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REVIEW ARTICLE

Contextualising Fred Wander's *The Seventh Well*

The Seventh Well. A Novel, by Fred Wander, translated by Michael Hofmann, New York and London, W.W. Norton, 2007, xiv + 160 pp., US\$23.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-393-06538-1

Der siebente Brunnen. Roman. Mit einem Nachwort von Ruth Klüger, by Fred Wander, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2005, 166 pp., €19.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-3-89244-837-2

Das gute Leben oder Von der Fröhlichkeit im Schrecken, by Fred Wander, Göttingen, Wallstein, [2nd revised edition] 2006, 399 pp., €24.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-3-89244-855-6

Hôtel Baalbek. Roman. Mit einem Nachwort von Erich Hackl, by Fred Wander, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2007, 228 pp., €19.90 (hardback), ISBN 978-3-8353-0150-4

Fred Wander, Leben und Werk, edited by Walter Grünzweig and Ursula Seeber, Bonn, Weidle, 2005, 255 pp., €23.00 (paperback), ISBN 3-931135-88-8

For many years primarily “a writer’s writer,”¹ Fred Wander (1917–2006) may finally be coming in from the cold. In Germany, Wander’s final editor, Thorsten Ahrend, has used his move to the Wallstein publishing house to initiate the republication of two of Wander’s novels and his memoirs while the recent publication of Michael Hofmann’s translation of Wander’s outstanding achievement, *The Seventh Well* (*Der siebente Brunnen*), is drawing considerable attention that one hopes will finally make Wander as widely known as he deserves. While not an unproblematic text, *The Seventh Well* is one of the most remarkable accounts of the camp experience published by a survivor of the Shoah and, though one should not perhaps recommend that the uninitiated reader consult Wander prior to, or instead of, Primo Levi, Jean Améry, or Ruth Klüger, there is every reason why *The Seventh Well* should be considered a must-read alongside their accounts.

Fred Wander was born in Vienna in 1917 as Fritz Rosenblatt. “Right from the outset I had a huge hump that made the children laugh,” he explained on one occasion. “It wasn’t really a hump, of course. It was my name, like all these Jewish names ... that corrupt officials had foisted on us unless you put a gold coin on the table.”² Wander, whose parents were East European Jews and had only settled in Vienna in 1911,³ came from a modest background. Clearly traumatised by his encounter with antisemitism as a child and youngster in Vienna, Wander fled to France after the *Anschluss*. “Arriving in France and experiencing life without constant harassment and humiliation were one and the same thing for me,” he later wrote in his memoirs.⁴

When the war started in September 1939, Wander was interned in France. He repeatedly fled from internment camps yet was regularly recaptured. In September 1942, Wander tried to flee to Switzerland but the Swiss authorities handed him over to the Vichy police.⁵ After a couple of days in the transit camp at Drancy, Wander was deported to Auschwitz on 16 September 1942.⁶ Exactly what happened next is not entirely clear and Auschwitz itself forms a remarkable blind spot in Wander's various accounts of this period. His memoirs would suggest that he was selected as a labourer immediately upon arrival and put straight on another train to one of the subsidiary camps belonging to Groß Rosen.⁷ Other accounts suggest that he remained in one of the subsidiary camps belonging to Auschwitz until May 1943 and was only then transferred to Groß Rosen. During the final winter of the war Wander survived several death marches, leading him to Buchenwald, from there to one of its subsidiary camps in Crawinkel and then back to Buchenwald, where he was liberated on 11 April 1945.⁸ It is this final period of the death marches that forms the main focus of *The Seventh Well*.

Following his liberation, he returned to Vienna, a step he described as "one of my greatest defeats," for "in May 1938, when I arrived in France, I had sworn to myself that I would never set foot in Vienna again."⁹ He had hoped to be reunited with his family in Vienna yet it transpired that his parents and sister had been murdered and only his brother had survived. Finding Viennese antisemitism still in rude good health, he now changed his name from Rosenblatt to Wander, a name he chose to reflect the notion that he was a restless wanderer with no clear sense of belonging. Eventually he admitted to himself that his attempts to emigrate to the US were unlikely to lead anywhere and he began to make a living for himself as a newspaper reporter and photographer. He had joined the Communist Party in 1947 and mainly worked for left-wing publications. Invited to join the first cohort of students at the newly established *Literaturinstitut* in Leipzig, an elite institution for the training of literary authors, he moved to the German Democratic Republic (GDR), initially just for the duration of the course, but then one thing led to another and eventually he settled in the GDR together with his second wife, Maxie Wander (1933–77). Their status as Austrians living in the GDR afforded them considerable privileges but also put them in an uneasy position where their foibles were often indulged but they were also rarely taken entirely seriously. Yet as Wander writes in his memoirs, "I would have been a stranger in any other country too."¹⁰ Wander initially made a living publishing books for youngsters – *Taifun über den Inseln* (1958) and *Bandidos* (1963) – and illustrated travel books on Corsica (1958) and Paris (1966) which he prepared in collaboration with his wife.¹¹

The year 1968 was a crucial turning point in at least two respects. Firstly, in May 1968, the Wanders' daughter, Kitty (born 1957), was killed on an unsecured building site in an accident that Fred and Maxie Wander considered entirely avoidable. They were deeply traumatised by this event and both considered it the root cause of the cancer that subsequently befell Maxie Wander and killed her in 1977.¹² Secondly, following the Warsaw Pact intervention in Prague in August 1968 Wander left the Communist Party. Wander himself placed considerable emphasis on the impact of the traumatic loss of his daughter on the composition of *The Seventh Well* and the book is dedicated to her. "In the midst of mourning our child I had the idea of writing a book about the young men who had stayed *there*," he explained in his memoirs.¹³ One also cannot help noticing that one of the former fellow prisoners whom Wander lends a voice in *The Seventh Well* is mourning the loss of his "beloved daughter ... She was

playing in front of the house when the hay wagon tipped over and crushed her.”¹⁴ Even so, as I will suggest below, it is perhaps possible to overestimate the significance of this trauma for *The Seventh Well*. Arguably, Wander’s final disillusionment with mainstream Communism also helped provide him with the conceptual leeway he needed to produce a text that was so radically at odds with the Communist take on National Socialism and the Shoah.

The publication of *The Seventh Well* in the GDR in 1971 was undoubtedly a major breakthrough for Wander but one should not exaggerate its impact. Wander was neither terribly well known as an author in his own right nor all that widely read in the GDR. Those in the know either loathed or admired him intensely. Wander went on to portray his exploits in Paris prior to the war in the novel *Ein Zimmer in Paris* (1975). In 1991 he published a novel, *Hôtel Baalbek*, that was based on his short summer of relative freedom in Marseille in 1942, prior to his disastrous attempt to flee to Switzerland and subsequent deportation, and 1996 saw the publication of his memoirs, *Das gute Leben*. These are all extremely interesting texts yet none of them is of the same quality as *The Seventh Well* and although they deserve much greater attention than they have received to date it seems hard to imagine that they could sustain a wider appeal were it not for the fact that they *also* help contextualise and provide innumerable intertextual references for a closer reading of *The Seventh Well*.

In short, in terms of his literary fame, Wander is only very gradually emerging from his wife’s shadow. Published in 1977 just before her death, Maxie Wander’s *Guten Morgen, du Schöne*, a remarkable volume of edited interviews she had undertaken with ordinary women in the GDR, was an extraordinary success and Wander subsequently edited a posthumous selection from her diaries and letters to equal acclaim. Yet following Maxie Wander’s death, he became increasingly dissatisfied with his situation in the GDR and in 1983 Wander finally moved back to Vienna with his third wife, Susanne, whom he had married the year before. Vienna, as he emphasised in his memoirs, “is not my home [*Heimat*] and yet it is my world.”¹⁵ Comfortable and for the most part at ease as he seems to have been living in Vienna until his death in 2006, he emphatically maintained his distance. “Yes,” he explained in 1994, “I hold an Austrian passport. But a Jew can no longer be an Austrian or a German! I am obviously not speaking for all Jews, I am not authorized to do so, this is my personal opinion. I could not stomach calling myself an Austrian; if I am asked, I could only ever call myself a Jew!”¹⁶

Scholarly secondary literature on Wander is only gradually accruing and the volume edited by Walter Grünzweig and Ursula Seeber is the first collection dedicated exclusively to Wander. It is organised in two parts. The first part assembles recollections and assessments by friends and colleagues who were involved with Wander in various ways, especially during his time in the GDR, while the second part consists of scholarly articles in the conventional sense. In the first section, Wolfgang Trampe, Wander’s East German editor, offers an account of their collaboration as Wander wrote *The Seventh Well* and Eberhard Görner provides an interesting and well-documented account of the ultimately abortive attempt to turn the book into a film in 1982–3. Also included is an interesting text by Christa Wolf that displays considerable sensitivity to some of Wander’s core concerns but also demonstrates the extent to which even she had ultimately internalised many of the constraints of the official GDR discourse on National Socialism and the Shoah.¹⁷ Wolf immediately drew attention to Wander’s preoccupation with form in *The Seventh Well* and the extent to which explicit discussions of the nature and constraints of storytelling form

a constant counterpoint to the narrator's efforts to tell his story and that of his fellow prisoners.

The second part of the collection, it has to be said, is a somewhat uneven affair. Erin McGlothlin and Klemens Renoldner offer interesting discussions of *The Seventh Well* and of Wander's work as a playwright. Christine Schmidjell discusses Wander's work as a newspaper journalist and photographer in Vienna in the early 1950s (before he moved to the GDR) and provides a bibliography of Wander's articles published at the time. Walter Grünzweig and Hannes Krauss seek to demonstrate the thematic continuity throughout Wander's literary oeuvre. Grünzweig does so by focusing on the three books that Wander wrote for youngsters and does a good job of tracing often coded references to Wander's core themes in these books. Krauss's attempt to achieve the same effect by focusing on Wander's travel books is more problematic and seems to contradict, at least in part, his own earlier work on Wander.

In an essay published in 2003, Krauss claimed that "one looks in vain for topics like ... emigration, flight, persecution and imprisonment in the camps in Wander's books of the fifties and sixties."¹⁸ In his contribution to this volume, he now concedes that the past is in fact a "substantial theme" in Wander's book on Paris (published in 1966).¹⁹ Yet this, surely, is still a curious understatement. The title of the book is in fact *Doppeltes Antlitz. Pariser Impressionen*, which translates roughly as "Two Faces. Impressions of Paris."²⁰ The "two faces" are those of the past and the present. The book has two parts relating to Wander's two stays in Paris in 1962 and 1964. Yet the two parts also stand for two very different approaches on these two occasions. "Back then," Wander wrote, "in June 1962, the memories were still too fresh. Unconsciously I was refusing to take in anything new ... Only during a subsequent stay, when I was no longer looking exclusively for the past, was I able to observe this changed France with a detachment that allowed me to see what was new."²¹ During his first stay, then, Wander is preoccupied almost exclusively with the past. Indeed, the book literally begins with an account of his trying to get a room in the same hotel he had lived in as an émigré twenty years earlier and most of what follows describes his attempts to trace the relatives and associates of former fellow refugees and camp inmates. His account in the Paris book includes much that readers of Wander's later texts will find familiar, including a characterisation of the fellow prisoner Jacques that is already very close to the one in *The Seventh Well*.²² Wander eventually meets a former member of the Résistance ("Capitaine Yves") who is only too happy, once he overcomes his initial scepticism, to talk to Wander about his exploits during the war but concludes, at the end of the first part of the book, by telling Wander that "you are right in wanting to know how we got here but it is even more important to explore where things are going. Make sure you come back quite soon; I will help you see Paris in its true light."²³

The second part of the Paris book hence covers Wander's deliberate attempt to take a fresh look at Paris, uninhibited by his memories. As he wrote in the epilogue, he "decided to abandon the retrospective and take in current reality."²⁴ Yet certain continuities nevertheless remain. Indeed, although Wander does not choose one of his old haunts, he does pick a hotel in a quarter that has seen little change and the inter-textual alarm bells are immediately set off when it transpires that the hotel room he takes during this second stay in Paris, just like the one he lived in during his previous stay, is on the sixth floor;²⁵ a trope Wander uses repeatedly in his texts and that is thrown all the more sharply into relief by the (apparently inadvertent) revelation in his memoirs that the room he and his wife took during their first stay in Paris in 1962 was in fact on the fifth floor.²⁶ Wander again meets "Capitaine Yves," who has made

arrangements to show Wander the true new Paris,²⁷ but whose role gradually recedes as Wander becomes increasingly involved with younger people.

Wander's exploits are now indeed much more directed towards the present, yet inevitably the past repeatedly breaks through into the present even now. None too surprisingly, Wander's visit to the Jewish Quarter brings up the past.²⁸ Wander meets a stranger there who shows him around, explaining how many Jews had been deported from each house. He and his two brothers had also been deported. Yet Wander realises that the stranger is in fact dying to tell him a different story, the story of the tailor Jehuda Lifschitz. Apart from the fact that it relates not to the camp context but to the pre-deportation period, this entire episode is startlingly close to Wander's mode of narrative in *The Seventh Well*. Wander subsequently encounters a march to the memorial for the deported on 8 May.²⁹ Many gave their lives, Wander ruminates on this occasion, "so that their children can play and laugh here, that they need feel neither hunger nor fear; so that the people can live and love and be carefree as they look out of their windows in the evenings. [Did they give their lives] Also so that they forget?"³⁰

Wander then introduces a Parisian cab driver who survived Sachsenhausen. "If he has a German customer he sometimes says a few words in German, just for fun. If he is asked where he learnt the language he simply says: 'In Oranienburg, in the KZ!'" Wander then adds, "it is not forgotten, it is always present." He visits the cab driver and his family, all of whom survived. "They do not speak about it," Wander explains, "but it is always present."³¹ This too is one of Wander's perennial themes. As he explains, "somebody who was in a KZ never shakes that off again."³² He cites a letter from 1974 in which Maxie Wander asks him, "will your imprisonment and your attempts to escape continue for ever like a curse (forgive the grand term) on you and your family?"³³ The image Wander uses most frequently to illustrate the problem is that of his suddenly waking up in the night and not knowing where he is. "Time and again in all these years I would wake up, bathed in sweat, and for a terrible minute I wouldn't know where I am ... in Vienna, in Paris, in Marseille, in Berlin – or in Buchenwald? ... Nobody who was there will ever get out of these barracks again."³⁴

Krauss's suggestion that the past is a "substantial theme" in the Paris book is surely a considerable understatement, then. The book is replete with intertextual references to Wander's subsequent work and this has two important implications. Firstly, it suggests the need for a close and detailed comparison between Wander's conceptual approach and narrative strategies in the Paris book and his subsequent texts to gauge how these changed over time and what the impact of the two momentous events of 1968 on Wander's work really was. Secondly, it would seem that Wander in fact used the Paris book of 1966 to test-drive some of his sensitive preoccupations in public, thus giving him a clear head start not only on the novels that are generally credited with playing a key role in introducing these themes into GDR discourse – Peter Edel's *Die Bilder des Zeugen Schattmann* (1969), Jurek Becker's *Jakob der Lügner* (1969) and Wander's own *Der siebente Brunnen* (1971) – but even on the earlier collection of poems edited by Heinz Seydel, *Welch Wort in die Kälte geworfen* (1968), that Thomas Schmidt singles out as a particularly significant milestone in this respect.³⁵

The Seventh Well has raised concerns on three main counts: its status as a work of fiction, the apparent optimism of its take on life and survival in the camps and, closely related, its discussion of the reasons for survival. On the first count, why beat about the bush: as a result of Wander's self-professed und unapologetic approach to

storytelling, it is hard to discern where the boundary between fiction and non-fiction runs in any of his texts. As he explained,

one could in fact accuse me of spending my entire life working on only one book³⁶ ... and especially of repeating myself so that occasionally a story will appear in one book that I have already told elsewhere, just in a different way. Here I have to make a confession: I adhere to the method of the genuine Jewish storytellers I encountered in the camps and whose way of storytelling has massively influenced me. After all, one had to make sure one didn't bore one's listeners. And I contend that a tale of love, misfortune, happiness and death is no less true for being told in five different versions.

Each time a story is "turned over," i.e. told in a new way, "we discover new connections, new meanings and symbols." For Wander, this approach is characteristic of the "Jewish world of the east" that has been "'murdered away' as the Jews say, it has disappeared and this is really my only topic."³⁷ On the biographical and experiential level, Wander's commitment to this Jewish tradition of storytelling as he understood it was doubtless heartfelt and genuine. Whether his grasp of this tradition went terribly far beyond this emotive identification is hard to say, though, and one should perhaps be careful not to credit Wander with a degree of sophistication at this juncture to which he himself never laid claim. "I believe," he explained in one interview, "that some Jewish storytellers come from the Hasidic tradition. I have not studied this," he added. "I know very little about Judaism/Jewishness [*Judentum*] – I live it!"³⁸

As an illustration of the intricacies involved in Wander's dealings with fiction and non-fiction, take the account of Mendel Teichmann's attempt to teach the narrator how to tell a story. *The Seventh Well* begins with this account which is absolutely crucial in establishing what is one of the most remarkable qualities of this text, namely the way in which it sets a counterpoint to the actual narrative by constantly reflecting on the potential and limits of the storytelling process. As Wander explains,

This Mendel Teichmann did really exist. It's just that I can remember neither his real name nor do I recall his speech verbatim. And that he taught me how to tell a story is, of course, fictional ... But this person did exist and we really did walk up and down between the barracks on our rare free days and I was deeply moved by the poems and anecdotes he recited in Yiddish ... And I have invented his speech but this is a good example for the way in which fiction sometimes comes closer to the truth than reality.³⁹

Wander resorts to fictionalisation, then, not in order to alter or detract from the reality he encountered but in an attempt to portray it with greater precision and acuity. In short, *The Seventh Well* is in no straightforward sense of the word fiction. But then neither, of course, can Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* and *The Truce* neatly be categorised as works of pure non-fiction.⁴⁰ This is not to say that Wander and Levi resorted to fictionalisation in equal measure in these texts but it does suggest that their narrative techniques, rather than standing in stark opposition to one another, mark points on a continuum. On balance, *The Seventh Well* makes more sense when understood not as a semi-autobiographical work of fiction but as a memoir that resorts to partial fictionalisation because its author knows no other way of saying what he needs to say with sufficient clarity and precision.

Wander was searching for a means "to bring the dead young men in Buchenwald to life ... It is impossible to say something about five million dead. About five or six people whom one knew, whom one watched live and die," however, "about them one can say something."⁴¹ Yet there exists, Wander writes in his memoirs, "no living

language to speak or write about what we, the survivors of the Shoah, saw. We speak and write yet at the same time we remain silent, we do not have the words. And nobody who was not *there* could understand.”⁴² The survivor’s own ability to deal with his or her experiences is equally at stake, though. “Remembering,” Wander states in his memoirs, “can be lethal if it catches you off-guard and overpowers you, driving you to the verge of madness.”⁴³ Or, as the narrator in *Hôtel Baalbek* puts it, those who were not in the camps cannot understand what it meant to be there but those who were there and who saw and survived this “hell” are also incapable of explaining their experience because it suffocates them and the shame makes their voice falter.⁴⁴ “Shame” here presumably refers to “the feeling of guilt at having survived and the images of dread in the eyes of those whose paths we have crossed,”⁴⁵ but also to the sense of shame Primo Levi described in the account of his liberation in Auschwitz (in *The Truce*) as

the shame that drowned us after the selections, and every time we had to watch or submit to, some outrage: the shame the Germans did not know, that the just man experiences at another man’s crime; the feeling of guilt that such a crime should exist, that it should have been introduced irrevocably into the world of things that exist, and that his will for good should have proved too weak or null, and should not have availed in defence.⁴⁶

The form and style of *The Seventh Well* are Wander’s response to the dilemma of finding a way for those who have “been with the dead”⁴⁷ to negotiate the experience of this hell in their own minds and at least begin to communicate that experience to those who have not been *there*. We can surmise that Wander resorts to fictionalisation in so far as it is necessary to facilitate this process of negotiation and communication. Yet in appropriating what he understands as a specifically Jewish tradition of storytelling to achieve this, Wander not only finds an ideal medium to lend a voice to those who did not survive. This appropriation also implies that the product of his labour by its very existence vouches for the reality of survival, the continuity of Jewish life beyond the Shoah.

This arguably brings us to the second concern raised by *The Seventh Well*: its apparent optimism. Before assessing this issue on its own terms, it should be borne in mind that Wander’s optimism in *The Seventh Well*, such as it is, displaced a very different and much blunter form of optimism, namely that inherent in the official GDR interpretation of National Socialism. When focusing on the modes of representation and interpretation deployed by authors writing about the Shoah, scholars’ principal concern tends to be with the fundamental difficulties involved in representing and making sense of an experience as traumatic and singular as this. This is so for good reasons, of course, but, as Thomas Schmidt points out in his extremely interesting comparative discussion of Fred Wander, Peter Edel, and Jurek Becker, this focus can also detract attention from the ways in which the authors in question may be compelled to contend with rather more immediate and contemporaneous discursive constraints.⁴⁸

No author writes, let alone publishes, in a vacuum, of course. Yet Wander, his anomalous and privileged status as an Austrian citizen living in the GDR notwithstanding, was grappling not only with issues of trauma and ineffability. He was also writing under the auspices of a dictatorship whose own sense of legitimacy hinged to a considerable degree on a very specific and carefully guarded interpretation of National Socialism. This interpretation was ultimately incapable of conceptualising

antisemitism and the genocide against European Jewry as anything other than an anti-Communist ploy and favoured a portrayal of the camps as sites of (Communist) resistance rather than focusing on the experience that Adorno so memorably summed up in the statement that “since Auschwitz fearing death means fearing worse than death” (*Negative Dialectics*). By explicitly tying what he considered the redemptive potential of narrative to a specific Jewish tradition of storytelling, Wander’s account was fundamentally at odds with this conceptual framework from its very inception.

Yet ultimately Wander systematically deconstructs the apparent optimism of his own narrative anyway. Schmidt focuses on two core passages to exemplify this. The first of these passages is from the tenth chapter, “What does the forest make you think of?” At the heart of this chapter is the story of Tadeusz Moll, a very young prisoner who before coming to Crawinkel had been a member of the *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz. In a truly miraculous fashion, Moll had been rescued twice by fellow prisoners. In the first instance, he was saved from being gassed immediately on arrival by two strangers who took him along to join the *Sonderkommando*. Later, members of the *Sonderkommando* smuggled him back into the main camp when he became sick. He consequently survived the liquidation of the *Sonderkommando* and found himself among those prisoners marched westwards by the Germans as the Red Army closed in on Auschwitz. In Crawinkel too, Moll can rely on the kindness of strangers. Indeed, insofar as Moll’s miraculous survival in Auschwitz makes him a symbol of hope, there is a sense in which his fellow prisoners, by helping to keep him alive are also keeping their hope alive. Yet in the end Tadeusz Moll, the prisoner who despite having stood at the precipice and looked into the abyss had been rescued not once but twice in Auschwitz, simply fell asleep without telling the fellow prisoners on his work detail where to find him. They had to return to the camp without him in the evening and he was registered as missing during the roll call, which was more or less equivalent to an automatic death sentence. Having been forced to stand outside with other recaptured escapees for a night and a day he was hanged the following evening. The narrator proceeds to imagine at length what might have been going through Moll’s mind during this time and it is this passage that Schmidt cites, pointing to a crucial interruption in the flow of the narrator’s discussion.⁴⁹ “No,” he interjects at one point, “we won’t presume that the hours spent standing under the gallows raise one’s consciousness of existence. That would be water on the mills of the despisers of life. Let’s take it at face value: dying means dying.”⁵⁰

The second core passage Schmidt singles out to demonstrate how Wander deconstructs the apparently redemptive nature of his account is in the twelfth and final chapter, “Joschko and His Brothers,” in which the narrator experiences the liberation of Buchenwald hidden in the children’s barracks. This is in any case a highly remarkable passage because it touches directly on what was arguably the single most important symbol of the official GDR interpretation of the camp experience: the self-liberation of Buchenwald by the well-established Communist resistance movement within the camp. Yet Wander, like most of the prisoners brought back from the camps in the east, was not in the main camp, he was in the so-called small camp (“*Kleines Lager*”), where conditions were inordinately worse and resistance was much less viable. Given his desire to give voices principally to some of the Jewish prisoners in the camps, it would in any case have made little sense for his emphasis to shift at this juncture. Yet in maintaining his focus Wander did, of course, find himself in a situation where he very explicitly and emphatically had to challenge the emphasis suggested by the officially sanctioned account and interpretation of the liberation of Buchenwald.⁵¹

The narrator recalls that he found himself “in a kind of ecstasy ... But,” he goes on to explain, “it wasn’t the muffled sounds of jubilation from the upper camp, not the clacking of spent bullets from rifles held in prisoners’ hands,” that caused this ecstasy. “It was the faces of Joschko and his brothers” that explained his jubilation, for to him they symbolised the continuity of Jewish existence. “I knew right then: everything will start over, nothing has been lost ... I was lying between a dead old man, peaceably turning his beard up to heaven, and a rabble of little Jewish boys, at the zero point of the world. It seemed to me as though this sick world in its last dying spasm had spat out a mouthful of children.” The narrator now piles on the pathos:

I looked now at the children, now at the old man next to me, and I was astounded. I was astounded by the bounty of nature: a beautiful old man, unknown, nameless, a wise man with even features and a splendid white beard and a mighty beak of a nose that might have been carved out of ivory. He lay there on his back, not like a corpse, but a statue (his eyes and mouth were shut fast), the embodiment of human perfection: grown old, life lived to fruition and set down without a complaint or a superfluous word. When had he arrived? Who had brought him in here, to the children’s barracks? He smiles in death, as though in answer to my question. He was the only dead man in all those years whom I saw smiling. He had handed himself on. Joschko and his bothers, who did not realize it, had picked up the staff he had thrown down, picked it up and carried it on among themselves.⁵²

Yet, as Schmidt points out, the narrator’s pathos at this juncture is promptly subverted, for the statement about Joschko and his brothers picking up the staff is immediately followed by the following remark in brackets:⁵³ “They had, incidentally, gone through his [the dead man’s] pockets and found a lump of hard bread in them; also they had gone through my pockets while I was asleep, they found my tin spoon, whose handle I had sharpened to a knife, they used it before my eyes with sublime indifference.”⁵⁴ It is not only these concluding remarks that counter the redemptive pathos of the narrator’s ecstasy, though. The narrator in fact begins the entire passage by pointing out that “the ecstasy that shook me was not that of Ezekiel who sees the heavenly hosts, the chariot of fire and the angels; it was the onset of the spotted typhus which, a couple of days later, was to completely befuddle me.”⁵⁵

On a similar note, let us recall Mendel Teichmann, whose attempt to teach the narrator how to tell a story, as we saw, introduces to *The Seventh Well* the notion of a redemptive quality in storytelling and whom the narrator continues to recall on later occasions. Not only is Teichmann already dead at the end of the first chapter. As the narrator explains, “he died a senseless and undignified death, let me pass over it in silence. His poems are forgotten, his ashes are scattered over the woods and fields of Poland.”⁵⁶ What is more, the book’s very first sentence in fact speaks of Teichmann’s death before the storytelling theme has even been introduced: “Three weeks after the conversation I will now relate, Mendel would die.”⁵⁷ Hofmann has translated this first sentence as follows: “In the beginning was a conversation. Three weeks after the conversation, Mendel died.”⁵⁸ Here I do take issue with Hofmann for this rendering surely privileges the status of the conversation between Teichmann and the narrator over the fact of Teichmann’s death in a way that emphasises those same redemptive implications that Wander was in fact at pains to subvert from the very outset. On Schmidt’s account, Wander’s achievement lies in the fact that his text seeks to negate redemptive modes of memorialisation without by extension negating on their own terms the prisoners’ desperate and in most cases futile attempts to maintain hope and stay alive.⁵⁹ This invariably results in something of a tightrope act and may explain

why some readers encounter *The Seventh Well* as a more optimistic and redemptive text than it actually is.

What then, finally, of the notion that Wander's discussion of the reasons for survival is problematic? Jonathan Beckman in his review of *The Seventh Well* in the *Times Literary Supplement* has suggested that Wander "comes disconcertingly close to suggesting that the survivors in some way deserved to live."⁶⁰ Beckman cites the following formulation as a case in point: "The ones who survived were the fulfilled ones, who wanted to drain their lives to the very last drop – even if it were a cup of poison."⁶¹ Beckman's irritation is understandable and Wander makes similarly disquieting statements on various occasions. "Dying was so easy," he explains in his interview with Wolfgang Trampe; "one only had to give up for an hour or a day."⁶² Indeed, as the narrator in *Hôtel Baalbek* puts it, "death was a release; to give oneself up to it and let go was a great temptation."⁶³ Conversely, what was it, Wander asks in his memoirs, "that allowed a few of us to survive, not only physically. I believe it was the struggle to maintain one's self-respect."⁶⁴

Of these contentions the latter is perhaps less offensive than the former. Wander's claim, after all, is not that one was guaranteed survival by clinging to one's dignity and hence, by extension, that only those who failed to make the effort died. He merely states that among those who to the best of their ability tried to survive without becoming actively complicit in the camp regime those fared better who did try to cling on. Wander's emphasis on the temptation of giving oneself up is partly down to his attempt to salvage the act of letting go as the one last dignified option still open to prisoners who found themselves beyond redemption. This is most evident in an episode in *Hôtel Baalbek*. The narrator relates the case of a fellow prisoner who stated one day that he would be dead in a week's time and exactly a week later lay down and died. The narrator wonders how this could be and eventually reaches the conclusion that the fellow prisoner had not so much foreseen the time of his death as determined it himself.⁶⁵

Yet Wander knows full well that this is at best part of the picture. As we have already seen, he is intensely familiar with survivor guilt in various guises. Moreover, as he explains in his memoirs, "I believe that each so-called survivor lives a different survival. Every one of them has his own story, a story of failure in a world of denial and silence."⁶⁶ Towards the end of the memoirs the death of a close friend in the GDR gives him occasion to come back to *The Seventh Well*. "I have written a book about the young men ... who died in Buchenwald," he begins.

But here I have not yet said how they died: alone and abandoned in the midst of a closely packed mass of men. Because the fatigue ... Nobody can imagine this fatigue as we fell onto our bunks, hungry and totally wiped out after 16 hours of hard labour. Nobody had the energy left to look out for the one who was lying next to him and was groaning and perhaps lay dying. Everyone was groaning and moaning.⁶⁷

A little further on Wander states that coincidence and sheer good luck had always been the crucial factors in determining his life and at this point he expressly throws his survival into the equation.⁶⁸ Those formulations that would seem to apportion merit or blame to survival or death in the camps, irritating though they remain on their own terms, are by no means all that Wander has to say on the matter and it seems highly doubtful that Wander would have claimed with confidence that he knew the answer to the vexing question of what facilitated survival in the camps (assuming for a moment there could be any satisfactory answer to this question). Wander has told us

what he knows about his own camp experience and survival. "I don't know whether what I think is true in all cases – in my case it is true."⁶⁹

Ultimately, *The Seventh Well* does exactly what it says on the tin. "People," to cite one of Wander's general observations, "find one another and make choices without realizing it."⁷⁰ *The Seventh Well* is a personal account that seeks to lend a posthumous voice not to a representative cross-section of the camp population with all the dilemmas it faced but to those whom Wander chose. It is not least for this reason that a reading of *The Seventh Well* in isolation would indeed render a rather lopsided grasp of life in the camps. But then, as Levi was the first to admit, *If This Is a Man* also provides a distorted picture because the camp he survived, Monowitz, though part of the Auschwitz camp system, was "not typical of the complex of camps that was Auschwitz ... While I thought I was writing the authentic story of the concentration camp experience, I was telling the story of my camp, of just one."⁷¹ What has allowed Levi's account to become widely regarded as the gold standard by which to measure all accounts of the camp universe, and rightly so, is not its comprehensive and representative nature but the transparent and reflective nature of its approach to those aspects of the story it does cover. It thus helps us understand more than it can actually account for directly and a similar claim can be made for *The Seventh Well*. Let me repeat: I am not suggesting that readers turn to Wander prior to, or instead of, Levi, Améry, or Klüger but there is every reason why *The Seventh Well* should be considered a must-read alongside their accounts.

Notes

1. Reiter, "Was mich entmenschlicht hat," 3.
2. Wander, "Wie ich mich als Jude sehe," 125.
3. Wander, *Das gute Leben*, 34.
4. *Ibid.*, 17.
5. *Ibid.*, 82.
6. Wander, *The Seventh Well*, xiii.
7. Wander, *Das gute Leben*, 90.
8. Wander, *The Seventh Well*, xiv.
9. Wander, *Das gute Leben*, 113.
10. *Ibid.*, 193.
11. They would later publish two more travel books on The Netherlands (1972) and Provence (1978) and Wander published another novel for youngsters (*Nicole*) in 1971.
12. Wander, *Das gute Leben*, 234.
13. *Ibid.*, 240.
14. Wander, *The Seventh Well*, 50–1. In a similar vein, Baptiste, the character modelled on Wander in his next novel, *Ein Zimmer in Paris*, sets out to find his now grown-up daughter whom he has never met. When he finally arrives in the village where she lives he finds the people there in uproar and mourning over the loss of a little girl who had just drowned and who turns out to be his granddaughter. Wander, *Ein Zimmer in Paris*, 170–2.
15. Wander, *Das gute Leben*, 390.
16. Wander, "Nicht jeder braucht eine Heimat," 43.
17. This text was first published in 1972 (in response to the first edition of *The Seventh Well*) in the GDR's most illustrious literary periodical, *Sinn und Form*, and later republished as an epilogue to the West German edition of *The Seventh Well* published by Luchterhand in 1985.
18. Krauss, "Reise-Erinnerungen," 322.
19. Krauss, "(W)anders Reisen," 179.
20. Wander, *Doppeltes Antlitz*.
21. *Ibid.*, 78–9.
22. *Ibid.*, 63–5; Wander, *The Seventh Well*, 23–5.
23. Wander, *Doppeltes Antlitz*, 100.

24. Ibid., 190.
25. Ibid., 103.
26. Wander, *Das gute Leben*, 208.
27. Wander, *Doppeltes Antlitz*, 112.
28. Ibid., 142–5.
29. Ibid., 158–60.
30. Ibid., 158.
31. Ibid., 161.
32. Trampe, “Gespräch mit Fred Wander,” 15.
33. Wander, *Das gute Leben*, 271.
34. Ibid., 351, cf. also 399 and Wander, *Ein Zimmer in Paris*, 79.
35. Schmidt, “‘Unsere Geschichte?’” 410.
36. On a similar note, he writes in his memoirs, “perhaps I would write the same book all my life and would never complete it!” and, “as I sometimes admit with embarrassment, strictly speaking I am forever only scribbling away at one book” (Wander, *Das gute Leben*, 297, 397).
37. Trampe, “Gespräch mit Fred Wander,” 20.
38. Ibid., 13.
39. Ibid.
40. Cf. Belpoliti, “‘I Am a Centaur’,” xxii–xxiii.
41. Trampe, “Gespräch mit Fred Wander,” 17.
42. Wander, *Das gute Leben*, 397.
43. Ibid., 351.
44. Wander, *Hôtel Baalbek*, 70.
45. Wander, *Das gute Leben*, 161.
46. Levi, *The Truce*, 218.
47. Wander, “Wie ich mich als Jude sehe,” 124.
48. Schmidt, “‘Unsere Geschichte?’” 94.
49. Ibid., 98.
50. Wander, *The Seventh Well*, 123.
51. Schmidt, “‘Unsere Geschichte?’” 413. All this might beg the question why Wander was able to publish *The Seventh Well* at all if it failed in substantial ways to comply with integral elements of the regime-sanctioned interpretative scheme. Schmidt suggests that Wander essentially personified the resolution of this conflict. He had chosen to live in the GDR and maintained (in fact right until the end of his life) that, all his various misgivings notwithstanding, the GDR had indeed been the better German state. While his interpretation of National Socialism and the Shoah differed from that of the regime, then, his practical conclusion, the “lesson” he had drawn from this historical chapter, as it were, seemed rather more compliant and it was in the regime’s interest to emphasise and encourage this compliance rather than draw attention to points of divergence. Schmidt contrasts this conciliatory strategy with the open rejection, a decade later, of Primo Levi. Wander was in fact instrumental in trying to get *If This Is a Man* published in the GDR yet the project was eventually vetoed by the official organisation of former resistance fighters (Komitee antifaschistischer Widerstandskämpfer). It has even been suggested that Wander’s support for this attempted publication ultimately only helped discredit it in the eyes of its opponents, who had already considered *The Seventh Well* beyond the pale but felt unable to veto it, given Wander’s status and track record (Schmidt, 416–17, 424–5 n. 72). Schmidt implies that the debacle with *If This Is a Man* helped precipitate Wander’s decision to turn his back on the GDR in 1983 (ibid., 425 n. 80). The failure of the film project mentioned earlier may equally have contributed to this decision.
52. Wander, *The Seventh Well*, 146–7.
53. Schmidt, “‘Unsere Geschichte?’” 98.
54. Wander, *The Seventh Well*, 147.
55. Ibid., 146–7.
56. Ibid., 12.
57. Wander, *Der siebente Brunnen*, 7 (my literal translation).
58. Wander, *The Seventh Well*, 5.
59. Schmidt, “‘Unsere Geschichte?’” 97.
60. Beckman, “Stories of Survival,” 21.
61. Wander, *The Seventh Well*, 26.
62. Trampe, “Gespräch mit Fred Wander,” 15.

63. Wander, *Hôtel Baalbek*, 197.
64. Wander, *Das gute Leben*, 307–8.
65. Wander, *Hôtel Baalbek*, 197.
66. Wander, *Das gute Leben*, 203.
67. *Ibid.*, 361.
68. *Ibid.*, 365.
69. Trampe, “Gespräch mit Fred Wander,” 22.
70. Wander, *Das gute Leben*, 395.
71. Levi, *The Voice of Memory*, 5.

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