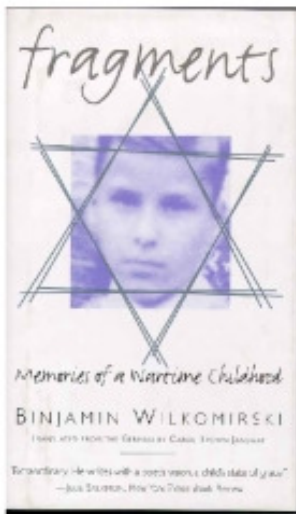




## Holocaust Survivor Memoir Exposed as Fraud

by Mark Weber

**A Holocaust survivor memoir that has received prestigious literary awards and lavish praise has been exposed as a hoax.**



In *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, Benjamin Wilkomirski describes his ordeal as an infant in the Jewish ghetto of Riga (Latvia), where his earliest memory is of seeing his father being killed. Wilkomirski also tells how he survived the terrible rigors of wartime internment, at the age of three or four, in the German-run concentration camps of Majdanek and Auschwitz.

First published in German in 1995, *Fragments* has been translated into twelve languages. In Switzerland, the country where Wilkomirski lives, the book has been a major best-seller. Two documentary films and numerous personal appearances by the author in schools throughout the country have helped promote the memoir.

The American edition was published by Schocken, an imprint of Random House, which heavily promoted the book with teachers' study guides and other supplementary materials.

Jewish groups and major American newspapers have warmly praised *Fragments*. The New York Times called it "stunning," and the Los Angeles Times lauded it as a "classic first-hand account of the Holocaust." It received the 1996 National Jewish Book Award for Autobiography and Memoir, while in Britain it was awarded the Jewish Quarterly Literary Prize, and in France the Prix Memoire de la Shoah.

The US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC -- a federal government agency -- was so impressed that it sent Wilkomirski on a six-city United States fund-raising tour last fall. This past summer, though, compelling **evidence came to light exposing Wilkomirski's memoir as an literary hoax.**



Although he claims to have been born in Latvia in 1939, and to have arrived in Switzerland in 1947 or 1948, Swiss legal records show that he was actually born in Switzerland in February 1941, the son of an unwed woman, Yvette Grosjean. The infant was then adopted and raised by the Doessekkers, a middle-class Zurich couple. Jewish author Daniel Ganzfried, writing in the Swiss weekly *Weltwoche*, also reports that he has found a 1946 photo of the young Bruno Doessekker (Wilkomirski) in the garden of his adoptive parents.

Comparisons have been drawn between Wilkomirski's *Fragments* and *The Painted Bird*, the supposedly autobiographical "Holocaust memoir" by prominent literary figure Jerzy Kosinski that turned out to be fraudulent.

Reaction by Jewish Holocaust scholars to the new revelations has been instructive, because they seem more concerned about propagandistic impact than about historical truth. Their primary regret seems merely to be that the fraud has been detected, not that it was perpetrated.

In an essay published in a major Canadian newspaper (*Ottawa Citizen*, Nov. 18, 1998), Jewish writer Judith Shulevitz arrogantly argued that it doesn't really matter much if *Fragments* is authentic. Her main misgiving, apparently, is that the deceit was not more adroit: "I can't help wishing Wilkomirski-Doesseker [sic] had been more subtle in his efforts at deception, and produced the magnificent fraud world literature deserves."



Deborah Dwork, director of the Center for Holocaust Studies at Clark University (Worcester, Mass.), and co-author of *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present* (Yale Univ. Press, 1996), agrees that *Fragments* now appears to be fraudulent. At the same time, though, she expressed sympathy for Wilkomirski, saying that when she met him he appeared "to be a deeply scarred man." Amazingly, Dwork does not blame him for the imposture, "*because she believes in his identity.*" Instead, she takes the publishers to task for having "exploited" Wilkomirski. (*New York Times*, Nov. 3, 1998).

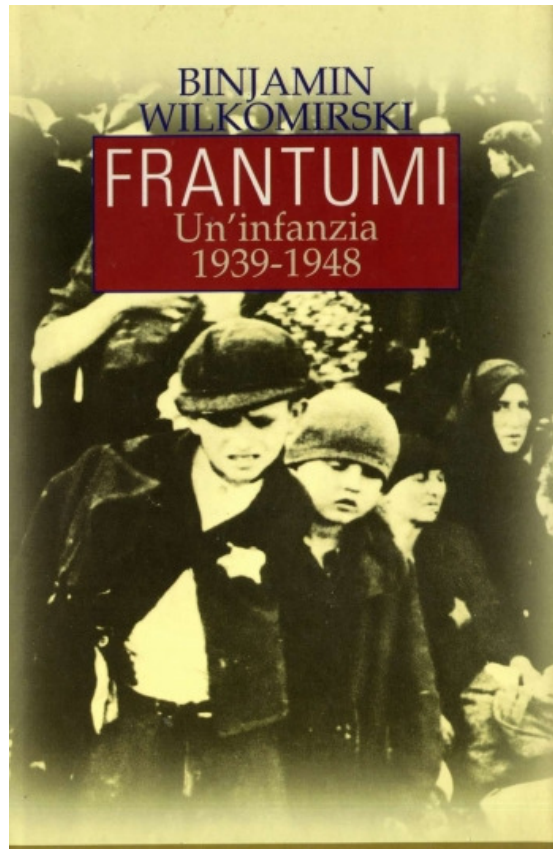
Deborah Lipstadt, author of the anti-revisionist polemic *Denying the Holocaust*, has assigned *Fragments* in her Emory University class on Holocaust memoirs. When confronted with evidence that it is a fraud, she commented that the new revelations "might complicate matters somewhat, but [the work] is still powerful."

Daniel Ganzfried reports that Jews have complained to him that even if *Fragments* is a fraud, his exposé is dangerously aiding "those who deny the Holocaust."

American Jewish writer Howard Weiss makes a similar point in an essay published in the *Chicago Jewish Star* (Oct. 9-29, 1998):

Presenting a fictional account of the Holocaust as factual only provides ammunition to those who already deny that the horrors of Nazism and the death camps ever even happened. If one account is untrue, the deniers' reasoning goes, how can we be sure any survivors accounts are true ... Perhaps no one was ready to question the authenticity of the [Wilkomirski] account because just about anything concerning the Holocaust becomes sacrosanct.

Wilkomirski himself has responded to the new revelations by going into hiding, although he did issue a defiant statement describing the climate of discussion about his memoir as a "poisonous" atmosphere of "totalitarian judgment and criticism."



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From *The Journal of Historical Review*, Sept.-Oct. 1998 (Vol. 17, No. 5), pages 15-16.

An interesting article on the psychology and social phenomenon of faked identities and fake personal histories, with fake Holocaust lives as the central pillar...

<http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~kihlstrm/rmpa00.htm>

## Memory and History

These problems in psychotherapy are matched by **problems in history, especially when historians rely on memoir or oral history, in the absence of written records or other forms of corroboration.**

**Consider the case of Benjamin Wilkomirski**, a Swiss musician whose book, *Fragments* (1995), portrays a young Jewish child's life in the concentration camps during the Holocaust. As Wilkomirski tells his story, he was born in Latvia in 1939, witnessed his father's execution when he was 3 or 4 years of age, and was incarcerated in a series of camps. At the end of the war, he was found wandering around Auschwitz, and he was placed in an orphanage in Cracow.



Wilkomirski included in his book a group photo taken in a Polish orphanage around 1946: one of the children is highlighted by the annotation, "Could this be me?". In any event, he was relocated to Switzerland in 1948, and recovered memories of his camp experiences during psychotherapy. Wilkomirski's book is vivid and powerful. Jonathan Kozol, reviewing it in *the Nation*, compared it with Elie Wiesel's *Night*, one of a true classics of Holocaust literature. The

book won a host of literary prizes, including the *Jewish Quarterly* prize for non-fiction and the National Jewish Book Award for autobiography; the American edition was listed by the *New York Times* as a "notable book" for 1997. It has been called the "most successful Swiss book since *Heidi*".

*Fragments* is also often cited as an example of the qualities of traumatic memory: it is fragmentary (hence its title), lacking in narrative coherence. Wilkomirski's story has also been touted as evidence for the success of recovered memory therapy. More recently, however, strong doubts have been raised about its provenance. In contrast to *Night*, it is lacking in specific details -- but then again, what do we expect from the memories of a

4-year-old child? More unsettling is the fact that few young children survived the camps. Children younger than 7 years were usually killed quickly after their arrival and apparently there were no children at all at



Auschwitz.

Despite Wilkomirski's photograph from Crakow, **Swiss adoption records indicate that Wilkomirski was born Bruno Grossjean** near Bern, Switzerland in 1941, to a poor, unmarried, Protestant woman. He was a public ward until 1945, when he was taken in as a foster child by Kurt and Martha Dossekker, and raised by them in Zurich; in 1957, he was formally adopted.

Bruner appears in Dossekker family pictures dating from 1946, and school records dating from 1947. He attended university, worked as a musician and instrument-maker, **became an amateur historian of the Holocaust, and changed his name to Benjamin Wilkomirski in the 1980s.** Both his adoptive parents died in 1986.

It is now widely believed that *Fragments* is a work of "nonfiction fiction". [...] Wilkomirski seems [...] to incorporate nonfiction, details of the Holocaust gleaned from a lifetime's obsessive reading, into fiction -- **a memoir which isn't based on personal recollection.** The irony is that *Fragments* works as a piece of fiction -- but as one critic noted, "Nonfiction sells better than fiction".

Moreover, in a striking parallel to the views of some trauma therapists, **some publishers [i.e., "those who publish Holocaust stories] seem to feel that it is not their job to fact-check their authors' memoirs.** *Arthur Samuelson*, Wilkomirski's American publisher, noted that:

**We don't have fact checkers.** We are not a detective agency. We are a vehicle for authors to convey their work, and we distribute their information with a feeling of responsibility. [?]

Similarly, Elizabeth Janeway, his American editor, stated that:

We don't vet books on an adversarial basis. **We have no means of independent collaboration [sic].**

Reliance on uncorroborated memory may be good for the publishing business, but it may not be good for history. But then again, it may not be good for the publishing business, either. **After commissioning an independent investigation, Wilkomirski's German publisher withdrew the book from circulation.**<sup>FN</sup>

In an article on "witness literature", Timothy Garton Ash referred to Wilkomirski as an example of a writer on "the frontier between the literature of fact and the literature of fiction", but whose book lacks the essential "truth test" of "veracity" (*On the Frontier*, *New York Review of Books*, 11/07/02).

Reading *Fragments* now, one is amazed that it could ever have been hailed as it was. The wooden irony ("Majdanek is no playground"), the hackneyed images (silences broken by the sound of cracking skulls), the crude, hectoring melodrama (his father squashed against the wall by a transporter, dead women with rats crawling on their stomachs). Material which, **once you know it is fraudulent, is truly obscene.** But even **before one knew that, all the aesthetic alarms should have sounded.** For **every page has the authentic ring of falsehood.**

In an interesting twist on the Wilkomirski story, a novel about the Holocaust, written in the first person, has been reissued as a memoir -- because that's what it actually is (*Holocaust Memoir is Reissued, No Longer Designated Fiction* By Ralph Bumenthal, *New York Times* 7/12/02). *Jakob Littner's Notes from a Hole in the Ground* by Wolfgang Koeppen (1992), was originally published, in 1948, as *Notes from a Hole in the Ground* by Jakob Littner, a Hungarian-born Polish Jew who was a stamp dealer in Munich before the war. Koeppen served as editor of the book. Littner died in 1950. Koeppen himself emerged as a prominent German writer in the 1950s. In 1992, Judischen Verlag issued *Notes* under its revised title with Koeppen listed as author and the book categorized as "fiction". When Littner's surviving relatives protested the appropriation, **Judischen Verlag (interestingly, a subdivision of Suhrkamp Verlag, which also published Wilkomirski's "memoir")** replied that Koeppen had "given the notes an adequate form" and acknowledged Littner in the title. But the situation is more complicated than that. Reinhard Zachau, a scholar of German literature, discovered that Koeppen had changed Littner's text in important ways. More important in the context of memory, Koeppen seems to have made Littner's story his own. Commenting on "his" book, Koeppen wrote, **"I ate American rations and wrote the story about the suffering of a German Jew. In so doing it became my story".**

Koeppen died in 1996. Littner's book has now been reissued under his original title, *Journey Through the Night* (Continuum, 2000), [falsely] categorized as "nonfiction".

[...] Apparently, Wilkomirski believes that his story is true: according to the *New York Times*, when the veracity of his book was challenged by his German publisher, he stood up defiantly and declared:

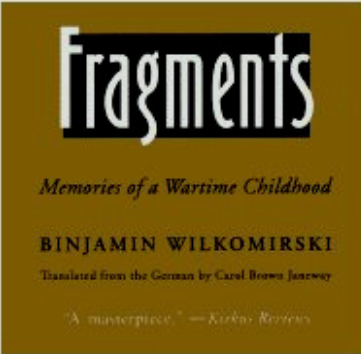
**I am Benjamin Wilkomirski!.**

[How sick is that?]

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Comment: Probably ALL Holocaust stories ought to be treated as such, until there is at least the most basic investigation into their validity. They have been the source of too much racial hatred, genocide, mass-slander, and extortion already. Too many of them have been proven false for them to be regarded carte blanche as history any longer.

**Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood**  
*Benjamin Wilkomirski* / Author, *Carol Brown Janeway* / Translator Schocken Books Inc \$20 (155p) ISBN 978-0-8052-4139-6



Majdanek extermination camp outside Lublin, Poland, was equally as murderous as Auschwitz, and nearly as large. It is curious that it is much less well known, but that is where the author spent about four years of his childhood, as an orphan, entering the camp around age three. His survival is a testament to his resilience. In sparest prose, the author describes such daily occurrences as starving babies who devour the ends of their own fingers. There are numerous Holocaust memoirs on the market, but this one is qualitatively different, for it attempts to introduce us to the worst of the Nazi horror through the mind of a child. Wilkomirski, today a musician living in Switzerland, worked with a psychiatrist to piece together these ""fragments"" of the story of his childhood--recollections that, he claims, he has dredged up through the psychiatric process. Though presented as fact, this blackest night of the soul reads like fine literature. (Sept.)

*Reviewed on: 10/02/1996*

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*ABOVE: Proven Holocaust fake still being sold as "real".*

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