

# The Holocaust Historiography Project

Remarkable Nonsense about the Holocaust

## Invented 'Memories' Praised

### A Holocaust Memoir in Doubt

By Doreen Carvajal

Until [Benjamin Wilkomirski](#)'s truth came into conflict with his own legal identity, the slim memoir of his Jewish childhood in the concentration camps of Poland was hailed as a "small masterpiece," a searing sketch of death and horror - rats rummaging among corpses, starving babies sucking fingers to the bone, a dying mother's last glimpse of her son.

**International Jewish groups showered the 155-page memoir, "Fragments," with endorsements and prizes:** the National Jewish Book Award in the United States, the Prix Memoire de la Shoah in France and the Jewish Quarterly Literary Prize in Britain. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum sent the first-time author and Swiss musician on a six-city fund-raising tour last fall. The book was translated into more than a dozen languages, an achievement considered the biggest global success for a Swiss book since "Heidi."

[...]

"Fragments" was first published in Germany in 1995, but it was not until this summer that questions were raised publicly about Wilkomirski's bleak memories of childhood, dating from 1939 to 1948. Wilkomirski's literary version is that he was a Latvian Jew whose earliest memories are of the beating death of his father in the winter in Riga, followed by fragmented images of imprisonment at the age of 3 or 4 in Majdanek in Poland and a second concentration camp that he never identifies. These scenes, described in a child's unflinching voice, were recovered through therapy, Wilkomirski says, and he has participated in seminars in Europe describing the techniques.

But the counterimage of Wilkomirski's life is far more mundane. The one that has emerged from legal records and Swiss news reports is that he is Swiss, was born in February 1941 in Biel to an unmarried Protestant woman, Yvonne Grosjean, and was later adopted by an upper-middle-class Zurich couple, all of whom are now dead.

[...]

Other publishers also trusted Wilkomirski's sincerity and were impressed by his prose, which was so plain and powerful that *The New York Times* included the memoir on its list of notable books for 1997.

"We are not private investigative agencies, nor finally [sic] can every publisher vet every manuscript and every author on an adversarial basis. It's unthinkable. It would be a travesty of the relationship with the author," said Carol Janeway, Wilkomirski's U.S. editor and translator, who called the memoir "remarkable testimony."

Another Swiss author [...] Daniel Ganzfried [...] himself the son of a Holocaust survivor, started gathering information that he called troubling and inconsistent. For example, he said, he listened to Wilkomirski's taped remarks in a seminar on his form of "interdisciplinary therapy," in which he denied that he was adopted. In a long interview with Wilkomirski, he said the author told him he was circumcised, which the author's ex-wife and his girlfriend later denied to Ganzfried.

Ganzfried said he asked the author whether he had a prison tattoo. He said Wilkomirski told him that he lacked one because he had been part of a medical experiment.

**"In one film, he claimed to have lived in Switzerland only from 1948, and he describes all these scenes after the war," said Ganzfried. "Then I found in the local school files of Zurich that he attended first grade in April 1947. I found a picture of him in the summer of 1946 in the garden of his adoptive parents from a photo book of his relatives."**

Eventually, he started searching local government offices and found Wilkomirski's adoption records. The 1941 birth date conflicts with the prominent subtitle of the book, which appeared in most foreign versions: "Fragments: A Childhood 1939-1948."

Letters from officials in Biel and Zurich verified the information. And Wilkomirski's former lawyer, Rolf Sandberg, confirmed that he had obtained records with similar information after a request from the German publisher for more verification before publication of the book.

"I told them I didn't doubt what his memory had to say," Sandberg said, "but I had to leave it to them what to make of this whole story. I could only say I have these documents and they prove that he is the son of Ms. Grosjean, but you can say: 'I don't trust it. I know better.' And that is what he says."

[...]

**In the afterword of his book, he briefly addressed the record of his 1941 birth by saying: "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."**

[...]

**Shortly before the annual Frankfurt Book Fair in Germany, which brings together publishers from all over the world, Wilkomirski sent a statement in German to all his publishers describing the current climate of debate as a "poisonous" atmosphere of "totalitarian judgment and criticism."**

**Wilkomirski acknowledged that the Swiss legal documents were not fake but suggested that a third party "who is no longer alive" had manipulated and replaced the papers. He also criticized Holocaust historians who had attacked his work, complaining that they were not expert in research about**

**children who survived that period.**

[...]

Dwork expressed sympathy for Wilkomirski, saying that she had met him when both received an award from the Jewish Book Council. He appeared, she said, to be a deeply scarred man, adding that **she does not blame him for the controversy because she thinks he believes in his identity. It is the publishers that she takes to task, saying they exploited him.**

Rabbi Marvin Hier, the dean and founder of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, said he considered it highly improbable that such a young child could have survived two concentration camps without an adult protector among the guards. "I think what you see is that when you wear the mantle of the survivor, there's a certain amount of trust, and no one has the concern that a survivor would make something up."

[...]

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