Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) dramatizes the substitution of family lore for historical evidence. For *A Boy*, the particular balance of historiography with literary fiction reflects the tendency of Seiffert's work as a whole towards allegory (Tollance 2005), in this case through mixing neo-modernist representations of interiority from varied orientations with details of historical cataclysm.

The outcome of this process in *A Boy* is that the setting takes over from the historical record, space overtaking history. The Ukrainian marshes become a semi-fantastic realm, into which the invented Yasia departs from the historical story of Willi Ahrem and away from the factual imagery of the road. This acts in the service of a fable of rescue which has had to amend the sources on which it relies. In the case of Ahrem's biography, some of the most compelling details, including the ethical inspiration he gained from his father and the wartime sermons of a Catholic bishop, as well as the assistance of other Germans in his rescue activities, have been omitted (Kosmala 2004: 146, 148, 154). For Seiffert's novelistic purposes, reproducing the detail of rescue achieved by a "good German" like Ahrem might have given an unrepresentatively redemptive emphasis in a context where the general rule was death.

However, the transformation of Ahrem's story into that of the anguished Pohl who is himself doomed is accompanied by the novel's reduction of atrocity as this took place in Ukraine. In contrast to the marshland's status in Seiffert's novel, as a pre-modern haven distant from the location of such technology as the brick works and road construction, it was a terrain in which murders, such as the notorious mass shootings in the Pripjat Marshes during the summer of 1941, did take place. Rescue was not the norm—Lower claims that any "individual attempts" at assisting Jews were "almost always sabotaged" by others—although the shelter of Yankel and Momik might have its origin in the historical account of two Jewish siblings who miraculously survived the war in hiding (Lower 2005: 92–94).

By contrast to the factual borrowings from Lower and Berkhoff which underpin the novel's representation of the Nazi occupation, and from Borowski for its portrait of complicity, *The Radetzky March* contributes to *A Boy's* portrayal of the Ukrainian marsh landscape. Such an influence includes the emphasis of Roth's novel on the omnipresence of the borderlands' "silver-grey" marshes and their townscapes' "miry streets," as well as the poverty of those—including the Jewish inhabitants—who "lived

wretchedly” there (Roth 2016: 138–39). Beyond their ambivalent beauty and inescapable mud, the swamps are shown in Roth’s novel to possess a subversive agency which also characterizes those in Seiffert’s. In *The Radetzky March*, the swamps’ “treachery” has engendered that quality in the area’s human “spawn,” while the gravel surface of the local road is no match for the “insatiable” ground and “victorious” mud (Roth 2016: 136–7). These hints at resistance come to fruition in Seiffert’s plot.

Despite this similarity, *A Boy* presents a reverse journey to that in *The Radetzky March*. Social advancement is conveyed geographically by Roth: the family of his novel’s protagonist, Carl-Joseph von Trotta, moved away from the homeland of their “Slavic peasant forebears” to the empire’s heart to become definitively “Austrian” (Roth 2016: 30). Contrastingly, in Seiffert’s novel morality is only consistent with a return trajectory. Yasia’s mother is described as living in a “small and sodden” village “far from everything,” until she “married onto the drier land” (Seiffert 2017: 57). However, it is in a village of this kind, precisely because it is “far from everything,” to which Yasia returns and where the salvation of Yankel and Momik is possible.

The depiction of its Ukrainian setting in *A Boy* embodies the novel’s hybrid origins, in the biography of a German rescuer as well as the reimagining of Roth’s novelistic imagery from *The Radetzky March*. Seiffert’s recasting in fictional form the “horrendous history” of this region in which “Nazi-style militarism, colonialism and genocidal population policies came together” (Lower 2) makes her the heir of Roth, whose *Radetzky March* gives historical significance to the same location of the Ukrainian marshland.

Rather than showing the marshes as the far reaches of a multicultural empire, as does *The Radetzky March*, or, as the wartime record attests, as swamp-filled areas where shelter was even harder to find than elsewhere (Lower 2005: 87), the fabular impetus of *A Boy* turns the marshland into a geographical and moral sanctuary. Ephraim’s fate personifies that of the region’s Jewish inhabitants, over 60% of whom were killed under the Nazis. However, the novel’s focus on the exceptional survival of Ephraim’s sons sheds light on the process of fictionalising a horrifying history, and the expectations with which it is received, in this representation of what is ultimately a literary landscape.

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## Bionote

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