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First-Person Narrative and the Memory of the Holocaust

by Jeremy D. Popkin

Former prisoners of the "little camp" in Buchenwald stare out from the wooden bunks in which they slept three to a "bed." Elie Wiesel is pictured in the second row of bunks, seventh from the left, next to the vertical beam (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum).

First-Person Narrative and the Memory of the Holocaust

Jeremy D. Popkin

Jeremy D. Popkin, who is a professor of history at the University of Kentucky, was a Delta Delta Delta Fellow at the National Humanities Center in 2000–01. This article is an outgrowth of his interest in the relationship between history and autobiography, which was the subject of the lecture "Holocaust Memory, Historians' Memoirs," which he delivered at the Center in February 2001.

How should we read first-person narratives from the Holocaust era? The question looms large in our contemporary culture. As the generation who survived the Holocaust moves into old age, and dwindles, the respect accorded to their recollections of that experience continues to grow. Elie Wiesel, the archetypal survivor-witness, was recently quoted as saying, "I want eventually to establish a principle that every manuscript [survivor's memoir] should be published." Reading Wiesel's memoir, *Night,* or Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* has become a rite of passage in many American high schools and colleges, a culturally authorized way to expose young people to the horrors of history and teach them the importance of tolerance. In our current cultural moment, with its mistrust of overarching "grand narratives," many readers have been willing to attribute a power of conviction to first-person accounts that they are reluctant to grant to the work of either historians or authors of fiction. Conversely, the emotional power of Holocaust survivors' accounts has served to validate the importance of autobiographical writing in general. If such works are seen as having a unique power to take us into the heart of the twenti-

eth century's most horrible catastrophe, then it is not surprising that we should also turn to first-person narratives to understand other aspects of human experience.

The awe in which Holocaust memoirs are currently held is a recent development. Efforts were made to gather survivor testimonies immediately after the war, and some, such as Olga Lengyel's account of Auschwitz, *Five Chimneys,* appeared in English at an early date, but these accounts did not attract a wide audience. The claim now made in some of the scholarly literature on the subject that Holocaust survivors were actively discouraged from talking or writing about their experiences may be exaggerated, but it is certainly true that no one accorded their writings any special status. The idea that the bleak and unheroic recollections of Levi or Wiesel should be part of American school curricula would certainly never have occurred to anyone at the time they were first published, in the late nineteen-fifties. Both told stories of innocent victims thrown into a world devoid of sense or meaning: "There is no why here," an Auschwitz guard tells Levi. Wiesel struggles to maintain his faith in God and his faith in himself and is severely shaken when he recognizes that he has been reduced to the point of feeling relief at the death of his father, whose inability to adapt to camp life drained his son's emotional and physical resources. A positive message in any ordinary sense is hard to extract from either account. It is therefore a sign of a considerable cultural transformation that these memoirs are now often approached as though they were truly sacred texts.

The fact that so much weight is now put on these texts is not the doing of professional historians of the Holocaust, who are one of the few groups to have expressed some reservations about the special status now accorded to these memoirs. Raul Hilberg, the dean of Holocaust scholars, has made little use of memoir literature in his work. He has pointed out that, by definition, all survivors of the Holocaust were exceptional cases and that readers who rely on their testimony get a biased picture of the event. Hilberg has acknowledged that his approach requires reconstructing the story of the Holocaust primarily from the documents left behind, intentionally or unintentionally, by the perpetrators, rather than the victims. Implicit in his critique is the notion that memoirs cannot really tell us the essence of the Holocaust story, because the victims never had a chance to comprehend it themselves. Jews knew they were being killed, but they had no understanding of the motives behind the Holocaust, or of its scope. "The perpetrator had the overview. He alone was the key. It was through his eyes that I had to view the happening, from its genesis to its culmination," Hilberg has written in his own memoir, *The Politics of History.*

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Hilberg's wariness of memoir sources is not unique among historians. Annette Wievorka, a leading French scholar of the Holocaust, has devoted an entire book, *L'Ère du témoin* ("The Era of the Witness") to criticizing what she sees as the overreliance on first-person accounts in the field of Holocaust studies. The danger she sees is that emotional firsthand accounts can obscure the importance of the historian's effort to "establish the

facts and try to give them a meaning" through analysis. Too often, she remarks, Holocaust memoirists are confused about the factual details of their experience. As other historians have remarked, survivors may remember personally seeing Joseph Mengele or Adolf Eichmann at times and places where they could not have been. The attraction of the reliance on memoir, Wievorka writes, is that it seems to "give history back to its real authors, those to whom it belongs: the actors and 'witnesses.'" But, she writes, there is a "tension between the witness and the historian, a tension, perhaps a rivalry, and, indeed, even a struggle for 'power.'" The vision of the Holocaust communicated in memoirs

> addresses itself to the heart, not to the mind.... This vision makes the historian uneasy. Not that he is indifferent to the suffering, that he has not himself also been overwhelmed by tales of suffering, and fascinated by some of them. But because he realizes that this juxtaposition of stories is not a historical account, and that, in a sense, it cancels out the historical account. How can one put together a coherent historical account if it has to be constantly opposed to another truth, that of individual memory? How can one incite people to reflect, to think, to be rigorous when feelings and emotions invade the public arena?

The unsettling case of the man who calls himself "Binjamin Wilkomirski" could have been designed deliberately to underline Wievorka's concerns about Holocaust memoirs. In 1995, Wilkomirski, a resident of Switzerland, published a text purporting to be his childhood memories of his experience in the Nazi death camps. The book, published in English under the title *Fragments,* received glowing reviews and several important awards. Doubts about the authenticity of *Fragments* soon began to surface, however, and the Swiss journalist Stefan Maechler's painstaking investigation, published in 2001 as *The Wilkomirski Affair: A Study in Biographical Truth,* appears to show that Wilkomirski was in fact born in Switzerland, of non-Jewish parents, and could not have suffered the horrors recounted in his book.

The Wilkomirski case, as Maechler has reconstructed it, does not appear to be a simple case of fraud, although there is still a possibility that legal action may be brought against the author of *Fragments.* Maechler's investigation suggests instead that the man who now calls himself "Binjamin Wilkomirski" was the illegitimate child of a Swiss mother and that he was raised in a succession of foster homes, in one of which he may have suffered severe psychological abuse. Eventually, he was adopted by parents who brought him up but did nothing to help him make sense of the confused and painful memories he retained from his early childhood. As an adult, "Wilkomirski" became fascinated with the subject of the Holocaust and began to wonder whether his own memories might refer to experiences in the Nazi camps. Maechler provides a convincing reconstruction of the process by which "Wilkomirski" gradually constructed an increasingly elaborate narrative of his supposed childhood. In 1972, for example, he attended a concert by the well-known violinist Wanda Wilkomirska: a friend remarked on his similarity in appearance to her. Together with the fact that "Wilkomirski" was himself a musician, and the coincidence that he had once purchased a portrait that turned out to show the pre-Holocaust rabbi of Wilkomir, the incident may have persuaded him that he had discovered his original family name.

Listeners and readers primed to extend special sympathy to Holocaust survivors played an important part in converting Wilkomirski's story into an "autobiography." As he pursued his project of discovering his own hidden past, Wilkomirski gravitated

toward friends who found his suspicions about his Holocaust past convincing, encouraged him to tell the story he was putting together, and in some cases actively helped him flesh it out. These "enablers" included a devoted girlfriend and an Israeli psychologist who became convinced that writing down his increasingly elaborate memories would be therapeutic. Once written, Wilkomirski's graphic stories readily found publishers, first in local Swiss journals, and then in book form. Although a few readers found it hard to believe that a child could have survived under the circumstances Wilkomirski recalled, or that a child exposed to such treatment could articulate such memories, even those who were skeptical hesitated to voice their doubts, fearful that they might be dismissing the sufferings of a genuine survivor. Most readers found Wilkomirski's account convincing, and some argued that it was his duty to publish and speak out on behalf of other child survivors, who often had difficulty convincing people of the truth of their garbled memories.

Once *Fragments* was published, the literary publicity machine and the network of enterprises devoted to memorializing the Holocaust worked together to consolidate the book's status further. The American edition includes jacket blurbs from celebrities including Maurice Sendak, Bill Moyers, Judy Blume, and the Holocaust historian Daniel Goldhagen. The book received the National Jewish Book Award in the United States and similar honors elsewhere. Other Holocaust survivors thanked the author for confirming their own memories of their wartime experience. At a public ceremony in Los Angeles, Wilkomirski had an emotional public reunion with a woman who claimed to remember him from the camps, an event filmed by the BBC. Therapists committed to the belief that adults who were traumatized as children may be haunted by repressed memories that can be recovered hailed Wilkomirski, who used his own experience to propose a general strategy for treating such cases. Public reception thus served to validate *Fragments* as an authentic memoir, and indeed to elevate it to the canon of first-person texts about the Holocaust that have come to be accepted as definitive statements on the topic, alongside the works of Wiesel and Levi.

Yechiel Dinur (Ka-Tzetnik) testifies in the Jerusalem trial of Adolf Eichmann, 1961 (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum).

Three years after the book's initial publication, the status of *Fragments* suddenly came under public question. A Swiss journalist, Daniel Ganzfried, wrote an article asserting that Wilkomirski was in fact Bruno Grosjean, born in Switzerland in 1941, that his new name was "a pseudonym, and its bearer never confined to a concentration camp." Ganzfried's attack provoked longer articles in the *New Yorker, Granta,* and finally Maechler's book. Maechler's investigation, commissioned by the literary agency that had originally placed the manuscript, was undertaken with Wilkomirski's cooperation, and he was promised the right to review and comment on the manuscript; his indignant rejection of Maechler's findings is included in the latter's book. Despite Wilkomirski's vehement

protests, the weight of the evidence now seems overwhelming. Maechler has not only shown how the Swiss foster child Bruno Grosjean (later known, after his adoption, as Bruno Dösseker) came to transform himself into "Wilkomirski," but has also exposed numerous factual discrepancies in *Fragments.* Many of the apparent confirmations of Wilkomirski's story turn out to be untrustworthy themselves. In particular, the woman who embraced Wilkomirski in front of the BBC's cameras has been identified as a non-Jew born in the United States who had previously peddled stories about her childhood sufferings at the hands of a satanic cult.

[Some] commentators have concluded that, if *Fragments* successfully communicates the horror of the Holocaust experience, it may be "authentic" even if the details it relates happened, not to its author, but to other victims.

Reactions to the revelation that Wilkomirski's memoir is, in all probability, essentially a work of fiction have been mixed. Most of Wilkomirski's publishers around the world have now withdrawn *Fragments* from the market, although the American publisher, Schocken, includes the text as an appendix to its translation of Maechler's volume, "in order to allow the reader to weigh Dr. Maechler's exploration of all the elements that make up Mr. Wilkomirski's book against the memoir itself." Even Wilkomirski's strongest critics have been at pains to point out that the discrediting of *Fragments* in no way weakens the evidence that the Holocaust took place. "Solid research on the Shoah fills whole libraries and there is more than enough proof of all the essential events," Maechler writes. Indeed, one motivation for exposing the fictional character of *Fragments* is precisely to distinguish it from the accounts by witnesses who were unquestionably in the camps, and to make it clear that there are critical methods by which fabricated memoirs can be separated from authentic testimony.

There are nevertheless readers of *Fragments* who are still prepared to grant the book a certain truth status, even if its author was never in the Nazi death camps. In a recent article, Michael Bernard-Donals, a professor of literature at the University of Wisconsin, has expanded an argument, familiar in the analysis of survivor memoirs, to the effect that the horror of such experiences is in essence incommunicable, to reach the conclusion that Wilkomirski's narrative can still teach us something about the Holocaust, namely, "the possibility that the gap between the historical record of the irretrievable event and the narrative memory built to name it can never be closed." Other commentators have concluded that, if *Fragments* successfully communicates the horror of the Holocaust experience, it may be "authentic" even if the details it relates happened, not to its author, but to other victims. The fact that authentic child survivors of the Holocaust embraced Wilkomirski as their spokesman could be interpreted in this sense. Roger Chemain, a French literary scholar, has noted the sharp difference between the literature about the Nazi camps, where the distinction between memoir and fiction has been regarded as essential, and the literature on the camps of the Soviet gulag, where avowedly fictionalized accounts such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch* have been widely accepted as authentic testimony and "the recourse to novelistic fiction—underlined by stories told in the third per-

son—has not been regarded as scandalous." (To be sure, the credibility of Solzhenitsyn's story owed something to the fact that he had been a camp prisoner himself.)

The Wilkomirski case has evoked many comparisons to the controversy over the Guatemalan human rights activist Rigoberta Menchù's memoir, some of whose details have also been called into question. Justifications of the veracity of Menchù's book have highlighted the notion that it should be regarded not as the account of a particular individual's experience, but as what is known in Latin America as a *testimonio,* a form of witness to collective experience. Such literature occurs in other cultural contexts as well; recent research on the well-known narrative by Olaudah Equiano, one of the earliest and most compelling first-person accounts of eighteenth-century slavery, has strongly suggested that the author, whose Christian name was Gustavus Vassa, was not born in Africa and that the parts of his book relating his childhood and sale into slavery are taken from other printed sources. In the introduction to her recent collection of child Holocaust survivors' memoirs, editor Anita Brostoff argues that the value of these accounts is not their literal accuracy, but the fact that "the essence of the experience, its meaning, is absolutely true." There are clear distinctions between these cases and the situation of Wilkomirski: no one has denied that Menchù does in fact come from the Guatemalan Indian milieu described in her book or that Gustavus Vassa was a real person and a one-time slave (many details of his story can be authenticated from historical documents) and that the contributors to Brostoff's volume are genuine survivors. Nevertheless, all of these cases make clear that the power of autobiographical testimony is not based solely on its documentable accuracy and that readers' reactions play a very large part in determining what is taken to be autobiographical truth.

Stefan Maechler has strongly emphasized this latter point in his dissection of the *Fragments* affair. The book's success came above all from the way in which it met readers' expectations; indeed, it did not so much tell readers about the Holocaust as confirm what they already thought they knew. The fact that Wilkomirski offered readers a text that seemed to be not a carefully constructed narrative but a transcription of isolated memories supposedly fixed in his head since childhood contributed to the book's persuasive power: this is the way many people remember fragments of their own childhood, and it corresponded to what therapists of the recovered-memory persuasion claimed to find in their patients. "As the most innocent of victims and one who knew how to tell an emotional and shocking story, Wilkomirski was the figure the public had been all but waiting for," Maechler writes. In addition, for all the horrors it recounted, his story—in contrast, for example, to that of Anne Frank—had a happy ending, in the sense that its author had survived and indeed overcome his experience sufficiently to write a book about it.

At the opposite extreme from the case of Wilkomirski, one might put the Holocaust writings of the Israeli author Yechiel Dinur, who publishes under the name "Ka-Tzetnik," a Holocaust-era term for concentration camp inmates. Whereas it now seems evident that the author of *Fragments* was never an inmate in a death camp, Ka-Tzetnik was unquestionably a survivor; he was even called as a witness at the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. Ka-Tzetnik has published extensively on the Holocaust experience, beginning with the Hebrew-language novel *Salamandra,* in 1946 (translated into English as *Sunrise over Hell*). His depictions of ghetto and camp life are characterized by their immediacy and their intense emotional impact: few authors succeed so effectively in making readers feel as though they were actually present in Auschwitz, and seized with the same fear and desperation as the prisoners. In one searing

episode in his later volume, *Kaddish,* he describes the agony of prisoners forced to lie side by side in their wooden bunk during an endless "block curfew." They are forbidden to use the latrine, and the penalty for soiling the bunk is death. Finally, one desperate prisoner is unable to restrain himself any longer. The other prisoners see that the guards have spotted the man who has lost control of himself and prepare to take advantage of the situation: "After him, they too will be able to let loose a drop. They'll blame it on the first.... Nine are out to save their lives at the cost of the tenth."

Overcome with emotion, Dinur faints during his testimony against Eichmann (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum).

In light of what we know about Auschwitz, such an episode is certainly easily imaginable, more so than some of the stories in *Fragments,* but are we to read it as autobiographical? Did the author witness it? Did he hear about it from a prisoner who was present? One does not like to think that any Auschwitz survivor would invent such a morally troubling account, and of course Ka-Tzetnik is not the only survivor to report that some prisoners took advantage of others in an effort to keep themselves alive. Ka-Tzetnik's insistence on publishing his accounts of Auschwitz under a pseudonym, however, has kept readers from being able to categorize his writings as autobiographical. When someone asked him to explain why his first book manuscript had no author's name attached to it, "I shouted back at him: 'The name of the author?! Those who went to the crematorium wrote this book! Go on, you write their name: K. Tzetnik.'... This nameless name has since appeared on all my books."

For Ka-Tzetnik, the refusal to put a proper name on his writings is not an effort to leave their truth status uncertain but rather a claim that the experience of Auschwitz itself deprived him of the right to write in an autobiographical mode. Calling himself Ka-Tzetnik communicates two fundamental facts about his camp experience: that Auschwitz deprived him of the personal identity that would justify a claim to authorship and that the purpose of his writings is not to speak of his own experiences, but to record those of the other victims who did not survive to speak for themselves. As he puts it in one essay, "K. Tzetnik was born in Auschwitz in 1943.... When a Red Army officer asked him: 'What's your name?' K. Tzetnik answered: 'My name was burned with all the rest in crematoriums at Auschwitz.'" Ka-Tzetnik not only refuses to acknowledge a proper name, but he insists that his story is really not his own. Recalling the long lines of prisoners on their

way to the gas chambers, he writes, "For two long years they trod through me, their eyes penetrating mine." Their reality became his, and it was what happened to them, not what happened to himself, that motivated his writing, always set down in the third person. For four decades after the Holocaust, he refused to allow photographs of himself to appear on the jackets of his books, and refused even to attend the ceremonies for the awarding of an Israeli book prize named in his honor.

The only exception to Ka-Tzetnik's rigorous refusal of the first person has come in one of his later works, *Shivitti,* originally published in 1987. *Shivitti* describes the author's decision in the nineteen-seventies to submit himself to a Dutch therapist's program of treatment with LSD, meant to allow patients to deal with persistent, painful memories. In Ka-Tzetnik's case, the LSD treatments induced lurid visions based on his experiences in Auschwitz. As he tried to transcribe these visions, the author "filled dozens of folio pages with tiny letters without even realizing the newness of what I'm doing: I am writing in the first person! Until now, all of my books have used the third person, even though I've had to go through contortions doing so. All I've ever written is in essence a personal journal, a testimonial on paper of I, I, I: I who witnessed ... I who experienced ... I who lived through ... I, I, I, till half through a piece, I suddenly had to transform I to he. I felt the split, the ordeal, the alienation of it, and worst of all—may God forgive me—I felt like the Writer of Literature."

In this extraordinary passage, Ka-Tzetnik acknowledges that his previous writings had in fact been the record of personal experience, and that the claim to be an anonymous Everyman (or Everysurvivor) was in fact a fiction. He would have liked to be free of his compulsion to write in the third person, to be able to speak directly, and to avoid the sense that he was transforming his story into a work of art. The spell of autobiography clearly exercises its fascination even on a writer who had fashioned such an effective alternative to it. Ka-Tzetnik is liberated to make this acknowledgment, however, only because of his plunge into a realm of unreality: the trip through his LSD-induced visions, in which the smoke from the chimneys of Auschwitz takes on the shape of a mushroom cloud, which Ka-Tzetnik recognizes as "Ashmadai the new King of Kings, lord of the universe." Paradoxically, only when he is able to openly share with readers his hallucinations about Auschwitz, including one in which his own face appears in an S.S. cap, does Ka-Tzetnik also feel able to connect himself to the experiences he actually went through there. It is, so to speak, only after exposing himself as someone capable of taking leave of reality altogether that he is also able to present himself as a truthful witness. Whereas Wilkomirski has clung to the claim of his narrative's truthfulness in the face of increasing evidence of its fictionality, Ka-Tzetnik has been willing to acknowledge his writings as autobiography only after voluntarily crossing the boundary into the unreal.

The cases of Wilkomirski and Ka-Tzetnik demonstrate some of the complexities lurking in the concept of the Holocaust memoir. If Stefan Maechler's reconstruction of the Wilkomirski case is accurate, we see that the cultural prestige now attached to Holocaust memories can induce even those who were not there to imagine that they were; we also see that it is possible for someone who did not undergo the experience to produce a text sufficiently convincing to be taken for authentic even by scholars of the subject. The Wilkomirski case demonstrates the effectiveness of Holocaust memoirs in shaping contemporary consciousness: Wilkomirski absorbed the message communicated by other authors' accounts so well that he was able to put himself in their place. But clearly the intent in reading verified accounts such as Wiesel's and Levi's is not to have read-

ers come to believe that they, too, were Holocaust victims. Wilkomirski's extraordinary gesture of writing himself into the Holocaust obliterates the boundary between self and other that constitutes one of the definitions of autobiography, namely, that we recognize the experience recorded by an autobiographer as that of someone other than ourselves and that we put aside our own preoccupations for the duration of the reading process in order to enter into those of the author.

The case of Ka-Tzetnik, like that of Wilkomirski, can be read in several ways. Although there was never any question that the author had been in Auschwitz, Ka-Tzetnik rejected the notion that first-person writing could convey that experience. His choice of a pseudonym and the deliberate ambiguity he created about the status of his writings about the camps were ways of communicating the annihilation of personality and individuality experienced by the victims, and of forcing readers to enter into the alien world of "Planet Auschwitz," as Ka-Tzetnik labeled it. Paradoxically, this author was able to write a first-person memoir only when he took as his subject the admittedly unreal world of his LSD visions, visions that he nevertheless insisted expressed some truth about Auschwitz that his hyperrealistic narratives could not. For Ka-Tzetnik, autobiographical truth could be articulated only by letting go of any claim to reality, and historical truth could be communicated only under the guise of fiction. This claim should not be read negatively, however: it should be seen as a tribute to the power of the human imagination, which finds ways to convey even truths that seem beyond the limits of representability.

In very different ways, "Wilkomirski" and Ka-Tzetnik thus raise questions about the consequences of making Holocaust memoirs the touchstone of literary and historical authenticity. The Wilkomirski case warns us that memoirs, no matter how persuasive, are not self-validating. Should we satisfy ourselves with the fact that the free process of criticism and the methods of history have brought the dubious status of *Fragments* to light? There was certainly no inevitability about this outcome, and it has to be admitted that the normal screening process of scrutiny by literary agents, publishers, book reviewers, and prize committees did not function well in this case, in large part because of the special meaning our culture has come to assign to Holocaust memoirs. Without the somewhat obsessive concern of Daniel Ganzfried, doubts about Wilkomirski might never have been publicized, and without Stefan Maechler's elaborate research, a plausible explanation of the case might never have been produced. But the very nature of Holocaust memoirs makes one uneasy about the thought of subjecting them all to the kind of cross-examination that has now been applied to *Fragments.* Both authors and readers have turned to this literature in search of texts that must be true. What happened to the victims of the Holocaust was so terrible that we feel a duty to listen to their message. In his recent full-length autobiography, *Memoirs: All Rivers Run to the Sea,* Wiesel has expressed his indignation at critics who questioned the literal truth of certain episodes in *Night:* "The witness has nothing but his memory. If that is impugned, what does he have left?"

The Wilkomirski case makes it clear that even Holocaust memoirs cannot claim this kind of transparent self-evidency. If we as readers are to take them as truth, we must read them in the light of another truth, namely, the truth that human memory is fallible. In the passage of his autobiography in which he complains about the criticisms of *Night,* Wiesel admits that the critics drove him to compare his memory of the incidents in question with those of other Auschwitz survivors, who confirmed his recollections. He thus recognizes that there is a legitimate function for critical procedures that are, in effect, the procedures of historical research. The historians, such as Hilberg and Wievorka, who have

objected to the privileging of Holocaust memoir over Holocaust history, have also helped provide a framework of verification that gives the authentic memoirs of Holocaust survivors more power, rather than less.

What, then, should we make of the writings of Ka-Tzetnik in this context? It is clear that writing under a pseudonym has allowed him to say some things about human behavior in Auschwitz that ring true but that would be difficult to say in a memoir, where they would come out either as morally discrediting self-accusation or as morally questionable accusation of others who, in most cases, are unable to defend themselves. (In its unpleasant portraits of her fellow prisoners, *Playing for Time,* Fania Fenelon's well-known account of her experience in the Auschwitz women's orchestra, provides many instances of the latter phenomenon.) We cannot simply conclude, however, that Ka-Tzetnik's writings are fiction, and that fiction is therefore truer to human experience than memoir. Ka-Tzetnik's authority to write what he does is rooted in the autobiographical fact that he was a prisoner in Auschwitz. It is this fact that makes us willing to tolerate the deliberate ambiguity he has cultivated about the source of the details in his narratives, and it is this fact that makes us read his writings differently from the way we read fiction about the Holocaust written by authors who never experienced it, such as William Styron's *Sophie's Choice.* Ka-Tzetnik's example suggests, however, that even some of those who were at Auschwitz have seen that the traditional first-person memoir is an insufficient medium for the transmission of the truth about an experience as horrible as Auschwitz.

As a touchstone for the meaningfulness of first-person literature, then, Holocaust memoirs prove to be deeply ambiguous. They demonstrate that, even in this extreme case, there is no such thing as a completely self-validating witness, and that even the authentic witness may only be able to speak by breaking the boundaries of memoir as it is normally conceived. In his recent *Sun Turned to Darkness: Memory and Recovery in the Holocaust Memoir,* critic David Patterson has insisted that the reader of such works "must become not an interpreter of texts but a mender of the world, a part of the recovery that this memory demands." Such sacralization of these texts demands more of them than any words on paper can provide. In the quest for truth, we must be willing to interpret these texts, ask questions about them, and, in some cases, admit that they may not be reliable. We must also recognize, however, that they are part of a larger human effort to transmit the truth of the human past, an effort in which first-person literature joins hands with both fiction and history.

Further Reading

Anita Brostoff, ed., with Sheila Chamovitz, *Flares of Memory: Stories of Childhood during the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). This collection of writing by child survivors offers an instructive contrast to Wilkomirski's *Fragments,* but raises its own questions about the reliability of memory.

Ka-Tzetnik 135633, *Sunrise over Hell* (London: Allen, 1977 [original Hebrew edition, 1946]), and *Kaddish* (New York: Algemeigner Associates, 1998). Both are searing, if sometimes melodramatic, depictions of the Holocaust experience by a camp survivor.

Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991). Langer's sensitive reading of survivor testimonies argues that memory brings no sense of closure for survivors.

Stefan Maechler, *The Wilkomirski Affair: A Study in Biographical Truth* (New York: Schocken, 1996). A detailed examination of the controversy surrounding Wilkomirski and *Fragments,* with some of the appeal of a detective story.

David Patterson, *Sun Turned to Darkness: Memory and Recovery in the Holocaust Memoir* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1998). Patterson develops Elie Wiesel's argument for the sacred status of memoir literature in a scholarly but readable fashion.