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Reviews of new and noteworthy nonfiction

A Holocaust Fantasy

THE WILKOMIRSKI AFFAIR:

A Study in Biographical Truth.

By Stefan Maechler. Schocken. 496 pp. \$16.95

A LIFE IN PIECES:

The Making and Unmaking of Benjamin Wilkomirski.

By Blake Eskin. Norton. 251 pp. \$25.95

Reviewed by Paul Maliszewski

In 1995 Benjamin Wilkomirski published *Fragments*, a memoir of his experience as a child survivor of the Holocaust. A clarinetist and instrument maker then living in Switzerland, Wilkomirski related his fractured

memories of World War II in simple, mostly unaffected language: seeing his father gunned down in Riga's ghetto, hiding out in a farmhouse in Krakow, surviving internment at two German concentration camps, fending off



Child survivors of Auschwitz, shortly after the camp was liberated in January 1945.

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rats, wading through excrement, and, once freed, coping with postwar life in Switzerland, where hardly anybody allowed him to speak of his experiences. Wilkomirski was three years old when the war broke out, or perhaps four; it's difficult for him to say for sure, because he received a new name (Bruno Grosjean) and a new religion (Christianity) upon entering his new country as an orphan.

Fragments earned widespread critical admiration and a number of awards. *The Boston Globe* praised it for taking readers "into the mind of a little boy." Writing for *The Nation*, Jonathan Kozol wondered whether, in light of what he identified as the book's qualities (austere writing, moral importance, and lack of artifice), "I even have the right to try to offer praise."

Although the memoir never became a best-seller, it did make Wilkomirski a prominent, revered figure in the survivor community. He visited the United States to address conferences on the Holocaust and on the memories of children who experience trauma, and went on a speaking tour to help raise money for the U.S. Holocaust Museum. At such events, Wilkomirski appeared on stage—often wearing a yarmulke, a medallion in the shape of the Hebrew letters for "life," and a scarf draped over his shoulders like a prayer shawl—and credited the therapists who had helped him unlock his long-suppressed memories. He expounded on his theory that therapy married to historical research can match the most fragmented memories to events. A child's fuzzy memory of a Nazi uniform can, Wilkomirski reasoned, imply some association with World War II. Further memories, slowly elicited, can suggest connections to more specific events. He often played his clarinet. If someone read passages from his book, he wept openly.

F*ragments* reveals its story in small pieces. It is as if something whole was shattered, and left that way. In the first chapter, Wilkomirski writes that he decided to stay true to his memories by allowing the "rubble field of isolated images and events" to remain a "chaotic jumble, with very little chronological fit." Vowing to "give up on the ordering logic of grown-ups," he constructs a puzzle of images seen through a child's mental fog, without details or historical context. When a "gray

black monster with a round lid" arrives suddenly at the Polish farmhouse, the reader must think "tank."

Before the book was published, Wilkomirski's agent and publisher learned of inconsistencies between *Fragments* and the documentary record. Production halted while they undertook an investigation. In the end, they accepted Wilkomirski's account of a Swiss-imposed identity, a fantastic and byzantine explanation that involves officials switching his name with that of a Swiss-born Christian child and then refusing, even today, to own up to their deception.

In 1998 Daniel Ganzfried, a Swiss writer who published a novel about the Holocaust the same year that *Fragments* came out, publicly questioned the book's veracity. Other journalists soon concluded that Wilkomirski was not who he claimed to be. He was an orphan, yes, but he had been born in Switzerland in 1941, not in Latvia in 1939. He was not Jewish. And, most damning of all, he had never been to concentration camps except as a tourist.

Blake Eskin and Stefan Maechler are the two latest authors to write about the mysterious Swiss musician, and their books cover similar ground in very different fashions. Eskin, an editor at *The Forward* and a contributor to public radio's *This American Life*, was the first American journalist to break the Wilkomirski story. His interest in the author of *Fragments* had its origins in genealogy; his mother's family, the Wilburs, trace their ancestors back to a family of Wilkomirskis living in Latvia. His book mixes his personal search for European ancestors (Could this Benjamin be our long-lost relative?) with Wilkomirski's rise and fall, and includes tangents into, among other things, the history of anti-Semitism in Switzerland.

Maechler is a Swiss historian who was hired by Wilkomirski's agent to conduct a second, fuller investigation after the book's public discrediting. The agent, Eva Koralnik, had represented a number of Jewish authors, shepherded many books about the war into print, and overseen the Anne Frank estate. Unearthing the truth about the author of *Fragments*, however belatedly, would help safeguard her reputation. Therefore, Maechler was given access to all records and received the cooperation of all parties, includ-

ing Wilkomirski and his family and friends. Maechler's capable and exhaustive, but occasionally exhausting, accounting, published with a complete text of the memoir, reads like a mystery novel crossed with the Warren Commission Report.

Why did *Fragments* take in so many readers and critics? While there is no easy explanation, it is possible to suggest several possibilities. To start with, the Holocaust as a subject renders critical faculties, if not completely silent, then at the very least extremely deferential. Critics approach books about the Holocaust with soft gloves, gentle smiles, and downcast eyes—witness Kozol's diffidence about his "right" to offer praise. To be sure, Holocaust books can't be reviewed the way other books are, for the simple reason that the Holocaust stands apart from other subjects, posed at an extreme of human understanding and experience. At the same time, the effect of this critical reticence shouldn't be overlooked: It led many of those who doubted the memoir's historical accuracy to keep their reservations to themselves.

In addition, *Fragments* is a story that many people, guilty of nothing worse than being optimistic and hopeful, want very much to believe. The book promises that a young child, all alone in the world, could survive the Holocaust and live to tell what happened. Though the events it describes are harrowing, the memoir delivers comfort.

Books like *Fragments*, ones that provide readers this much comfort so readily, are works of sentimental melodrama. At one point, a German woman promises young Benjamin that he will soon be playing and having fun, and then dispatches him to his first concentration camp, Majdanek. The narrator concludes, and the chapter ends, with the stunningly obvious and, I'm sorry, cloyingly poignant line, "Majdanek is no playground." Elsewhere, a German guard kicks a wooden ball back and forth with several children in the camp. Benjamin lets his defenses down and, in spite of himself, begins to feel something like joy. "Then," Wilkomirski writes, "I see the huge, thick arm lifting itself even higher in the air with the ball, I see the arm swung back, I see bull-neck's face suddenly grimace, then I see the arm come hurtling down in a huge

swing." The guard strikes a child with the heavy ball, and the child dies. Later, Benjamin sees a woman on top of a pile of bodies. She seems to be pregnant, and it looks as if the baby is alive, still kicking, inside her. When the boy draws near, hoping against hope, he discovers a bellyful of rats.

Such scenes, like many in *Fragments*, unfold with the calm-precedes-shock pattern that has become a staple of horror movies. Works of melodrama succeed because they go down easily, rendering what is impossible to swallow more palatable, flattening complex experiences into a series of recognizable emotional highs (disarming calms) and lows (jolt-ing shocks), and washing it all down with a lachrymose moral: Life for the children of the camps was no playground.

The real Wilkomirski's life, as revealed not in the pages of his own memoir but through the investigations of Eskin and especially Maechler, was probably no playground either. His living situation was sometimes chaotic, and his relations with others were fraught with tension and distrust. That said, having to endure a hot-tempered, depressive foster mother is not, by any stretch, Auschwitz.

Which raises an ultimately unanswerable question: Why would an author take genuine memories of the farmhouse he lived in with a moody foster mother and set them several years earlier in war-torn Krakow? Fiction writers, of course, do this sort of thing all the time, but when Wilkomirski packed up his Swiss memories, shipped them across the border, and moved the farmhouse and all its inhabitants, he called the result autobiography.

When asked for an explanation or corroborating evidence, Wilkomirski stacks his fragmented memories of a war he never saw and pain he did not experience against rigorous historical accounts, and judges his memories more accurate. Wilkomirski seems less like a con artist, someone who has set out to deceive others, than like a man who has done a good job of deceiving himself. He has, to date, admitted nothing. The most he has said is that he doesn't care whether readers think his memoir is true or not. One has the distinct impression that he will always have his memories.

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