

A Pearl in the Levite Crown: Fred Wander's *The Seventh Well*

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Abstract

One would have hoped that the publication of Michael Hofmann's superb translation of Fred Wander's novel *The Seventh Well* (New York 2008) might finally help secure Wander's text the attention it deserves, alas, as yet to no avail. Fred Wander, probably best known (if at all) as the widower and executor of Maxie Wander, was a survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. First published in East Berlin in 1971, *The Seventh Well* is a semi-fictionalized account of his experiences in the camps (and an attempt to lend those of his peers who did not survive a posthumous voice).

Keywords

Fred Wander – *The Seventh Well* – Holocaust memoirs

Those of us who hoped that the publication of Michael Hofmann's superb translation of Fred Wander's *The Seventh Well* in 2008 might finally bring Wander's text in from the cold and help draw the attention it deserves have, unfortunately, been disappointed.¹ A survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, Fred Wander is probably still best known (if at all) as the widower and executor

* The following short text is the slightly revised version of a pitch made at an event called 'You Must Read This Book' that took place as part of the UCL Festival of the Arts in May 2014.

1 Fred Wander (1917–2006), *Der siebente Brunnen. Roman. Mit einem Nachwort von Ruth Klüger* (Göttingen 2005); Fred Wander, *The Seventh Well*, translated by Michael Hofmann (New York 2007). The page references apply to the English edition. For a more detailed discussion see my 'Contextualising Fred Wander's *The Seventh Well*', *East European Jewish Affairs* 39(1) (2009) 107–119.

of Maxie Wander. A semi-fictionalized account of his experiences in the camps (and an attempt to lend those of his peers who did not survive a posthumous voice), *The Seventh Well* was first published in East Berlin in 1971.

Now, Holocaust memoirs tend to be written either by 'Wieselettes' or by 'Levites.' The conceit of the Wieselettes – think Eli Wiesel – is that if you read their accounts you will know what it was like to be there, how it felt, how it smelt. The Levites – think Primo Levi – acknowledge that their own experiences defy easy generalization because they are the experiences of a particular individual in a particular camp (indeed, as in the case of Auschwitz Monowitz, a particular part of a camp), and that they are in any case by definition exceptional, given that they survived; and they insist that nothing they or we could do will ever allow us genuinely to know what it was like to be there.

The Wieselettes offer us an easy opportunity to identify with them and feel deep empathy. But, if we want to understand rather than just empathize, we must turn to the Levites. Indifferent to our empathy, they want us to engage seriously and critically with their difficulties; their difficulties in grappling with the absolute disorientation of life in the camps, life (to use Jean Améry's striking phrase) at the mind's limits;² and their difficulties in subsequently communicating their experiences to others.

Though there is no inherent reason why this should be so, the accounts of the Wieselettes are more often than not redemptive; the accounts of the Levites never. The Wieselettes tend to privilege content over form (assuming they think about this issue in the first place), the Levites tend to be rather more self-conscious when it comes to form, given their profound awareness of the incommensurate nature of what they are seeking to convey.

Within the Levite canon, no narrative has been more self-consciously crafted than Fred Wander's *The Seventh Well*. Indeed, it begins with a story about the potential and limitations of storytelling in the form of an ongoing conversation between the narrator and one Mendel Teichmann, renowned for the 'magical powers' of his storytelling. It could take Mendel 'just one word to make the men turn pale, make them think, cry, laugh; words lashed them, choked them, made them ache and sweat' (5). Yet crucially, the book's very first words are these: 'Three weeks after the conversation I will now relate,

2 *At the Mind's Limits* is the title of the English translation (first published in 1980) of Améry's single most important text, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* (first published in 1966). See Jean Améry, 'Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne. Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten,' in J. Améry, *Werke*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart 2002) 1–77; J. Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* (Bloomington 1980).

Mendel would die.³ Storytelling, in other words, for all that it can achieve, and indispensable as it is for human existence, ultimately could not withstand the inexorable process of annihilation in the camp.

Yet Wander's eschewal of redemption is not simply one of resignation, it is underpinned by defiance, realism, and humour. Take the narrator observing a group of young prisoners waiting to be executed. Why did they not run towards the fence and get themselves shot? Perhaps, the narrator suggests, 'life, compressed into that tiny remaining time, sharpened by barely imaginable sufferings, perhaps life had become distilled to some quintessence of itself.' Yet at this point he quite abruptly changes tack: 'No,' he continues, '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' (123).

Another case in point is the narrator's account of the liberation of Buchenwald, the only camp liberated by its prisoners. Wander challenged official GDR antifascism by focusing on the Jewish prisoners in the so-called small camp who were neither directly involved nor immediately affected by the uprising. The narrator, semi-delirious with typhus, observes a dead old Jew and a 'rabble of little Jewish boys.' He contemplates the dignity of the dead old Jew and the vitality of the Jewish boys. The old Jew, he then suggests, 'had handed himself on' – and the Jewish boys 'had picked up the staff he had thrown down, picked it up and carried it on among themselves' (146–147). But then the narrator again abruptly cuts short any redemptive line of thought. The boys, he adds, 'had, incidentally, gone through his [the dead man's] pockets (...); also they had gone through my pockets while I was asleep, they found my tin spoon (...) [and] used it before my eyes with sublime indifference' (147).

Subtle and understated, deeply affecting and profoundly thoughtful, *The Seventh Well* is a pearl in the Levite crown and an absolute must-read for anyone seriously interested in grappling with the Shoah.

3 Here I disagree with Michael Hofmann who, in his translation, splits this sentence into two, thus opening a gap between the storytelling and death, and privileging the former over the latter.