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## **The Wilkomirski Case: *Fragments or Figments?***

In 1995, Binjamin Wilkomirski, a Swiss clarinet maker and performer, published in Suhrkamp's prestigious Jüdischen Verlag a book entitled *Bruchstücke. Aus einer Kindheit 1939–48*, translated into English the following year under the title *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*. This purported memoir, an account of the author's survival as a child in the Maidanek and Auschwitz death camps, sets forth two parallel series of recollections—the fragmented remains of largely painful experiences—which alternate between one story-line about the world of the barracks and another about his subsequent life in Switzerland. Both strands proceed, more or less, in chronological order.

During the next three years, *Fragments* received numerous prizes, including the National Jewish Book Award, the *Prix Mémoire de la Shoah*, and the *Jewish Quarterly* Literary Prize, and it was translated into nine languages, with at least two more translations in preparation; excerpts were even publicly read at the Salzburg Festival, together with passages and poems from Elie Wiesel and Paul Celan, by Elfriede Jelinek, one of Austria's leading writers and women of conscience. But then, Daniel Ganzfried, himself the child of a survivor and the author of a novel (1995) drawing on his father's Auschwitz experiences, published a series of articles (1998a, 1998b, 1998c) in the Swiss weekly newsmagazine, *Die Weltwoche*, that questioned the authenticity of Wilkomirski's account. Several subsequent legal, journalistic, and historical investigations—most notably by Stefan Maechler (2000), whose researches were undertaken at the behest of Wilkomirski's former literary

This paper began as a presentation in October 1998 to the Vanderbilt University Psychiatry Department Humanities Seminar, a venue that had originally been scheduled for Binjamin Wilkomirski but instead became about him. A fuller version was delivered at the Sigmund Freud Museum in Vienna on April 26, 2002.

agent, Liepman AG—have concluded that the author of *Fragments* was not Benjamin Wilkomirski, born in Riga in 1939 and the child survivor of death camps, but Bruno Doessekker, who was born Bruno Grosjean in 1941 to an unwed mother named Yvonne in Biel, Switzerland (Gourevitch 1999; Lappin 1999; Eskin 2002).<sup>1</sup> The results of a recently released DNA test have confirmed this finding (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 2002).<sup>2</sup>

Despite the vast amount of evidence arrayed against Bruno Doessekker's claim to be Benjamin Wilkomirski, the question remains: was this affair a hoax or a delusion? By drawing upon both the psychopathological and the criminal senses of "case," my title seeks to reflect (and reflect on) this conundrum. Put more broadly, does the constellation of claims and counterclaims, narratives and counternarratives, surrounding Wilkomirski-Doessekker—the hyphenated name by which he will be referred to in the remainder of this article—present a case study of a victim of trauma or an account of criminal fraud the goals of which included fame and fortune, the latter via royalties and, perhaps, reparations?<sup>3</sup>

Yet—and this will bear the brunt of what follows—the Wilkomirski affair has always been about more than personal identity. The response to *Fragments* has less to do with the *symptoms of a case* than with the *case as a symptom*. As I examined the "case history" of his identities and intentions, questions about the nature and function of memory, both in general and specifically with regard to the Shoah on the national, institutional, and individual levels, were ever-present in the texts I read. Issues of the responsibility of our social and human sciences—especially psychoanalysis—came to the fore. Many of the participants voiced concerns about the contemporary culture of spectacle. In short, I encountered a series of knots, many of which I had—operating under different assumptions—previously sought to untangle in teaching *Fragments*. The present essay will move from the case made by the author of *Fragments*, to my own affair with the author, to that author's fall.

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**Wilkomirski's Case**

After the narrator of *Fragments* states his claim to have a photographic memory, the first series of his “recollections” begins with flash-images of pre-Nazi-occupied Riga followed by a brief montage of scenes from the *Razzia* (round-up of Jews) by the Latvian militia.<sup>4</sup> A man the narrator believes may be his father is murdered, and then he escapes by night on a ship with his mother and brothers. This leads to a period of hiding in a Polish farmhouse interrupted by his capture and removal to Maidanek’s children’s barracks. There ensues a series of violent and at times grotesque episodes as well as an encounter with a dying woman who may be his mother. The Maidanek sequence culminates with the narrator finding himself on a pile of naked corpses and then being transported to an unnamed second camp in which he is kept in hiding. In later interviews, the author claimed to have deduced that the second camp was Auschwitz-Birkenau and that he was held with other blond-haired, blue-eyed non-Aryans selected for ophthalmic experiments (Wilkomirski 1997; see Maechler 2001a, 39–40). The final scenes of this first series of recollections show the narrator joining others leaving the camp. A woman, from whom the boy learns his name is Wilkomirski, takes him to Cracow where he eventually enters an orphanage.

The second series of putative recollections starts with the narrator’s illegal entry into Switzerland and includes several scenes from his stay in an orphanage in that country. When the first story-line reaches, chronologically, the beginning of the second, the memoir recalls the narrator’s youth and adolescence through a series of alienating experiences of home, school, and play that unfold once he is taken in by an unnamed elderly Protestant Swiss doctor and his wife. Even as the narrator perceives his early life in Switzerland to be a continuation of the world of the barracks, he repeatedly receives the message, “You must forget that now. Forget it—it’s a bad dream. It was only a bad dream,’ [the doctor’s wife] kept saying. ‘You must forget everything’” (Wilkomirski 1996, 122).

*Fragments* culminates in a high school history class where the instructor screens newsreels of the liberation of the camps and the narrator learns that the war had ended over a decade earlier, that the world of the barracks had long since disappeared, and that he had, when he exited the camp, in fact been liberated.

There is also an afterword—as it turns out, one demanded by the publisher to allay initial doubts voiced in the reviewing process—in which the narrator acknowledges that the only identification papers in his possession show a different name, birth date, and birthplace. (Incidentally, he provides the date, but neither the place nor the name on these papers.) In opposition to such official documentation, however, he defiantly proffers his own memory-determined identity. Further, he asserts the truth of his account, *Fragments*, against those who—in the past, present, or future—would deny him and other childhood survivors their memories and hence their identities. Wilkomirski-Doessekker’s doubters and deniers emerged *en masse* three years later.<sup>5</sup>

### **My Affair with Wilkomirski**

One could say that I entered the case in the last days of August 1998 when I received an e-mail message from my friend Marion Faber, a Professor of German at Swarthmore College. She asked me if I had heard the latest about Wilkomirski. I had no idea to what she was referring. Responding to my incomprehension, Marion informed me that a Swiss colleague of hers had seen on the web site of *Die Weltwoche* an article declaring *Fragments* to be a hoax.

To say the least, I was rather taken aback. For one thing, I had been using this book in my Holocaust courses for the previous two years and had intended to use it again in the coming fall semester. For another, I had secured an invitation for Wilkomirski to come to Vanderbilt University, and he was scheduled to arrive in little over a month. I had heard nothing from him one way or another about the latest “revelations.”

I immediately called up the Yahoo search engine and found the site of the Swiss weekly. There I read Daniel

Ganzfried's first article, "*Die geliehene Holocaust-Biographie*" ("The Borrowed Holocaust Biography" [1998a]), which acidly concluded that "Binjamin Wilkomirski, alias Bruno Doessekker, knows Auschwitz and Maidanek only as a tourist." What now?

I began to take stock. With the hundreds, if not thousands, of survivors' memoirs available in English, what was it about this one that had garnered it worldwide attention and led me to adopt it for my classes (and may also have contributed to the uproar once the author's identity came under suspicion)? In teaching about the Holocaust I am confronted by students, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, who elect to take my class and yet believe they already know the story. Similarly, many groups involved in Holocaust education fear that far too many people believe that they already know the story, and therefore do not want to hear any more about it. *Fragments* offered these jaded individuals an unfamiliar point of view. Most Holocaust memoirs or autobiographical novels are narrated by someone who recalls his or her experience from a relatively safe distance—both spatially and temporally—and tells of the time before, the time during, and the time after the Shoah. The narrative perspective of *Fragments*, however, is not that of an adult, however scarred, looking back, but of a victimized child who knows neither before nor after.

Moreover, the graphic depictions of violence and brutal imagery of *Fragments* seized its readers' imaginations and haunted their dreams. For example, there is a scene reminiscent of the film series *Alien* with a rat exploding out of a seemingly pregnant corpse, and another of hungry children who literally gnaw their fingers down to the bone. In *Fragments* the Holocaust achieved cinematic immediacy. The confrontation with such imagery allowed the students in my classes to explore their anxieties about their possibly voyeuristic and even perverse fascination with the Holocaust. Is studying the Holocaust—as some of Wilkomirski-Doessekker's severest critics feared—tantamount to viewing the ultimate snuff film (Ganzfried 1998a; Lau 1998; Leinemann 1999)?

Assigning Wilkomirski-Doessekker foregrounded additional aspects of the transferential relationship of the reader with the text and its presumed autobiographical narrator. For my

American-identified students, there was a tendency to sympathize with one who is neither believed nor listened to but rather silenced—by parents, by spouses, by people in authority. For some, this response testified to their own humanity and compassion. Others enjoyed the cathartic pleasure derived from the release of the gut-wrenching, heart-aching, anguish aroused by the narrative (or their narcissistic search for sympathy because they were so affected). Still others luxuriated in their emotions as though they were narcotic substitutes for their own impoverished experience that helped them to avoid facing the responsibilities of knowledge (Neukom 1999). My European-identified students encountered, in addition, their feelings of shame or guilt as children or relatives of perpetrators or bystanders; some looked upon their reading of the memoir as an act of symbolic reparation.

The narrator of *Fragments* also positions the reader in a way that goes beyond national or ethnic origin. On the one hand, there is the play of silences among the shards of memory—in live performance these were enacted by Wilkomirski-Doessekker's sighs and sniffles—that the reader or auditor is invited imaginatively to fill in. On the other, there is the implicit obligation to listen to and trust the narrator. By failing to do so, the reader would become one of those who magnified Wilkomirski-Doessekker's pain. The unreflective enactment of such transference relations—which I wanted my students to recognize in themselves and to engage critically—was the target of concern and condemnation by many of Wilkomirski-Doessekker's critics.

The nature and function of memory were no less fundamental components of *Fragments* and integral to my interest in teaching this work. Indeed, as my earlier brief summary of the book suggests, the theme of memory and its problematic relation to identity frames the narrative. The narrator presents a model of memory as literalized trauma: powerful events and emotions leave ineradicable impressions. Their power testifies to their authenticity. Wilkomirski-Doessekker speaks of preverbal bodily memories.<sup>6</sup>

Although written in the past tense, the narrator's encounters with the world of the barracks emerge with the seeming

immediacy of *Erlebnisse* (lived experiences), rather than as secondarily elaborated reconstructions integrated into his life story. These “memories” have a compulsive character that defies, he claims, his attempts to organize them. Hence they comport with a model of traumatic memory as relived rather than recollected experience (Caruth 1995; 1996). *Fragments* presents itself as a virtual textbook of trauma. This was why I had arranged for Wilkomirski-Doessekker’s participation in the Vanderbilt Holocaust lecture series as well as—once he informed me of his work with other similarly traumatized child survivors—for his presentation to the monthly seminar of the Department of Psychiatry at Vanderbilt Medical School.

Complementing its assertion of the photographic accuracy of its recollections of childhood, *Fragments* challenges the notion that memory is inherently constructed, and therefore necessarily somehow inauthentic or untrue: “If I’m going to write about [my childhood], I have to give up on the ordering logic of the grown-ups; it would only distort what happened” (Wilkomirski 1996, 4). Indeed, Wilkomirski-Doessekker insists that his narrative is *not* constructed. Moreover, like his very survival, the deliberate unliterariness of his text defies the logic, planning, and ordering that are the operational modes of the perpetrators and their exterminationist order.<sup>7</sup> He also reproduces the admonition of Elie Wiesel (1983; see also 1978) that any representation of the Holocaust is a misrepresentation—especially by a nonsurvivor: “I write to denounce writing. I tell of the impossibility one stumbles upon in trying to tell the tale” (Wilkomirski 1996, 4). As a collocation of shards and silence, the text purports to embody that impossibility.

To be sure, in reading and teaching *Fragments* I did not fail to note problems of fact. The English translation was in part to blame. The title omits the dates 1939–48 that appear in the original title; consequently, based on the date provided in the text for the narrator’s birth, he could not possibly have had experienced what he claimed to have experienced in pre-Occupation Riga.

Yet one does not read Holocaust testimony primarily for the dates. Nor should testimony be the only or even the

primary means of engaging the Holocaust. Still, while any account of Holocaust survival is rife with luck and miracle, how this toddler managed to survive the destruction of the entire Jewish children's barracks in Maidanek and then wind up on a transport to (as he claimed to have learned after the completion of *Fragments*) Auschwitz seemed to have escaped all the reference works I consulted. (Wilkomirski-Doessekker's detractors, both before and after Ganzfried's revelations, regularly cite Raul Hilberg [Lau 1998; Lappin 1999, 48], the dean of Holocaust historians, on the many factual inaccuracies of the text.) Moreover, as I learned from the transcripts and videotapes of Wilkomirski-Doessekker's extended testimony (1997) to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), his account became more and more elaborate. Yet that was not surprising since, as a consequence of his new role as unofficial spokesperson for child survivors and a part-time fund-raiser for (among other organizations) the USHMM itself, he had encountered many others who could perhaps help him fill in some of the gaps in his account, make sense of his recurring images, and recognize the recollections of his Swiss youth as but screen memories.<sup>8</sup> Then again, perhaps, he might simply have been adjusting his story to audience expectations (van Alphen 1997; Maechler 2001b). After all, one might argue in extenuation, a survivor's testimony should be judged by different epistemological criteria from those used in a court of law: it bears witness not so much to *what* specifically happened as to the brute reality that it *did* happen (Langer 1991; Saner 1998).

Still, I was not prepared for Ganzfried's article.

Daniel Ganzfried pieced together the life of the individual named on the identification papers that, according to Wilkomirski-Doessekker's own afterword to *Fragments*, were in his possession. Ganzfried made the case that those documents of a Swiss-born national were not the signs of an "imposed identity"; rather, they were the traces of an origin that the author had sought to efface. According to Ganzfried, the author's name at birth was Bruno Grosjean; he was born out of wedlock on February 12, 1941, in Biel, Switzerland, to a woman named Yvonne. In 1945—not, as Wilkomirski-

Doessekker asserted, in 1948—he lived in a children’s home in Adelsboden, Switzerland. Ganzfried also disclosed that, after Bruno left the children’s home later that year and entered the household of Dr. and Mrs. Doessekker, he assumed the name of Bruno Doessekker. This name still adorned the mailbox of the home Ganzfried had visited in order to interview the author of *Fragments*. Bruno Doessekker had already entered school in 1947 when, according to the chronology presented by the author of *Fragments* in the 1997 film, *Das gute Leben ist nur eine Falle, ein Besuch bei B.W.* (*The Good Life Is Only a Trap: A Visit with B.W.*), the child survivor was still in Cracow. What is more, Ganzfried reproduced in his follow-up article, “*Fakten gegen Erinnerung*” (“Facts versus Memory” [1998b]), a photograph taken in the summer of 1946 of the young Bruno in the embrace of the Doessekker family. He additionally noted that when Yvonne Grosjean, Bruno’s birth mother, died in 1981, Bruno Doessekker received a portion of her modest inheritance. Going beyond Wilkomirski-Doessekker’s paper trail to relate the testimony of people who knew Bruno, Ganzfried casually mentioned that as a youth the author of *Fragments* had girlfriends, and “none of them can confirm (*bestätigen*) that he was circumcised at the time.”

Despite my apprehensions, I could explain away all of these troubling details. Professional organizations had smuggled a number of children into Switzerland after the war and secured papers for them (Picard 1998; Maechler 2001a). That Wilkomirski-Doessekker’s papers coincided with those of someone else who had existed also did not defy possibility; the death of Bruno Grosjean might have been covered up. Orphanages and foster homes are not always model care providers. Papers in any case are not beyond tampering. As far as the dates were concerned: well, those given by the author of *Fragments* were always approximations. And the matter of the inheritance? The narrator of *Fragments* seethed with hostility toward his stepparents. What better way to strike back at them than by initiating contact with his alleged birth mother? How would she know about the switch when she had broken off contact with her child when he was a toddler?<sup>9</sup> Finally, there was no mention of whether any of Wilkomirski-Doessekker’s

girlfriends had actually been in a position to observe the condition of his penis.<sup>10</sup>

With Ganzfried's downloaded article in hand, I contacted the other members of the Vanderbilt Holocaust lecture series committee to address the situation. Just before we were about to meet I received an e-mail message from Wilkomirski-Doessekker (1998b), who informed me that he had suffered a collapse as a consequence of these latest accusations and would not be able to make the trip. The question of how we were to respond to his message and to the doubts raised by the article in *Die Weltwoche* strikingly reproduced some of the issues subsequently generated in the exchanges among Ganzfried, Wilkomirski-Doessekker and their respective adherents.<sup>11</sup>

To retract our invitation to Wilkomirski-Doessekker, should he recover, would imply an acceptance of Ganzfried's charges. If Wilkomirski-Doessekker was who he claimed to be, then to accept the accusations against him would be to subject him to a second Holocaust by extinguishing his identity. It would place us among those who would not listen to those survivors too young at the time of the catastrophe to have developed a paper trail and whose family history had been turned to ashes. Despite Wilkomirski-Doessekker's equivocal first response to Ganzfried's charges, "Nobody has to believe me. . . . The reader was always free to take my book as literature or as a personal document" (Wilkomirski with Teuwsen 1998), and his refusal to undergo a DNA test, based on the information available to us from Ganzfried we were unwilling to become potential perpetrators. Nor did we want to act like reparations bureaucrats, who, harboring the perhaps antisemitic assumption of potential deceit, require the petitioner to prove both past victimhood and present destitution and then subject him or her to continued supervision (see Pross 1988). Besides, there were corroborating witnesses for Wilkomirski-Doessekker—most notably Laura Grabowski, another blond-haired, blue-eyed child-survivor who had known little Benjamin in the children's experimental barracks in Auschwitz and who was also coming to Vanderbilt to appear with her "Binji." We did not realize at the time that Laura Grabowski, under the name of Lauren Stratford, had some ten years earlier pub-

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lished a best-selling account of her alleged victimization at the hands of the so-called Satanic Ritual Abuse underground (Passantino, Passantino, and Trott 1989; 1999).

### **The Fall of Wilkomirski-Doessekker**

Ganzfried was about more than the unmasking of an opportunistic con man. He saw the reception of Wilkomirski-Doessekker and his narrative as symptomatic of a number of social and institutional problems as the world approached the millennial turn: the problems of living in “posthistory” when historical data become components of an entertaining collage in which personal experience alone claims authenticity, and when always-innocent victims claim the last vestige of ethical purity as they embody a reproach to our (feared) complicity in their plight, while we seek cheap grace by extending them our sympathies (Sturken 1999).

The reception of Ganzfried’s work certainly highlighted these issues. It was fascinating to observe how his disclosures were picked up in the German-language press. Perhaps most notably, if unsurprisingly, there was no further investigation of the details, no point-by-point examination, let alone refutation, of his evidence. Ganzfried’s conclusion was disseminated as a given. But the very repetition of his disclosures was symptomatic of problems with the *Vergängenheitsbewältigung* or “mastery of the past” (see Maier 1988; Buruma 1994; Herf 1997; Pross 1998) that these articles employed as their frame for reporting on Ganzfried.

Ganzfried’s charges in late August 1998 did not arise in a vacuum. The topic of *Vergängenheitsbewältigung* was very much in the air. Switzerland had just undergone a series of shocks to its historical memory and national identity. The scandal over the treatment of the bank accounts of Holocaust victims, survivors, and their descendants by Swiss financial institutions was reaching resolution, and a fund of some 1.25 billion dollars was being set up to achieve partial restitution. Swiss policy and practice with regard to Jewish refugees during the Third Reich, especially after the Final Solution had been set in

motion, were coming under increasingly critical scrutiny. The Bergier Commission had been created to undertake the historical investigation. As might have been predicted, Wilkomirski-Doessekker called on the commission to resolve the dispute over his origin; it refused on the grounds that this was outside their legislated purview. Resentment toward both international Jewish organizations, such as the World Jewish Congress, and the American government was rampant due to their involvement in raising these issues. Antisemitism was growing, and the familiar canards of Jewish greed and deceit were being disseminated.<sup>12</sup> The Swiss were also getting tired of *Nestbeschmutzer* (muckrakers) such as Wilkomirski-Doessekker who regularly spoke of conspiracies on the part of antisemitic Swiss officials and, in particular, of the scandalous *Hilfswerk Pro Juventute* that from the 1920s on had regularly taken Jenisch (Roma or gypsy) children from their homes and transplanted them with new names, new identities, and no paper trail into proper Swiss households (Picard 1998; Lappin 1999, 34–35; Maechler 2001a, 187–89).

Germany too was still in the midst of a great debate over whether and, if so, how to build a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust (*Holocaustmahnmal*). Just days before the news about Wilkomirski-Doessekker broke, the Berlin Senate (and then-Chancellor Kohl) decided to defer a final decision on the Holocaust Memorial until after the coming national election. Thrown into this mix was the visit to Berlin of Stephen Spielberg—for German critics, the very embodiment of the Hollywoodization of the Holocaust (Göttler 1998). He was there to discuss a possible working relationship between the proposed memorial and his Shoah Visual History Foundation, which endeavors to interview all living survivors about their Holocaust experiences.

At the head of the five-member commission that had been formed to decide on an appropriate memorial was James Young, a world-renowned expert on the construction and meanings of Holocaust memorials. Young was not only the only academic and the only non-German, but he was also the only Jew on the commission (Young 2000). After having been alerted to Ganzfried's article, Jörg Lau, the chief features

writer for the German weekly *Die Zeit*, ambushed Young. First asking Young for his opinion of *Fragments*, which Young described as “*ein wunderbares Zeugnis*” (an amazing witness), Lau then confronted him with Ganzfried’s charges. Young beat a hasty retreat, but held that the book retained its literary value regardless of the incidentals of authorial biography.<sup>13</sup> The question of the literary merits—or deficiencies—of *Fragments* had been a prominent feature of Ganzfried’s critique. He compared *Fragments* unfavorably with Germany’s glorified version of Zane Grey, Karl May. This issue took up much of the remainder of Lau’s article. The positive evaluations of the text by Young and other (interestingly, almost exclusively American) scholars were roundly condemned.<sup>14</sup>

In general, Ganzfried’s revelations lifted the inhibitions against venting *ressentiment* toward those who had directed the attention of Swiss and German people to only a criminal aspect of their pasts and who would have deprived them of any national pride. Hence, in the conservative German daily *Die Welt*, Jost Nolte’s commentary on Ganzfried’s findings, “*Wuchernde Phantasie über dem Abgrund*” (“Out-of-Control Fantasy about the Abyss”), combined a negative assessment of Wilkomirski-Doessekker with a no less negative commentary on contemporary Germans’ guilty relationship to their heritage.<sup>15</sup> From the title alone, the reader was led to anticipate not only a revisionist reading of *Fragments* but also a possible revisionist reading of German history. To describe a non-Jew (Doessekker) pretending to be a Jew (Wilkomirski), Nolte (with either diabolical irony or coy antisemitism) employed one of the most powerful and negatively charged words (*Wuchern*) associated with Jews. Jews were often called *Wucherer*, that is, usurers or loan sharks—the equivalent to the English “Shylock”—though *wuchern* and its derivatives are also used in other, nonprejudicial contexts to mean “to grow rampant.” Nolte then, in another reversal, compared the hysterical initial reception of *Fragments* to that other forgery, *The Hitler Diaries*. And, like Lau, he took the American reception to task. His concern with national pride was signaled by his opening half-hearted (I would say mock) empathy with those whom he referred to as his *arische Zeitgenossen* (Aryan contemporaries)

who, in the face of Auschwitz, changed their names to Jewish-sounding ones and threw their German identity overboard.

This paying back of old debts was manifested when another Daniel appeared on the scene. In 1998, German academics and intellectuals were still debating the significance of the reception of Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* and his triumphal book tour that followed the publication of the German translation. Why, they wondered, would such a tendentious, poorly written, and sloppily researched reading of the German past as one dominated by so-called eliminationist antisemitism be so readily celebrated by the contemporary German public? Were they middlebrows? Masochists? Dupes of marketing? Repeated mention was made of the blurb by Goldhagen that appeared on the back of the paperback edition of *Fragments*: "This arresting book also teaches those who are familiar with the literature about the Holocaust. It will deeply move everyone." If Goldhagen was unable to see the (now) obvious historical errors in *Fragments*, what did that say about the use of evidence in his own work? The two *poseurs*, Goldhagen and Wilkomirski-Doessekker, served, in the eyes of the German intellectual elite, to discredit one another (Graf 1998a).

Beyond national interest or literary taste, both Ganzfried's work and its reception continuously turned on one issue that has had a long-standing and powerful effect on judgments about psychoanalysis through the misappropriation of Freud's work on repression and trauma, namely, the question of recovered as opposed to false memories. Even before he laid out the documentation in his first article on Wilkomirski-Doessekker, Ganzfried indicted the discipline of psychoanalysis as exemplified by the response of the audience at the Zurich Psychoanalytic Seminar to a lecture by Wilkomirski-Doessekker. There he had presented a version of his paper, "The Question of Identity of Holocaust Children: Interdisciplinary Cooperation between the Psychotherapist and the Historian," which he was also going to deliver at Vanderbilt. According to Wilkomirski-Doessekker's abstract (1998a), this paper outlines the therapeutic procedure whereby "the client's suffering is alleviated to a great degree as he discovers that his

memory fragments, revealed with the help of the therapist, correspond with actual historical facts as related to him by the historian. Often, by means of skillful cooperation between the historian and the psychotherapist, events surrounding the early life of the 'Holocaust child' can be reconstructed, thereby enabling him to discover his true identity." To Ganzfried's dismay, the assembled analysts in Zurich were silent about the lecturer's failure to consider the question of the proportion of fact and fiction in each memory. Of course, Wilkomirski-Doessekker looked upon traumatic memories, even those generated in infancy, as absolutely authentic and true.

Wilkomirski-Doessekker distinguished his own veridical recollections from the products of recovered-memory counseling. In an e-mail to Philip Gourevitch (1999), he angrily insisted: "RECOVERED MEMORY means to re-discover through therapy. And that is in my case ABSOLUTELY WRONG. Never in my life have I forgotten what I wrote in my book. I had NOTHING TO RE-DISCOVER again!" (54–55; Wilkomirski-Doessekker's capitals throughout). He acknowledged that the role of psychotherapists in his creation of *Fragments* had occasioned the original doubts. As Suhrkamp was preparing to publish his memoir, it received a letter from Hanno Helbling, the former chief features editor of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, that asked the press to halt release of the book because Wilkomirski-Doessekker had acquired (*gelangt*) an identity thanks to the help of a psychotherapist. Indeed, according to Wilkomirski-Doessekker and his supporters, he had in 1991 finally acceded to his friends' requests that he see a therapist to help him deal with his nightmares. The therapist, Dr. Monika Matta, apparently did not employ hypnosis (as is sometimes done by recovered memory practitioners) and claimed not to have solicited the memories in any other way. She did admit that she had asked Wilkomirski-Doessekker to make sketches of as well as describe the wordless images that were inundating him. She also offered Wilkomirski-Doessekker her complete trust as he shared his nightmares (or memories) in the course of a two-and-a-half-year treatment with her. Based on her twenty years' experience in distinguishing patients' true and false memories, Dr. Matta vouched for their veracity to Suhrkamp.

More complicated is Wilkomirski-Doessekker's relationship with the Israeli psychotherapist Elitsur Bernstein. Wilkomirski-Doessekker initially met Bernstein in 1979 when the latter was looking for a clarinet teacher. Bernstein accompanied Wilkomirski-Doessekker on his research visits to Cracow, Riga, and the camps in the 1990s. It was Bernstein who suggested that Wilkomirski-Doessekker write down his nightmares, and Bernstein was the first to read—hot off the fax—each installment of what would become *Fragments* as soon as Wilkomirski-Doessekker had written it down. Bernstein is careful to distance himself from any suggestion that he did anything more than offer the support of a best friend. However, he did join Wilkomirski-Doessekker in lecturing and later writing “The Identity Problem of Childhood Survivors of the Holocaust” (1997), which they jointly published in the psychoanalytic journal *Werkblatt*.

This collaborative endeavor responded to a very real need. A number of orphaned Jewish children had to assume false identities to survive during and after the Shoah, and then either had to deny or forget their pasts or else had the reliability of those memories questioned. But when, many decades later, these “repressed” memories resurfaced, they took on an exalted significance. The testimony of Holocaust survivors—like that of virtually anyone who has experienced victimization—garnered social acclaim, under the misguided assumption that oppression always purifies or sanctifies. Amid the rubble of European Jewry and Judaism—as well as of modernity in general—rituals of memory have arisen in which survivors serve a sacerdotal role, transubstantiating their fleeting and fragmentary signifiers into the body of the real. Consequently, as the demand for Holocaust testimony grows in inverse proportion to the number of survivors still living, those now grown-up “children without identity” respond to both personal and collective needs to reconstruct and validate the notion of an “original” and “true” self.

Read against this background, “The Identity Problem of Childhood Survivors of the Holocaust” proves a most interesting text, because when one examines the three clients mentioned and compares their biographies with Wilkomirski-

Doessekker's accounts in *Fragments* and various interviews, one realizes that they are all one and the same. In the first case study, the client remembers "a scene in front of a house in a city, which he connects with the name Riga, where a man perhaps his father is killed." The client also alludes to a nighttime escape by ship. This account is identical to the description in the opening chapter of *Fragments* (1996, 5–8). The second client recalls fleeing with a group of others, following a sort of massacre, along railroad tracks. He also describes the horrible pain in his "inflamed eyes" when he looked to his right at the setting sun. Again, this case study exactly reproduces the account in *Fragments* (96). The final case tells of the client's arrest by men in green uniforms; not coincidentally, *Fragments* recounts the narrator's arrest by such uniformed soldiers (34–35). In these situations, Wilkomirski-Doessekker assumed the role of the historian. In addition to his musical career, he had been working on a doctorate in Zurich focusing on the plight of Jewish refugees in the 1930s, and he does indeed have an extensive archive of Shoah and World War II material. Had he been given the opportunity, Wilkomirski-Doessekker would doubtless have stepped forward in the guise of the therapist as well.

The exposure of Wilkomirski-Doessekker's Swiss origins became fodder in the combat against the Recovered Memory Movement, just as some of the original support for *Fragments* had followed upon the translations of Judith Kestenberg's work on childhood Holocaust survivors and the dissemination in a German milieu of other works on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Bergmann, Jucovy, and Kestenberg 1982; see also Bauer 1999). Not surprisingly, Wilkomirski-Doessekker's cause was embraced by Alice Miller (1998), who incorporated *Fragments* into her all-embracing theory of the origins of the twentieth-century age of atrocity in the culture of child abuse.

### **A Hell of One's Own Making**

What, in conclusion, is one to make of *Fragments*? On the one hand, researchers such as Maechler, Lappin, and

Gourevitch have traced many of its elements back to other works (Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* and Eberhard Fechner's *Der Prozeß* [*The Trial*], a 1984 three-part television documentary of the Maidanek Trials in Düsseldorf)—to which I would add Bruno Apitz's 1958 novel *Nackt unter Wolven* (*Naked among Wolves*). Wilkomirski-Doessekker was likewise influenced by the testimonies of Holocaust survivors that he had encountered in the course of his life as well as by his own childhood as Bruno Grosjean, which has now been reconstructed by Maechler (2000; 2001a).

Can we look upon Wilkomirski-Doessekker as a self-conscious artist forging what Jörg Lau (1998) has called “an almost perfect pain”? Or are he and his book rather the products of years of conscious and unconscious searching? Wilkomirski-Doessekker, in a radio interview, described how he sought verbal captions to assign to his sometimes sharp, sometimes vague images and the associated emotions of pain, alienation, victimization, abandonment, loss, betrayal, and powerlessness: “It was actually a process that lasted for decades, because most of the pictorial memories course through me day by day. . . . But for a long, long time I couldn't interpret most of these pictures. They were there, they also caused me anxiety, but I had no words for them“ (quoted in Maechler 2001b).<sup>16</sup> He also required a collectively validated narrative into which to insert these annotated images and emotions. Such a narrative would compensate for his victimization by eliciting sympathy and attention as well as absolve him from responsibility for his pain. In the United States in the 1980s, several popular narratives of victimization emerged: childhood sexual abuse and, in religious circles, Satanic ritual abuse (Maechler 2001b, 84–87; Prager 1998). Central Europe had another paradigmatic narrative of victimization: the Shoah. Can one then ascribe the saga of Wilkomirski-Doessekker to false memory syndrome (Pendergast 1996; 1998; Loftus and Ketcham 1994)?

There may well have been a Riga-born child survivor of death camps. After all, Jerzy Zweig, the Polish child hidden by the inmates in Buchenwald, really existed. He, however, did not write *Fragments*. There was no doubt a child named Bruno born to Yvonne Grosjean in Biel in 1941, a boy who was later

adopted by the Doessekkers and as an adult became a clarinet maker and performer. But he no longer exists either. Since the case is not closed, allow me to adopt a theatrical metaphor. Wilkomirski-Doessekker was a character in search of a drama that would make him a star. This drama had to satisfy the Aristotelian unities, as well as the audience and the actor. Wilkomirski-Doessekker found in *Fragments* a drama that was decades in the making and enjoyed a three-year run. Not only was it the role of a lifetime; it became his lifetime.

In their “Preliminary Communication” (1893), Freud and Breuer pithily concluded that “hysterics mainly suffer from reminiscences” (7). Perhaps this essay could be summed up by saying that we suffer mainly from the cultural narratives that shape our reminiscences. Yet is the primary source of suffering the memory itself, whether its origin be an individual trauma or a social script? Or, as not only the narrator of *Fragments* but also numerous survivors of the Holocaust and victims of childhood sexual abuse have attested, are the confusion, pain, and pathology due more to the actual or anticipated refusal by others to hear and believe the individual’s story? If the latter, consider Wilkomirski-Doessekker’s present situation. Rather than “getting his voice back” and setting himself “free,” he now lives in a world much like that of the youth in Switzerland described by the narrator of *Fragments*—alone, trapped, ridiculed, and heard and believed by no one.

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### Notes

1. The English translation of Maechler’s book-length study (2001a) is packaged with *Fragments*, though, tellingly, without its original subtitle, *Memories of a Wartime Childhood*.
2. Responding to the invective of Wilkomirski-Doessekker’s defenders, Ganzfried (1998c) called for Wilkomirski-Doessekker and Yvonne Grosjean’s surviving brother to submit to DNA tests. Wilkomirski-Doessekker refused. As it turns out, he had in 1995 already taken a DNA test in an attempt to confirm that he was the son of the survivor Yakov Maroko named Benjamin who had disappeared at Maidanek; but this test came back negative. What is more, he discovered at that time that his biological father was still alive, but concealed this information (Ganzfried 1999; Maechler 2001a, 140n15). Finally, compelled by legal proceed-

- ings in Switzerland for alleged fraud, Wilkomirski-Doessekker again submitted to a DNA test, which confirmed his identity as Bruno Doessekker (born Grosjean).
3. I shall depart from my usage of the name Wilkomirski-Doessekker only in registering his own self-identification and in recounting my dealings with him and his text prior to the 1998 exposé by Ganzfried.
  4. The use of the phrase “Latvian militia” is one of a number of factual errors that have been found in *Fragments*. These collaborators were actually known as the *Bendeldikke* or “auxiliary police.” See the chapter, “Tracking Down the Truth—The Historical Research,” in Maechler 2001a, and also Lappin (1999, 48, 54–58).
  5. The skeptics included not only those who denied the veracity of Wilkomirski-Doessekker’s account but also the deniers of the Holocaust who, after Ganzfried’s story broke, had a field day in their journals and websites. See Graf (1998a; 1998b), Thion (1998), *Recht + Freiheit* (1998), *National Journal* (1998), and Meyer (1998–99).
  6. The existence of bodily memories has been contested (Loftus and Ketcham 1994). However, such attempts at refutation rest on a very narrow definition of memory. The notion of habit, which may be described as a form of bodily memory, plays a prominent role in Foucault’s theory of discipline and Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus*, as well as in the work of their forebears Nietzsche, Mauss, and Merleau-Ponty. More recent analyses of memory along physiological lines appear in Antze and Lambeck (1996).
  7. A similar argument has been advanced by Saul Friedlander (1993) in his call for a new historiography of the Holocaust.
  8. Wilkomirski-Doessekker told Maechler that, just prior to the publication of *Fragments*, he had been informed by the former rector of Cracow University and an expert on the Polish death camps that the second camp to which he recalled having been transported was in all likelihood Auschwitz-Birkenau.
  9. Maechler (2001a, 232–34) describes how Wilkomirski-Doessekker actually contested his mother’s will to ensure that he received his share of her estate.
  10. Although now superseded by the DNA evidence, it is striking that no one appears to have taken up this inexpensive means of directly verifying the accuracy of Wilkomirski-Doessekker’s story. Ganzfried expresses his surprise about this neglect in his just-published memoir (2002, 135). Eskin (2002, 107–08) simply accepts his uncircumcised state as a fact. So too Maechler (2001a, 86, 238) seems to take for granted that Wilkomirski-Doessekker was not circumcised. Lappin (1999) apparently relies on private communications when she writes that “Ganzfried went so far as to ask Annie Singer [a friend from Wilkomirski-Doessekker’s youth] and his former wife, Annette, about whether or not he was circumcised. Both said that he was not” (26). In his memoir, Ganzfried (2002) recounts his conversations with both Annette and Annie. He had earlier asked Wilkomirski-Doessekker whether he was circumcised, to which he hesitatingly responded, “jaahh” (61). Ganzfried also intended to pose this question to Wilkomirski-Doessekker’s current partner, Verena Pillar, but was interrupted before he could obtain an answer (70).
  11. Among Wilkomirski-Doessekker’s champions are Traister-Moscowitz (1998; 1999) and Harvey Peskin (1999), who supported honoring him with the Max A. Hayward Award of the American Orthopsychiatric Association in 1999. Eskin (2002, 164–70) offers an account of the ceremony.
  12. See, e.g., Kramer (1997), Erdle and Wildman (1998), Picard (1998), and Eskin (2002, 131–37). Ganzfried frames his *Holocaust-Travestie* (2002) around the worldwide attention directed at Swiss behavior during and after the Holocaust.
  13. Lau’s situation was rather ticklish. Two weeks earlier—that is, a week after Ganzfried’s first article—Wolfgang Benz, a historian and the director of the Center for Research on Antisemitism at Berlin’s Technical University—had contributed an article to *Die Zeit* (September 3, 1998) in which he acclaimed not only the authenticity but also the literary value of *Fragments*.

14. Lau was far from alone in his attacks on the American critics who had praised *Fragments*. Nolte (1998) lambasted Julie Salomon's review in the *New York Times Book Review* (January 12, 1997) and Jonathan Kozol's in *The Nation* (October 28, 1996), as well as the favorable comments by Maurice Sendak (see Jacob 1998).
15. Jost Nolte is no relation to the historian and editor, Ernst Nolte, whose apology that Nazi concentration camps were modeled on Soviet camps, among other problematic claims, initiated the Historians' Dispute (*Historikerstreit*) of the mid-1980s (Maier 1988).
16. Compare the radical hermeneutic position of Spence that "interpretations are persuasive . . . not because of their evidential appeal; conviction emerges because the fit is good, not because we have necessarily made contact with the past" (1982, 32).

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