

Central Queensland University

Sue Bond

Troubling the life narrative: the case of Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a childhood, 1939–1948*

Abstract:

Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a childhood, 1939–1948* was first published in 1995 in Germany, and in English translation in 1996. It purported to be a Holocaust memoir: the author wrote of his experiences as a six year old in concentration camps in Poland. Doubts were raised as to its authenticity, and eventually the memoir was revealed to be a 'hoax'. Wilkomirski (whose actual name was Bruno Grosjean at birth) had been given up for adoption by his mother, who was poor and the victim of an accident that left her with brain injuries. I argue that the author of *Fragments* could not find a sense of identity or belonging as an adoptee, but did as a Holocaust survivor, and through a long and complex process he came to produce a narrative that explained his life *as he saw it*. I discuss the case in detail to build a picture of Wilkomirski as an adopted person rather than a literary hoaxter, and utilise the work of Betty Jean Lifton, who postulated that the damage done to him in childhood reverberated through the years into his adult life. A discussion of trauma (and trauma theories), as it relates to adopted persons and their life narratives, and the Divided Self theory adapted by Betty Jean Lifton and Jo Sparrow, are employed in providing a reading of *Fragments* as a troubled adoptee memoir, one that is embedded within the 'false' or 'hoax' memoir of Holocaust survival.

Biographical note:

Sue Bond is a PhD candidate at Central Queensland University. She has degrees in medicine, literature, and creative writing, and has published short stories, essays, and book reviews in print and online journals in Australia and overseas. Her essay 'A hole in the heart: on secrets, silence, and sorrow' was long-listed for the Calibre Essay Prize in 2014.

Keywords:

Creative writing – hoax memoir – Holocaust – adoption – trauma – testimony – witness

Introduction

In researching and writing about adoptee memoir for my doctoral thesis, I read a review of a study of a memoir from the 1990s that at first glance seemed to have nothing to do with adoption. Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a childhood, 1939–1948* (1996) purported to be a Holocaust memoir, a child's-eye view of surviving concentration camps in Poland. It was widely praised and awarded prizes until it was proven to be a 'hoax'. A number of memoirs purporting to be by survivors of the Holocaust have been revealed as false (Katsoulis 2009), but the focus of my interest here is not hoaxing but adoptee narratives. The review was of Stefan Maeckler's *The Wilkomirski affair: A study in biographical truth* (2001) and the reviewer was Betty Jean Lifton, an adoptee, adoptee activist, psychological counsellor and writer. Why was Lifton reviewing this book about a literary hoax and its author?

That Wilkomirski was adopted is the obvious answer to Lifton's interest, but the fact that the author chose to write a 'false' memoir about being a Holocaust survivor rather than a factually 'true' memoir about being an adoptee (survivor) is the troubling, complicating feature. Lifton's review, and Wilkomirski's memoir, are the starting points for my larger investigation into the nature of adoptee trauma and testimony as it can be manifested in memoir. For this essay, I will specifically discuss the Wilkomirski affair and present an alternative reading of his memoir as that of an adoptee.

It is impossible for me to read this memoir in the same way I might have done when it was first published in English translation in 1996. Now it has been shown that Benjamin Wilkomirski is an invented identity, that he is not Jewish, and was not in any concentration camps, it cannot be read as a Holocaust memoir. I could read it as a *fictional* account of the Holocaust from a child's point of view, and it may be valuable as an attempt to portray such a view through the work of the imagination (see, for example, Geras 2002). But as an adoptee, I have chosen to read it as the (deeply flawed and complex) memoir of an adopted person because I think it brings to the fore questions about the adoptee experience both now and in the past, attitudes towards illegitimacy and adoption, and the depiction of that experience in the memoir form.

There is a tension within the Western perception of adoption¹. On the one hand, as Novy discusses, Western culture shows that adoptees 'find their identity in meeting their birth parents' (2007: 1), as seen in story of Oedipus and Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. The idea of the 'real' parent being the biological parent permeates our views of adoption (Estrin 2002: 276). On the other hand, in the past, adoption was a solution to the 'problem' of unwed motherhood and infertile married couples, with the birth mothers expected to forget their 'mistakes' and the children provided with a socially sanctified home with the 'stain' of illegitimacy removed. Now, the social landscape has changed, unwed motherhood is no longer stigmatised, and family formation can occur with the aid of not only adoption but also technological methods. Scholars such as Estrin (2002) and Homans (2013) have written about the essentialist nature of preferencing the biological family over the adoptive, and cited caution in expecting too much from the search for, and reunion with, the birth parent, an often

key feature of the adoptee memoir. Part of their argument encompasses the fact that identity does not lie wholly within the genes and expecting the self to be made whole from reunion can be fraught with danger.

The importance to adopted persons of their biological origins varies with the person, but for adoptees who write their memoirs, it is a very common feature of their adoptive story (see, for example, Dessaix (1994), Chick (1995), McCutcheon (2005) and Winterson (2011)) whether or not their adoptive family experience was positive or negative or mixed. The drive to know one's origins can be strong, just as the drive to form a family can be strong. The impact upon the adoptee of being adopted has not received much attention until relatively recently, with the experiences of adoptees being examined, for example, clinically and through their stories (for example, Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Henig 1993; Verrier 1993, 2003). This background has relevance for the case of Wilkomirski, whose troubled childhood, search for an identity, and feelings of grief and loss for his biological origins and parents clearly shaped his life and the writing of his memoir. I will briefly discuss the 'hoax' and, because certain significant details about Wilkomirski's adoptive life are sometimes left out of scholarly engagement with the memoir, go into that detail to show its importance and provide background for further exploration of why he wrote *Fragments* as a Holocaust memoir. This will involve discussion of trauma and trauma theory as it applies to the adoptee, as well as Lifton's and Sparrow's work on theories of the self and identity.

Background to the 'hoax'

Fragments was first published in August 1995 in Germany, and in English translation in 1996. Wilkomirski writes of seeing his father killed, or a man he thinks is his father, and then being taken to camps in Poland where he experiences the horror of death and degradation all around him. He recounts being taken to see his dying mother who gives him a precious handful of bread. It is a harrowing story that shows the little boy's confusion and deep sense of loss and damage, but he does, of course, survive and go on to be taken in by a family in Switzerland and eventually adopted by them. However, he is distressed by the attitudes of those in the postwar world, who want him to forget everything in his past and assume a new identity.

According to Philip Gourevitch (1999), Wilkomirski did not expect much interest in his memoir but the reaction to its release was extraordinary. Many reviewers described it as a classic and gave it high praise; it went on to win several prizes, including the National Jewish Book Award. Interestingly, sales were low by international standards, not quite reaching 70,000 copies worldwide in the first four years (Langer 2006: 49). Readers responded passionately because his story deeply moved them.

There were, however, doubts about its veracity from the beginning and these grew until, in 1998, the journalist Daniel Ganzfried revealed that Benjamin Wilkomirski was born Bruno Grosjean to Yvonne Grosjean, a single, working class woman, and was eventually taken in by the middle class Dössekkers in Zurich. He had never been in any concentration camp and was not Jewish. Ganzfried called *Fragments* 'an

internalized collection of images by a man whose imagination has run away with him' (qtd. in Maechler 2001: 129). In response, Wilkomirski emphasised that 'The reader was always free to regard my book as literature or as a personal document' (Maechler 2001: 131). The public reaction to the revelations was intense, with much media seeming to merely repeat what Ganzfried had written, but some also conducting their own investigations. Some Jewish newspapers, organisations, and groups of survivors were critical of Ganzfried (rather than Wilkomirski) because they believed the article would encourage Holocaust denialists (Maechler 2001: 136–8).

The historian Dr Stefan Maechler was engaged by Wilkomirski's agent at the Liepman Literary Agency in April 1999 to investigate the veracity and authenticity of *Fragments*. The resulting report was published in English translation as *The Wilkomirski affair: A study in biographical truth* in 2001. In short, he exhaustively researched all aspects of the case, including interviewing Wilkomirski and everyone who was associated with the book and his story. His conclusion supported Ganzfried. Maechler was more circumspect about Wilkomirski himself, however, and recognised the difficulties he had faced as a child (hence my enclosing of the word 'hoax' with inverted commas).

Who is Benjamin Wilkomirski?

There are many written portraits of the author (for example: Gourevitch 1999; Lappin 1999; Eskin 2002) but the most thorough biography of Benjamin Wilkomirski is that given by Stefan Maechler in his report, and possibly reveals why he is more sympathetic towards the author, or at least less harsh in his judgement. These details are important in attempting to understand Wilkomirski and his possible motives for writing the memoir as he did. Some months before Yvonne Grosjean gave birth to Bruno in February 1941, she had been involved in a serious accident while riding her bicycle with friends. She was hit by a car and sustained severe injuries that left her with permanent brain damage, loss of her sense of smell, and a disfigured face. It was while she was in hospital that her pregnancy was discovered. Interestingly for the time, the doctors advised that, after his birth, Bruno stay with his mother while she was hospitalised, and convalescing elsewhere afterwards, as they felt it would be harmful to separate them (Maechler 2001: 10).

Bruno's father, Rudolph Zehnder, had positive memories of Yvonne, in contrast to the paternity records which described her as having seduced him; he reported these as being the work of his father who wanted him to have nothing to do with Yvonne now she was the mother of an illegitimate child and needing support. He provided financial child support for a time, but had no further involvement.

At that time, cases of illegitimacy required that the parental power be taken from the mother and given to a guardian, in this case an official called Walter Stauffer (Maechler 2001: 9). He was unduly and negatively influenced by Rudolph's father's opinion, and thus regarded Yvonne in a dim light. He appeared to prefer that Bruno be cared for by others rather than stay with his mother. As she was limited in her capacity to work both by her disabilities and her need to mother Bruno, this was a

very difficult time. The two of them moved around from place to place and she could earn only a small income; life appeared somewhat chaotic.

When he was two, Bruno was sent to live with two different foster families before being transferred to the Aeberhards, who lived in a village in a farmhouse. Along the way, his behaviour had been reported as ‘lively’, ‘stubborn’, ‘a bed-wetter’ (Maechler 2001: 12). At the Aeberhards, Bruno had a mixed experience, enjoying some of his time in the company of their eldest son, but also encountering difficulties. These were not so much Bruno’s fault as the unfortunate consequence of Mrs Aeberhard’s ‘seizures and rages’ which frightened him and made him hysterical (Maechler 2001: 15). Yvonne visited him regularly during these times, and it was reported that Bruno responded positively to her visits. Bruno was sent to Sonnhalde Children’s Home in Adelboden in March 1945, where children whose families were in crisis could stay. It was while he was there that the guardian attempted to persuade Yvonne to sign away all rights to her son, including those of future contact. She initially refused but he eventually convinced her to hand Bruno over to a childless couple interested in adopting, and so he went to live with Dr Kurt and Mrs Martha Dössekker.

Another important background detail that gives a picture of the attitudes towards children in that time and place, is the family history of Yvonne and her brother, Max. Their mother died when they were six and four respectively, and, because their father was an alcoholic, they were sent to live with different foster families by the authorities. ‘Sent to live’ seems to have meant ‘sold as labour’, as Max Grosjean told Maechler in 1999 that he had been subjected to forced labour and treated badly, beaten and neglected. From the time of their separation the two siblings had no contact until Max tracked down his sister just as she was about to have Bruno. It was a system of child labour that has been severely criticised for its brutality and with which Switzerland is only just coming to terms (Maechler 2001: 6, Eichenberger 2013).

When Bruno went to live with the Dössekkers as a five year old, he entered a wealthy household vastly different to anything his original, working class mother could have provided. His father was a medical specialist and wanted his adopted son to also become a doctor; later Bruno did begin medical studies but dropped out to study music and became a clarinettist and instrument repairer. His parents provided him with material comfort and an education, but it was reported by Maechler that Bruno attempted suicide on more than one occasion, and that the housemaid Hermine Egloff was the only person he felt he could talk to in the household (2001: 236). In his summary at the end of his report, Maechler wrote ‘Wilkomirski’s story is a cautionary tale of how certain adoptions are doomed to failure’ (269). He then proceeded to explain this statement with several points.

First of all, Bruno’s mother was coerced to give him up, and then he changed foster homes at least twice before being settled permanently with the Dössekkers. There was no professional support for, or supervision of, either his foster parents or his eventual adoptive parents. The parents of the Dössekkers, particularly Kurt’s, did not approve of them adopting, emphasising that they did not want their wealth being passed down to a ‘stranger’; Wilkomirski discovered later that his adoptive father was disinherited

as a result. Bruno was not brought up in a household where he felt free to discuss his past, or be informed about his original parents, and his contact with his mother was officially denied, with legal barriers being imposed later. The adoption was not finalised until twelve years after Bruno was taken in, so he lived in uncertainty, only making fears of further abandonment worse. Maechler stated that ‘It seems obvious to me that all these difficulties only aggravated the original trauma and reinforced his need to flee into fantasy’ (270). He believed that Wilkomirski’s ‘need to translate memories that consist of fragments and gaps into meaningful narrative opens the way for suggestion’, and that his ‘fantasies of victimization were radicalized with the help of those around him’ (270–1), namely his partner Verena Piller, his friend Elitsur Bernstein who was a former clarinet student and psychologist, and his therapist Monika Matta. What society offered and accepted for ‘the narration of horrible experiences’ (271) was, for Wilkomirski, the Holocaust, not his own family, fostering and adoption history. And belonging to the community of victims gave him a sense of belonging that he had not felt before.

Review of Maechler’s study by Betty Jean Lifton

In her review of the Maechler report, Lifton stated that, while Wilkomirski may be ‘an imposter, a fraud, a liar’, he ‘is also an adoptee and, as such, is another kind of child survivor’ (2002: 77). By this she meant that his origins and past were kept secret or not talked about, his illegitimacy was viewed as shameful, and his ‘rescue’ by adoptive parents could only be viewed as fortunate, leaving no room for his feelings of not belonging and mismatch. While she was careful to not equate this with Holocaust survival, she believed that children from each shared ‘a feeling of being abandoned, alone, and powerless’ (77).

Lifton provided an interpretation of not only Wilkomirski’s severe illnesses in the 1980s but also of him placing his child self in the death camps only after certain events of 1981. Those events began with the death of his original mother Yvonne Grosjean; a letter from her lawyer informed Wilkomirski of this, and he also learnt that she had not left him anything in her will. He was entitled to make a claim as her son and he did, which necessitated going to her home with the lawyer. Lifton made the case that doing this ‘must have been like falling through a time machine into the dark place in his psyche that was left when he lost his mother. He reconnected not only with his mother, but with the unresolved trauma of losing her’ (78). Noting that he was ill for a long time after this, she emphasised his increasing sense of loss as his marriage ended and his adoptive parents died. It was after this period of physical and mental breakdown that she suspected he ‘buried’ the two Brunos, at least partly because ‘Binjamin could express the pain better than Bruno, whom nobody had heard or taken seriously’ (78). She wrote of the DNA test that proved his genetic relationship with the Grosjeans but how he still refused to believe in anything other than his memories and that he had proof he had been abused as a child, wherever that abuse may have occurred or by whom.

There is enough evidence to support the case for Wilkomirski being traumatised as a child during at least one foster family placement. But Lifton goes further:

But Bruno also suffered the trauma of so many adopted children who are separated from their birth mothers and are not able to resolve their grief. Of course, most adoptees do not reinvent themselves in such an extreme way. But if Bruno Grosjean/Dossekker/Wilkomirski's story tells us anything, it is that adoptees cannot build an authentic sense of self when society does not recognize their trauma of being cut off from their origins (78).

Reading Wilkomirski's *Fragments* as an adoptee

There is now growing awareness of the long-term effects of trauma, both psychological and physical, on babies and young children into adulthood, particularly that caused by disrupted parenting (Perry and Szalavitz 2008; Karr-Morse and Wiley 2012). It is only in recent years that work on the potential for adoption to have psychologically traumatic effects, through the separation of mother and child, has been conducted and recorded (for example: Verrier 1993; Lifton 1994; Palacios and Brodzinsky 2010; Sliwka 2010; Quartly, Swain and Cuthbert 2013).

Caruth wrote of trauma as being 'always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available' (1996: 4) and Wilkomirski's 'wound that cries out' as expressed in his memoir was not of suffering the death camps but of suffering loss and pain through adoption, however well intentioned it may have been. Bonding between mother and child is a 'continuum of physiological, psychological, and spiritual events which begin in utero and continue throughout the postnatal bonding period' (Verrier 1993: 1). Verrier, a psychologist and adoptive mother, described the 'primal wound' as the trauma resulting from this process being interrupted by separation of the mother and child, causing 'abandonment and loss' which is 'indelibly imprinted upon the unconscious minds of these children' (1993: 1). She also described it as 'a wound which is physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual, a wound which causes pain so profound as to have been described as cellular' (xvi). Wilkomirski, although able to stay with his mother in the first two years of his life, had this relationship disrupted by multiple fostering, before adoption by the Dössekkers separated him from her forever. If this was recognised as potentially traumatic by his adoptive parents (who broached no discussion of his previous life or his birth mother, according to Wilkomirski) or by society generally, nothing was done to assuage it from the evidence we have. As Verrier stated, 'The attitude of society and many clinicians that there is no difference between adoptive and biological families helps none of the people involved, because it discounts legitimate feelings' (108).

Various theories of trauma provide useful frameworks for thinking about Wilkomirski and his memoir. Freud's *fort-da* ('gone'-'there') game he observed his grandson playing led him to understand it as a way of coping with the absence of the mother, and, later, as a way of achieving mastery and control over situations in which there was none (1920: 285). For the adopted child, the *fort-da* game has especial significance, given that the original mother has gone away and not returned. Wilkomirski's '*fort-da*' as an adoptee was in the context of a permanently 'gone' birth mother but the 'there' became a concentration camp; was his experience of

childhood so damaged and his loss of his birth mother so profound that his only way of expressing the loss and grief was through Holocaust imagery?

Caruth posited that trauma is amnesic, unspeakable, and only effectively witnessed by fiction (1996), but there have been challenges to this view (Leys 2000; McNally 2003; Radstone 2007; Pederson 2014). Radstone criticised Caruth's trauma theory for reinterpreting Freud to the point of de-emphasising the importance of the unconscious and its processes to produce 'binaries of "inside" and "outside", "trauma" and "normality", and "victims" and "perpetrators"' (2007: 19). The subject of trauma theory is not 'caught up in desire' but 'constituted by forgetting' (20), so that it is an *event* that is forgotten, not a deeper knowledge about the subject itself through its unconscious processes. Pederson (2014) wrote of the newer clinical studies on trauma, particularly those of McNally, repudiating the idea of traumatic amnesia and the irrepresentable nature of traumatic memories. Of particular interest is the differentiation between victims not being able to remember and *choosing* not to remember, for whatever reason; I would argue that the unspeakability of trauma may be related more to the reactions of potential but reluctant (even hostile) witnesses to the victim's testimony; a witness failure, if you like, rather than a failure of the ability to remember and record. Certainly, Wilkomirski encountered hostile witnesses as an adoptee, in contrast to those for his testimony of Holocaust survival.

Wilkomirski's trauma had been written into his memoir, and he recorded elsewhere how long he searched for proof that his memories from childhood were valid; he insisted that those memories were not 'recovered' during therapy (Maechler 2001: 82) but had always been present. He remembered his adoptive life, and inserted scenes from it into his memoir, but the memories of his mother, of Yvonne, are nebulous, perhaps because he was very young when separated permanently from her. The memories he was primarily talking about recording were those of the Holocaust he did not experience and it could be postulated that *Fragments* was the fiction that represented these. It is a complex entanglement.

Alford teased out the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's ideas about trauma. He characterised his approach as a question of 'whether the individual is able, or can be therapeutically enabled, to live a rich interior life' (2013: 263). Winnicott, who was especially interested in the mother-child relationship and families, thought about trauma as 'the penetration of the self' and as 'the erosion of the self' (264) with reference to his ideas of the true and false self. The true self is a 'vital psychosomatic center' whereas the false self is there to 'protect the true self from being known and exploited by others', and trauma is 'an attack on these sources of "vitality in living"' (264), an attack on 'the meaning of being, the meaning of life' (265). Trauma is a disruption of the 'sense of continuity of one's existence as a person' (Alford 2015) and produces knowledge of the fragility of being human, of being in the world, and Winnicott links it with our dependence upon 'a being and a force, mother, who was beyond both our control and our knowledge (as a separate fallible being with needs of her own) when we needed her the most' (Alford 2013: 267). This dependence 'changes its locus – from mother to world' as we grow into adulthood.

In Maechler's interviews with Wilkomirski, he recorded him mentioning 'one's real self' (2001: 61) with respect to fitting in to what was expected of him and not revealing 'his true identity' but 'playing a role'. He kept up the pretence of being what he was not until he could do it no longer; nightmares and physical illness were threatening to overcome him. His partner Verena Piller provided the initial listening ear to his unheard voice and encouraged him to record his memories. Lifton wrote of her theory of the adoptee's Divided Self, composed of the Artificial Self and the Forbidden Self, her variations of Winnicott's true self and false self (1994: 51). The Artificial Self is the 'good' adoptee described by Wilkomirski above, the one who does what is expected, denies its own needs for the sake of others, and tries to fit in with the adoptive family (52). The Forbidden Self is the one 'that might have been had it not been separated from its mother and forced to split off from the rest of the self' (56) and 'goes underground for vitality and authenticity, harbouring a jumble of fantasies about the birth parents and the life that might have been', which reflects Wilkomirski's confused identity and even his ambivalence towards his birth family. Sparrow (2015, 2017b) added the Authentic Self to this, which is formed by the adoptee by weaving together 'the two sides of the Divided Self' to form a new self-narrative. Its construction is 'complicated by the silent nature of pre-verbal trauma which is sustained when a child is separated from their biological mother; and the disenfranchisement of that loss and grief' (2017a). Wilkomirski does not seem to have found his Authentic self in his memoir but rather created a fictional self. The name 'Wilkomirski' came from his belief that he was related to a violinist, Wanda Wilkomirska, after an acquaintance remarked that they looked alike (Maechler 2001: 194), underlining, perhaps, the importance for some adoptees of resemblances to others as they grow up.

There are a number of scenes in this book that stand out for me as descriptions of an adoptee's experience. One in particular is a scene where he is taken to see his dying mother in the camp and is told not to speak to her or about her afterwards at any time, on pain of death as he understands it (Wilkomirski 1997: 47, 49). Later, when he is out of the 'camps', and starts living with his adoptive parents, there is a scene where his adoptive mother tries to teach him to say good night to her as his mother. It is significant for its reflection of Wilkomirski's adoptive experience and its importance in his life through his adulthood.

"Now you must learn to say 'good night' to me properly," the strange lady said.

"What's that?" I said.

"Good night, Mother – that's what you must say to me now," she said.

"No, I won't," I cried, upset.

"Yes, I'm your mother now."

"No, no – aunt!" I screamed.

"Not aunt – you must call me your mother," she said forcefully.

"No, I know where my mother is. You're not my mother. I know where my mother got left. I want to go back, I want to go home," I yelled as loud as I could. "I want to go back to where I came from." I didn't dare to say the name of the place, in case she would be able to find me there again.

“You must forget that now. Forget it – it’s a bad dream. It was only a bad dream,” she kept saying. “You must forget everything. I’m your mother now.”

I jumped up and wanted to get dressed again, get my shoes on, most of all get out of here, get away, get out of this terrible house.

But she wouldn’t let me and there was a sort of wrestling match all around my bed, with both of us screaming. I cried and yelled and bit and scratched and kept trying to reach my clothes. But she was stronger and she had longer staying power.

At some point I was exhausted and gave up, and sobbed out some muttered noise that sounded like “mother”, and she relented and turned out the light.

I cried for a long time. I thought about my mother’s face as she lay there and how she sort of smiled as she gave me the bread.

I felt more ashamed than I had ever felt in my life. I felt as if I’d become a criminal, my mother’s betrayer. I felt filthy and wretched, and my skin began to crawl and itch again.

Now I’ve really turned into a bad person (122–3).

He yells that he knows ‘where my mother got left’ but now we know that she was not in the concentration camp but in Switzerland, just as he was, and after visiting him in his foster homes, she disappeared from his life when the adoption papers were signed (under considerable coercion from the guardian) as was required. But did he feel as if she was left in something like a camp, or might as well have been? His sense of betrayal to his mother when he eventually gives in is strongly portrayed. Read on its own, this is a wrenching scene of a child displaced from his mother and his home and forced to reconcile with a different situation altogether, one that tells him he must forget everything that came before, including his original mother.

Wilkomirski told Maechler that when he was taken in by the Dössekkers, he would not call Mrs Dössekker his mother. She told him to forget the past as if it were ‘a bad dream’ (Maechler 2001: 24), and objects he had brought with him were taken away. On a tour of the house, he was told everything he could not do. Dr Dössekker informed him he was a medical doctor and that he hoped Bruno would be ‘bright enough’ to follow his profession (Maechler 2001: 24). Some of what he told the historian was also written into his memoir, as indicated in the excerpt above.

It is apparent from the interviews with Maechler that Wilkomirski was often confused and contradictory, as when he stated the visual memory of his mother’s face was first ‘missing’ then that it was ‘very clear’ (Maechler 2001: 38). But what is important here is that he recalled seeing his mother ‘several times’ (Maechler 2001: 37), although he was ‘not able to recall her face exactly’. He went on to say:

“I don’t really know what I understand, whether it’s right ... Sometimes I have the feeling that I understand things emotionally as well, and I believe, at least, that during my infancy I sense something of it, and maybe something is left of that.”

“A mother who loved you?”

“Yes. Yes. Otherwise she would never have given me the bread. I didn’t understand any of it at the time, I was merely afraid. I regret to this day that I didn’t go beyond that fear, didn’t look more closely” (Maechler 2001: 38).

Although we know that his mother was not in the camp and so did not give him the bread, his emotional memory is of a mother who loved him, and what does bread signify but nourishment and comfort shared with loved ones?

Why a Holocaust survival memoir and not an adoptee memoir?

Given all of the above, why did Wilkomirski write a memoir that was based on untruths instead of one based on his adoptee experience? Or to put it another way, why did he frame, or ‘encode’ (Gross and Hoffman 2004: 38), his suffering in the experience of the Holocaust rather than the experience of fostering and adoption? What I have presented by Maechler and Lifton and others provides part of the explanation, to the extent that we can ever know the answer(s) or know them completely. His story is complex and multifaceted and many have written about his possible motives and/or pathology (for example: Whitehead 2004; Katsoulis 2009; Rothe 2011; Sorensen 2012). There are a number of factors involved in coming to some understanding of what influenced him, including the need for belonging and acceptance, the search for identity, having a voice to which others listen, and the nature of testimony.

As a child survivor of the Holocaust, Wilkomirski found acceptance and a powerful sense of belonging amongst other survivors, something that was missing for him as an adoptee. Over many years, he researched the Shoah extensively and built up a large library on the subject, travelled to sites of Holocaust remembrance, gave lectures on the Holocaust and therapeutic methods for survivors, and participated in a documentary film (Maechler 2001: 74). His identity was very much as a Holocaust survivor: his business card listed him as having available an archive of Holocaust literature *above* his role as musician and instrument repairer (Eskin 2002: 12). Those close to him, as well as other survivors, encouraged him and rewarded his work on the Holocaust, including that on the importance of child survivors (and children generally) being heard and believed. In the early post-war years, even child survivors of the Holocaust were often not listened to, partly because they were not expected to remember much and it was not thought that it would harm them in the long-term (see, for example, Eskin 2002: 79).

In contrast, as an adoptee he was not encouraged to speak of his past and not listened to if he did and had little support for his loss and pain. Being regarded as the ‘illegitimate’ son of ‘an unmarried, uneducated, low-class shiksa’ – as his supporter Lea Balint commented (Eskin 2002: 137) – only reinforced his negative feelings about being an adoptee. As well as all of his work mentioned above, the Holocaust survival memoir gave him a voice to the rest of the world, an audience to whom he could express the loss and pain in what he considered to be an acceptable form as the survivor of a major event that no one could argue against. If he had written about himself as an adoptee ‘survivor’, he may have received a response similar to that recorded in Maechler’s report: ‘almost everyone who knew the Dössekkers expresses

outrage that Wilkomirski presented such a negative description of his foster parents' (2001: 206).

The contest between the selves as felt by the adoptee and as seen by others leads into a discussion about the role of the reader of *Fragments*—the witness to Wilkomirski's testimony of suffering. I have already mentioned that Maechler felt Wilkomirski's 'fantasies of victimization' (270), as he called them, were encouraged and channelled towards Holocaust survival, the accepted 'narration of horrible experiences' (271). Carroll (2007) has written the 'text infers a remembering subject who is by no means in full possession of his past or of his identity' and that what is revealed is 'not the triumphal self of classic autobiography but the self-effacing affirmation that he is a "child without identity"' (24). She argues that his memories 'evoke the character of testimony' that is described by Felman (1991) as 'composed of bits and pieces of a memory that had been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance' (Felman 1991: 5). My role as witness to his testimony through reading his memoir involved reading as an adoptee, in the knowledge that he was neither Jewish nor a death camp survivor, knowledge that was not available to readers pre-revelation of the 'hoax'. Could they have read differently? Wilkomirski did not have a 'listening other' for his *adoption* testimony, a witness with 'a crucial role in bringing the traumatized memories into narrative and into meaning' (Carroll 2007: 30) but did have for a (fictional) Holocaust testimony, perhaps for some of the reasons discussed in this essay, and others outside its scope.

Conclusion

In *Fragments*, Wilkomirski/Grosjean/Dössekker wrote about his childhood experiences as if he were a Jewish Holocaust survivor when he was not. Instead, he is a different kind of survivor, that of fostering and adoption in the mid-twentieth century. It is a complex and complicated case and the more I delved, the more material came up, with further possibilities for research. Much scholarly work on the case of *Fragments* mentions the fact that Wilkomirski was adopted and had a difficult childhood; however, little of it explores in sufficient detail the memoir in the context of his adoptive life. The author also stresses the importance of listening to children, a fact revealed in interviews with Maechler, amongst others. Wilkomirski's case reflects in part the issue of unspeakable stories and the heard (or unlistened to) voice, but not because he survived the horrors of the Holocaust. Not only as a child but later on, he found no one to hear his story of original mother loss and not fitting in, partly at least because speaking of the difficulties that can come with adoptive life goes against the happy narrative of adoptive family formation and the child rescued by adoption. The memoir shows not literal truth so much as emotional truth, and not about surviving genocide, but about surviving significant loss on an intimate scale and having it ignored and swept aside.

Endnote

1. It is important to acknowledge the use of language in adoption terminology. Many parents object to the use of qualifiers such as 'birth' and 'adoptive', preferring to be called parents, mothers and fathers. I use this terminology in the essay in order to provide clarity.

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