

THE LURE OF VICARIOUS TRAUMATIZATION:
BINJAMIN WILKOMIRSKI'S *BRUCHSTÜCKE* AND
THE CONSTRUCTION OF FALSE IDENTITY

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1. FRAGMENTS OF IDENTITY

My earliest memories are a rubble field of isolated images and events. [...] If I am going to write about it, I have to give up on the ordering logic of grown-ups; it would only distort what happened (Wilkomirski, 1996: 4)¹.

Memory, writing, perspective and, by implication, truth (that which happened) permeate the first few paragraphs in Binjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*. It is the last one of these ever-present buzzwords in autobiographical studies that now dominates the discourse on the "Wilkomirski case". Since Daniel Ganzfried's doubts about the authenticity of Wilkomirski's so very unlikely story of survival had been confirmed in Stefan Mächler's meticulously researched study *The Wilkomirski Affair*, academic research has relegated *Fragments* to the ever-growing pile of scandalous Holocaust kitsch and declared Wilkomirski – or rather Bruno Dössekker, the person who "invented" Binjamin, the traumatized child Holocaust survivor – a liar and fraudster.

What is mostly neglected, however, is the aspect Stefan Mächler pointed to in the subtitle to his work: *A Study in Biographical Truth* (in the original German: *Über die Wahrheit einer Biographie*). Biographical truth raises questions about the veracity of memories that contradict historical facts, the need for structure and narrative in the incorporation of memories into biography, the workings of (auto)biography in literary discourse and on the market for "life-writing", and the moral pact between author and readership that defines the practice of reading. In short, it addresses the construction of identity in autobiographical

¹ Meine frühesten Erinnerungen gleichen einem Trümmerfeld einzelner Bilder und Abläufe. [...] Will ich darüber schreiben, muß ich auf die ordnende Perspektive des Erwachsenen verzichten. Sie würde das Geschehene nur verfälschen (Wilkomirski, 1995: 7-8).

writing. This essay will argue that the story of Benjamin Wilkomirski and its success was closely related to the emergence of trauma studies as a paradigm of literary and cultural criticism. Not only did Dössekker rely heavily on the findings of trauma studies for his *Fragments*, but the field itself also found in him and his story a near-perfect example of what it set out to address.

Fragments is more than anything else a story of survival and traumatization. Young Benjamin Wilkomirski, separated from his parents during an anti-Jewish pogrom in Riga in 1939, is taken to the Majdanek concentration camp after having hidden for a short time on a farm near Zamość. He survives in the camp for several years, despite being continually viciously attacked, subjected to medical experiments, and having lost all friends and family, including his mother, whom he briefly sees shortly before her death. After the war, he is taken to an orphanage in Kraków, whence he is sent to Switzerland and placed with foster parents. Decades later, still severely traumatized by his childhood in the camps, he resolves to write down the fragmentary memories he has preserved. Presented through a child's eyes and in the language of the boy who survived the camps, Wilkomirski offers few historical details and instead concentrates on violence, horrifying images, and his struggle as an adult to come to terms with his traumatic memories. In the words of Jonathan Kozol, whose blurb on the back cover of the English edition will have convinced more than a few readers to buy this "memoir", "stunning and austere work is so profoundly moving, so morally important, and so free from literary artifice of any kind at all that I wonder if I even have the right to try to offer praise".

Authenticity was at the core of the praise and a primary reason for the prizes Wilkomirski received for his autobiography and at the heart of the crushing criticism Dössekker, his publishers, friends and psychiatrists endured after it was publically revealed that the *Fragments* were nothing more than figments of a very lively imagination. The importance of historical accuracy and factuality in the reception of *Fragments* can therefore hardly be overstated. When Philippe Lejeune wrote his often quoted study on the autobiographical pact – the textual assertion that the author, narrator, and protagonist are identical and an agreement with the readers that they will encounter in the book an actual person whose existence is legally verifiable (1989: 4, 11) – he probably could not have guessed that this pact would actually ever be a matter of a real legal dispute. In the case of Wilkomirski, however, this is exactly what happened. Manfred Kuhn, a Zurich lawyer, filed a formal suit:

As stated in Ganzfrieds article in *Die Weltwoche*, we are dealing not with the book of a mentally ill man but with a cold-blooded swindle perpetrated by several persons, which is why I am filing a suit against Dössekker and consorts

on my own behalf as an aggrieved party. I have been deprived of the book's price, since I would never have bought it had it been publicly offered as a novel. Moreover – beyond the strictures of the law – I have been cheated of a portion of my life and maliciously tricked into feeling sympathy for this topic².

Within the strictures of the law, however, the public prosecutor of the canton of Zurich could find no evidence of criminal fraud. However, the DNA test she had ordered to settle the matter of his identity had confirmed that Wilkomirski was in fact Bruno Grosjean, a Swiss citizen born in 1941, whose own personal history was worlds removed from the horrors of Benjamin's supposed childhood ordeal during the Holocaust³. When a DNA test finally settles literary matters, questions of identity take on a whole new meaning.

2. AUTHOR AND SCANDAL

The author of *Fragments*, an illegitimate child of Yvonne Grosjean, grew up in several foster families, before he was taken in and finally adopted by the Dössekker family. Young Bruno Dössekker displayed an early interest in history and music, and later, as a professional clarinetist and instrument-maker, he devoted his spare time to the history of child survivors of the Holocaust. Long before the publication of his text, he introduced himself to friends and acquaintances as a child survivor and professed to remember his "real name", Benjamin Wilkomirski. Over the course of many years and through countless discussions with friends, psychiatrists, historians and real Holocaust survivors, he perfected his story, and, believing in it himself, presented it in interviews, academic talks, and documentary films about child survivors. The publication of *Fragments* was in actuality only a small part of the "Wilkomirski Phenomenon"⁴.

Benjamin Wilkomirski's text appeared on the literary market in 1995 and was soon translated into numerous languages. Despite poor sales in every single one of those markets⁵, it soon became the centre of media hype. For five years, writes Sebastian Hefti, from the spring of 1995 to the autumn of 1999,

² M. Meier (16 Nov. 1999): "Strafanzeige gegen Autobiograf Benjamin Wilkomirski", *Tages-Anzeiger*, quoted in Mächler (2001: 299).

³ *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (13 Dec. 2002).

⁴ A detailed description of Dössekker's real childhood and the origin of fragments can be found in Mächler (2001: esp. 3-21 & 84-110).

⁵ The English translation sold only 32,800 copies altogether; the German original sold not more than 13,000 over the course of four years before the publishers withdrew it. "No one got rich on the book; it was more a media event than a sales smash" (Mächler, 2001: 119).

the Wilkomirski hoax provided the “shocking and thrilling material for an orgy of false emotions”. In Wilkomirski, Hefti polemicizes, Switzerland found its suffering saviour, a “pop-star” of psycho-literature and, in “holy Benjamin, the blessed ‘hystorian’ of new-helvetian self-accusation” (2002: 7, my translations, M.M.). Martin Hainz offers a similar diagnosis of the readiness of the public to welcome a text that, for him, is nothing more than a description of hateful murder. In his view, Wilkomirski neither manages to attest to the industrial scale of the exterminations that define the Holocaust nor strives to restore a measure of dignity to its victims. Instead, he concludes, it is a hollow collection of drastic descriptions – and the public could and should have noticed this right away (2007: 614). The real scandal, Hainz writes, was the manner in which *Fragments* was received, as only the enthusiastic reception allowed for Wilkomirski’s “pathologic craving for recognition and a poor text” (2007: 621, my translation, M.M.) to become a literary phenomenon; the scandal lies in the public’s simulated sympathy and commiseration.

Doubts about the veracity of Wilkomirski’s text had been raised before its publication, including by Hanno Helbling, the former editor of the feuilleton section of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, directly to Suhrkamp editor Siegfried Unseld. But these doubts were, at least for a time, calmed by an afterword added to *Fragments* in which Wilkomirski himself admitted to the fact that Swiss official documents indicated nothing of his past in a concentration camp, but in which he asserted that he was going to challenge the “pseudo-identity” that had been provided him: “I have now taken legal steps to have this imposed identity annulled” (154). Similarly, any criticism of the authenticity of *Fragments* was dismissed in the book’s reception from the very beginning, such as in the review by Klara Obermüller, who, clearly informed about the possible historical inaccuracies in the work, nevertheless praised its value:

It took decades before Benjamin Wilkomirski found the courage to stand by the truth of his life, before the world and before himself. How vulnerable that truth is, how fragile his certainty still is, can be read from every line of the text. And so I wish for him and his book readers who treat it as gently as it deserves, given its origins. It is first and foremost a piece of literature – good, very good literature – but it is also the recovery of a lost identity. Anyone who wishes to meddle with that needs to be clear about just what he is doing⁶.

⁶ K. Obermüller (3 Sep. 1995): “Einführung zum Buch von Benjamin Wilkomirski ‘Bruchstücke’”, given as an address at a publishing party. Quoted in Mächler (2001: 112-113).

The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* equally combined its praise for Wilkomirski's "memories" with an emphatic warning against criticism. The reviewer said of Wilkomirski's *Fragments*:

[It carries] the weight of this century. The stony, photographic precision of a defenseless child's eyes and the spare words spoken in a low voice make it one of the most essential witnesses to the death camps. There are images here that can sear the bones. Without laying claim to being literature, with its density, irrevocability, and the power of its images, it nevertheless meets all the criteria of literature – if that were to be one's measure. But shame forbids that⁷.

"Shameless" was a word that featured prominently in the first public allegations against Wilkomirski by Daniel Ganzfried in the Swiss weekly *Weltwoche* as well as in the reactions to his article which defended the "child survivor". Ganzfried was perhaps spurred on in his critique by the failure of his own fictional account of the Holocaust, and he was probably not alone among Wilkomirski's critics on this count. For Ganzfried, Wilkomirski's story was clearly a hoax, but his arguments did not immediately convince everyone. On the contrary, Ganzfried faced fierce criticism that charged his article with being a thinly veiled attempt to discredit the suffering of all child survivors. In April 1999, about half a year after Daniel Ganzfried had first published his accusations, the Liepman Literary Agency, who had assigned the rights to *Fragments* nationally and internationally, engaged Stefan Mächler to "investigate, as a historian, the book's claims of authenticity" (Mächler, 2001: vii). Notably, Dössekker/Wilkomirski also signed Mächler's contract, promising full cooperation and access to all relevant documents. This indicates quite clearly that Dössekker either believed in his story himself or was confident it was impossible to disprove.

For the most part, however, *Fragments* was greeted with acclaim, praise, and prizes. The book won several awards, among them the National Jewish Book Award in the US, the Jewish Quarterly literary prize in the UK, and the Prix Mémoire de la Shoah in France. Wilkomirski also received an award from the American Orthopsychiatric Association (ORTHO) after doubts about his story had already been raised and, in part, even proven. ORTHO awarded Wilkomirski the Hayman Award for Holocaust and Genocide Study "in recognition of his writings and collaborations with clinicians, which have furthered the understanding of genocide and the Holocaust" (quoted in Mächler, 2001: 113-114). For ORTHO, this award was meant to be a clear

⁷T. Gut (14 Nov. 1995): "Mit nichts zu verbinden: Binjamin Wilkomirskis Suche nach seiner Kindheit im KZ". In: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. Quoted in Mächler (2001: 113-114).

signal. Harvey Peskin, a member of the ORTHO board, entitled his essay on the controversial issue “Holocaust Denial: A Sequel”, indicating that any criticism of Wilkomirski’s text comes dangerously close to denying the Holocaust altogether. Informed about the doubts surrounding the text, but writing before Stefan Mächler offered proof against *Fragments*’ veracity, Peskin explains the reasoning behind the award:

The Ortho prize awarded to him [...] is being given for his promotion of interest in traumatic memory, perhaps the most elusive aspect of horrific suffering and hence the most tempting to ignore or discredit. Specifically, the award also honors Wilkomirski as a historian in his work with Dr. Elitsur Bernstein, an Israeli clinical psychologist, for their innovative conceptualizations in helping young child survivors recover a sense of personal identity through historical verification of their fragmented memories. [...] The Ortho award honors, then, the memoirist and the healer, and his journey from one to the other. [...] The Ortho Hayman award, in honoring the very uncertainty of a child survivor’s identity, acknowledges the unfinished memory of many. And where the usual stakes of fragmented, hidden and lonely memory have favored forgetting, *that* is an important truth to remember (Peskin, 1999: s.p.).

3. WRITING TRAUMA THROUGH FALSE MEMORY

As both the ORTHO award and many of the reviews at the time indicate, the acknowledgement of childhood trauma and the difficulty of coming to terms with a traumatic past were central to the praise that *Fragments* received. An identity that first had to be re-discovered and then integrated not only into a personal biography but also into a framework of Holocaust testimonies – which had until then been dominated by adult accounts of the camps – was simply too interesting to be ignored by a literary discourse that had just “discovered” trauma studies as a new field. Wilkomirski offered an alternative to the hitherto existing implicitness of memory and its understood use; he offered new approaches to the memory of child survivors that took into consideration the generational shift from adult survivors to younger witnesses and the ensuing shifting framework of historical reference (Messerschmidt, 2003: 99-100). Binjamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments* catered to a rising demand for new forms of memory culture. As Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider have noted, the memory boom of the last two decades has “elicited a massive political [...] and academic reaction”. The “fragmentation of remembrance” has led to differing and sometimes competing points of view on the past, manifest in the publication of private memories across a broad political spectrum.

Thus, witness testimonies are at the same time historical sources and considered historically unreliable. [...]. The authenticity of these reports is often determined not so much by their accuracy as by their political context and the possibilities associated with it (Levy & Sznajder, 2006: 151).

In other words, the time was right for children's memoirs of the Holocaust to challenge established paradigms of Holocaust study – and *Fragments*, despite or possibly because of its historically unreliable character, did just that.

While narratives of loss, oppression, marginalization, and physical and psychological trauma were by no means new to readers, the specific dedication of the humanities to these issues had taken on a new quality when *Fragments* appeared. “[W]e inhabit an academic world that is busy consuming trauma [...]. We are obsessed with stories that must be passed on, that must not be passed over”, writes Patricia Yaeger (2002: 29). This new interest in trauma draws especially on insights from psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, a field that is still very much influenced by Sigmund Freud and his followers. Sigmund Freud, who himself often resorted to literature to explicate his concepts of psychosexual development and its possible connection to neurosis, formulated the beginnings of a theory of trauma together with Josef Breuer in their *Studies on Hysteria* in 1895. As Craig Piers summarizes nearly one hundred years after Freud's and Breuer's study, the idea that “hysterics ‘suffer from reminiscences’ or the return to consciousness of an anxiety-provoking idea/memory or ‘exciting event’ in symbolic and symptomatic form” is now at the core of recent debates on the nature, transmission, treatment – and telling – of trauma. Piers found it necessary to return to these first attempts at classifying and explaining the traumatized condition in order to systematize contemporary trauma theory within the framework of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, where Freud's theorizing “in many respects is as much the source of debate now, as it was during his own times” (1996: 539).

The idea of “suffering from reminiscences” and an anxiety about confronting them also greets the reader on the very first pages of *Fragments*:

My early childhood memories are planted, first and foremost, in exact snapshots of my photographic memory and in the feelings imprinted in them, and the physical sensations. Then comes memory of being able to hear, and things I heard, then things I thought, and last of all, memory of things I said. [...] My earliest memories are a rubble field of isolated images and events. Shards of memory with hard knife-sharp edges, which still cut flesh if touched today. Mostly a chaotic jumble, with very little chronological fit; shards that keep surfacing against the orderly grain of grown-up life and escaping the laws of

logic. If I'm going to write about it, I have to give up on the ordering logic of grown-ups; it would only distort what happened (Wilkomirski, 1995: 4)⁸.

The very sharpness of Wilkomirski's memory makes touching upon the "shards of memory" such a difficult and possibly painful undertaking. The omission of order and a lack of logic, so we read, have as their cause the very events that are to be recounted. With this perspective that is so deliberately incoherent, associative, achronological, and generally barely comprehensible, a child-like abrupt directness is not only hinted at by the writer, but also plainly demanded from the reader (Bauer 2006: 17). This seemingly naive but nevertheless highly stylized narrative mode therefore constitutes the unavailability of Wilkomirski's story as well as his person, creating, as Alexandra Bauer has aptly called it, a "magically-sacrosanct position" (Bauer, 2006: 17) for both the author and his text. As Mächler notes, one important "a priori effect of this artifice is that the reader does not expect historical precision – after all, it's only a small child speaking. Historical imprecisions or contradictions do not impair credibility; on the contrary, they underscore the authenticity of a childlike perception" (2001: 279). Of course the reader notices the structuring hand of an adult author behind the child's perspective, an ordering logic that attempts to integrate isolated fragments of memory into a somewhat coherent narrative of trauma. This realization on part of the reader welcomes the childhood memories exactly as the author had introduced them: as shards of memory with sharp edges which have to be taken up gently and carefully, as misshapen fragments of a past that the adult mind cannot quite grasp. An identity constructed from a traumatic experience need not be coherent – in point of fact, the gaps in its history of itself authenticate the autobiographical story.

The nature of Wilkomirski's "early childhood memories" as "exact snapshots of my photographic memory" (Wilkomirski 1996: 4) and the need for (and supposed impossibility of) an ordering logic also takes up another common trope of trauma studies: the literal imprint of the traumatic event into the memory of the traumatized person and its integration into narrative identity. When neuroscientists Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane and

⁸ Meine frühen Kindheitserinnerungen gründen in erster Linie auf den exakten Bildern meines fotografischen Gedächtnisses und den dazu bewahrten Gefühlen – auch denen des Körpers. Dann kommt die Erinnerung des Gehörs und an Gehörtes, auch an Gedachtes und erst zuletzt die Erinnerung an Selbstgesagtes. [...] Meine frühesten Erinnerungen gleichen einem Trümmerfeld einzelner Bilder und Abläufe. Brocken des Erinnerens mit harten, messerscharfen Konturen, die noch heute kaum ohne Verletzung zu berühren sind. Oft chaotisch Verstreutes, chronologisch nur selten zu gliedern; Brocken, die sich immer wieder beharrlich dem Ordnungswillen des erwachsen Gewordenen widersetzen und den Gesetzen der Logik entgleiten. Will ich darüber schreiben, muß ich auf die ordnende Perspektive des Erwachsenen verzichten. Sie würde das Geschehene nur verfälschen (Wilkomirski, 1995: 7-8).

Onno van der Hart wrote on the nature of traumatic memories, they did so with the aim of treating a psychological disorder:

Traumatic memories need to become like memories of everyday experience, that is, they need to be modified and transformed by being placed in their proper content and restructured into a meaningful narrative. [...] Thus, in therapy, memory paradoxically becomes an act of creation rather than the static (fixation) recording of events that is characteristic of trauma-based memories (1996: 420).

In her brilliant *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Ruth Leys criticizes this approach to trauma, particularly the notion of “a literal imprint of an external trauma that, lodged in the brain in a special traumatic memory system, defies all possibility of representation” (2000: 16). Nevertheless, following the works of van der Kolk and others, the integration of literally imprinted traumatic memories into narratives of trauma has become the focal point of trauma literature and its criticism.

Wilkomirski himself had spoken on this topic at several conferences, urging a collaboration between historians and psychologists in order to help victims work through their traumas. He even developed a concept of interdisciplinary therapy together with Elitsur Bernstein – for which he received the ORTHO award (for “helping young child survivors recover a sense of personal identity through historical verification of their fragmented memories”) – a therapy based, however, entirely on the study of one client (himself) and on the expertise of one historian (also himself) (See Mächler, 2001: 80-82 & 294-295). While Wilkomirski insists that *Fragments* was not initially intended to be published and ought to be regarded as the outcome of self-designed psychotherapy, a means of structuring personal elusive memories and a strong pillar in the (re) construction of his identity, the text as published clearly intends to assist other child survivors grasp their own shards of memory. Wilkomirski concludes in his afterword to the text that his intention was

to explore both myself and my earliest childhood; it may also have been an attempt to set myself free. And I wrote them with the hope that perhaps other people in the same situation would find the necessary support and strength to cry out their own traumatic childhood memories, so that they too could learn that there really are people today who will take them seriously, and who

want to listen and to understand. They should know that they are not alone (Wilkomirski, 1996: 155)⁹.

This intent takes up issues raised by Hans Keilson in his study on sequential traumatization of child survivors of the Holocaust – one of the many books on the Holocaust, trauma, and trauma therapy in Wilkomirski's personal library (Mächler, 2001: 294-5) – such as the danger of questioning the experiences of traumatized children and ignoring their suffering¹⁰. In light of Judith Herman's highly significant findings on trauma, Wilkomirski's demand for a widening of trauma studies beyond the usual boundaries of adult experiences is actually quite plausible (Herman 1997). When Herman introduced the concept of complex post-traumatic stress disorder, she emphasized that the manifestations of trauma are much more varied than commonly thought and underlines her argument with the findings of eminent psychiatrists such as William Niederland, who, after having worked with Holocaust survivors, found that “the concept of traumatic neurosis does not appear sufficient to cover the multitude and severity of clinical manifestations’ of the survivor syndrome” (Herman 1992: 378). In this sense at least, Wilkomirski merely chimed in with a general call for a reorientation of trauma studies within psychology.

4. SILENT IDENTITY: THE LANGUAGE OF TRAUMA

When cultural work engages with trauma, it does so with a double emphasis on contradictory terms: the impossibility of both fully grasping the traumatic moment and translating it into language (especially in regard to the Holocaust) and the need to transmit knowledge of these traumas and translate them for new audiences. Roger Luckhurst has called these two sides to the study of other people's pain the “trauma paradigm”: “Given the narrative/anti-narrative tension at the core of trauma, aesthetics might step into this area because its task is (like that of the cultural critic) to ‘play with contradictions’”. Cultural forms, he argues, have provided

⁹ mich selbst und meine früheste Vergangenheit zu erforschen, wahrscheinlich war es auch eine Suche nach Befreiung. Und ich schrieb in der Hoffnung, daß vielleicht Menschen in vergleichbarer Situation auch die nötige Unterstützung und Kraft finden, ihre traumatischen Kindheitserinnerungen endlich in Worte zu fassen und auszusprechen, um dann zu erfahren, daß es heute doch Menschen gibt, die sie ernst nehmen, die zuhören und verstehen wollen. Sie sollen wissen, daß sie nicht ganz allein sind (Wilkomirski, 1995: 143).

¹⁰ For an overview over the life and work of Hans Keilson, see R. Kaufhold (2008): “‘Das Leben geht weiter’. Hans Keilson, ein jüdischer Psychoanalytiker, Schriftsteller, Pädagoge und Musiker”. *Zeitschrift für psychoanalytische Theorie und Praxis* 1/2: 142-167.

the genres and narrative forms in which traumatic disruption is temporalized and rendered transmissible. Trauma has become a paradigm because it has been turned into a repertoire of compelling stories about the enigmas of identity, memory and selfhood that have saturated Western cultural life (Luckhurst, 2008: 80).

The enormous “repertoire of compelling stories” about trauma (a repertoire Wilkomirski could draw from), however, is, as Luckhurst himself admits, “at odds with some of the most influential cultural theories of trauma, where the term trauma can be defined *in opposition* to narrative” (2008: 80, original emphasis). Most prominent among these theories of trauma as a point of narrative impossibility is Jean-Francois Lyotard’s definition of the traumatic experience. “What art can do, is bear witness not to the sublime, but to this aporia of art and to its pain. It does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it” (1990: 47). This leads Luckhurst to conclude that “[t]rauma can therefore only be an aporia in narrative, and any narrative temporalization is an unethical act”. Severe trauma, he writes, “can only be conveyed by the catastrophic rupture of narrative possibility” (2008: 81).

Fragments also takes up this notion of the aporia in narrative, of the impossibility to communicate trauma through language. Both inside and outside of the camps, Benjamin either speaks little or not at all: “All I’d done was to keep asking about my brothers. That’s all I said” (Wilkomirski, 1996: 12)¹¹. Even friendship and mutual understanding is marked by silence in *Fragments* (see also Bannasch, 2002: 186). When Benjamin meets a fellow child survivor in an orphanage, communication takes place entirely through the eyes (which have seen everything) rather than through language (which has to interpret events):

I looked back at her silently. I didn’t dare move, just returned her stare, mesmerized. I saw her wide-open eyes, and all of a sudden I knew: these eyes knew it all, they’d seen everything mine had, they knew infinitely more than anyone else in this country (Wilkomirski, 1996: 140)¹².

¹¹ “Ich hatte immer nur wieder nach meinen Brüdern gefragt. Dies war das einzige, was ich sprach” (Wilkomirski, 1995: 15).

¹² Sprachlos schaute ich sie an. Ich wagte nicht, mich zu bewegen und erwiderte gebannt ihren Blick. Ich sah ihre weit aufgerissenen Augen, und mit einem Schlage war mir klar: Diese Augen wußten alles, sie hatten alles gesehen, was auch meine Augen gesehen haben, diese Augen wußten unendlich viel mehr als alle anderen in diesem Land (Wilkomirski, 1995: 130).

The “normality” of the camp, which for example also marks Imre Kertész’s lauded *Fatelessness*¹³, becomes young Benjamin’s only reality. A reality outside of the logic of the camp does not exist for him:

People talked about things and learned things that simply didn’t exist. Mostly, I couldn’t understand a thing. I could understand most of the words quite quickly, but when I put them together, they made no sense, no shape that I could project (Wilkomirski, 1996: 127)¹⁴.

This dissociation of language and actuality, a system of symbolic references almost entirely formed and determined by the experience of the camp and a reality in which the camp (for Benjamin) only supposedly suddenly ceased to exist¹⁵, makes communication nearly impossible on two levels. Benjamin cannot explain his experience of the camp to those who have not also lived through it, and their reality and language make no sense to him at all. Notably, *Fragments* also plays with the opposite configuration of knowledge. Before Benjamin is initiated into the world of the camp, he finds that some names have a beautiful sound to them, names that have, for the informed reader, long lost any such innocent meaning. “Majdanek, Majdan Lublin, Majdanek,” I said, over and over again. The name was so pretty” (Wilkomirski, 1996: 36)¹⁶. Should the world of the camp, however, intrude through language into Benjamin’s present, through a certain term that was for him forever imprinted with a dark and deadly meaning, the horrors of the Holocaust immediately return and he is reaffirmed in his belief that the camps still exist, even after the war and even in Switzerland. When his foster mother comes to pick up young

¹³ I. Kertész (2004): *Fatelessness*, trans. Tim Wilkinson. Andrea Reiter has examined the similarities of this aspect in the works of Ruth Klüger, Imre Kertész, and Benjamin Wilkomirski. In all these cases it is the assumed perspective that strikes and influences readers most directly: “It is the gaze of the child that allows us to see in a new way that which we think we already know. [...] Unlike the authoritarian gaze of the parent, the child’s gaze is naive but accurate” (Reiter, 2000: 84).

¹⁴ Man sprach von Dingen und man lernte Dinge, die es in Wirklichkeit gar nicht gab. Meistens verstand ich gar nichts. Ich verstand zwar die meisten Wörter sehr bald, aber zusammen, als ganze Sätze ergaben sie mir keinen Sinn. Sie formten nichts, was ich mir vorstellen konnte (Wilkomirski, 1995: 119).

¹⁵ When young Benjamin for example discovers a coal furnace and what he thinks to be wooden bunks in the cellar of his foster family, he thinks: “I was right. They’re trying to trick me. That’s why they want me to forget what I know. The camp’s still here. Everything’s still here.” (Wilkomirski, 1996: 125) [“Ich hatte doch recht! Man will mich täuschen! Deshalb soll ich vergessen, was ich doch weiß. Das Lager ist noch da. Alles ist da!” (Wilkomirski, 1995: 117)].

¹⁶ “Majdanek, Majdan Lublin, Majdanek wiederholte ich immer und immer wieder. Der Name klang so schön!” (Wilkomirski, 1995: 36).

Benjamin, the question of “transport” arises – a term that has lost its innocence for Wilkomirski:

“And what have you thought about transport?” And the strange lady said: “I think we’ll take the train.” I didn’t listen to another word; I began to scream and yell [...]. “No, no transport, no – I won’t go on any transport,” I screamed despairingly. “I want to go home, let me go home. Not the transport, please!” [...] They tried to give the word “transport” other names, but I didn’t let myself be fooled. After all, I knew the word from personal experience and from what lots of children had told me. Whenever I asked them about their parents or brothers or sisters, it was always the same: “They were put on the transport” (Wilkomirski, 1995: 120)¹⁷.

This is by far not the only case in *Fragments* where metonymy acquires such a dreadful quality. As Michael Bernard-Donals has noted, Wilkomirski’s text, “marked by stutters, breaks, and impossible juxtapositions of images [...] reveals the point where we begin to be unsure of the object of language at all” (2000: 126).

The crisis of language manifests itself in *Fragments* not only in its inadequacy to describe a reality marked by the Holocaust, but also in its own complicity in violence. Language itself has become guilty – again a common trope of the Holocaust discourse. When young Benjamin tells a newly arrived child in the barracks to relieve himself in the straw on his bunk, as everything else would have resulted in immediate wrath on part of the guards, his words result in the death of this other child, who is killed the next morning when the guards find the soiled straw. Wilkomirski carries forever this guilt with him:

I’m guilty, I’m a murderer. If it hadn’t been for me, it wouldn’t have happened. And they’ll know it was me by my voice. [...] I’m a coward. A murderer. I killed the new boy. I’m scared they’ll find me out. I mustn’t talk anymore. I’ll be an outcast, and it’ll serve me right (Wilkomirski, 1996: 66)¹⁸.

¹⁷ “Und wie haben Sie sich den Transport gedacht?”, und die Fremde Frau antwortete: “Ich denke, wir nehmen die Eisenbahn...”. Weiter hörte ich nicht zu, ich begann zu schreien, zu brüllen. [...] “Nein! Kein Transport! Nein! Ich will nicht auf Transport!” kreischte ich verzweifelt, “Ich will nach Hause, laßt mich nach Hause! Nur kein Transport!” [...] Sie versuchten, dem Wort “Transport” andere Namen zu geben, aber ich ließ mich nicht beirren. Ich kannte ja das Wort aus eigener Erfahrung und aus den Erzählungen vieler Kinder. Auf die Frage nach Eltern oder Geschwister, hatte ich immer wieder zur Antwort bekommen: Sie sind auf Transport! (Wilkomirski, 1995: 112-113).

¹⁸ Ich bin schuld, ich bin ein Mörder! Ohne mich wäre es nicht geschehen! Und an meiner Stimme werden sie mich erkennen! [...] Ich bin ein Feigling! Ich bin ein Mörder! Ich habe den Neuen getötet. Ich habe Angst, entdeckt zu werden. Ich darf nie mehr sprechen! Ich werde ein Ausgestoßener sein, und dies zu Recht (Wilkomirski, 1996: 63).

Survivor guilt, both in terms of having had to do something “unspeakable” in order to survive and in the sense of having done wrong simply by surviving a traumatic event that others did not, is again very common in real narratives of trauma (Ryn, 1990; Krell & Sherman, 1997). In *Fragments*, Benjamin and his friend Karola¹⁹ from the orphanage both do not feel they deserve to be alive, “living among the living, yet we didn’t really belong with them – we were actually the dead, on stolen leave, accidental survivors who got left behind in life” (1996: 82)²⁰.

5. THE LURE OF VICARIOUS TRAUMATIZATION

Other traumatic experiences and images in *Fragments* include several violent beatings from the guards, the ever-present rats ready to attack the living and eat the dead, and a description of babies gnawing the flesh off the bones of their frozen fingers. In each case, Wilkomirski’s descriptions are considerably more detailed and gruesome than in most other Holocaust testimonies, with one exception being Jerzy Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird* (1965), which, Wilkomirski admits, deeply impressed him. Kosinski’s book indeed seems to have been an inspirational model for *Fragments*, as Stefan Mächler has already noted. The ever-present rats, babies thrown from a passing train, unlikely survival, the placement in an orphanage, and losing one’s voice in the face of trauma also feature in *The Painted Bird*. In formal terms as well, the works share very similar configurations:

Both texts break up into disconnected episodes told from a child’s perspective. This increases the reader’s identification with the innocent victim, who is helplessly handed over to a world of villains. The style is simple, but the descriptions of acts of violence are as drastic as anything one has ever read (Mächler, 2001: 213).

Notably, Kosinski also claimed that *The Painted Bird* was an autobiographical account – and it was also later unmasked as fiction (See esp. Sloan, 1996).

While Philip Gourevitch has noted that Wilkomirski’s *Fragments* is “in every way” the opposite of a memoir like that of Primo Levi (who “never draws attention to himself; he detests his victimization; he knows irony”) (1999: 68), the focus on the victimization and its gruesome details attracted rather than repelled readers, as reviews of the book on Amazon.com indicate (where it is

¹⁹ Karola is called Mila in the English version of *Fragments*.

²⁰ “Wir lebten unter den Lebenden, aber doch nicht richtig dazugehörend – Tote eigentlich, auf einem illegalen Urlaub, nur irrtümlich am Leben Gebliebene” (1995: 77).

still advertised as a memoir)²¹. Although some reviewers detest it as an “Oprah version of the Holocaust, crafted to tug at the heart strings”, others refute such “ugly attacks and smears against this beautiful, heart rending work of the triumph of life and hope in the midst of evil and oppression”. “*Fragments* is the ultimate account of innocence and humanity lost and regained. All who love the human spirit should cherish it.” Described as “Truth with a capital T” and as a “must for any Jew or anyone who likes to read true, scary tales from the past”, it is often praised for the experience of being taken “through your worst nightmares” and being left “feeling vulnerable and disoriented”, “shocked, in tears and emotionally drained”. This cathartic effect of witnessing such trauma second-hand, however, was not restricted to the general readership.

The idea of vicarious traumatization was in fact readily taken up by the most prominent proponents of trauma studies in literary and cultural criticism – which, I believe, goes a long way towards explaining the interest of academics in *Fragments* both before and after it was revealed to be a fabricated narrative of pain. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub first addressed “trauma texts” in their 1992 study on the crises of witnessing, in which they studied the role of testimony in literature, psychoanalysis, and history and in which they explored the possibility – and necessity – of participatory re-creation of trauma. Shoshana Felman writes of teaching traumatic texts and histories:

Teaching as such, takes place precisely only through a crisis: if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either vulnerability or the explosiveness of a (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps *not truly taught* (2002: 53, original emphasis).

In this view, only the re-creation of trauma (“creating in the class the highest state of crisis that it could withstand”) (Felman, 2002: 53) can facilitate a true understanding of the nature of trauma and adequately address the crisis of witnessing. This rather bold idea is still very prominent in the discourse on trauma; it found its way into the very influential volume edited by Cathy Caruth in 1995, which specifically engaged trauma and memory, as well as Caruth’s later monograph that expanded the scope of the project into narrative (1996).

²¹ Bettina Bannasch’s observation that also the literary quality of *Fragments* was suddenly questioned by literary critics after it was unmasked as fiction (Bannasch, 2002: 188) can also be confirmed through a study of the reviews on Amazon.com: Up until 1999, the reviewers give it constantly only the highest possible rating, after the news about the “true Wilkomirski” had spread, it receives – with very few exceptions – only the lowest possible rating.

Cathy Caruth's idea of trauma as a means of connecting with the other, of "a speaking and a listening *from the site of trauma*" (1995: 11, original emphasis) sheds some more light on the context in which *Fragments* emerged:

In a catastrophic age, that is, trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves (Caruth, 1995: 11).

Psychiatrist Dori Laub, then, also claims that "the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself" (1992: 57). This configuration of trauma as a link between cultures and of co-ownership of trauma through listening of course poses ethical questions. As Nancy Miller and Jason Tougaw observe,

in a culture of trauma, accounts of extreme situations sell books. Narratives of illness, sexual abuse, torture or the death of loved ones have come to rival the classic, heroic adventure as a test of limits that offers the reader the suspicious thrill of borrowed emotion (2002: 2).

It seems that it was this "thrill of borrowed emotion" that contributed very much to the popularity of *Fragments* both outside of and within academic discourse.

6. CONCLUSION

An identity formed by trauma, such as Binjamin Wilkomirski's, an identity fully determined by horrible memories that had to be integrated into a somewhat coherent story of self, an identity that, furthermore, in its fragility and its insistence on unspeakability and guilt mirrored the fate of many real child survivors, necessarily achieved prominence in a field which, precisely at the time of the book's publication as autobiography, was experiencing such a surge in interest in trauma, memory, and the suppressed histories of suffering. "Wilkomirski might not be an actual victim of the Holocaust, but he is a fitting monument to victim culture," conclude Andrew Gross and Michael Hoffmann (2004: 43). As Dominick LaCapra has warned, the emergence of such a "victim culture" or "culture of trauma" is in danger of losing contact with history:

The significance or force of particular historical losses (for example, those of apartheid or the Shoah) may be obfuscated or rashly generalized. As a

consequence one encounters the dubious ideas that everyone (including perpetrators or collaborators) is a victim, that all history is trauma, or that we all share a pathological public sphere or a “wound culture” (2001: 64).

Could critics have known about the fraud of *Fragments* all along? Eminent figures such as Lawrence Langer, Raul Hilberg, and Ruth Klüger have claimed to have regarded *Fragments* as literature or even kitsch all along. But this is not the important question here. What is at stake in the study of trauma texts, especially so in the study of autobiographical trauma narratives, is nothing less than the appropriate critical academic stance. When questions regarding the construction of identity in autobiography turn into unreflective calls for empathic understanding, when vicarious traumatization is welcomed in the construction of one’s own identity as a literary critic or cultural historian, then the study of literature collapses into nothing more than the mere appropriation of other people’s pain for personal profit and pleasure. Then we are truly left with nothing but fragments.

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