

Ghent University  
Faculty of Arts and Philosophy



**The Creation and Reception of False Testimony:  
Benjamin Wilkomirski, Tania Head and Ishmael Beah**

Supervisor:  
Prof. Dr. Craps

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
“Master in de Taal- en Letterkunde:  
Engels-Spaans” by Hans Pieters

June 2009

## **Contents**

Contents.....	2
Acknowledgements .....	3
1. Introduction .....	4
2. The curious case of Benjamin Wilkomirski.....	7
2.1. Benjamin Wilkomirski’s traumatic history.....	7
2.2. From Bruno Dösseker to Benjamin Wilkomirski, a Holocaust survivor.....	10
2.3. Allegations and exposure of his lies.....	13
2.4. From Benjamin Wilkomirski back to Bruno Grosjean .....	22
2.5. Bruno’s strategies of deception .....	27
2.6. His possible motives and ‘triggers’ .....	35
2.6.1. <i>His personal reasons</i> .....	35
2.6.2. <i>Social conditions</i> .....	37
2.6.3. <i>The influence of others</i> .....	39
2.6.4. <i>Conclusion</i> .....	41
2.7. Moral judgement .....	42
2.8. The problem of authenticity and genre.....	45
3. Tania Head’s Miraculous 9/11 escape story.....	49
3.1. Introduction .....	49
3.2. The making and unmaking of her personal Hollywood story .....	50
3.3. Her strategies of deception.....	53
3.4. The reasons why it came so far .....	58
3.5. Moral judgement .....	60
4. Ishmael Beah’s best-selling child soldier memoir .....	64
4.1. Introduction .....	64
4.2. How the text differs from false memoirs and corresponds to them .....	66
4.2.1. <i>Typical features of a testimony</i> .....	66
4.2.2. <i>Characteristics of an invented memoir</i> .....	67
4.3. His reasons for exaggerating and moral implications .....	69
5. Conclusion.....	72
Bibliography.....	75

## **Acknowledgements**

Evidently, this dissertation would not have been possible without the supervision and expertise of Prof. Dr. Stef Craps. I would like to thank him first of all for awakening my interest in trauma literature. I also want to thank him for the patience and understanding he has shown in the course of the writing of this work. Moreover, he has also made important suggestions about which books to read and what topics to write about. Also the corrections he has suggested are kindly appreciated.

I would also like to thank Prof. Dr. Philippe Codde for providing me with a copy of the documentary Kind van de Dodenkampen on the Wilkomirski case.

I am also very grateful to my girlfriend Elke Heirman who has supported me throughout this entire year when sometimes I felt like giving up.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my parents for the support they have always given me. They have always believed in me and done the maximum to give me all the opportunities in life. Also, I would like to thank them for their financial support they offer for my studies.

## **1. Introduction**

Binjamin Wilkomirski's book Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood, 1939-1948 was first published in 1995. In this work he describes how as a child he was taken away from his hometown Riga by the Nazis, subsequently survived two concentration camps, and then spent some time in an orphanage before being adopted by the Swiss Dösseker family. The book was an instant hit and in no time became a bestseller. The original version was translated into nine different languages and was praised for finally giving a voice to child survivors of the Holocaust with, among other prizes, the Prix Mémoire de la Shoah. As we also observe with other traumatic events such as 9/11 (cf. *infra*), survivors often encounter great difficulties to get recognition from society, after all they are considered "the lucky ones" compared to the huge number of deaths. Consequently, the strength of Wilkomirski's story rests exactly on obtaining recognition for these child survivors. For the first time in history, real attention was given to this group and their suffering was recognized as well. Yet, after the success came a massive disillusion with the investigations carried out by Daniel Ganzfried and Stefan Maechler. They discovered that Wilkomirski was not a child survivor at all and found that the story contained many lies and inaccuracies. Moreover, they also found out he had been born as a non-Jewish Swiss boy by the name of Bruno Grosjean. Yet, one of the debates concerning this case that continues up to this day is whether this author was a sheer liar or rather an unstable person who is easily influenced by his therapists and the people around him.

In what follows, I will not restrict myself to a study of the text itself, but rather intend to adopt a broader, sociological perspective in trying to unveil also what reasons are at the basis of false testimony and what judgements – both moral and literary – these cases provoke. In order to do so, a summary of Wilkomirski's story in Fragments will be provided before we will deal with the sociological and literary discussions caused by this event. Then, we will try to determine how and why this story was created and establish how someone could get tangled up in their fantasy to such a great extent. Finally, we will also look at the moral implications of this invented survivor memoir and the literary debate it provokes. To illustrate the complexity of these matters further, I will compare this work to the case of Tania Head, a fake 9/11 survivor, and the polemic surrounding Ishmael Beah's A Long Way Gone. Tania Head claimed to be one of the few 9/11 survivors who were above the point of impact when a plane hit the south tower. Moreover, she told everyone her fiancé had perished in the north

tower. As we will see in chapter three, she made up a story that transcended everyone else's. In chapter four, we will have a closer look at A Long Way Gone. In this memoir, Beah describes how, as a child, he was forced to join the Sierra Leonean government army. He describes his two years as a child soldier and how he was reintroduced in 'civilization' through the Unicef rehabilitation centre in Freetown. Nonetheless, three Australian journalists discovered that the rebels' attack on his village, which caused him to flee, took place two years later than the author says in his book. This means that Beah was "only" a child soldier for two months. On top of that, they have shown that some of the most atrocious scenes in his book did not take place (or at least not in Beah's presence). In this study, it is not my intention to use the Holocaust as a model or frame of reference for other traumatic events, since each trauma is different and deserves its proper attention. Rather, I would like to investigate whether the strategies of deception and the reasons for lying on the one hand, and the moral judgement of the audience on the other, are affected by the difference in circumstances between these three persons: as we will see, in Wilkomirski's case the role of therapy will be of the utmost importance, whereas for the other two it does not play any role at all. Nevertheless, Head did not publish any book and did not try to gain any financial profit out of the situation. Therefore, I would like to investigate how she adapts her strategies to this fact and, even more importantly, if the audience takes this into account when passing judgement on her. Beah, on the other hand, can call to his defence neither the influence of therapy, nor a lack of financial profit. However, he is the only one who really has an empirical bond with the events he describes. He did not really lie, but just exaggerated his story. Because of this interesting fact, I will compare his novel with both traditional real and fake memoirs. Moreover, I believe that from a moral point of view this case will also be particularly fascinating because I expect it to be the most nuanced of the three cases.

On top of that, Wilkomirski's case also provoked an important literary discussion about the genre of the memoir. I will also dedicate a section of this dissertation to this polemic. First, I will show how difficult it is to classify Fragments under a particular literary genre. Then, I will discuss a more general issue in literature which concerns the existence of the genre of the memoir and testimonies in general. As we will see, many critics have argued that a testimony can never describe the exact facts of an event. Therefore, some of these critics have argued that the genre of the memoir cannot exist. Others, however, prefer to redefine the concept 'memoir'.

As I already said, I particularly chose to investigate these three cases in one study because they differ in very interesting aspects even though they are all cases of false

testimony. Because of these differences, I believe, they allow us to gain a greater insight in the mechanism of false testimony. At the same time, they illustrate how difficult it is to form a moral and literary judgement about them. By placing these three people alongside each other, I want to unveil the thin line that lies between criticizing and defending them. Moreover, Wilkomirski's Fragments and – especially – Beah's A Long Way Gone seem to defy the existing boundaries between the genre of the memoir and fiction.

Even though Wilkomirski's case has been widely discussed, few studies have focussed on “the making of” his false memory and the reception by the public. If any judgement was expressed, it was often too one-sided in condemning the author. Therefore, I would like to nuance this judgement. Moreover, few studies have engaged in comparative work, especially across the borders of one specific trauma, as the Holocaust for example. By using three cases of different traumatic events, I want to investigate the similarities and differences they present. In doing so, I hope to discover some typical features of false testimony, which would allow to identify future cases easier.

## **2. The curious case of Benjamin Wilkomirski**

### **2.1. Benjamin Wilkomirski's traumatic history**

As mentioned above, Wilkomirski's story begins in 1941 when the Nazis invaded Riga. Lots of Jews were gathered in the synagogue and burned alive, while the Latvian fascists also murdered thousands of them, among whom possibly also Wilkomirski's father. As a small child (he was only two or three years old) he managed to escape the Nazis together with his mother and brothers, leaving their hometown first by boat and then by train. They hid on a farmhouse in Poland, but there he lost his family before being arrested and deported to the concentration camp of Majdanek, one of the worst death camps under the Nazi regime. In his book he writes a very moving passage about the death of his mother in this camp in which she gives him a valuable piece of bread at her death bed. Later on, Wilkomirski was transferred to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where, so he claims, he was one of the victims of the medical experiments carried out by Doctor Josef Mengele, nicknamed "the angel of death". This also explains why he does not have a number tattooed on his arm like other survivors. Among these children was also Laura Grabowski, a woman from Los Angeles who contacted Wilkomirski after reading his book. She said she was infertile due to the maltreatment in the camp. She was about the same age and claimed to have similar memories to his. Moreover, once adopted she was not allowed to use words like "Poland" or "Jewish". When they finally met each other, he claimed to recognize her and she expressed in front of the camera the legendary words: "He's my Binji<sup>1</sup>, that's all I know"<sup>2</sup>. In Fragments, the author says he managed to get away from Birkenau after the liberation because a woman who recognized him led him out of the camp and walked with him to Sandomierz near Kraków. At this point, the story Wilkomirski tells tends to differ, confusing various homes. Moreover, it is impossible to reconstruct the author's biography only on the basis of his book since it is constructed out of fragments and consequently leaves out certain episodes of his life. Therefore, in what follows, I prefer to complete Wilkomirski's account of events where necessary with what Stefan Maechler, an expert in this case, considers "the most plausible version" (Wilkomirski Affair 42). First Wilkomirski was put in a home on Długa Street, but he ran away because he found it unbearable. Consequently, he lived on the street begging for a while. He went in and out of different orphanages until finally Frau Grosz, a nurse at one of

---

<sup>1</sup> Short for Benjamin. This is a nickname she uses for him.

<sup>2</sup> We will come back to Laura Grabowski further on in chapter 2.4, page 25.

these homes, took him to Basel claiming she would pass him off as her son. Nonetheless, when they arrived there she was gone. Yet still, he was lucky enough to be given a place in a Swiss orphanage where he received the false identity of Bruno Grosjean and thus stopped being Benjamin Wilkomirski. From there, he moved in with the Dösseker family who eventually adopted him, according to Wilkomirski only because his foster father was a Nazi sympathizer and was fascinated by the fact that he was “one of Doctor Mengele’s children”. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that the official adoption only took place in 1957 against Wilkomirski’s own will, therefore he still refers to the Dössekers with the term ‘foster parents’, as shall I in the rest of this dissertation. According to Wilkomirski’s story, his foster parents tried to get him to repress and forget his past. In a message to his editor Thomas Sparr, dated March 1995, Wilkomirski recalls:

Once I discovered a magazine with pictures of war ruins and lots of barbed-wire barricades. I ran screaming to my foster mother. ‘You see, that’s where I come from! From there!’ and pointed to the pictures. ‘I don’t come from where you always tell me I do. Look here! Please tell me where that was, please!’ She strictly forbade me to look at any more picture magazines. Then she said the usual thing: ‘You just dreamed it.’ But I wouldn’t let it go, and I begged her to tell me whether she knew anything, if she knew where I came from. And in the end she grew weary and suddenly said, ‘That was so awful, such a horrible place, that no one should even speak about it.’ (qtd. in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 49)

Nonetheless, the young Benjamin spent hours in his tree-house repeating his memories out loud to himself in order to remember more and more about the place he came from, because, he says, he “had the illusion that one day I could escape this place and go back” (Kind van de dodenkampen).

Moreover, in his book he also describes some dreadful experiences he had in school that contribute to shaping the image of a traumatized human being, which Wilkomirski clearly is or at least claims to be. For example, he describes a scene when his class went to a Folk Fair in Zürich and he got distressed because kids were aiming guns at a (painted) lady. At that same fair he also began begging at a candy stand because he had no money and, according to the author, it reminded him of his time on the streets in Kraków. Furthermore, there is another shocking scene he describes which contributes to the interpretation of Wilkomirski as a child who has been traumatized by the Holocaust. When his teacher unrolls a poster of William



Tell, he recognizes him as an SS officer and panics, much to the laughter of the other children in class. This is definitely one of the most striking scenes in his memoir.

Yet, these are not the only experiences of compulsive reliving he describes. For example, when he sees the coal furnace in his foster parents' house he believes he is still in the camp. Another appalling passage in the book is when he identifies a ski lift driven by a noisy engine as "the death machine" (141). On top of that, he claims that after research he has discovered that both the ski lifts in Switzerland and the trucks that produced the gas in the camp of Majdanek were driven by Saurer engines, which would explain his confusion.

## 2.2. From Bruno Dösseker to Benjamin Wilkomirski, a Holocaust survivor

In his book, Wilkomirski confides to the reader that thanks to the conversations he had with two of his teachers in the private gymnasium he attended he realized for the first time he was not crazy. He started to understand the context in which his memories belonged and became aware of the reason why people did not want him to talk about them. In particular, the wisdom of Salvo Berkovici, his physics teacher, appears to have been crucial for the young Bruno Dösseker / Benjamin Wilkomirski. His history teacher for his part made him acquire more information on the Nazi system and World War II.

Moreover, his Jewish awareness was stimulated when he went home to tell his father he was going to marry a Protestant girl. His father raved like a fury screaming he would regret not marrying a Jewish girl. As Maechler states: “This slip confirmed for Wilkomirski that despite the family taboo, his foster father had always been well aware of his past” (Wilkomirski Affair 57). Later on, when his foster parents died in 1985, he found a book in their home about the psychological and psychiatric treatment of children who have been in concentration camps in which his foster father had underlined certain place names and symptoms (more specifically: William G. Niederland’s Folgen der Verfolgung: Das Überlebenssyndrom Seelenmord). The psychological description resulting from the combination of all the underlined symptoms matched the way Wilkomirski had behaved as a child at home he said. The geographical names in their turn were marked on a map by the author which resulted in a route being drawn from Riga to Majdanek and Birkenau, exactly the route he describes in his book.

Then again, there are various other important facts in his life that influenced him and eventually led to the publication of Fragments. First of all, his history studies, and especially his investigations on Jewish migration in central and eastern Europe between World War I and the Refugee Conference at Évian in 1938, provided him with the opportunity to gain more information on this subject matter. For his research he went to Poland several times and was granted access to many archives. While working on his doctorate, he tried to find out more about his personal past as well. Also, Wilkomirski’s reading of Jerzy Kosinski’s The Painted Bird<sup>3</sup> clearly influenced his later writing. Furthermore, the television film Der Prozess

---

<sup>3</sup> This book describes the life of the author as a six-year-old boy wandering the Polish-Soviet borderlands during the War. Moreover, he claimed to have been sexually abused during this period as well. Ironically, Kosinski’s story was proven to be a fiction as well. In 1994, the Polish writer Joanna Siedlecka revealed that he had lived in gentle circumstances during this period and had never been mistreated. In reality, his life appeared to be the exact opposite of what he had written down in his novel.

broadcast in 1984 was very important for him since it was the first time he was able to see photographs of Majdanek. It is all the details he acquired from these events and which he inserted in his book that in the end gave him the credibility of a real Holocaust child survivor.

Another crucial person in his life is without a doubt the Israeli psychotherapist Elitsur Bernstein, who first approached him in 1979 because he wanted to take clarinet lessons with Wilkomirski, who was a musician at the time. Bernstein became his closest friend and most loyal companion on his trips to his past. As a psychotherapist, he also tried to help Wilkomirski to evoke his memories sometimes for hours on end until he would get physically sick. In this process, Monika Marta's expertise was also of the utmost importance since Bernstein was often in Israel. For two and a half years she worked with Wilkomirski in emotionally very demanding psychotherapeutic sessions.

Yet, probably the most essential person in the placing of his memories and the realization of his book was his partner Verena Piller whom he met in 1982. She took him seriously from the start and did not try to block his memories or try to influence him by saying he was not making any sense. In a video interview for the Holocaust Memorial Museum (included in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair) Wilkomirski himself affirms her importance:

I felt the first moment, she was able to create a sort of atmosphere of security and that I from the beginning could tell her first a little bit and then more and more ... about all my nightmares and where they come from and what I remember. And she had incredible patience and loved to listen, listen again and again, and that was during the time I was ill and it was due to her that I survived that, because I already had given up. I saw no chance anymore to survive this illness. (qtd. in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair: 62)

It was she who told him for the first time that his physical problems originated from memories he had. Together with Bernstein she accompanied him on his journeys and encouraged him to write down his memories in a book as a therapeutic means. She urged him to do so, since he was very ill and thin at the time (according to him because of the experiments performed on him in Birkenau) and she believed he would not get better until he could express himself. Interestingly enough she, just like Bernstein, continues to call him Bruno because she feels that the name Benjamin "tends to make him smaller".

Finally, his visit to the camps of Birkenau and Majdanek in the company of his girlfriend and Bernstein was the climax of years of effort and investigation. In a video made by one of Bernstein's sons we see a very emotional Wilkomirski, clearly moved by his

“homecoming”. He plays his role very convincingly so no one would ever dream of doubting this man’s sincerity and truthfulness. Yet, as will be discussed further on, maybe Wilkomirski truly believed he was a Holocaust survivor through his therapy sessions and in that case really was sincere. Consequently, we should consider the role a therapist plays in the reconstruction of memory (cf. *infra*). Moreover, the fact that his drawings made during therapy resemble the camp almost perfectly only complicates things further. This could be due to the information he acquired during the events mentioned above, yet it could also be influenced by his sessions with Matta and Bernstein. Nonetheless, Wilkomirski himself tends to minimize this influence:

The process allowed him to bring order to his memories. They are not the product of therapy, Wilkomirski emphasizes; he had written them down the first time as a child. “I simply wanted to get a precise fix on it all and concentrate on what was still in my memory, be it important or unimportant.” (Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 82)

### 2.3. Allegations and exposure of his lies

Wilkomirski's manuscript immediately interested many different publishers. Eventually Suhrkamp Verlag published it in the spring of 1995. Nevertheless, even before the official publication of the book, problems already started. In February of 1995, Hanno Helbling, former head of the *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, sent a letter to Dr. Siegfried Unseld, publisher of the Jüdischer Verlag (a part of Suhrkamp Verlag). In this letter he makes some interesting observations:

A fifty-year-old musician who has or has had a very difficult life – I don't know his name – has found his “identity” with the help of a psychotherapist. [...], he has been able to persuade himself that he is a surviving victim of Auschwitz. On the basis of this assumption or certainty – perhaps not created out of thin air, but at any rate incompatible with reality – he has written a book that is ostensibly his “concentration-camp memories” [...]. It also appears that certain Jewish circles have encouraged him in this.

Everything depends, then, on how such a publication is presented: as an “Auschwitz novel”, to which the author has given the literary form of a first-person narrative (thus leaving obscure that he himself actually believes the book to be remembered); or as “genuine” memoirs that sooner or later may be identified as fiction; or what it is: a psychological rarity, testifying to the Holocaust's ability to radiate into new mythic shapes ...

In any case, a very ticklish matter and, given the right circumstances, dangerous as well, in the sense that a legend about Auschwitz might be welcomed by those who endeavour to explain Auschwitz as a “legend”.

(qtd. in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 93-94)

As a matter of fact, Helbling really tackles some very fascinating issues here. Firstly, he makes an interesting observation about the status of the book. Would it not have been better if the book had been presented as a fictional book based on historic events, which would avoid all problems? Nonetheless, every reader must admit that an autobiographical story always strikes him or her as more moving, in the knowledge that someone has gone through all these horrors. Secondly, the risk of giving ammunition to Holocaust deniers is something one must

take into account considering the existing doubts. Both these issues will be treated more extensively further on in this dissertation.<sup>4</sup>

On hearing about the letter, Eva Koralnik, his literary agent, called Wilkomirski immediately, which caused him to break down. He felt as if everything was starting all over and explained to her it was impossible for him to gain access to his documents since he was adopted. Consequently, she advised him to get a lawyer to try and get hold of his documents. Nonetheless, she realized the delicacy of this situation seeing that on the one hand, if he lied it would be an outrage and a unique opportunity for Holocaust deniers. On the other hand, if his story were true it would be emotionally very confronting and extremely painful for him. As a young Holocaust survivor herself she was able to ask him more specific questions about what he had been through, which he all could answer. Therefore, she kept on believing and supporting him, nevertheless still requiring the necessary official documents. He was also immediately supported by his psychotherapist Monika Matta, who stated that after twenty years of experience she was able to distinguish between patients' real and fake memories, and that Wilkomirski's were clearly authentic. Also his good friend Elitsur Bernstein came to his rescue in a letter to Thomas Sparr:

In reading Bruno's manuscript I never had any doubt as to its so-called "authenticity". I shall take the liberty of saying that in my judgement only someone who has experienced such things can write about them in such a way. To be sure, I have no knowledge as to what extent particulars are accurate down to the last detail. But the spirit that moved me as a reader was the same one that I encounter working with someone who has been through these things and that is the hallmark of the stories told by a great number of those who were children at the time. (qtd. in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 100)

To be even more sure, Sparr and Koralnik travelled to Israel in order to meet Lea Balint, an Israeli historian specialized in the issue of 'children without identity'. For her, it was certain that Wilkomirski spent some time in the orphanage on Długa Street in Kraków since he knew the name of Karola, a girl that figures in the official lists of this institution. Given that she really is a specialist in the matter and already had lots of experience with similar cases probably was decisive for the publishers to go through with the publication of the book. Moreover, Julius Löwinger, himself a resident of the home on Augustianska Boczna (the second orphanage in Kraków where the author claims to have been), intervened in favour of

---

<sup>4</sup> The problem about the 'label' of the book will be treated at the end of this chapter.

the author as well. Löwinger states that his descriptions of the house and the playground are completely correct and that therefore there should not be a single doubt as to the fact he really was there at the time.

Consequently, they agreed on releasing Fragments with an afterword in which Wilkomirski criticizes Swiss society for forcing children like him to oppress their memories. He also provides an explanation why certain things do not seem to fit his story officially:

As a child, I also received a new identity, another name, another date and place of birth. The document I hold in my hands – a makeshift summary, no actual birth certificate – gives the date of my birth as February 12, 1941. But this date has nothing to do with either the history of this century or my personal history. I have now taken legal steps to have this imposed identity annulled. Legally accredited truth is one thing – the truth of a life another. Years of research, many journeys back to places where I remember things happened, and countless conversations with specialists and historians have helped me to clarify many previously inexplicable shreds of memory, to identify places and people, to find them again and to make a possible, more or less logical chronology out of it. [...](154-55)

Thus they hoped to cut all critics short, already admitting that his story for some might seem impossible considering the (official) facts known about his life. Furthermore, even though not all doubts were dismissed, Eva Koralnik “simply could not conceive that anyone could invent such a story. And so the decision was made in *in dubio pro reo* [...]” (Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 110).

The book was an enormous success and was received enthusiastically in the entire world. Even Daniel Goldhagen, author of Hitler’s willing executioners: Ordinary Germans and the holocaust, hailed the book as “a small masterpiece” (qtd. in Merckelbach). By some the book was even compared to Anne Frank’s diary. As already mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, Wilkomirski received various award for his book. For example Le Prix Mémoire de la Shoah, an award from the city of Zürich, the National Jewish Book Award for autobiography and memoirs in New York, and the prize for nonfiction in the British magazine Jewish Quarterly.

However, there were already some jury members who expressed their concern. Klara Öbermüller, the president of the Zürich Literature Committee, was still being careful when she stated that “[Wilkomirski’s memories were] too few for reconstructing a trustworthy biography, but enough for a book whose higher literary significance silences every doubt as to

its authenticity” (qtd. in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 115). Gary Mokotoff, a member of the Jewish Book Council, was much harsher in his choice of words, writing to his chairman that he considered the novel a work of fiction rather than an autobiography. He even made a list with his arguments, like the fact that it would have been virtually impossible for a three-year-old to survive in a concentration camp for such a long period of time. Moreover, he considers a transfer from Majdanek to Auschwitz highly unlikely and concludes by stating that “[if] you take each of the events he describes, they seem to be the sum of the experience of all survivors” (qtd. in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 115). Yet, Wilkomirski was still widely accepted as a true Holocaust survivor and was invited all over the world to give speeches and guest lectures about his experiences. He even participated in fund raisings for the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and figured in various documentaries about children in the war. Most people did not even bother to check the facts of his story, because for the first time in history someone gave a voice to the children who survived the Holocaust and that was all that mattered for them. As I already stated in my introduction, the survivors were considered ‘the lucky ones’ and therefore found it hard to encounter real recognition for their suffering. As a result, Wilkomirski was considered a hero among this group, which felt as if it was their story that was told too. In an interview for the Holocaust Memorial Museum, he himself recognizes the importance of his story for these people: “What they experience for the first time is a kind of totally self-evident, unconditional solidarity and love for one another. They live in a world where they usually still feel surrounded by the perpetrators” (qtd. in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 120).

Nonetheless, writer Daniel Ganzfried was not impressed at all by his story: “I read this book like a movie script. It was like these things did not happen to him but it was like he saw them happening” (Kind van de dodenkampen). He says that it is as if Wilkomirski almost has pleasure in describing certain scenes and has a pornographic look at certain events. We must agree with Ganzfried when we have a look at the following scene for example:

By day, you had to go outside to relieve yourself, but only if you could run far enough to reach the latrine ditch near the big fence. We soon found out what could happen to anyone who didn’t reach the ditch in time.

The image of the two boys in front of the barracks door is burned into my mind. They were forbidden to come back into the barracks. They were meant to be a warning to the rest of us. Huddled over, crying constantly, they knelt in the filth. I stared horrified at their trousers, which were all spotted with red.

The other children explained:



On the way to the latrines they hadn't been able to hold their water anymore. Two of the block wardens had caught them as they were peeing against the wall behind one of the barracks. As a punishment, they'd taken little sticks and pushed them up into the boys' penises, making the sticks break off. The wardens had laughed a lot and had a good time.

"Now all they'll do is pee blood," said one of them. (Wilkomirski 60)

Also Carl Tighe remarked that his descriptions sometimes "have the feeling of a sadomasochistic fantasy rather than an actual event" (98). He also rightly observes some practical issues about this scene:

And how, practically, are we to understand that this was done? Did one man hold the child? If the incident took place it would take three, perhaps four people to do such a thing. Did they do it to both boys? Why did not the second child run away? The author enjoys the idea of the horrors too much and he has no details to offer. He is too keen to shock us, to make us suffer for his suffering. [...] The incident is constructed to offend bourgeois sensibilities. (98)

The scene narrated by Wilkomirski does not stand alone in his novel. For instance, he describes a scene where two children ate their own (frozen) fingers overnight, or another scene where he tells us how in the barracks they had to stand up to their ankles in excrement.

Furthermore, in the quoted passage Tighe immediately tackles another crucial point, namely the lack of details in many of his descriptions. However, Wilkomirski seems to get away with it by conveniently adopting the child's perspective and by constantly claiming that he has only fragments of memory and therefore cannot provide a full account of events (cf. *infra*).

Moreover, the film-like quality of the book was not Ganzfried's only point of criticism. When he compared Wilkomirski's account to that of his father, who survived Auschwitz, he noticed that, unlike his father's stories, in this account there was no room left for imagination. He states that everything was always filled up "with either pathos or violence" (*Kind van de dodenkampen*) whereas with his father's stories he could always imagine the camp for himself.

What is more, he does not believe a two- or three-year-old can remember all these details about his life. This is a view many critics share with him, among others Harald Merckelbach, who expressed his indignation about the fact that not even one of the many psychotherapists who came to Wilkomirski's readings who remarked that this case countered

all the existing principles about ‘infantile amnesia’. He confirms Ganzfried’s statement that people do not have memories – not even fragments of memories – of their first years of life (n. pag.). Merckelbach is right to express this concern, because Wilkomirski’s own psychotherapist mentions nothing about the influence of his age at the time:

She notes that she has found Wilkomirski to be a highly gifted, open, and honest man, who is equipped with an extraordinarily precisely functioning memory and who has been profoundly shaped by his childhood experience. She can attest with certainty to his identity and hopes that these absurd doubts can be dispelled and declared null and void.

(Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 97)<sup>5</sup>

Also Bernstein, who even though he is a friend of Wilkomirski still is a professional psychotherapist, does not see any problem: “I think that when a child experienced very traumatic events, something of these events might be fixed in his memory. And I was totally confident that such things could be a part of his experience” (Kind van de dodenkampen). So it appears that even professional psychotherapists can let their ‘suspension of disbelief’ take the upper hand when reading or hearing a story. Surprisingly enough, Wilkomirski himself brings up the problem in a letter to Thomas Sparr. Evidently, he does not endorse Ganzfried’s viewpoints to the full but instead recognizes some of the limitations of a child’s memory:

[...], and I have learned, and it has been confirmed: My memory functions correctly, I can depend on it. All this while well aware of necessary limitations. A small child’s memory can be authentic, but one may not read unconditionally from it a historical/judicial authenticity in terms of the events contained within it. For a child’s memory orders events differently; sometimes it builds bridges between events where there are none, in order to hold on better to individual images. The child’s memory does not order things chronologically, but usually in terms of intensity. The sense of time is different. Something that expands in a child’s memory over several years can in actuality have taken place within six months.

(qtd. in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 103-4)

Nevertheless, he still makes the mistake of not taking into account the aforementioned principle of ‘infantile amnesia’ which, according to Merckelbach, is widely accepted among psychologists. In his interview with Daniel Ganzfried however, Wilkomirski still believed that

---

<sup>5</sup> Maechler’s source for this was a letter which Monika Matta wrote to Thomas Sparr in February of 1995 just after his authenticity was first called into question by Helbling.

“[t]he traumatic memory of what has happened, even in earliest childhood, is preserved, as clear as glass, in the soul” (qtd. in Ganzfried n. pag.).

Exactly because Ganzfried had a father who managed to survive the horrors of the death camps, he was so appalled by this case. He accused Wilkomirski of fraud and theft of other persons' personal history. He compared him to an actor taking on the role of a victim. Because of that, he wanted to get to the bottom of the case and unravel the author's real past. For one thing, he discovered that Wilkomirski went to school in Zürich one year earlier than he actually said he did. On top of that, he did not even tell a single one of his former classmates about his traumatic past. Thereupon, Ganzfried decided to confront him with his personal doubts about the book and what he still called “the rumours” (Kind van de dodenkampen). In a documentary shown on Canvas in 2003 he informs us how Wilkomirski immediately began to cry once confronted by Ganzfried, which made the latter even more suspicious because, so he says, he had already talked with dozens of survivors but had never seen a single tear. Consequently, Ganzfried felt even more confident about his own version and published an article accusing Wilkomirski openly of fraud. Ganzfried's harsh conclusion read: “Binjamin Wilkomirski alias Bruno Dösseker, however, knows Auschwitz and Majdanek only as a tourist” (n. pag.).

Yet, Wilkomirski would not give up that easily and set up a counter-attack saying that he who had struggled all his life to come to terms with his past was now being attacked by another jealous writer (Kind van de dodenkampen). He also tried to defend himself by means of the afterword which he inserted at the very last moment before publication:

Every reader can see from the afterword in my book that my papers do not correspond to my memories. My memories are all I can put up against a seamless Swiss identity. That was clear from the start. These charges are nothing new. The reader was always free to regard my book as literature or as a personal document. [...]. [I]t is most certainly false if this journalist wants to give the impression that I covered that up. Also untrue is the charge that I never attempted to locate the documents: I had extensive conversations with the authorities thirty years ago. (qtd. in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 131)

In the aforementioned documentary, Verena Piller tells us how shocked her boyfriend was about Ganzfried's article. According to her account, he was in such a bad state she was not even allowed to touch him. He also kept mumbling the same incomprehensible word, which eventually they were able to identify as the Russian word for bread. As if that was not dramatic enough, he also lay in bed looking very pale for two or three hours. Just when Piller

thought he was going mad he “came back” (Kind van de dodenkampen) and did not even remember what had just happened. To further re-establish his credibility she also tells us about how she and Bernstein went to Riga with him and how he managed to find the house where another Wilkomirski family used to live without a map. Now the discussion was fully open and more and more opinions were being expressed. Because of the complexity of the whole case and the multitude of information we will follow Wilkomirski’s account chronologically, indicating particularities provided by various historians and other people as we move on.

First of all, the author remembers the scene when he and his family had to run after somebody yelled “Watch it: Latvian militia” (6). But the historian Raul Hilberg argues that this term only came into use after 1940, and when this episode took place the common term was ‘auxiliary police’ or ‘Bendeldikke’<sup>6</sup> (Maechler 2001: 167). Next, Wilkomirski claims he left Riga by boat. However, another historian, Margers Vestermanis, estimates that that would have been virtually impossible at the time:

A rescue by ship is very implausible, though of course it cannot be excluded entirely. [...] The passage down the Daugava into the Gulf of Riga was hermetically sealed. Theoretically you could have sailed upstream, but all the cities in Latvian territory were already “free of Jews”. Farther upstream you would arrive in Belorussia, at the cities of Polotsk and Vitebsk, where there were still Jews in Ghettos. For such a long journey you would need not only Aryan documents, but also various “permits” issued by the German occupation authorities. From Belorussia the Wilkomirskis (if they looked Aryan and had very good documents) could have made it to Poland, to Kraków. In terms of my own Holocaust research and my current work on a book about stories of rescue in which the most fantastic things did happen, it’s not impossible, but this variant is hard to believe. (qtd. in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 166)

Secondly, another historian, specialized in the history of the camp of Majdanek, says the only way it would have been possible for such a little child to survive over there was that the Germans would not know he was Jewish. However, Wilkomirski claims to be circumcised, so this seems rather unlikely. Moreover, various historians know of 38 people who were transported from Majdanek to Auschwitz in April 1944, but none of them survived. Furthermore, Marek Bojzm, director of the first orphanage in Kraków at the time, does not

---

<sup>6</sup> According to Hilberg this term refers to the armbands on their prewar military uniforms.

remember a “Binjamin Wilkomirski” who stayed in his home. What is even more, according to Lieselotte Hilb, who provided assistance to refugees in Switzerland, the alleged name change to Bruno Grosjean would have been completely superfluous since he arrived in Switzerland after the war and therefore there was no need to hide his real identity (Kind van de dodenkampen). Nonetheless, Lea Balint defends him, saying that she finds it rather unlikely that he would know about the other, much smaller orphanage in Poland if he has not been really there, because it was not investigated until more recently.

Furthermore, Ganzfried has discovered that there really was a child named Bruno Grosjean and correctly wonders where he could be “if not in the skin of Binjamin Wilkomirski” (Kind van de dodenkampen). One must admit that, as I will show in the following section, the list of evidence collected after rigorous investigation of this matter is really impressive. Consequently, I consider it personally the biggest ‘onus probandi’ against the author of Fragments.

## 2.4. From Benjamin Wilkomirski back to Bruno Grosjean

Bruno Grosjean was the son of a single mother, Yvonne Grosjean, who became lightly disabled after suffering a car accident during her pregnancy. Since she was very poor, they had to live in bad circumstances and she could not take care of her son properly. Therefore, Bruno was placed with the family Aeberhardt in 1944. Stefan Maechler was able to meet their son René Aeberhardt in the summer of 1999. This man was able to clear all doubts about the authenticity of this work when he identified a picture of the young Benjamin Wilkomirski as Bruno Grosjean among a series of old photographs. He also states that this child was definitely not circumcised and not Jewish. When given a version of the book, he goes even further in unmasking Wilkomirski as a fraud. He states that the Polish farm where the author hid with his brothers was actually the house of the Aeberhardts in Nidau. About the following passage in the book he says that “Bruno describes it al precisely [...] just the way things looked there” (qtd. in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 227):

A farmstead, a cluster of small buildings arrayed in a rectangle to make a courtyard in the middle. A house facing an empty stable, a barn for the horsecart minus horse, standing open on the side facing the courtyard, and another barn for grain, now as empty as the stable.

The only grown-up is the farmer’s wife, severe, rough, full of punishments. She supervised us, fed us, some kind of porridge out of a big pot.

[...]

A canal ran past the farmstead. We had to cross a small footbridge over a weir to get to a meadow where we were sometimes allowed to play. There was only one rail and it was too high for me, and I was afraid of the deep whirlpool under my feet. (Wilkomirski 26-28)

René Aeberhardt clarifies that at their house they indeed had a barn for grain which was empty (qtd. in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 227). There was also a canal with whirlpools and a weir with a rail too high for Bruno Grosjean. Moreover, this man also claims to know where other parts of Wilkomirski’s “fragments” come from. For example, Wilkomirski claims that even up to this day he moves his feet in his sleep because of his fear for rats nibbling his toes which originated in Majdanek where, according to his account, there was a rat plague. Aeberhardt, however, remembers how he went to the riverside with his younger foster brother, who panicked when he saw some mice passing. Indeed, the step from mice to rats is very small, particularly for a young child like Bruno at the time. On top of that, Tomasz

Kranz, head of the research department of the Majdanek museum, says that there is no evidence of a rat plague in this camp, only lice and fleas were present in great numbers (qtd. in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 169). Furthermore, in the Canvas documentary Kind van de dodenkampen<sup>7</sup> Aeberhardt also points out the resemblance between the “severe farmer’s wife” (cf. supra) and the block warden of the book on the one hand and his mother on the other. Sometimes she would have these outbursts of anger which eventually got so bad Bruno Grosjean was moved to the adoption centre in Adelboden. First, his uncle and aunt wanted to adopt him, but they could not compete against the money of the rich Dösseker family in Zürich. Friends of this family confirm that Bruno was already present during the winter of 1945, when Wilkomirski was still in Poland according to his book. The same people also contradict that the father of the family would have been a sympathizer of the Nazi system<sup>8</sup>.

These are not the only testimonies which contradict Wilkomirski’s account of events. Another important person – in the light of what the author describes in his book<sup>9</sup> – is his teacher Ruth Akert. First of all, she says she would never have taken a group of such young children to a folk fair. She states: “visiting a fair is a struggle for a teacher, what with little children fluttering off in every direction” (qtd. in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 192). Secondly, she denies having ever told legends about heroes in class which makes the appalling chapter about William Tell impossible. She claims having told only fairy tales in class. Likewise, none of his former classmates remember his fear of ski lifts or his talking about ‘death machines’ when he saw them. Moreover, one of his school friends even remembers the author as an excellent skier.

Even though this is already very convincing evidence, it becomes even worse for Wilkomirski when the interviewers in the Canvas documentary were able to track down one of his ex-girlfriends, Annie Singer, who – like all the others – is totally convinced that “everything was still there” and so that he was not circumcised. Also, she recalls his tendency to tell little – at the time irrelevant – lies. For example, she talks about when they were about seventeen or eighteen years old and he told her he came from the Baltic States. This makes him look like someone with a history of lies and severely damages his credibility. What is even more, in his book Maechler was able to collect various testimonies from Bruno’s former

---

<sup>7</sup> Dutch for “child of the death camps”

<sup>8</sup> I would like to nuance this statement however by pointing out that it is rather obvious that they contradict these allegations even if they really were true. Not only would it make their friend look bad, but it would also make themselves look like possible Nazi supporters.

<sup>9</sup> Remember the scene about the legend of William Tell mentioned on page 4 -5 and also his account of a school trip to a folk fair where he started begging.

schoolfriends. These all recall that right from childhood “his stories were not always reliable” (Maechler, “Wilkomirski the Victim” 61). Maechler concludes from these testimonies that:

He did not actually lie so much as distort reality, relating strange tales – of scorpions or caves, for example – in his desire to impress others. He once dedicated a poem to his girlfriend’s mother, whom he respected, claiming to have written it himself, whereas it really was by Bertolt Brecht. Even his epileptic attacks, which aroused the concern of his fellow pupils at secondary school, were probably simulated as well. (“Wilkomirski the Victim” 61)

Another major element that speaks against him is the fact that he claimed Yvonne Grosjean’s small inheritance. Wilkomirski himself however tells two different stories about this. In the documentary, he says that a man called him one night and said that the woman who ‘on paper’ was his mother had passed away and had left him some money since there were no other relatives. Moreover, he also claims he asked that man if there really was no one else, since he did not consider her his mother. Only after it was established that there was really no one else did he accept the inheritance, he says. In Maechler’s study of the affair, however, Wilkomirski claims he was one of three inheritors and only accepted the money after insisting that it be shared with the two others (friends of Yvonne Grosjean). Nevertheless, Maechler found Yvonne’s official will and surprisingly enough her son is not mentioned as a beneficiary:

I have been informed that my son, Bruno Dösseker, whom I gave up for adoption shortly after his birth, has rights to a portion of my estate. And yet I hope that Bruno Dösseker will not take advantage of these legal rights, inasmuch as he has put together his own life today and no personal connection exists. (qtd. in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 233)

According to this document, she left everything to her two sisters-in-law. Moreover, Bruno Dösseker wrote a letter to the testamentary office in which he contests the will literally referring to Yvonne Grosjean as “meiner leiblichen Mutter”<sup>10</sup> (Kind van de dodenkampen). Afterwards, he declared that he only did this because as a musician he did not earn lots of money and still had five people to feed.

Nevertheless, Wilkomirski still tried to defend his version of the truth. One of his strategies was the sudden appearance of a so-called father in Israel. On one of his trips there he met Yaakov Maroko, who lost a son in Majdanek and thought that Wilkomirski might be

---

<sup>10</sup> German for “my biological mother”.



this long lost son. Because many people were obviously sceptical about this new turn in Wilkomirski's personal history, they had a DNA test done which definitively ruled out this possibility. Moreover, the investigators of the documentary were able to track down his real father, who, however, preferred to remain anonymous. When they show two pictures alongside one another, one of Wilkomirski and one of this man when he was young, the resemblance is striking. When they invited the author to take a second DNA test, now to compare the results with this man's, he refused because he found it humiliating. This, in my eyes, completely destroys any credibility that might still have been left. Maroko and Wilkomirski continue to live in their reality, i.e. that of a father-son relationship.

On top of that, people have found out that Laura Grabowski, his most important witness since they shared the same memories (cf. supra), is not who she claims to be. She turned out to be Lauren Wilson, born near Seattle in 1941. Moreover, as Lauren Stratford she already wrote a book, Satan's underground, about her experiences with satanic rituals in which even babies were killed. She describes how as an eight-year-old she was forced into pornography and sex with animals. When the makers of the documentary tried to contact her, it appeared that her address in Los Angeles actually belonged to a mail-order company. When they tried to phone her for a reaction she simply had her number changed and moved.

Furthermore, Maechler also unveiled where Bruno Dösseker had got the name "Wilkomirski" from. In 1972, when he visited the Marx family in Katowice there was a concert of a famous violin player named Wanda Wilkomirska. When another friend of the family looked at the posters of the violin player, he remarked that Dösseker and the artist looked so alike they must be relatives. According to Christine Marx, Bruno started to believe he descended from the Wilkomirski family because of this man's statement (Maechler 2001: 193-95).

Finally, all the elements of Wilkomirski's story seemed to fall apart into small fragments again. Today it is widely accepted that this book cannot be autobiographical. In what follows I will try to establish how he was able to mislead so many people – including psychotherapists and historians from all around the world – , and most importantly why he wanted to do so (if he really did it consciously). Surprisingly enough, this final question is something important critics like Ganzfried and Maechler did not go into very much<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, rather than restricting myself to the facts, I would like to get to the bottom of this

---

<sup>11</sup> Maechler would only later publish his article "Wilkomirski the Victim. Individual Remembering as Social Interaction and Public Event". Yet, both were translated in 2001, although they were originally not published at the same time.

crucial issue. In 2.5 we will have a closer look at eight strategies – both inside and outside the text – used by Wilkomirski to trick his audience. Then, in 2.6, we will try to uncover his motives for lying and how it got that far.

## 2.5. Bruno's strategies of deception

Already from the very first words of the book, I got the impression that this narrative was constructed to convince readers rather than present them a story objectively<sup>12</sup>. I was particularly drawn to the following words on the first page of the novel: “[m]y 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” (4). It gave me the impression the author was already trying to justify and defend himself from the very beginning. He calls on his readers to read between the lines and construct a story themselves from the photographic fragments of memory he provides them with. It is exactly the presentation of his memories as just small fragments that poses the first difficulty to us as readers since this strategy allows him to leave out specific dates or – from a historical point of view – problematic connections between the different parts of his story. This is something Anne Whitehead also observed: “He is extremely vague in the details of the text and we are given few clear dates or places. Even the child's name, and the identification of his mother and father, are not definite” (n. pag.). These vague recovered memories give rise to a ‘double-voiced’ narrative. This is a term coined by Bakhtin which means that “in each utterance there is present the representing and the represented voice” (Vice 82). More specifically, we notice that the narrator understands things now that he did not understand at the time, like the fact that a ski lift is not a “death machine” (Wilkomirski 141). This again forms part of the shock-effect on the reader.

Secondly, Carl Tighe also observes some interesting matters concerning the style of the narrative, which he contrasts with that of Auschwitz survivors like Primo Levi. He claims that the book is designed to take advantage of the reader's so-called ‘suspension of disbelief’ through the use of two techniques: First of all, he conveniently leaves out certain details and secondly, through the use of a child focalizer he obtains more empathy from the reader. Indeed, the horrors described appear so surreal for the reader that they increase the barrier for an outsider to question what an (alleged) survivor recounts, even if it is just what Tighe calls “sick invention”. The book opens with the following lines:

I have no mother tongue, nor a father tongue either. My language has its roots in the Yiddish of my eldest brother Mordechai, overlaid with the Babel-babble of an assortment of children's barracks in the Nazis' death camps in Poland.

---

<sup>12</sup> However, I must admit that I knew the polemic surrounding the book beforehand. Therefore, it was probably much easier for me to identify certain passages as an attempt to convince the reader.

It was a small vocabulary; it reduced itself to the bare essentials required to say and to understand whatever would ensure survival. At some point during this time, speech left me altogether and it was a long time before I found it again. So it was no great loss that I more or less forgot this gibberish which lost its usefulness with the end of the war. (qtd. in Tighe 93)

Tighe observes that these opening lines are not only contradicted by the rest of the book (he describes several conversations later on in the narrative and tells us he is deaf, yet not dumb), but also by the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. He illustrates this by referring to Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (originally published as *If this is a man*), in which Levi says that "not being talked to had rapid and devastating effects" (qtd. in Tighe 93). Moreover, Levi also affirms that:

The greater part of the prisoners who did not understand German - that is, almost all the Italians - died during the first ten to fifteen days after their arrival: at first sight, from hunger, cold, fatigue, and disease; but after a more attentive examination, due to insufficient information. If they had been able to communicate with their more experienced companions, they would have been able to orient themselves better: learn first of all to procure for themselves clothing, shoes, illegal food; avoid the harsher labour and the often lethal encounters with the SS; handle the inevitable illnesses without making fatal mistakes. I don't mean to say that they would not have died, but that they would have lived longer and had a greater chance of regaining lost ground. (qtd. in Tighe 93)

Therefore, if he really was unable to speak, his already very improbable survival of the death camps becomes even more unlikely.

On top of that, Tighe also indicates a number of narrative problems which illustrate the importance of this 'suspension of disbelief' for the acceptance of Wilkomirski's story. For example, one of the book's most atrocious scenes, in which he describes how he had to stand up to his ankles in excrement in order to keep his feet warm, seems to contain some inaccuracies. First of all, if everything is frozen (as he claims) the excrement should have been frozen too. Secondly, the people in those camps were suffering a diet of watery soup which makes it rather unlikely for their excrement to be solid. However, this is not the end of Wilkomirski's "play upon the reader's emotions", which clearly irritates Tighe and causes him to accuse the author of "unscrupulous play with the reader's willing belief and sympathetic emotion." He even calls it "a kind of obscenity" (95):

In his depiction of life in both the Polish and Swiss orphanages we are led to believe that this child has never seen jam, does not accept bread from anyone except his mother, that he thinks the Swiss basement laundry is reminiscent of camp bunk-beds, and finds that the central heating boiler reminds him of the furnaces at the camp - which, if he ever saw, he did not tell us about. For the most part he can get away with these things by claiming that these are the memories of a child, and that he could not reasonably be expected to recount his story or to 'know' facts in the way an adult might. But Wilkomirski trades on the gullibility of the reader, the willingness to believe all horrors. He has the reader for a willing fool. (Tighe 2004: 95)

A third remarkable element is the style of the novel, which is atypical for a survivor's account. As Norman Geras points out, "[t]he norm is a more linear narrative, in which the act of literary construction has effected a conventional sequencing" (118). Fragments on the other hand moves away from what Wilkomirski calls "the ordering logic of grown-ups," feeling "it would only distort what had happened" (qtd. in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair viii). Maechler also points out that in doing so, Wilkomirski wrongly assumes that our memories can be brought up unchanged in the present, whereas "our memory is subject to influences and changes because it is always constructed or reconstructed within the context of the present" (viii). Moreover, Wilkomirski's account presents a particular use of the tenses. Whitehead observes that "the immediacy of the past, overwhelming and flooding the present, is powerfully represented in Wilkomirski's distinctive use of the tenses" (n.pag.). This is something Andrea Reiter pointed out, because she noticed that in the German edition of Fragments each of the sections:

opens with a short passage in the imperfect, followed by an extended description of the camps in the present tense, and concluding with a brief reflective passage in the imperfect. The present-tense narration is further characterized by the use of 'short and excited main clauses'. This method of narration emphasizes the traumatic nature of the memories described, which are not so much remembered as re-experienced or relived. (Whitehead n. pag.)

Fourthly, by working with a child narrator he makes it easier to justify the black-and-white way of thinking in the book. In order to fully grasp what the main character went through, the reader has to adopt the child's perspective. He or she has to accept a world view in which almost everyone is evil and only a few people are good. We enter the universe of a small boy who has to face up to a world which is almost completely against him. Again, this

stimulates the sympathy and pity we feel for the author. Also, it provides him with an excellent excuse for not knowing certain things without arousing suspicion in his audience. Furthermore, because he adopts the identity of a child survivor, people automatically are less critical. We all feel extremely bad about the horrible things that were done to these small, vulnerable creatures in the camps, so much so that reading this book fills us with hope and makes us feel a little better knowing that at least some of them managed to survive. Even if this book is a fiction, we just want to believe it for ourselves.

A fifth strategy I encountered is the extensive use of what I would like to call the ‘I am alone-motif’, which he uses to play upon the readers’ emotions. In the first chapter, for example, Wilkomirski says he witnesses the death of a man in Riga who *may be* his father. Yet, he immediately adopts the victim role of the lonely child by stating, “All at once I realize: From now on I have to manage without you, I’m alone” (7). Consequently, this “allows Wilkomirski the odd gift of accruing all the emotional sympathy we might give a child who has witnessed the death of his father, without the difficulty of having to sketch in a relationship with that father, or the emotional burden of having to mourn for his loss” (Tighe 94). Yet, this is not the only time he uses this motif. On the contrary, such scenes of abandonment return more than once throughout the novel:

The waiting room was empty. “Why am I always the one who’s left behind?” I wondered. (18)

Switzerland isn’t a beautiful country, the way Frau Grosz said. Frau Grosz lied to me! Frau Grosz has left me all alone. I hate Frau Grosz! (25)

Where could they have gone? Why didn’t they take me with them? I thought.<sup>13</sup> (34)

I felt absolutely helpless, crippled, I was beginning to turn freezing cold. What had happened? I didn’t understand. All I knew was that I was alone now.<sup>14</sup> (76)

But one day, I noticed that Kobo had vanished, along with the others. Why have I been left on my own? [...] They’re all going off somewhere, they all seem to know something I don’t know. Why am I always the only one who doesn’t understand? Why doesn’t someone tell me? Where are they all going? I don’t have anywhere to go, I’m hungry and I’m freezing cold. (107)

---

<sup>13</sup> when he could not find his brothers anymore

<sup>14</sup> after Jankel’s death in Majdanek

Where was the woman who knew my name? She'd gone – I never saw her again. (115)

They took it away. Here there's nothing but stone houses – everywhere – and no grandpa, no mama, no brother to take me away. Where can I go, what can I do? (117)

The camp's still here. Everything's still here. They've only got to carry the "fruit racks," the bunks, into the wooden garden house, they've only got to take the cast-iron oven with the children's door and install it out on the stone forecourt outside, the garden's already fenced in, and it would all be just the way it was before, except that this time I'd be alone, totally alone. (125)

As we observe, he constantly tries to present himself as having no one around him to help him. Yet, I believe that he overdoes it by repeating it all the time. The first time it is effective, but the more he uses this motif the less impact it has upon the audience.

Another strategy which Wilkomirski uses extensively is to stuff his narrative with well-known, documented historical facts. In this way, the story fits perfectly into the larger historical context the readers already know. This is something Stefan Maechler also points out:

In reaching back, for his narrative, to the cultural memory of the Shoah and its aftermath, Wilkomirski makes use of many familiar elements: the guards' unpredictability, plagues of rats, children hidden in laundry barracks, experiments by doctors (mentioned only orally), obsessive hoarding of food by children after their liberation, the survivors' sense of guilt, the returnees' painful experience of finding no one who will listen, and so on. Thus readers find in Wilkomirski's text essential historical facts that are already known or sound plausible. They automatically locate the story within the realm of reality. The context and the individual facts scattered within it lend the narrative the authority of fact. (Wilkomirski Affair 278-279)

In this way, the reader – albeit unconsciously - will accept this novel much more quickly as an autobiography because he or she recognizes elements from other testimonies he or she knows. For example, Wilkomirski conveniently uses the excuse of being a medical test case in the concentration camp for not having a number. Likewise, he tries to stage a name change by the Swiss administration for his growing up first as Bruno Grosjean and later as Bruno Dösseker.

Yet, according to Maechler, he does not only use his historical knowledge, but also his psychological knowledge. In order to make his story credible in the eyes of therapists, Wilkomirski creates “stereotypical situations [...] in which the I-narrator is seized with unexplainable panic by everyday circumstance” (Maechler, “Wilkomirski the Victim” 81). It is as if this account is textbook material for psychologists. He knows the exact strategies and attitudes he has to adopt to present himself as a credible traumatized person. Nonetheless, Maechler also observes that the author makes a vital mistake in adopting this tactic. He correctly observes that traumatized people who suffer compulsive reliving of their trauma often do not know why they feel panic. If we take the episode of William Tell as an example, we can conclude:

In contrast to Wilkomirski’s narration, if a genuine former child camp-inmate were to panic when confronted with the story of Tell, he would not know that he was confusing the Swiss national hero with an SS man, and the present with the past. He would experience fear without knowing the cause. Recognizing the confusion would remove his panic, since the SS man would be relegated to the place where he belonged – to the past.

(Maechler, “Wilkomirski the Victim” 81)

Ironically enough, even the experts in psychology were so impressed by his story that they simply ignored this. Only after the investigations of Ganzfried and Maechler would people start to see the problems in his narrative.

On top of all these textual strategies, he also cleverly uses other means to enhance his credibility among the audience. For instance, his frequent public appearances as a victim constitute a well-considered tactic. Wilkomirski wanted to be seen constantly in this context. Because of that, the audience gets so accustomed to his new identity that no one would ever dream of questioning it. For this, his strategies are threefold. First of all, he appeared in various films and documentaries on the Holocaust. Also, he managed to obtain public recognition from historians, like Lea Balint, and important Holocaust museums. Thirdly, he offered many public readings and guest lectures, thereby turning himself into the spokesperson of child survivors.

Finally, one of his most important tactics consists in involving other people in his account of events. The best example is of course Laura Grabowski. As I already pointed out, she was lying as well, yet Wilkomirski immediately seized his chance and claimed to remember her as well. This feast of recognition definitely helped improve the trustworthiness of his story. As it turned out, they just provided mutual alibis in their ‘survival of the slickest’.



Also Yakov Maroko's appearance proved to be very convenient for Wilkomirski. If this man wanted to believe that Wilkomirski was his long-lost son, than why would he argue that? It fitted perfectly into his invented Jewish past so he just played along.

It is remarkable that there is only one person whom he literally mentions in his novel, namely Mila<sup>15</sup>:

Mila was somewhat older than I was. I recognized her when we met each other again in the orphanage in Kraków. I didn't have to be afraid of her. We knew each other from somewhere, from one of the many barracks probably, we weren't sure anymore, and we never talked about it. We just looked at each other and that was enough. [...]

And now we were together in this orphanage in Kraków, at least some of the time. I don't know anymore whether I lived there too, or whether I was just put there during the day, and got something to eat and was allowed to play. [...]

Years later, when we were both grown up, we met quite by chance. She was working as a translator, and I'd become a musician. Mila had managed to find her mother, and we went together to visit her – she was old by now – in a hospital. She died soon after that. Mila and I saw each other regularly now – we often had long talks. We discussed the present, but what we really meant was our past. (80-82)

As we can see, this woman plays a part in almost every important episode of his life.

Nonetheless, creating a fellow-sufferer who clearly was still alive turned out to be a vital mistake in the end. Stefan Maechler was able to talk to the real Karola,<sup>16</sup> who told him that Wilkomirski simply stole her memories and presented them as his own. As it turned out, they only met for the first time in 1971 on the train from Zurich to Paris, where she started talking about her past. She was really angry with Wilkomirski because she felt that “he took over my whole life, all my memories, and the lives of all those that were deported” (qtd. in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 196). In contrast with what the author says in Fragments, she did not lose her mother. They stayed together and for some time went to the homes of Długa Street and Augtianska Street to eat. She claims that Wilkomirski was definitely not there at that time. Moreover, they could not have been together in one of the camps either because she was in a concentration camp in Germany. The only thing that is correct is that she and her mother were saved by a Nazi, only not the spectacular way he tells it in the book. He describes an amazing

<sup>15</sup> Stefan Maechler points out that in the German edition – and in real life – this character's name is Karola.

<sup>16</sup> She does not want her complete name to be known, which is why we have to keep using the first name only.

scene where they were thrown quickly onto a pile of dead people by an SS man, which allowed them to escape, while in fact they were just told to go “because my mother looked like the wife of a Nazi and I looked like his daughter” (Karola qtd. in Maechler, Wilkomirski Affair 197). On top of that, this scene did not take place in the camp, but rather in the Lemberg ghetto. What also betrayed Wilkomirski after later investigation was that he did not know about her using the name Marta during and after the war in the orphanage, something which all the former residents of the home do remember. Nonetheless, before all this was discovered, this added an extra emotional dimension to his story. It is a subtle way of introducing other victims in his story, which in my opinion provides more space for real Holocaust survivors to identify with the account of events. Her story is one of the many incredible stories of people who just managed to escape a horrible death. It was most important for Wilkomirski to introduce another story that sounded true and authentic to the people who lived through the hell of the camps as well.

Evidently, two other essential figures are Elitsur Bernstein and Monika Marta, Wilkomirski’s psychotherapists. They provide him with the scientific basis for his long-repressed fragments and testify how hard it was for him to relive his memories during their sessions. What is even more, their authority and expertise in their domain automatically enhance his credibility with the audience. Why would we as ordinary readers question something that is accepted by experts in psychology? Furthermore, during their sessions he could always repeat his “memories” and train himself, as it were. A lot of psychotherapists confirm that by doing this one can also really start believing what one says. However, we must wonder who took advantage of whom here. Is Wilkomirski a pathetic liar who tried to gain the confidence of two psychotherapists who just got caught up in his lies? Or was he rather a victim who was lost in the world until these people came along and tried to convince him that he was a Holocaust survivor, thereby creating massive publicity for themselves and their expertise as well? I will come back to this issue in the next paragraph where we will try to determine how it ever got this far. Not only will we consider the author’s personal motives, but also the possible effect of certain ‘triggers’ around him.

## 2.6. His possible motives and ‘triggers’

Since this case was such a large-scale media event, people from all around the world are interested in his motives. Especially psychologists and psychotherapists have tried to explain what exactly could have happened. In what follows we will first have a closer look at some possible personal motives before turning to the role his upbringing and other people played in the construction of this story. With regard to this last factor, particular attention will be given to the role of his psychotherapists.

### *2.6.1. His personal reasons*

First of all, we must keep in mind that Wilkomirski really was a victim, only not from the Holocaust, as he claims. He suffered a lot from his adoption and has lived the life of a social outcast. When he was young, he did not have any close friends and he also failed to bond with his foster parents. We must also not underestimate the impact of the violent mother of the Aeberhardt family on this small boy. Also, the passage in the orphanage was probably not the happiest period of his life either. He always felt alone, like an outsider. Keeping this in mind, we could argue that he just assumed a more extreme victim role, because he knew that he would get much greater recognition that way. Anne Karpf shares this opinion:

If you are [a] victimized, miserable, turbulent person because you’ve been adopted, because you’ve been badly treated you aren’t necessarily going to get the kind of sympathy which you’re going to get if you are a Holocaust survivor. In the hierarchy of suffering it’s at the pinnacle.

(Kind van de dodenkampen)

He knew that his story as it was would not be interesting for other people. If he had written a book about what really happened to him, it probably would not have received the same attention as it did now. Moreover, Carl Tighe argues that his lies might have originated in the shame of being the son of a so-called ‘Verdingkind’<sup>17</sup>. He indicates that Bruno went through his own personal Shoah because almost everyone attempted to make an ordinary Swiss boy out of him, thus erasing his – and also a national – shameful past. Tighe concludes:

In *Fragments* the cruelties, pain, desire, the longing to belong are all expressions of otherness, aloneness, apartness, unconformity, unease at

---

<sup>17</sup> The ‘Verdingkinder’ were children who were auctioned like slaves, only here “the bid went to the person who put in the lowest figure for the child’s upkeep” (Tighe 96).

privilege, desire to be different, desire to name and shame those who caused pain, a desire to be legitimate, a potent desire to be someone else. (98)

With his book *Wilkomirski* finally received sympathy and solidarity from the audience, something he had missed his entire life.

Ganzfried, on the other hand, also considers the possibility that the author really had some fragments of memory which he could not place. Starting from that idea, he argues that the Holocaust just provided Wilkomirski with an ideal way of explaining “his hazy and troubled background” (Ganzfried n. pag.). Using the Shoah allowed him to fill the gaps in his memory. It is not so strange that he resorted to the Holocaust to express his suffering, because, as James Young already observed in 1988, it has become an archetype for new kinds of suffering. Young rightly points out a very interesting paradox in this respect when he states that “[i]t is ironic that once an event is perceived to be without precedent, without adequate analogy, it would in itself become a kind of precedent for all that follows: a new figure against which subsequent experiences are measured and grasped” (99). He concludes that “[t]he figure of the “Holocaust Jew” [...] [has come] to epitomize for both Jews and non-Jews the embattled victim, the sufferer and martyr” (99). Also Maechler believes it plausible that Wilkomirski really originated from a traumatic history. Yet, Merckelbach argues that, by following this line of thinking, Ganzfried and Maechler make the same mistake as the author did. They assume that his present failure in life must have a traumatic cause (Merckelbach n. pag.). He states that in accepting this way of thinking these authors just follow Wilkomirski’s path which eventually led to his survivor story.

Evidently, a specific kind of personality is required to engage in this extreme kind of lying. As I already stated above, his former friends and classmates remember him as someone who often told small lies. For instance, he once told Annie Singer, one of his ex-girlfriends, that he was from the Baltic States even though she knew that this could not be true. Yet, when she confronted him, he always admitted his lies immediately. She believes that his reason for lying “was always to show himself in a better light or – you know – to be noticed, to be looked at, attract attention” (*Kind van de dodenkampen*). This type of character is what psychologists define as ‘fantasy proneness’<sup>18</sup>. People who have such a character get so caught up in their lies and fantasies that, in the end, they really start believing them. Bruno Grosjean even came to believe in a different identity. The same goes for Laura Grabowski the difference being that this was the second time she engaged in such lying. After her first book

---

<sup>18</sup> This term was first coined by Wilson and Barber in 1983.

was exposed as fictional, she just sought a new victim identity. Merckelbach states that these people start off as liars trying to convince others and eventually, by doing so, also convince themselves (n. pag.). Maybe even the author himself is surprised about the massive scale his lies took on. It is possible that he just wanted to be recognized as a victim of the Shoah by a small intimate group but that things got out of hand by the many contacts he acquired after a while.

Also Bruno's real father speculates about what might have gone wrong. He suggests that maybe as an unborn child Wilkomirski suffered some damage from the car accident his mother had while being pregnant with him. However, I believe this chance to be rather small. If he really suffered brain damage, one would expect to see other problems as well rather than just a tendency to lie. Wilkomirski however, as far as we know, does not suffer any other physical or mental ailments.

For Ganzfried, the solution does not necessarily have to be that complicated. He also proposes a very simple option:

He had a lot of talents, but none of the talents were dead-locked enough to make really something out of it. And – you know – [...] he grew up with a lot of other rich kids – you know – so this guy desperately tried to make a character out of himself so – you know – what better character can you have but the victim. (Kind van de dodenkampen)

This assumption is in line with what Crombag and Merckelbach say in their studies of cases of sexual abuse. In this book, they state that (false) recovered memories can have diverse causes. For example, people with failed marriages, a ruined career or psychiatric diseases like anorexia and bulimia often have a great need for a clear, unambiguous explanation. Therefore, they turn to external causes, as we can see with Wilkomirski's (ab)use of the Holocaust. It is possible that he felt his life was a failure and tried to find an external explanation for this by inventing a new traumatic past for himself.

### 2.6.2. *Social conditions*

Nonetheless, maybe the most important reason for his lies cannot be found with Wilkomirski himself but rather with the people that surround him. Maechler for example points out that:

Generally speaking, most of our memories form when our parents, friends or other people recall them to us. It is the family and other social institutions that constitute the necessary framework within which individual memory is possible at all. (“Wilkomirski the Victim” 70)

Yet, we know that during his childhood Wilkomirski was moved constantly between orphanages and foster families. Therefore, he had no firm base or ‘framework’ to help him develop his personal memories. When in his book he says that his past was a taboo subject for his foster parents, this might be true. He just lies about his real past, but his statement that his new family wanted him to start again from scratch seems plausible. Consequently, no one ever told him about where he came from or what he had been through, something essential in the development of a child’s memory. On top of that, he came into contact with Jews at a young age in school. This is significant because Maechler claims that figures of authority, in this case his teacher, can have a strong influence on the development of memories (“Wilkomirski the Victim” 70-71). Because of that, we could assume that his fascination with Jewry and the Holocaust proceed – at least partially – from his respect for Jewish role models. Moreover, Bruno’s former school friends testify that he was extremely fascinated and influenced by books on the Holocaust. I already mentioned Jerzy Kosinski’s The Painted Bird (cf. supra), but Annie Singer also indicates the influence of Gerhard Schoenberner’s The Yellow Star. I believe it to be very significant that the latter book also contains large-scale pictures of the Holocaust. Therefore, it is possible that Wilkomirski drew a large part of his “inspiration” for his so-called visual memories from this book.

Nonetheless, this “inspiration” might have entered Wilkomirski’s world obliviously. Domnick LaCapra points out the phenomenon of ‘secondary traumatization’ and states that “vicarious experience, linked to processes of identification, may lead to the extreme blurring or effacement of these distinctions [of experience] insofar as one who was not there comes (or is moved) to believe he or she was indeed there and presents fiction as if it were testimony or historical memoir” (132). This means that Wilkomirski, little by little, may have grown to believe he was a real Holocaust child survivor. Furthermore, as we will see in the next section, the psychotherapy he had only stimulated this belief.

### 2.6.3. *The influence of others*

Even though the theory put forward in the previous section seems plausible, many critics have argued that the answer is to be found neither with the author himself nor with the social environment in which he grew up. They claim that Bruno Dösseker has become the victim of ‘false memory’<sup>19</sup> due to his therapy sessions. Also Maechler recognizes this important influence. He states that “without therapy [...] single episodes would not have taken on such concrete shape and his manuscript would not have materialized” (“Wilkomirski the Victim” 74). Indeed, it is possible that Bruno had this fragmented memory which was interpreted by Bernstein as a consequence of the Holocaust. Once Wilkomirski got convinced by this, he and Bernstein just – unconsciously – filled in the story piece by piece. This psychotherapeutic phase is described by Dori Laub as “the phase of joint acceptance of the Holocaust reality by both analyst and patient” (69). However, I would like to point out that Wilkomirski’s name change dates from 1972 when he, as I already mentioned above, attended a concert by Wanda Wilkomirska, whereas he only met Elitsur Bernstein in 1979. Thus, the truth is probably somewhere in the middle. I think it is plausible that Dösseker, who possesses a tendency to lie by nature, was encouraged by his therapy and decided to take things a little further. Furthermore, we can assume that people who go into therapy feel more uncertain than others. Therefore, they are more easily influenced and tend to accept the therapist’s ideas faster. For these reasons I believe Bernstein’s influence to be of the utmost importance, and therefore I did some more research on the possible influence of therapy. The scientific literature published on this subject is enormous. In 1996, for example, Garry et al. observe that “when a mental health professional repeatedly encourages a client to imagine an abusive childhood event, these imagination activities may unknowingly promote a greater belief that particular episodes occurred. The search for fact may create fiction.” (qtd. in Horselenberg et al. 129). A person experiencing an event as authentic due to having imagined it first – individually or in therapy sessions – suffers from what psychologists call ‘imagination inflation’. On this theme, Horselenberg et al. set up an interesting study in which he let people rate the probability of an event twice. In between these two question rounds the guinea pigs were told they were assisting in a study on their imagination abilities. They had to elaborate a story around simple fictitious events like “You’re playing outside the house. Your mother just told you that within half an hour, dinner will be ready.” (Horselenberg et al. 130).

---

<sup>19</sup> By the supporters of this type of therapy this is called ‘recovered memory’.

Surprisingly enough, they concluded that “irrespective of imagination, asking twice about the same events increased the subjective probability of these events” (131).

In this respect, the case of Laura Pasley proves to be very interesting as well. She suffered from bulimia nervosa and decided to seek therapy. Her psychotherapist convinced her that her condition originated in sexual abuse. From her testimony, we can derive which tricks he used to keep her in counselling:

The visions in my head were of severe physical and sexual abuse. The images were so incredibly bizarre, yet they seemed so real. My picture of my family became distorted. Was it the drugs the doctors had me on, was it television shows or traumatic events I had witnessed over the years, or was it actual memories? I did not know, but Steve<sup>20</sup> said they were fact and to deny them meant that I did not want to get well. He said I was in denial, I was running, I was ‘protecting’ my family. (qtd. in Crombag and Merckelbach 198)

Eventually she realized she was the victim of ‘memory implantation techniques’ and sued her counsellor. He did not even try to win the case and just settled the manner with a six-figure number on a cheque. This is definitely not an isolated case of withdrawal. Even though Wilkomirski has not joined this group of ‘retractors’, it is possible that he fell victim to a similar kind of therapy.

Furthermore, Crombag and Merckelbach published a study on sexual abuse in which they stated that it is possible that under the influence of psychotherapy one might interpret certain memories in a much more extreme way (197). This is particularly interesting since René Aeberhardt (cf. supra) claimed that Wilkomirski’s book in certain aspects is just an exacerbation of certain things that happened when he stayed with this family.

Nonetheless, there are also important arguments in favour of psychotherapy. It is scientifically proven that patients who get a clear diagnosis from their therapists tend to heal faster. The hearing of a diagnosis creates new hope of healing in the patient. This particular kind of placebo is known as the ‘Rumpelstiltskin-effect’ (Crombag and Merckelbach 205). In this specific case, Bernstein – maybe because he himself is Jewish – may have truly believed that his patient’s memories had their origin in the Holocaust and genuinely tried to help him. But this is something only he himself knows for certain.

---

<sup>20</sup> her psychotherapist



#### 2.6.4. Conclusion

As we have seen, the quest for one specific motive or reason why Wilkomirski made up this story turns out to be virtually impossible. Therefore, we have to settle for a truth that is probably somewhere in the middle of all these explanations. We could say that the basis was already formed during his childhood, where he not only showed a strong tendency to lie, but also was the victim of a very unstable family situation. Then, at a later age, he encountered great difficulties dealing with his past and defining himself in the Swiss society and therefore sought professional help. When he and Bernstein eventually tried to work through his supposed trauma together, they created the opposite of ‘screen memories’<sup>21</sup>, which Spence defines as “exaggerated piece[s] of reality in which, as in bad fiction, subtleties are erased, colors are brighter, and outlines bolder” (qtd. in Maechler, “Wilkomirski the Victim” 75-76). This description fits Wilkomirski’s Fragments perfectly. As I already stated above, these screen memories could be influenced to a great extent by his confrontation with lots of Jewish texts and television documentaries about the Shoah. Ultimately, we can conclude that it was rather a concurrence of circumstances than just one of the individual possibilities presented above. Because of this great complexity, it is very difficult to form a conclusive moral judgement about this case. In what follows, to conclude this chapter, I will discuss various opinions expressed by others on this man and his therapist.

---

<sup>21</sup> According to Freud, screen memories are relatively reassuring or comforting memories that serve to hide, displace or erase more disturbing memories. However, Wilkomirski seems to have done the opposite here.

## 2.7. Moral judgement

When it became known that Wilkomirski's story actually was a fiction, people obviously felt appalled and upset. It is hardly surprising that the numerous criticisms levelled at Wilkomirski were very sharp and harsh. Anne Karpf, daughter of a real Holocaust survivor, puts it as follows:

It almost felt blasphemous – you know – as if being a Holocaust survivor was some kind of costume that you can just put on and impersonate someone, I felt absolutely appalled. [...] It is incredibly hurtful to genuine child survivors that this man came along, if that's what he did, and somehow thought he could filch their experience and use it for whatever his own ends were.

(Kind van de dodenkampen)

It seems almost unimaginable that someone – Holocaust deniers apart – would lie about something as awful and serious as the Holocaust. Because of that, Ganzfried believes that what Wilkomirski did was as bad as denying the Holocaust (Kind van de dodenkampen).

Natalie Gold-Lumer, for her part, touches one of the most important issues of this case when she states that “it was so hard to come out for many of us and to have him questioned makes all of us feel like all of a sudden our stories are questionable” (Kind van de dodenkampen). In composing an invented narrative, he presented Holocaust deniers with an ideal argument for defending their beliefs. As expected, they immediately jumped on this case and tried to present all Shoah testimonies as lies. Tighe correctly summarizes the situation as follows:

By producing a fake personality to go with the memoir, Wilkomirski pointed up the unreliability of oral and personal testimony in an area where a great many documents are missing and where there are enormous voids in our understanding of the Holocaust and the people who enabled it. He underlined just how fragile are the achievements of oral history and autobiography in the face of the Holocaust, and emphasized that the distinction sometimes made between literary imagination and memoir is not clear. Worse, Wilkomirski has brought into question the personality and reliability of survivors. Worse still, he has made survivors seem like people with a psychological disorder, rather than people struggling to make sense of an experience that defies description or explanation. (100)

Indeed, by lying he also destroyed diminished the credibility of other witnesses. In my opinion, this is the worst consequence which arose from Wilkomirski's invented memoir. Because, as Roger Boyes observes "witness accounts are essential to deflect the efforts of Holocaust deniers, and [...] fake testimony distorts the debate" (qtd. in Vice 163).

Nevertheless, Suleiman does not seem to be worried much by Holocaust deniers. She points out that "[h]istorians have never relied exclusively on survivor testimonies, and even less so on a single testimony, in writing the history of the Holocaust" (30). Therefore, denying the entire Holocaust on the basis of Wilkomirski's case clearly is a false synecdoche.

However, I believe it would have been much wiser to present this novel as a work of fiction rather than autobiography. Of course, he would not have got the same compassion he received now, since the emotional effect on the reader would inevitably have been smaller. This is something Norman Geras, for example, observes as well. He states that:

There is no doubt that [reading Fragments as a novel, not a memoir,] alters the impact of the episode. For we are then aware that the tragedy summoned up for us may have no exact correlate in the real world of experience, where otherwise it would have had. [...] The most painful experiences, where these are literary or dramatic creations rather than the reporting of actual events, will take on a different importance for their audience. (121)

Nonetheless, I believe he would still have been laurelled for writing a great novel and have received attention and recognition from the audience, albeit in a different way. After all, it must be said that there is also something positive coming out of the publication of Fragments. As I already mentioned various times, the book resulted in child survivors becoming widely recognized for the first time. Although I do not consider this to be of higher importance than the factual truth, I believe we have to give him credit for giving a face to this group which has been in the dark for too long. Again, Geras makes the same observation when he says:

Though [fictional tokens] may not report any real particular event or episode, they can nonetheless elicit an understanding of the environment in which they are set, of the manner of what occurred there, of what it meant or how it felt to the participants, of individual motivation and character. It is in this mode that, in my view, Wilkomirski's *Fragments* retains its quality as a novel of a Holocaust childhood and its truth in the way of literature. (121-122)

On top of that, I also think it would be unfair to blame only Wilkomirski for what happened. Maechler, for example, believes that he was influenced by various other people who just used him for their own interests. For Karola he was a cousin she had lost during the

war, for Yakov Maroko his long-lost son, for Lea Balint he was an interesting test case for her studies, and we could go on like this. Evidently we must not forget Bernstein, who might have used Wilkomirski as “an instrument to realize his therapeutic plans” (Maechler, “Wilkomirski the Victim 88-89).

Therefore, I would like to conclude by arguing that we all must nuance our criticisms of this man. I hope I have been able to show that this case is not as simple and clear-cut as it may seem at first.

## 2.8. The problem of authenticity and genre

As Sue Vice points out, “literary judgements often shade seamlessly into the moral” (73). Therefore, the moral polemic discussed above also gives rise to a literary discussion. The revelation that Wilkomirski’s book was not a memoir caused a great uproar because, as Vice points out, the “implicit anxiety is that allegorizing or fabulizing the Holocaust implies that its specific historical events do not matter, and that its uniqueness may be questioned” (70). As I have shown, the fear that this book was the perfect example for Holocaust deniers was enormous. However, I also discussed the falseness of the synecdoche this group attempts to use.

Moreover, the complexity of this case has given rise to an interesting literary discussion. As I already suggested briefly (cf. supra), the distinction between memoir and literary imagination is not always clear. In this respect, Wilkomirski’s case only complicates this vague distinction further, since we can neither label this book as a memoir, nor as a complete fiction. Because, as we have seen, Wilkomirski seems to genuinely believe that the account he gives in Fragments is what really happened to him due to his fragmented memory. Nevertheless, what the author describes in his book is not what actually happened. Various authors, like Vice for example, have pointed out the importance of the author’s biography in the evaluation of a book: “critical estimates vary according to what is known of a writer’s biography, and what relation a narrator has to the text’s author” (163). Generally, non-fiction works are evaluated better than fiction works, because of the greater effect they seem to have on the reader. Nonetheless, Wilkomirski really seems to believe his work belongs to the category of non-fiction. Therefore, it seems that Fragments can be categorized best as a “false or deluded memoir” (Suleiman qtd. in Whitehead n.pag.). Moreover, John Kihlstrom proposes to classify false memoirs, like this book, under “non-fiction fiction” (n. pag.). Only, Wilkomirski seems to have reversed the usual mechanism. Instead of introducing fiction into non-fiction, the author has “incorporate[d] non-fiction, details of the Holocaust gleaned from a lifetime’s obsessive reading, into fiction – a memoir which isn’t based on personal recollection” (Kihlstrom n. pag.). Even though I agree with what Kihlstrom proposes here, I find his description not completely adequate, since, as I already suggested various times, Wilkomirski’s memoir might be based on personal recollection, albeit false personal recollection.

Furthermore, James Young observes that it is interesting “to know the memoirist before knowing the memoir,” because “[t]he figures he brings to his memoir may have much

more to do with his current occupation than with the events under his pen” (30). Here, Young immediately highlights another interesting polemic in regard to the genre of the memoir and testimony in general. It brings us to the discussion if a testimony can ever be completely true. On the other hand, we could wonder if it has to be true to be authentic. Many critics have already suggested that writing is always a step behind of the facts of lived experience. To say it with the words of André Breton, “[...] life is other than what one writes” (qtd. in Suleiman 21). I believe that Suleiman makes the right conclusion when she states that “[a] memoir, whether it be a Holocaust memoir or any other kind, provides only a single, mediated perspective on reality, not a direct, immediate apprehension of the ‘thing itself’ ” (32). As Young points out, survivors will always let their writing be influenced by the outcome of the events (30). This “post factum element of these testimonies” (Young 30) indeed seems to be the biggest flaw of the genre. Whitehead goes even further, because she seems to suggest that Holocaust fiction may be more accurate than testimonies: “[i]t has been recognized that Holocaust fiction is often based on extensive historical research and documentation, while Holocaust testimony is subject to the inaccuracies and distortions of memory” (n. pag.). This means that neither of these two genres can ever represent the exact factual truth. Or, to put it in Robert Scholes’ words, “[i]t is because reality itself cannot be recorded that realism is dead. All writing, all composition, is construction. We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it. There is no mimesis, only *poesis*” (qtd. in Young 17). Nonetheless, as I already suggested, this does not mean that Holocaust memoirs or novels cannot be authentic or truthful by definition. If we proceed from Sue Vice’s definition of ‘authenticity’, we clearly observe that Wilkomirski’s story can be defined as authentic: “Authenticity generally means [...] that the author must be writing in good faith, preferably about events they have experienced. However, as well as real it can mean ‘real-seeming’; [...]” (78). Moreover, in this definition it strikes me that Vice first uses “the author” as the subject of her sentence, but then moves to “events *they* have experienced”. This could be a mere linguistic error; yet, I believe this “they” could refer to the victims of the Holocaust in general. If we interpret it in this way, this definition suits Fragments even better. Because, almost all the critics seem to agree that this book is a real-seeming account of what they, i.e. Holocaust child survivors, have experienced during the Shoah. This is exactly the force of Wilkomirski’s book and also the reason why it was such a massive success. Moreover, as Whitehead observes, “[Fragments] may not be the true account of a child’s Holocaust experiences, but it nevertheless arguably contains a version of ‘truth’ in its representation of post-war Switzerland” (n. pag.). Some authors even take this way of reasoning even further, which

causes the distinction between the concepts of ‘authenticity’ and ‘truth’ to blur. James Young, for example, states that “[w]hatever ‘fictions’ emerge in the survivors’ accounts are not deviations from the ‘truth’ but are part of the truth in any particular version”. This means that, since writing the exact truth is impossible, all the ‘authentic’ works on an event together constitute the truth of an event.

What is even more, there are critics, like Weber and Wolfe for instance, who suggest that the facts in book are subordinate to the effect it produces on the reader (Young 62). Young correctly observes that the readers’ response is different when he believes a testimony or a work to be true than when the work is a fiction. As we have seen, it was exactly because Wilkomirski’s book provoked such a great effect on the reader that Holocaust child survivors were finally recognized. This could make one wonder if the end justifies the means here. Because, as Young states, “when we turn to literary testimony of the Holocaust, we do so for knowledge – not evidence - of events” (37). Nonetheless, Lejeune still argues that the distinction between autobiography and fiction has to be maintained, because “it is not a question of actual fact that separates autobiography from fiction, in Lejeune’s view, but a question of the right to invoke the empirical bond that has indeed existed between a writer and events in his narrative” (Young 24). Also Vice distinguishes Holocaust testimony and fiction in this way. Because, she says, that with testimony “one might reasonably demand an authentic connection between the author-narrator and the events described” (4).

Thus, we can conclude that although no literature on the Holocaust can really reproduce the complete factual truth, we still have to maintain the distinction between testimony and fiction on the basis of an ‘empirical bond’. Nonetheless, as I have already argued so many times, the peculiarity of Wilkomirski’s case rests, among other things, in the fact that it is plausible that he really feels an empirical bond with the events he describes in his book. Therefore, it is hard to form any moral or literary judgement on this man. Consequently, I would like to conclude with the words of Susan Suleiman, which perfectly reflect the complexity of this case:

Being an extreme case, *Fragments* poses certain questions starkly: Where does literature end (or begin) and psychopathology begin (or end)? Where should the line be drawn – Should the line be drawn? – between personal memory and imagined or “borrowed” memory? To whom does the memory of the Holocaust belong? The fact that *Fragments* raises these questions, powerfully, may be reason enough for its continued presence in our literary landscape – if not as a

memoir (it is not that), and not as a novel (it is not that either [...]), then at least as a “case”. (37-38)



### **3. Tania Head's Miraculous 9/11 escape story**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

In this chapter, we are going to have a closer look at the story of Tania Head. Even though she has not written a false memoir, like Wilkomirski did, I believe this case deserves particular attention because of the interesting parallels it shows with his case. Moreover, like the Holocaust, 9/11 clearly is one of the most important events in contemporary history. Therefore, it is not surprising that another 'false memory-case' surfaced exactly here. Even though the attacks took place in 2001, Tania Head only popped up the radar in 2003 with a story not even a Hollywood director would dare come up with. As Barbara Conrad, a (fellow) survivor, puts it: "She had all the key elements from everyone else's story. She saw it, ran from it, survived it, had a lost husband. Everyone else had one element, she had all the elements, the perfect story." (Conrad in Gatton 2008) Because of her incredible story, just like Wilkomirski, she was 'the rising star' among survivor groups and for the first time drew massive media attention to the fate of the so-called "lucky-ones". She became president of the World Trade Center<sup>22</sup> Survivors' Network, gave many guest lectures and readings, and led tours for the Tribute W.T.C. Visitor Center. She was even chosen to tell her story and give a tour to the Mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg, and former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. Consequently, the shock was enormous when it came out that she was not even in New York at the day of the terrorist attacks.

As this is a more recent case, there has not been published very much on this issue. Nonetheless, the parallels with Wilkomirski's case are obvious. Therefore, I will discuss her unbelievable story in the light of the theories and discussions presented in the previous chapter. In order to fully understand this polemic, I will use a similar structure to the chapter of Wilkomirski. First, I will reconstruct her story before going into the exposure of her lies. Then, I will try to articulate an answer to the question how she managed to trick everybody and, even more important, try to answer the 'why-question' as well. Ultimately, we will have a deeper look at the moral judgements this case implicates. Of specific importance during this discussion will be the fact that she did not publish a book and did not benefit financially from her story in any way. We will try to find out if this influences the public's opinion in any way.

---

<sup>22</sup> Since we are referring to the name of an American organization, I prefer to use the American English spelling in this case.

### 3.2. The making and unmaking of her personal Hollywood story

She claimed that at the moment when the plane crashed into the north tower, she was working on the 96<sup>th</sup> floor of the south tower as a spokeswoman for Merrill Lynch & Company. When United Airlines flight 175 hit the south tower minutes later, she was waiting for an elevator at the 78<sup>th</sup> floor, exactly the floor where the plane crashed into the tower, to leave the building. This would mean that she was one of only nineteen survivors who situated themselves at or above the point of impact before the plane crashed into the Twin Towers. On her way to the stairs, she came across a dying man who handed her his wedding ring which she later returned to his wife month's later. She herself owes her life to the solidarity and helpfulness of the twenty four-year-old Welles Crowther, who stanching the flames on her burning clothes while she was unconscious for a moment and helped her down the stairs. Up to this day, she still wears the consequences of these burns on her arm. Then, when she was almost downstairs, a fireman took her in his arms and ran outside with her before handing her over to another fireman. As they were running away towards the ambulance, the tower collapsed. According to her account: “[the fireman] found cover under a truck and covered me with his body. We were engulfed and soon it was pitch black and impossible to see or breath. We shared his mask until we were rescued. Next thing I remember is waking up in the hospital” (qtd. in Gatton n.pag.). As if her story was not remarkable enough as it were, she went even further by stating that when she woke up in the hospital five days later, she found out that her fiancé Dave had perished in the north tower. Her account became even more compelling when she stated that at 8.30 a.m. – about sixteen minutes before the first plane would hit the north tower – Dave had phoned her to ask her if she wanted to meet downstairs for a cup of coffee, which she had refused because she was too busy. Her last words to him were “I’ll see you later” (Head qtd. in Carney n.pag.). As a tribute to her dead fiancé, she said, she founded the Dave’s Children Foundation. To enhance the movie-like quality of her story, she also told everyone how she had met Dave years ago when fighting over a taxi. Consequently, to commemorate how they met, she puts a miniature yellow cab at ground zero each anniversary of the disaster.

Then, as I already said, in 2003 she started to profile herself publicly as a 9/11 survivor. Eventually, in 2004, she got into contact with Gerry Bogacz, co-founder of the World Trade Center Survivors’ Network, who, unlike her fiancé, had managed to escape the north tower just in time. Like many others, he was simply amazed after hearing her story: “The constellation of her experiencing the plane crash personally on the 78<sup>th</sup> floor and her

fiancé's being in the other tower and getting killed was just amazing" (qtd. in Dunlap n. pag.). About a year later, she became a board member of this foundation and the face of all 9/11 survivors.

When asked about her past she just told everyone she was the daughter of a diplomat and had done work as a financial executive in the United States, the United Kingdom, Argentina, France, Singapore and Holland for "leading firms" (Dunlap & Kovaleski n. pag.). With respect to her education, she claimed to have "an undergraduate degree from Harvard and a graduate business degree from Stanford" (Dunlap & Kovaleski n. pag.). However, even her closest friends do not know more about Head's past.

Surprisingly enough, it was not until 2007 that people started to ask questions and wanted to verify her story. Because she acquired such big fame, the New York Times wanted to interview her. Yet, Tania Head avoided the interview and that is when they grew suspicious. Eventually this newspaper exposed her as a liar. From the beginning it was obvious that she did not seem to get certain details right in the construction of her story. At various times, she made statements that contradicted her earlier story. For example, to some people she said that she had already married Dave, while originally she told it was her fiancé with whom she shared an apartment and a dog Elvis. She later tried to explain this discrepancy by stating that, shortly before 9/11, she and Dave went on a vacation to Hawaii and celebrated their commitment for each other in an unofficial ceremony. She also claimed that their official wedding would have taken place in October of the same year. Yet, the family of this man says they have never heard of a woman called Tania Head and do not remember Dave going on any trip to Hawaii in the last years. Moreover, according to his mother, none of his e-mail messages indicated that he had a relationship. Because of this, she changed her story again, this time telling Janice Cilento that she had only known Dave for a couple of months and that his family could not know her since they kept their relationship secret from his family. On top of that, even small details, for instance the dog they shared, seem to be invented. Because, when friends of the Survivors' Network visited her later on, there was no sign of a pet living in the apartment. Eventually, Tania had no other option but to admit that her relationship with Dave had been a fantasy.

Moreover, scrutiny of Merrill Lynch & Company's records has pointed out that there was not a Tania Head employed at the time. Here as well, she tried to solve this problem by adapting her story. Linda Gormley, another board member of the Survivors' Network, affirms that in 2007 Tania told her she was in the building applying for an internship. What is even

more, Harvard and Stanford both do not possess any record of a student by the name of Tania Head.

Since the larger framework of her story seemed to fall apart, people started digging deeper for information on this woman and started to verify even the smaller details of her story. For example, the Dave's Children Foundation, which she founded in memory of her alleged lost fiancé, is not officially registered as a charity neither with the federal government nor with the New York State. Furthermore, she has never revealed the identity of the man who gave her his wedding ring in the tower, thus there are no witnesses to confirm this statement of hers.

Piece by piece, Tania's story seemed to fall apart. According to Gatton, while on her way back from seeing relics of the Twin Towers at JFK airport, she muttered to another survivor "What if all this had just been a dream, and I was never even there?" as if knowing that her lies were coming to an end. He correctly points out that "the life of an impostor is a lonely one" (Gatton n. pag.) and that she might have tried to see how her new-found friends would react to this semi-confession.

However, Gatton continued to investigate things further for the making of his documentary The 9/11 Faker in the UK. He found out that Tania was not who she claimed to be. Her real name was Alicia Esteve Head and it turned out that she was not even in New York or the United States on September 11, 2001. Rather, that day she attended classes at the ESADE Business School in Barcelona. What is even more, she is said to have travelled to the United States for the first time only in 2003. On top of that, her classmates stated that Tania had told them her arm injury was from a car accident, or alternatively a riding accident. Never did she mention something about the terrorist attacks or a lost fiancé or husband. This investigation was the final blow for Tania Head, like Maechler's study meant the destruction of Wilkomirski's story. In what follows, we will try to determine whether or not her motives are similar to those of Wilkomirski. Also, we will look at her strategies for deceiving the audience. As we know, she has not written a memoir of her story, which makes it all the more interesting. Because of this fact, we can see if her means for lying are different to those of Wilkomirski – seeing that she cannot use textual strategies like him – and if this affects the overall moral judgement of the audience. Two other interesting differences between these two cases is on the one hand the fact that Wilkomirski really might have been traumatized in his youth, and on the other the important role of therapy. Tania Head's case possesses neither of these elements. Consequently, some interesting contrasts related to their motives and moral judgement are likely to surface.

### 3.3. Her strategies of deception

Tania Head's most important strategy is that, from beginning to ending, her story sounds like the scenario of the ideal Hollywood movie: "A woman fights with a man over a taxi and hates him at first. Nonetheless, they fall in love a bit later. Everything goes perfect for them and they want to marry, until one day there is this huge disaster. She heroically manages to escape alive thanks to the help of a man who stanching the flames on her clothes. On top of that, she even receives the wedding ring of a dying man on her way down. Unfortunately, her fiancé appeared to have been in the other tower and was not able to make it. Yet, she still finds the strength to adopt a positive attitude and tries to give strength to other fellow-sufferers." Everybody is moved by how she manages to get on with her life after such a disaster and so her tragic story still gets a kind of happy ending. Thus, it is obvious that, just like Wilkomirski, Tania Head extensively uses the play upon the audience's emotions. Her equivalent for Wilkomirski's 'I am alone-motif' is a kind of 'romantic comedy-motif'. She also uses this motif very consciously when talking about her heroic escape: "I kept thinking about my fiancé, about our wedding. I wanted to wear that white dress and swear my love for him. Something gave me the strength to get up. I believe today that it was my fiancé on his way to heaven" (qtd. in Gatton n. pag.). Moreover, Gatton had the chance to read her written report of events via hundreds of emails and writings and he observes that she constantly uses iconic imagery: "white wedding dresses, wedding rings exchanged, last words, love letters ripped up and cast into the ocean. An overweight, non-descript person, her writings showed an unrequited desire for romance. That powerful narrative captivated those who heard it." (n. pag.). One of these e-mails was posted online<sup>23</sup> by Al Siebert, director of The Resiliency Center, and perfectly shows what Gatton means with the above statement:

I think I already told you that Dave's family doesn't want to go to the site this year. They get heartbroken with the way it looks. They don't like to see trains and construction trucks go by in their son's final resting place. Instead I proposed that we spend the day quietly at the Hamptons, a coastal area in Long Island, where Dave and I bought a house. Dave used to [love] that place! We'll have a service there in the morning at a local church. Many friends are driving up there for the service as well. The priest is very nice and knows us well so we

---

<sup>23</sup> This e-mail from Tania Head to Al Siebert (dated September 2, 2004) was posted on the website <http://www.survivorguidelines.org/articles/taniahead/html> as a reaction to the article in the New York Times on the 27<sup>th</sup> of September 2007.

asked him if it could be a mass and a memorial service at the same time and he agreed. This means that we'll have friends and family come up and talk about Dave and we'll also play his favourite songs. In the evening we're going to have a sunset ceremony where we'll congregate at the beach and we'll throw flowers and messages for Dave into the ocean. His old band will play and we'll have a few beers and a BBQ just as he liked it. We'll then get a fire going and we'll talk about him all night till sunrise.

Again, the romantic, idealistic tone stands out in her account. Once more, we can perfectly picture this as a typical Hollywood movie. Notwithstanding the fact that her story seems very extraordinary and unusual, nobody dared to question her story. I believe that this is – at least partially – due to the audience's familiarity with stories like these through Hollywood scenarios. These movies make us believe that extreme accumulations of horrors are possible and maybe even normal to a certain extent. On top of that, she realizes very well the importance of a kind of happy ending in order to fully grasp the audience. It is clear that she did not just tell the first thing that came to her mind, but instead prepared her story very meticulously in the two years preceding her arrival in New York. Just as in Wilkomirski's story, we want to believe it is true because it is a story of hope. As the New York Daily News puts it: “[t]o behold Head's smile is to know the terrorists did not come even close to winning. To see that smile is also to be challenged to be as decent and positive as this true survivor<sup>24</sup>. ‘If I get sad and cry, then everybody cries,’ she will tell you. ‘You have to keep that smile coming.’ ” (n. pag.). Her story stands out exactly because she perfectly managed to depict both the tragedy and heroism of that day.

Secondly, we also notice that Head's account is similar to Wilkomirski's in providing very detailed description of the horrors she has seen. Ironically, this opposes them to other survivors. Nonetheless, people only seem to observe this fact after they have been exposed as liars. Because, at first they seem to think that Wilkomirski and Head form exceptions in that they are very courageous and have a enormous ability to cope, which other survivors lack. In Wilkomirski, we remember for example the scene of the boys who got sticks pushed up into their penises. Here, Head provides a detailed account of the moment just after the plane hit the south tower in the New York Daily News:

She went to the 78<sup>th</sup> floor, where several hundred people waited in the Sky Lobby for the express elevators. “This woman started saying, ‘There's another

---

<sup>24</sup> This article was written before her lies were discovered.

plane coming! There's another plane coming!' ” Head recalled. “We didn't believe her at first.” The tip of the wing tore through the crowded Sky Lobby. “The first thing you feel is a tremendous increase in pressure, all the air being sucked out of your lungs,” she said. “The next thing you feel is flying through the air.” She was knocked unconscious and awoke in searing pain. A young man was patting out her burning clothes. His name was Welles Crowther and he wore a red bandana his father had given him to filter smoke should he ever get caught in a fire. He saved dozens that day. “He will forever be known as the man with the red bandana,” she recalled. “His calm made me calm.” Burned, bleeding, nearly blinded by dust, she struggled toward the stairway. “Blood. Body parts. I crawled through all that,” she recalled. “I realized everybody around me was dying.” (n. pag.)

Furthermore, in Gattouso she said: “I looked around, it was like a horror movie, people were mounted on each other, the smell of burnt skin and people's insides was gagging” (n. pag.). Again, this immediately catches the reader by the throat and, in my opinion, helps to obtain the ‘suspension of disbelief’ in the audience. Also, I would like to point out that she herself uses the word “movie” in this last quote, which in my view is indicative for where she got her inspiration.

Another strategy which Tania Head and Benjamin Wilkomirski share is the introduction of well-documented facts in the construction of their story. Very important for her story is the presence of Welles Remy Crowther, a man who is known to have saved numerous people in the south tower but sadly enough did not make it himself. How crude it may sound, this provided Head with a unique opportunity since he would not be able to contradict her story. Also, by claiming she was on such a high floor on the moment of impact she not only made her story more heroic, but also made it easier for her to pretend working for Merrill Lynch & Company. She just chose a firm which probably had lost all its employees present at the time. As it is such a big company, people from that firm itself would not be suspicious of her so easily since it is impossible to know everyone there. Only after specific requests from investigators did they check the official company records. Moreover, also the selection of her fiancé was a well-considered decision. She chose the name of a man whom she knew really had perished in the north tower. As Dunlap and Kovalski observe “[i]t felt as though her vocabulary for that day and the aftermath had been gleaned from talking to real survivors, assiduous research on the internet and in books and films about 9/11 (she didn't put a foot wrong on the factual details of that complex event)” (n.pag.). Again we observe the

similarities between this case and Wilkomirski's story. Even though Tania Head has not written a book she works by the same principles and means as he does. Both engaged in a scrupulous study of the facts by talking to real victims and looking in archives of all sorts before stepping forward with their own stories.

Nonetheless, she did not construct her story as thoroughly as Wilkomirski did, because I believe she has made various mistakes that decreased her credibility. First and foremost, she seemed to have forgotten the fact that the family of Dave, whose surname is kept a secret for privacy reasons, normally should have known if their son was engaged. Only afterwards did she realize this and did she try to adapt her story to make it work after all, but it was too late already. Secondly, in my eyes she makes the error of not being consequent. As we have seen, she provides such a detailed description about the attack itself, yet there are other things which she does not tell us anything about. For example, we do not know the names of people she might have met in the tower aside Mr. Crowther. What is even more, she has never given the name of the hospital where she was treated or the name of the man whose wedding ring she got that day. In my opinion, this accumulation of secrets stands in great contrast with other details she does provide her audience with, and therefore loses a great part of her credibility. Nonetheless, for a long time she got away with it, just because people felt this was a private and very painful issue for her. For example, even Alison Crowther, Welles Crowther's mother, who lost her son states: "She never shared those details, and it was nothing we wanted to probe. I felt it was too private and painful for her." (qtd. in Dunlap & Kovalski n. pag.). Even a fellow-sufferer like Gerry Bogacz felt it was inappropriate to question certain aspects of her story. One can definitely understand this kind of reasoning since it is often hard for victims to talk about what they have been through. Nevertheless, it strikes me as odd that no one ever seemed to observe the obvious contrast with the rest of her detailed account. Yet, I only read about her story afterwards, already knowing that she was lying which evidently makes it easier for me now than for other people who heard her story before these revelations.

A fourth important strategy she cleverly employs is placing herself at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of suffering by producing the biggest story. Again, this reminds us of Wilkomirski's case, because there we observed that his history of a bad childhood was turned into the account of a child who survived no less than two concentration camps. In an online interview with Adrian Gatton about his documentary, he observes:

The nearer you were to the impact at the towers, the more important you were in the post 9/11 survivors' group. And Tania obviously understood that



perfectly and very quickly because she had the worst injuries, she was at the impact floor, plus lost her fiancé – you know –, no one had this double “why me?”. So, compared to everyone else, she was the queen bee and she used that power that was inexistent [...] for her own means. I mean, she rose throughout those ranks, she became president. She had some sort of sway over the direction of the group and it’s interesting that these hierarchies form in any [group] but I just hadn’t considered it before in 9/11 survivors.<sup>25</sup>

Even Gerry Bogacz admits: “[e]ven though we tried to be egalitarian and equal, there’s no question that this hierarchy of suffering does form and the stories that we were telling didn’t seem to have as much impact as what she experienced” (qtd. in Gatton n. pag.). Because her story topped everyone else’s, she immediately had the utmost respect of everyone in the Survivors’ Network. Moreover, again parallel to Wilkomirski, she obtained massive attention for a forgotten group. Consequently, people were even more reluctant to accuse her of being a fraud. In this way, she also managed to become the leader of this group and get a greater control on the others. Moreover, this also served her intention of becoming famous which worked out wonderfully well. This is proven, for example, by the tour she was allowed to give to Michael Bloomberg and Rudolph Giuliani.

Finally, I would also like to point out a smaller subtlety which Head introduced in her story. When she describes her way down out of the tower she recalls the moment when she first encountered a man in FDNY<sup>26</sup> bunker gear: “I always like to say for me it was like seeing God [...]. It was like, ‘Okay, we’re going to make it.’ ” (qtd. in New York Daily News n. pag.). In a nation like America, the mentioning of God always works on the audience’s emotions. We only have to look at the famous final words of the presidents’ speech “May God bless America” to understand the enormous importance and influence faith has in this country. As she was from Spain, a very religious country as well, she perfectly understood the strength of this three-letter word. Moreover, she also clearly mentioned that she felt her husband *on his way to heaven* gave her the strength to escape (cf. supra).

As we see, the way in which she tried to deceive the audience largely corresponds to Wilkomirski’s strategies even though they did not use the same means. Whereas Wilkomirski mainly uses his novel and his speeches, Tania Head works only via her spoken statements and e-mails to other survivors. Let us now turn to her motives and see if these parallel our first case as well.

---

<sup>25</sup> Source: [http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/C/cutting\\_edge/9\\_11\\_faker/](http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/C/cutting_edge/9_11_faker/)

<sup>26</sup> the New York City Fire Department

### 3.4. The reasons why it came so far

In my opinion, the main reasons why Tania Head wanted to lie about such a horrid event are threefold. All of these, save her quest for love (cf. *infra*), again correspond to Wilkomirski's motives. Nevertheless, I believe it to be essential that Head did not work with a therapist and has not got a fragmented memory about a specific trauma in her life. Therefore, unlike Wilkomirski, she is the only one who is to be held responsible for what happened. Later on, in 3.5, we will try to establish if this has any effect on the moral judgement formed by others on her.

As said above, a certain type of personality is generally observed in these cases of extreme lying. This "fantasy proneness" is something we can also attribute to Tania Head. If we may believe Gatton:

She was a serial liar, whose arm injury – depending on which of her stories you believe – may have been from a car or a riding accident. Or it may have been a disabling birth defect. Tania was from a rich Spanish family and had even gone to finishing school in Switzerland. She had been leading a double-life. [...] We could not find out whether she is estranged from her family, but certainly people who knew her in Barcelona were well aware of her propensity for lying.  
(n. pag.)

From this testimony we can assume that people who engage in such forms of deception probably are quite experienced and are definitely not doing this for the first time. Again, I would like to point out, that maybe she got caught up in her own lies to such an extent that there was no way back for her. Also in the previous chapter I did not exclude the possibility that they lost control and got more famous than they actually wanted.

This immediately brings me to the next possible explanation for this case, namely a quest for love and attention. If this was her main motivation, she probably never wanted her story to take on such large dimensions and would have preferred to keep it in an intimate group. Nonetheless, leaving in the middle if her new acquired fame was intentional or not, Gatton observes that once she established herself in the Survivors' Network she "was in search of love and friendship, using the network as a sort of catastrophe-smitten lonely hearts club." (n. pag.) This means that even if she did not want everything to take on such a large dimension, she still continued to pursue love and attention albeit on a much bigger scale.

Last but not least, there is a very important explanation that lies in the basic nature of humankind which we have also seen in studying Wilkomirski's case. Tununa Mercado in her novel En estadio de memoria describes this feature as follows:

La persona se relaciona en permanencia con el afuera, lo que viene del otro lado de su pared condiciona sus movimientos y organiza sus rituales; busca, fundamentalmente, estar en grupo, pertenecer al grey, pensando tal vez con razón que esa pertenencia puede alejar de ella la locura o, por lo menos, la incertidumbre. (24)

Man constantly relates to the outside world, what comes from the outside determines his movements and organizes his rituals; fundamentally, he wants to be in group, to belong to the mass, thinking maybe with reason that this belonging can remove his madness or, at least, his uncertainty. (My translation)

I believe this is an essential element in understanding both her story and Wilkomirski's. They were both indistinctive, unimportant figures who felt alone in the world and wanted to be part of a group. Both went very far to satisfy this desire and placed themselves in survivor groups of some of the most horrific events in human history. When we have a look at Gatton's description of Tania Head we clearly notice how weak her first impression on people was: "[h]er clothes were unremarkable, she struck me as nondescript and underwhelming. This matched what I later heard, few people – even though they had been with her many times – could remember anything distinctive about her: her lipstick, her clothes. It was as if Tania Head *was* her story. Without that, there was little left." (n. pag.). We must admit the fact that in our society usually only the one who suffered most, or the prettiest, the funniest, the most spectacular, the most intelligent, etc. get attention. Although I realize it would be utopian to demand that society would change this immediately, I want to point out that every one of us contributes to this kind of society and therefore have a hand in these kinds of stories showing up. Nonetheless, not everyone who feels left out in society turns to this means to get attention. Thus, as I already pointed out, it is rather a combination of factors that provokes fictitious accounts like these.

Nevertheless, there is also something which distinguishes Head's case from Wilkomirski's. Since Tania Head has not written a memoir, she cannot be accused of having done all this for the money. Moreover, she also did not earn any money as president of the Survivors' Network or her guided tours. In Wilkomirski's case by contrast, this possibility cannot be excluded. We will return to this in the next paragraph where we will see that this definitely seems to influence the moral judgement that is cast upon her.

### 3.5. Moral judgement

Again we are confronted with a difficult situation that has to be nuanced. On the one hand, she lied and, unlike Wilkomirski, she does not have the extenuating circumstance that her story might be – at least partially – the result of bad therapy. On the other hand, she did not try to make any financial profit whatsoever out of her story, something which again opposes her to the author of Fragments. This is also something she herself calls in her defence stating “I have done nothing illegal” (qtd. in Dunlap and Kovaleski n. pag.). Therefore, it seems interesting to me to have a closer look at how Tania Head was judged by others and compare this to the great variety of opinions about Wilkomirski.

Surprisingly enough, most newspaper reports on this case result to be fairly neutral in forming an opinion and rather tend to sympathize with Head. Usually the greatest focus goes to the fact that she has done a lot to improve the fate of the survivors. It seems as if the survivors themselves do not have any problem whatsoever with her lies. What is mentioned, for example, is the fact that she managed to obtain privileged access to the site for this group. Carrie Coen Sullivan testifies that before “[w]e had to stand out around the big metal gates with all of the tourists taking their pictures and the people selling the horrible tacky merchandise of the attacks [...]. There was no place to grieve.” (qtd in Gatton n. pag.). Moreover, she managed that the Survivors’ Network would have a say as well in the decision of the memorial. Gatton even claims that some survivors literally told him that if everything would result to be a lie they would forgive Tania immediately. Indeed, it seems very unfair to suddenly discredit everything she did for the organization.

Nonetheless, there obviously was still some critique on what she did. For instance, Janice Cilento points out:

“I’ve been there anytime she needed someone to listen, even if it was at three in the morning. She has stolen my time and my soul,” she said.

Cilento said many of the network’s members “feel very upset and betrayed.

“We have members who thought Tania’s trauma was so extreme they did not want to discuss their own. They gave their time to help her, and she didn’t even need it,” she said. (qtd. in Worstall n. pag.)

This indeed seems one of the worst things she has done. She has demanded all the attention, even from the real survivors, when it was actually them who needed help and not her. Gatton even mentions that “[some] felt ashamed they could not match her energy” (n. pag.). This is of course very painful once one knows the truth about her story. Moreover, in his

documentary Cutting Edge: The 9/11 Faker, Gatton also recounts the story of something horrible she did to the parents of Welles Crowther, the man who allegedly saved her. These people had lost their son and still she was looking for their sympathy as well. She promised to give them a piece of her burned clothing, which was probably one of the last things their son had touched. In doing so, she really has played with these people's emotions. Therefore, Gatton believes this is actually the worst thing she did in terms of lying. He feels as if she has crossed a line here from "an attention seeker to being very dark"<sup>27</sup>. Nonetheless, at the same time he also observes that during his interviews with real survivors and Crowther's parents, his interviewees could talk more rational about Tania, whereas they were obviously really emotional when talking about the events themselves. Even though they all felt angry and deceived, it was just "a bee sting" for them compared to what they already had been through. Obviously, they all felt that losing a husband or a son was much worse than her lies.

Furthermore, on blogs and internet fora we encounter some heated discussion about this topic with harsh judgements towards both Tania and her friends of the Survivors' Network. A person with the avatar "dawg" posted the following excerpt:

Max and Leanne, you are so wrong about Tania you can't even imagine what a bunch of idiots you all are. You would rather believe a reporter with nothing on her and reports from unknown sources in a foreign country than a person who gave so much to the cause of survivors. Mark my words, some day soon you will have to eat your words. Especially those two lying judas Janice Cilento and Linda Gormley. If this is what they do to a friend, I don't want to know what those two would do to an enemy. They and all of you who go around posting things about a person who was there everytime you needed her, should just shut up and go play victim, that's what you know best. I know what true friendship is.<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, I feel that, even though he or she uses very strong language, he or she does not build up a strong argument by simply mistrusting the media. A certain "Nicole" suggests that maybe Tania herself has posted this, which could be perfectly possible, and expresses the frustration of many real survivors:

Good point, Tania! I see you never stop pretending you're other people. Why don't you show this so-called evidence and clear your name already? We all

---

<sup>27</sup> Source: [http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/C/cutting\\_edge/9\\_11\\_faker/faker1.html](http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/C/cutting_edge/9_11_faker/faker1.html)

<sup>28</sup> Source: <http://timworstall.typepad.com/timworstall/2007/09/tania-head.html>

know the answer to that question. We just figured you would have found another tragedy to exploit by now. Who cares about other people's feelings. The emotionally damaged rich girl feels unloved and nobody can understand that. Even people who lost loved ones in a terrorist attack across the ocean from your hometown.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, by adopting the identity of a 9/11 survivor Tania Head seems to imply that her personal 'trauma' (not being loved) is worse than the trauma of the survivors. Sadly enough, many of the real survivors would happily exchange lives with Tania. Cynthia Shepherd for example says: "I think if Tania had asked me to trade, I would have traded with her. I would have loved her to have my suffering and my pain and I can have her life." (qtd. in Gatton n. pag.). Both Head and Wilkomirski descend from rich families and have enjoyed a good education. Therefore, it is hard to understand that it is exactly in those circles that these lies popped up.

Nevertheless, as I already pointed out, we are all responsible as a society for the creation of a hierarchy of suffering in which only the most spectacular stories receive our attention. Because of that, Wilkomirski and Head both had to go to great extremes to get this attention. I am not saying this is a valid excuse for everyone to start inventing whatever story they like; yet, we all have to stand still with the consequences of this hierarchy we created.

Finally, I would like to close this polemic with the words of a person named "Alan" on the same forum as already mentioned: "I watched the documentary on her, it seems she helped more than she hurt. Apparently she got funding for the organization, got survivors access to the pit, got counselling for people who needed it. So she lied, we all do, but not everyone helps people affected by 9/11 as much as she did. Do we really have to vilify her like that?" (Cf. footnote 29)

On top of this argument, I would like to refer to a court case in Washington in which a fake Vietnam veteran was sentenced to 500 hours of community work. More specifically, he had to tend the graves of the real war veterans. This seems like a fair and appropriate punishment to me. But, if we look at it in that way, did Tania Head not already do her part of community work? Therefore, just as in the treatment Wilkomirski's case we have to be very careful for passing a judgement too quickly. Whereas Wilkomirski was probably influenced by his years of psychotherapy, Tania Head has done a lot of good things for the survivors' movement. This affair again shows us that these cases of (literary) invention have to be

---

<sup>29</sup> Source: <http://timworstall.typepad.com/timworstall/2007/09/tania-head.html>

treated with careful attention and must be nuanced at all time. Although at first we all are compelled to condemn these persons, we must recognize the extreme complexity and great variety of opposing arguments that always seem to mark these judgements. It is always balancing between condemning a person for his or her lies and laurelling the same person for his or her merits.

## **4. Ishmael Beah's best-selling child soldier memoir**

### **4.1. Introduction**

In 2007, Ishmael Beah published his novel A Long Way Gone which recounted his life as a child soldier in the government army of Sierra Leone. In his book he vividly describes his life starting just before the war and ending just after it. According to his account, at the age of twelve, rebels invaded his village in January 1993 upon which he wandered the Sierra Leonean country for ten months before being forced to join the fighting for a period of two years. In January 1996, he was saved by a United Nations' force and was put in a UNICEF rehabilitation centre. Finally, he was chosen by the UN to be ambassador for children at war. Now, he lives in New York City with his foster mother Laura Simms.

However, in 2008, a trio of Australian journalists claimed that Beah had largely exaggerated his story. They stated that residents of the author's village all told them that the attack on Mattru Jong only took place in 1995, which implies that he would have been a child soldier for only two months at the age of fifteen, not thirteen as he claims. Logically, Beah tried to counter these allegations stating that there were already sporadic attacks on the mining areas since 1993. Moreover, he also cited witnesses confirming his account of events. Nonetheless, the Australian was able to come up with a document showing school results for March 1993 in which Beah figured. What is even more, in an interview for the Oxford Student, the Oxford university newspaper, Beah himself said he was in secondary school in Sierra Leone "up to 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> form" (qtd. in Wilson, "Thanks for the memories" n.pag.). Usually, secondary school in Sierra Leone starts at the age of twelve or thirteen, but Beah claimed to have left the village at the age of twelve, thus he seems to contradict himself here.

On top of that, several people in the village are for certain that the attack of the rebels and the subsequent escape through the swamp – described in the book in the pages 21 until 25 – only took place once, in 1995. Peter Wilson, one of these three journalists stated: "This wasn't a skirmish, this was a wholesale invasion – and the only time that happened in Mattru Jong was in 1995. For people from that town, it's like questioning a New Yorker on whether the Twin Towers fell on September 11, 2001." (qtd. in Rayman n. pag.) One of these people was Moses Sao Kailie, the priest whom the rebels had used as a messenger before attacking the village, who says: "[...] this only happened once ... in 1995. I know it because it was me. And it was just impossible for it to have happened to any other priest in 1993 – I was the only priest in the (Mattru Jong) region from 1991 to November 1995." (qtd. in Wilson, "Beah's credibility a long way gone" n. pag.).



Furthermore, there are no official traces to be found of the battle in the UNICEF rehabilitation centre in which, according to Beah, six children were killed. This seems rather strange since a fight of that extent would have received massive attention in the press and would be at least written down in an official report. Also, one of the most striking scenes in the book, when he gets shot three times in the foot by an AK-47 and has the bullets later removed with a pair of scissors, raises questions. Harayda wonders if this would not cause some permanent damage. Vincent DiMaio, a gunshot specialist, as well thinks it would be unlikely for someone to put three bullets into a foot. Moreover, “he also notes that it’s common for wounded soldiers to believe that they’ve been shot when, in fact, they were actually hit with shrapnel.” (qtd. in Rayman: n. pag.)

Also, the map that figures in the front of the book is terribly wrong. According to that map, the coastal boarder of Sierra Leone would be 1200 miles (or 1931 kilometres), while in fact it is only about 250 miles (or 402 kilometres). Also, he situates the village of Yeke on more than 400 kilometres from Mattru Jong, while in fact these two villages are only about 12 kilometres away from each other.

Even though Beah and his environment are still defending the book as it is written now and refuse to include a disclaimer, it looks as if Beah actually did exaggerate his story. As Wilson observes, his pace of writing seems to corroborate this. Because, it takes him a hundred pages to describe his first ten months on the run but only thirty pages to recount his two years as a child soldier before “[reverting] to the original pacing once he reaches the refugee camp” (qtd. in Rayman n. pag.).

Therefore, we are confronted with a very peculiar borderline situation here. We will try to study in which ways Beah’s story, motivations and judgement correspond and differ from fully invented narratives like that of Wilkomirski. Consequently, we will unveil how hard it is to establish a clear border in what is acceptable for the audience and what is not.

## 4.2. How the text differs from false memoirs and corresponds to them

### *4.2.1. Typical features of a testimony*

Even though Beah exaggerated his story, it stands beyond question that he definitely has been a child soldier. Therefore, his book contains some of the features Robert Eaglestone observes in Holocaust and African trauma literature. First of all, in A Long Way Gone we encounter a great variety of metatextual material included in the book. For example, the map at the beginning clearly situates the book in a realistic spatial framework. Also, the acknowledgements and chronology of Sierra Leonean history at the end of the book help situate the novel in real life. Thus, all these elements contribute to define this book as an authentic memoir.

Secondly, Beah has also introduced a clear narrative frame in his novel through a kind of introductory chapter set in an American schoolyard. By doing this we can identify the author as being in the United States recounting events from his past. It announces what is about to come in the continuation of the book.

Finally, also the use of confused time schemes is a typical characteristic of testimonies. Here, as I also indicated in the previous paragraph, the author frequently uses flashbacks to recount his experiences as a child soldier.

Beside the above described characteristics for Holocaust and African testimonies, the photo on the cover of A Long Way Gone seems to be a stereotypical feature borrowed from African literature. As Binyavanga Wainaina satirically observes in his “How to Write about Africa”: “Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it, unless that African has won the Nobel Prize. An AK-47, prominent ribs, naked breasts: use these...” (qtd. in Eaglestone 75). Although Beah does not drive it as far as described here, the reader is immediately appalled by the child on the cover with his gun on his shoulders and the worn-out flip-flops on his feet. In this way, the play upon the reader’s emotions already starts before he or she has read even one letter of the book.

What these features also illustrate is the fact that in reality no memoir can actually be authentic since there is always some literary mediation in play. Therefore, maybe it would be better to publish these books as works based on reality rather than real authentic testimonies. In this respect, Uzodinma Iweala’s Beasts of No Nation and Dave Eggers’ What Is the What seem to be a better alternative. As the narrator of this last book tells us:

This book was born out of the desire on the part of myself and the author to

reach out to others to help them understand the atrocities many successive governments of Sudan committed before and during the civil war. To that end, over the course of many years, I told my story to the author. He then concocted this novel, approximating my own voice and using the basic events of my life as the foundation. Because many of the passages are fictional, the result is called a novel. It should not be taken as a definitive history of the civil war in Sudan, nor of the Sudanese people, nor even of my brethren, those known as the Lost Boys. This is simply one man's story, subjectively told. And though it is fictionalized, it should be noted that the world I have known is not so different from the one depicted within these pages. We live in a time when even the most horrific events in this book could occur, and in most cases did occur. (Preface)

Here, the author clearly indicates us that he has been involved in the atrocities described, but also leaves open the possibility of some fiction creeping in his story. He also stresses the fact that he wants to draw the reader's attention to what is going on in Sudan. This is particularly interesting, since we have seen that one of the things that was always called into the defence of the three authors treated in this dissertation was exactly that they at last were able to draw attention to a forgotten trauma. Eggers, in this way, seems to suggest that there is also another possibility for obtaining this kind of attention without actually having to lie. For instance, Wilkomirski could have included a preface in which he tells that his book is a fiction but that it is also based on real history and the testimonies of others. Although he would not have received the same sympathy from everyone, I think he would still be celebrated for simply drawing attention to the fate of child survivors. Since this really is an essential issue in the treatment of these three cases, I will come back to this in the final conclusion.

#### *4.2.2. Characteristics of an invented memoir*

In spite of all the above characteristics, there are still some clues in the text that already seem to suggest that there is some degree of invention in play. Particularly three strategies caught my attention here.

First of all, I was struck by one passage that sounded rather familiar after reading Wilkomirski's Fragments:

This medicine worked. During my primary-school years and part of my secondary-school years, I was able to permanently retain everything that I

learned. Sometimes it worked so well that during examinations I could visualize my notes and all that was written on each page of my textbooks. It was as if the books had been imprinted inside my head. This wonder was one of many in my childhood. To this day, I have an excellent photographic memory that enables me to remember details of the day-to-day moments of my life, indelibly. (51)

Similarly to Wilkomirski's "exact snapshots of my photographic memory" (cf. *supra*), this reads as a plea in favour of his own memory. It is as if he is already anticipating doubts that could emerge while reading the text. By stressing the great ability of his own memory, he tries to get the reader to conform easier to what he will describe later on in the book. Nonetheless, there is a scientific debate going on about whether it is actually possible to possess a photographic memory. Alan Searleman, a psychology professor, states that "virtually no adults possess the ability" (qtd. in Rayman n. pag.).

Another strategy which we have already seen in the two cases above is the placing of oneself at the top of a hierarchy of suffering. This is something Rayman also observes when he says that "[b]ecause of the power of Beah's story, most observers are loath to question it, thanks to the attention it has so successfully brought to the plight of the child soldier" (n. pag.). These three cases have all chosen to describe an extreme story which consequently received a lot of attention. Because of all the good this attention brings with, people will – even if they actually have doubts – suspend their disbelief more easily. Also Boothby, an expert on children at war, observes that Beah's story seems to include every possible trauma in the life of a child soldier and estimates it highly unlikely that all these events would have happened to one person (qtd. in Rayman). As we have seen already above, this 'hierarchy of suffering' brings along some moral implications which we will treat in the next subdivision of this work.

Finally, Beah complicates any possible verification for his book by using a lot of characters without mentioning a surname or sometimes no name at all. This is a technique Wilkomirski also introduced in his novel; think of Mila / Karola for example.

Since the literary technique he uses is very nuanced, combining elements from both real and fake testimonies, it is interesting to see if his motives will be nuanced as well.

### 4.3. His reasons for exaggerating and moral implications

Even though we have always treated the reasons for lying and the moral judgement separately, I placed them together here because they clearly go hand in hand here.

As we know, Beah is not a pathological liar and, in my view, has a very obvious reason for his exaggerating. We cannot forget the fact that because of his story, Beah was able to speak for the UN in New York and in that way also assured a safe home for him with Laura Simms in the United States. Because his story was the most remarkable of all, he has received chances that many other ex-child soldiers can only dream of. If we look at it that way, can we really blame him for overstating certain events in his book? Whereas Wilkomirski and Head were judged because they proceed from rich families, no one can ever suggest that Beah was leading an enviable life. In his shoes, we all would probably try to do the same. Moreover, Wilson observes that “at every step of the way Ishmael was given incentives to exaggerate his story” (qtd. in Appleyard n. pag.). Indeed, we learn in his book that at school Ishmael already had a gift for language and quoted Shakespeare a lot and very well. Furthermore, after the war in the UNICEF camp, Esther, one of the nurses, stimulates him to recount his story to her and even rewards him with a Walkman. Thirdly, as I already said, his story was his access ticket for the UN and the United States. On top of that, he lives with Laura Simms now, a storyteller herself, who stimulates his writing. Finally, there is the important influence of Dan Chaon, his writing professor at Oberlin College, who noticed his vivid imagination and encouraged him to start writing a book. Nonetheless, it is very significant that this book he started in class was originally meant to be a fiction work. Boothby also affirms this when he states:

I think what [Beah] has done is meet with UNICEF, journalists, and others, and he told stories, and people responded to certain stories enthusiastically [...].

That has encouraged him to come out with an account that has sensationalism, a bit of bravado, and some inaccuracies. To me, the key question is whether there's enough accuracy to make the story credible. (qtd. in Rayman n. pag.)

Again, this brings us back to the problem of the hierarchy of suffering we have created in our society. Therefore, I agree with Boothby when he says “[t]he system is set up to reward sensational stories. We all need to look at why does something have to be so horrific before we open our ears and hearts?” (qtd. in Rayman n. pag.). Beah's only chance on a better life was to introduce this exaggeration in his story, because our Western world only is interested in the most extreme cases. Therefore, maybe we should rather judge ourselves rather than a

man like Beah. Nonetheless, Wilson also has a point when he argues that the truth also has its importance: “I’m sure he went through a terrible ordeal, but the truth matters. It is plain to anyone who wants to look at this objectively that he did not experience what has been sold as the truth to hundreds of thousands of readers. The truth matters. It sounds naïve, but the shocking thing is: the publishers don’t care about this. They’ve made millions of dollars.” (qtd. in Sherman n. pag.). Again, one of the major counter-arguments is the great profits the author and his publishers make with these false testimonies. In this way, he corresponds to Wilkomirski and differs from Tania Head. Nonetheless, I believe Beah, just like Wilkomirski, also could have some sort of excuse for this. Maybe they both never wanted to publish a book but were urged by others to do so. It is perfectly possible that at first they lied for other reasons – in Wilkomirski’s case attention among a private circle, in Beah’s case a better future in the US – and then there simply was no way back. As I have already commented above, Beah was stimulated by a lot of factors to tell this story, which goes as well for Wilkomirski who was urged to write by his girlfriend and his psychotherapists.

Moreover, as we know from the book, Beah was on drugs most of the time while being a child soldier. Because of that, it is definitely plausible that his memory was affected by the effects of these drugs. The combination of the trauma of war, his young age and the drugs might easily have transformed the memories he has. Even Wilson, one of his biggest critics, admits the unreliability of memory under stress. He himself has been in the Iraq war and when he was asked how long he had been there he replied “that it felt like it lasted three years but was probably only three months” (Wilson, “Beah’s credibility a long way gone” n. pag.). To his great surprise, when he checked his notes he found out he had actually only been at war for three weeks. Therefore, he reproaches the author not the fact that he exaggerates but rather that he does not want to acknowledge the unreliability of his memories – and memory in general – .

On top of that, we again observe a kind of ‘fantasy proneness’ in Beah. Many sources, like Dan Chaon for example, mention his great gift for imagination and storytelling.

Consequently, once again the audience cannot simply judge this man as a fraud since there are so many other factors in play. On the one hand, the readers feel betrayed because of the financial profit that has been made with the book, but on the other, there are also various factors that speak in favour of Ishmael Beah. Once more, this illustrates the great complexity of false testimonies and brings us back to the debate on whether the genre of the memoir can actually ever be authentic (cf. *supra*). As I already suggested, it might be wiser to opt for a book like Beasts of No Nation or What Is the What. On the other hand, we have seen in the

discussion of Wilkomirski's case that the distinction between testimony and fiction can be made on the basis of an 'empirical bond'. There is no doubt whatsoever that Beah really has been a child soldier and has experienced at least a part of what he describes in his book. Therefore, if we look at it in this way, Beah's novel, in my opinion, still deserves to carry the label "memoir". As Young already observed, if the function of testimony is to show an intimate link with experience there is no problem. If, however, testimonies and memoir aspire to an exact account of the facts, the existence of this genre is impossible (Young 23).

## **5. Conclusion**

As we have observed, these three cases each in their own way unveil the strategies used to trick an audience into believing a false testimony. We clearly notice the importance of not only textual features but also elements outside the texts, like the involvement of professional psychotherapists or alleged partners in adversity.

Moreover, I have tried to demonstrate the great variety of ‘triggers’ which eventually can lead to this kind of lies. At the centre of all these features and influences, however, seems to be what is described by psychologists as “fantasy proneness”. We have observed in each of the three cases that the protagonists showed a clear tendency to invent stories already from their childhood. Therefore, I believe this capacity to be indispensable for the realization of this type of stories. Nonetheless, it appears that a great variety of other influences can eventually contribute to the creation of such a massive lie. Mostly dissatisfaction with their personal lives seems to be a critical issue as well. However, in Beah’s case the audience seemed to understand and approve his lies more than in those of Wilkomirski and Head, because for them he was in the worst situation before he started telling his story. Some even still called him a hero after he was exposed. This great degree of understanding was not present in the other two cases. Nevertheless, both cases have also shown us that there are other factors as well which diminish the responsibility of the false witness. They received sympathy and understanding for other reasons. Wilkomirski was given the benefit of the doubt by some, because it is perfectly possible that he was influenced to a great extent by his therapists. Head in her turn was praised because she did a lot of good work without financially benefiting from it.

Nonetheless, as I already suggested before, it would have been perfectly possible for them to get attention – although not to such great extent as now – for themselves and for the victim group they describe without resorting to the genre of the memoir. If Beasts of No Nation and What Is the What show us one thing, it is that it is perfectly possible to denounce a horrific situation with a fictional novel. Moreover, we have seen that one can wonder whether it is actually possible to write a real memoir. As Sarah Kofman rightly asks: “How can testimony escape the idyllic law of the story?” (qtd. in Eaglestone 81). Our memories can never be a hundred percent accurate, especially when there is a long time between the event and the recounting like in the case of Holocaust child survivors. Nonetheless, Primus St. John states that it is a misconception of the genre that everything has to be perfectly true. He claims there is a difference between “what’s true” and “what’s *authentic*” (qtd. in Rayman).



Consequently, St. John's opinion corresponds to Sue Vice's statement that an authentic account must not be completely true, but rather "real-seeming" (cf. supra). Therefore, we can conclude that Beah's book can still be given the label of "memoir" without much difficulty. However, I have also insisted on the importance of the empirical bond between an author and the events he describes. Because Wilkomirski lacks this bond, it complicates the categorizing of his book. Consequently, I believe it would be a much safer alternative for the publishers to publish the book as a fiction, or – even better – as "non-fiction fiction", like Kihlstrom suggested (cf. supra). This would certainly put a stop to the large number of polemics that have turned up recently: Jerzy Kosinski, Mischa Defonseca, Benjamin Wilkomirski, Rigoberta Menchú, Margaret Seltzer, Lauren Stratford, James Frey, etc.; all their memoirs have caused massive scandals. Without wanting to accuse anyone, publishers should see the flaws of the genre and try to do something about it. After all, it is clear that a person's memory is not sufficient proof for the actual occurrence of an event.

Yet, I am not so naïve as to believe their will come an end to fake victims showing up. It is something that has always been there and will continue to exist. For example, already in 1704 Psalmanazar wrote a fake eyewitness account. In Description de l'île de Formose en Asie he described how, as a native of the island Formose he witnessed "its cannibalistic religious practices, among other exotica" (Suleiman 36). It seems as if you cannot have a trauma without some fake testimonies surfacing. Moreover, as we have seen, these fake testimonies are not always created consciously. Therefore, some of these authors really believe they are writing their memoir. Nonetheless, I think recognizing the flaws of memory and introducing the genre of the non-fiction fiction would already contribute to a solution. On the other, we can wonder if there is any point in trying to avoid the genre of the memoir, as has been suggested by some critics (cf. supra). Because, even if Wilkomirski had admitted there is some fiction in his book, he might still have lied about his true autobiography and still claim that some of the passages were inspired by his own life. Even though this problem seems insoluble, I hope I have contributed to a better understanding of the creation of fake testimonies and the techniques used by their authors. I have shown that we cannot just vilify these "fakers" without looking at the complete picture surrounding their story. More specifically, by comparing these three cases, we have noticed how difficult it is to draw a line between what is acceptable and what is not. In each case we have seen strong arguments that complicated the moral judgement cast upon the author. Especially in the last case, because Beah really has been a child soldier, the final conclusion was extremely nuanced. Since the moral judgement and the literary judgement go hand in hand, it is not surprising that the

discussion on the genre of the memoir also resulted hard to conclude. Nonetheless, testimonies of traumatic events are essential in the understanding of these events. Therefore, I would like to conclude by stating that “[t]he lesson to be drawn, finally, may be this: If memory is a ‘shifting and many layered thing,’ never reaching the bedrock one longs for, the way around that problem is not to keep silent, nor to confine oneself to fiction, but [...] to keep on writing and rewriting. Breton was right, life is not what one writes. But one may never get closer to it than that” (Suleiman 42).

## **Bibliography**

Beah, Ishmael. A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier. London: Fourth Estate, 2007.

Benjamin Wilkomirski: Memory Thief? My thoughts on a Man Trying to "Invent" the Holocaust. 26 October 2008 <<http://holocaust-children.tripod.com/wilkomirski.html>>.

Bonilla, Lara. "La Impostora de l'11 de Setembre... és de Barcelona." AVUI 29 September 2007. 3 March 2009 <[http://www.avui.cat/article/mon\\_politica//7130/la/impostora/l/setembre/es/barcelona.html](http://www.avui.cat/article/mon_politica//7130/la/impostora/l/setembre/es/barcelona.html)>.

Carney, Mark. "Paper Finds Big Holes in Woman's Tales of Surviving 9/11." USA Today 27 September 2007. 3 March 2009 <<http://blogs.usatoday.com/ondeadline/2007/09/paper-finds-big.html>>.

Carney, Mark. "Fake Vietnam Vet Ordered to Tend to Graves of Real Vets." USA Today 31 July 2007. 3 March 2009 <<http://blogs.usatoday.com/ondeadline/2007/07/fake-vietnam-ve.html>>.

Crombab, H.F.M. and H.L.G.J. Merckelbach. Hervonden Herinneringen en Andere Misverstanden. Amsterdam/Antwerpen: Uitgeverij Contact, 2002.

Dunlap, David & Serge Kovalevski. "In a 9/11 Survival Tale, The Pieces Just Don't Fit." New York Times 27 September 2007. 26 October 2008 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/27/nyregion/27survivor.html>>.

Eaglestone, Robert. "You Would Not Add to My Suffering if You Knew What I Have Seen: Holocaust Testimony and Contemporary African Trauma Literature." Studies in the novel 40.1&2 (2008): 72-85.

Eggers, Dave. What Is the What. Canada: McSweeney's, 2006.

Ganzfried, Daniel. "The Purloined Holocaust Biography." Trans. Katherine Quimby Johnson. Die Weltwoche 27 August 1998. 3 March 2009 <<http://www.stopbadtherapy.com/experts/fragments/ganzfried.shtml>>.

- Gatton, Adrian. "The Fantasist of 9/11: The Story of Tania Head's Escape From The Twin Towers Captivated America and Made Her a Heroine Among Survivors... Just One Problem - She Wasn't Even There That Day." Daily Mail 12 September 2008. 26 October 2008 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk>>.
- Geller, Jay. "The Wilkomirski Case: Fragments or Figments?" American Imago 59.3 (2002): 343-65.
- Geras, Norman. "The True Wilkomirski." Res Publica 8 (2002): 111-22.
- Horselenberg, Robert, et al. "Imagining Fictitious Childhood Events: The Role of Individual Differences in Imagination Inflation." Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy 7 (2000): 128-37. 3 March 2009 <<http://arno.unimaas.nl/show.cgi?fid=2429>>.
- Iweala, Uzodinma. Beasts of No Nation. London: John Murray, 2005.
- Kihlstrom, John. "Memory, Autobiography, History" Proteus: A Journal of Ideas 19.2 (2002): n. pag. 15 May 2009 <<http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~kihlstrm/rmpa00.htm>>.
- Kind van de Dodenkampen. Canvas. N.p. 2003.
- LaCapra, Dominick. "Trauma Studies: Its Critics and Vicissitudes." History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory. Ed. Dominick LaCapra. Ithaca (New York): Cornell University Press, 2004.
- Laub, Dori. "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening." Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History. Eds. Felman, Soshana and Dori Laub New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Maechler, Stefan. The Wilkomirski Affair: A Study in Biographical Truth. Trans. John E. Woods. New York: Schocken Books, 2001.
- . "Wilkomirski the Victim. Individual Remembering as Social Interaction and Public Event." Trans. Moira Moehler-Woods. History and memory: studies in representation of the past 13.2 (2001): 59-95.
- Merckelbach, Harald. "Geboren Verteller. De Affaire Wilkomirski." Skepter 15.2 (2002): n. pag. 26 October 2008 <<http://www.skepsis.nl/wilkomirski.html>>.

Meuleman, Marc. "Hervonden Herinneringen: het Geheugen op een Dwaalspoor." Eos April 2002: n. pag. 3 March 2009 <<http://www.skepp.be/artikels/psychotherapie/hervonden-herinneringen-van-incest-tot-satanisme>>.

Perlstein, Rick. "A Holocaust Fraud Exposed, a Peccadillo Papered Over." New York Observer 30 April 2001. 3 March 2009 <<http://www.enigma.se/info/FFI-Wil.htm>>.

Siebert, Al. "About Alicia (Tania) Head, Alleged WTC 9/11 Imposter" 10 October 2007. 3 March 2009 <<http://www.survivorguidelines.org/articles/taniahead.html>>.

Suleiman, Susan Rubin. "Do Facts Matter in Holocaust Memoirs? Wilkomirski/Wiesel." Obliged Memory: Literature, Religion, Ethics. Eds. Steven Katz and Alan Rosen. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2006. 21-42. Google books 15 May 2009 <<http://books.google.com>>.

Tighe, Carl. "Faking a life: Benjamin Wilkomirski, *Fragments*." Writing and responsibility. Ed. Carl Tighe. London: Routledge, 2004. 90-102.

Vice, Sue. Holocaust Fiction. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

Whitehead, Anne. "Telling Tales: Trauma and Testimony in Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* (1)." Discourse. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, n. pag. 3 March 2009 <<http://www.accessmylibrary.com>>.

Wikipedia. "Aanslagen op 11 September 2001." 3 March 2009 <[http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aanslagen\\_op\\_11\\_september\\_2001](http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aanslagen_op_11_september_2001)>.

Wikipedia. "Tania Head." 3 March 2009 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tania\\_Head](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tania_Head)>.

Wilkomirski, Benjamin. Fragments: Memories of a Childhood, 1939-48. Trans. Carol Brown Janeway. London: Picador, 1996.

Worstell, Tim. "Tania Head." 30 September 2007. 3 March 2009 <<http://timworstell.typepad.com/timworstell/2007/09/tania-head.html>>.

Young, James. Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988.