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The Wilkomirski Affair: A Study in Biographical Truth
(review)

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Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Volume 17, Number 1, Spring 2003,
pp. 161-163 (Review)

Published by Oxford University Press



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2. Hayden White, "Historical Employment and the Story of the Truth," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* Saul Friedländer, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 37–53, cited in LaCapra, *Writing History*, p. 16.
3. LaCapra observes that "Modern languages do not have a middle voice in grammar but may at best allow for a discursive analogue of it." *Writing History*, p. 19.
4. White, "Historical Employment," p. 40, cited in LaCapra, *Writing History*, p. 18.
5. Richard L. Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History: Mass Death and the American Future* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 6.
6. Ibid.
7. I have challenged the traditional religious attempt to see the governance of divinity in human history. See Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
8. See Thomas J. J. Altizer, "God as Holy Nothingness," in *What Kind of God? Essays in Honor of Richard L. Rubenstein*, Betty Rogers Rubenstein and Michael Berenbaum, eds. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), pp. 347–56.

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***The Wilkomirski Affair: A Study in Biographical Truth*, Stefan Maechler (New York: Schocken, 2001), ix + 496 pp., \$16.95.**

The scandal of Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* is generally known. First published in German in 1995, the book appeared in English in 1996. Its immediate success launched its author into a giddy round of readings, interviews, lectures, and honors. Yet even before publication the German publisher, Suhrkamp, had been advised not to release the work. After speaking with Wilkomirski and insisting on an ill-fated "Afterword," Suhrkamp head Siegfried Unseld directed the company's subsidiary Jüdischer Verlag to go ahead and publish the book. Doubts about the memoir's veracity soon were voiced publicly, however, culminating in an angry 1998 denunciation by the Swiss writer Daniel Ganzfried, who called the book a hoax and its author a liar. Wilkomirski, claimed Ganzfried, was not a Jewish survivor but rather Bruno Grosjean, a Swiss gentile who as a child had been adopted by a physician, Kurt Dössekker, and his wife, Martha. For a while opinions were split. Suhrkamp initially stood by Wilkomirski and, for the most part, resisted demands that the book be withdrawn from the market. Others joined Ganzfried and called for a full explanation from the beleaguered author, who continued to insist that he was indeed Benjamin Wilkomirski and that his book was genuine. Lengthy articles in the summer of 1999 in the *New Yorker* (by Philip Gourevitch) and *Granta* (by Elena Lappin) added weight to Ganzfried's assertions. A complete revelation was still lacking, however, and Wilkomirski continued to insist that he was a Jewish survivor, and that *Fragments* was a truthful account of his childhood.

In 1999 Wilkomirski's agent engaged a University of Zurich historian, Stefan Maechler, as an independent scholar charged with investigating the case and ascertaining the truth. In July of that same year, Maechler gave a preliminary report to the principal parties, and, as a result, those publishers still marketing the book withdrew it from sale. Maechler wrote up his findings in the form of a journalistic report, which was published in German in 2000 and which has now appeared in, as the imprint states, "somewhat different form" in English. Schocken has included the text of *Fragments* as an appendix.

Maechler first examines Grosjean's story, proving conclusively that Bruno Dössekker was born Bruno Grosjean in 1941, the illegitimate child of Yvonne Grosjean. Prior to being taken in as a foster child by the Dössekkers in late 1945, he had been shunted from one address to another, first with, and then without, his handicapped mother. The childless Dössekkers did their best to provide stability, comfort, and security for the disturbed youngster and legally adopted him in 1957, when he was sixteen years old. They were forceful advocates for Bruno to study medicine and to continue the Dössekker physician dynasty. However, Maechler clearly demonstrates, the trauma stemming from the instability, abuse, and pressures of Bruno's formative years had left a deep impression.

In the second chapter, Maechler sets out Wilkomirski's view of himself and his life. Wilkomirski admitted that the Dössekkers had previously cared for a child named Bruno Grosjean, but that Wilkomirski, who at the end of the war had been brought to Switzerland from Poland, soon replaced this child. The Dössekkers, Wilkomirski insists, continually attempted to efface his Jewish identity and concentration-camp experiences. But Maechler repeatedly brings out the inconsistencies and discrepancies in Wilkomirski's account. For example, in one interview Wilkomirski describes an event as having taken place when he was fifteen years old. Elsewhere he states that he was seventeen years old. Succeeding chapters describe "The Origins of *Fragments*" and how the work became "A Global Literary Event," before Wilkomirski's "Plunge into the Abyss," where he experiences both criticism and support—the latter largely from survivors.

In "Tracking Down the Truth," Maechler describes his conversations with the individuals whom Wilkomirski had used to "prove" his past—for example, that he had been in two homes for Jewish child survivors in Cracow in the postwar period. Maechler found no evidence that any child could have arrived in Basel from Poland with a blank nametag, as Wilkomirski insists he did, and not have been noticed and noted in the records. Maechler locates a neighbor in Zurich who clearly remembers the arrival of Bruno Grosjean as a foster child of the Dössekkers and is certain that there was no foster child before him. Other stories from *Fragments* relating to Switzerland (begging at a fair, identifying a picture of William Tell as that of a member of the SS) are also revealed to be false. Maechler shows striking similarities between *Fragments* and its author, on the one hand, and *The Painted Bird* and Jerzy Kosinski on the other. He ex-

poses as a fraud one of the “child survivors,” now living in California, whom Wilkomirski “remembers”—a woman whose background (foster care, abuse, instability) is similar to Bruno Grosjean’s. Equally fascinating is Maechler’s demonstration that the topography of the “farm in Poland” and Benjamin Wilkomirski’s experiences there prior to his sojourn in the camps are identical to those Bruno Grosjean knew from the children’s home in Adelboden, where he had lived for about six months in 1945 before being taken in by the Dössekkers.

In the afterword Wilkomirski tells how his “memory could not be wiped clean,” and that “countless conversations with specialists and historians have helped me clarify many previously inexplicable shards of memory.” Given the widespread interest in recovered memory in the 1990s, its role in retrieving the “fragments” that make up the memoir was generally assumed. Maechler carefully discusses this aspect of the work and describes how Wilkomirski, with his friend Elitsur Bernstein, exploited the practice not only to “discover” his own life, but also to lecture on the subject and encourage others to make use of the practice.

In place of the inventions that constitute *Fragments*, Maechler has produced facts and clarifications. Yet he is careful not to roundly condemn the author, as Ganzfried did. Nor does he emphasize Wilkomirski’s disturbed mental state, saying instead that the “story he wrote in *Fragments* and has told elsewhere took place solely within the world of his thoughts and emotions.” “Without an audience,” he bluntly states, “there would be no Wilkomirski.” One might also say that without Maechler’s impressive and sound book there would be no certainty, and *Fragments* would continue to hold sway over many of the readers who swallowed it. Maechler’s is not the last word on the subject—Blake Eskin has published *A Life in Pieces*, and other responses to this sad affair may yet appear.

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***Holocaust and Memory: The Experience of the Holocaust and Its Consequences: An Investigation Based on Personal Narratives*, Barbara Engelking, ed. by Gunnar S. Paulsson (London: Leicester University Press in association with the European Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 348 pp., cloth \$35.00, pbk. \$19.95.**

In his personal account of the Holocaust and its aftermath, Saul Friedländer notes “there are certain memories that cannot be shared, so great is the gap between the meaning they have for us and what others might see in them.”¹ *Holocaust and Memory* is the result of Barbara Engelking’s attempt to bridge this gap for herself and to “pass [her] inner knowledge” to the reader (p. 16). Her book deals with numerous key issues of Holocaust literature, focusing on the victims’ experiences, but also analyzing the nature of memory and the long-lasting effects of the tragedy on the lives of sur-