



INTERESTING TIMES: THE NEW GENERATION OF HOLOCAUST “SURVIVORS”

BY DEBORAH MARKUS

When I worked at a small bookstore, and then later visiting a friend whose son was autistic, I learned of the theory (admittedly not widely held) that autistics inhabit their own strange difficult world not for neurological or genetic reasons, or even in reaction to poor upbringing, but because they are still stunned and staggering from the effects of a previous lifetime spent and ended in a Nazi concentration camp. I don't remember who wrote the book on the subject, but my friend, who had moved past any hope for a normal life and was now only struggling to find a classroom that could cope with her child, wasn't Jewish or related to survivors in any way. She told me of the tremendous relief she'd felt on hearing this theory from her doctor. "Things make sense now," she said. "I understand a little better. I used to think he was just really into numbers — you know, all the counting and everything? His

teacher says that autistics like order and patterns and things like that. But I don't think that's all of it. Like, I don't think he's just saying 'nine.' I think it's 'nein.' He's protesting what happened to him. And all the bad dreams he has, and his weird little rituals — it all makes sense now."

One night at a restaurant I couldn't ordinarily afford, a friend of mine and I were lingering at our expensive table talking about our childhoods, especially my own tediously less-than-optimal experiences. She, the cherished only daughter in a close, conventional middle-class family, found these morbidly fascinating, and I was young enough at the time to be flattered by any interest and obligingly dredged up anecdotes for her. At last she sighed and shook her head. She was in the process of converting to Judaism, and had already chosen her Hebrew name: Esther, after Etty Hillesum, a young woman killed in

Auschwitz when she was just about my friend's age. My friend had given me her own copy of *An Interrupted Life*, Hillesum's diaries found and published after the war. She had told me often how much Hillesum's life and work had moved her, how close she felt to this woman she had never met who somehow seemed to speak directly to her. "You survived your own holocaust," my friend said now.

I recall feeling intensely uncomfortable after both of these conversations. What was I supposed to say in the first? To the mother of a disabled child: Your son is himself and no one else, autistic like millions of other kids because that's the way the chips fell for you, and maybe you'd both be better off accepting that and trying to get him whatever help is out there instead of imagining some mystical link with a murder most foul?

It was a little easier to tell my other

friend that being belted around a bit in the midst of whitebread suburbia didn't exactly add up to a concentration camp. She was puzzled and hurt by my vehemence. Later, when my anger had subsided, I realized that in a misguided way she'd only been trying to pay me a compliment.

Why this urge to make some personal identification with the Holocaust, when the holocaust has come to mean not only the event itself, but the worst of all possible events? It's a word still too new and charged to be used swiftly or passingly. It demands pause. The holocaust is that most lethal and dreaded collecting place of grief. Why in the name of sanity would those who have a choice in the matter choose to enmesh themselves and their lives with it?

I don't mean those who cheapen the word and all it means with casual usage. Political extremists who employ the h-word as an analogy for their pet cause belong in another category and deserve to be smothered by silence and scorn until they begin behaving like rational moral beings. But what about those who have moved past metaphor? Doesn't my friend have enough troubles just raising an autistic son, without also having to consider him a death camp fatality? Does my other friend's spiritual journey have to carry with it the shadow of death in order to be somehow more authentic?

First heard about Benjamin Wilkomirski when I read Philip Gourevitch's *New Yorker* article, "Stealing the Holocaust," a few years ago. My initial reaction was chagrin that I'd somehow missed Wilkomirski's 1996 book, *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*. By no means a scholar in the field, I nevertheless have an interest in holocaust literature. It upset me that I'd never even heard of a work that had garnered glowing reviews and literary awards. Then, as Wilkomirski's story unfolded in Gourevitch's spare and unsparing prose, I became fiercely glad that *Fragments* had managed to escape my notice. This way, I'd never know for sure if I'd have been convinced by the narrative.

Although of course I would have. When one is handed the memoir of a holocaust childhood, doubt doesn't occur except to those, thankfully few in number, who doubt the occurrence of the holocaust in the first place. That is the first paradox of the event: the more unbelievable the stories we hear,

the more we are compelled to believe. The survivors themselves can afford to say, as Primo Levi did in *Survival in Auschwitz*, "Today, at this very moment as I sit writing at a table, I myself am not convinced that these things really happened." We are convinced. We're terrified not to be. Because once upon a time people didn't believe, even the very people threatened by the horrors; and that insistent innocence, that refusal to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, led to our expulsion from the garden. And so here we are, generations later, never again able to claim that anything, however monstrous, didn't happen because surely it couldn't have.

We listen to the stories. Ironic that this long after the event there have never been so many to hear. Books on the subject, scholarly and personal, proliferate on the shelf. We listen, frozen but somehow not numbed. I have heard survivors tell bitterly of those who remain unmoved and even irritated by tales from the depths — "at first the details horrify though finally they're a bore," as the poet and scholar Dan Pagis put it — but I've never met anyone capable of such willful heart-hardening. Sometimes I wonder how much of that perception of indifference isn't colored by grim expectation. The great nightmare that dominated the camp, again according to Levi, was the dream of going home and seeing one's loved ones, telling them of all that had happened, only to have them ignore the story, turn away, begin to speak of something else. And so I can see how an expressionless gaze on the face of the listener might seem to be a confirmation of worst fears.

I think it more likely to be what Inga Clendinnen in *Reading the Holocaust* described as the Gorgon effect: "the sickening of imagination and curiosity and the draining of the will which afflicts so many of us when we try to look squarely at the persons and processes implicated in the Holocaust." Listening to the survivors, we are stunned at how their stories, all alike and all so very different, can continue to pierce and to shock.

Which is another holocaust paradox. Surely these tales, after so much time has passed and so much knowledge accreted, should lose their power to pain. We want that to be the case, for our own sakes, and yet it never is. Once, discussing Dante's *Inferno*, I asked my teacher if the tormented souls contained therein wouldn't have a rest now and then — not because a merciful God would intervene, but simply

because a system shouldn't be able to sustain such a constant level of agony. Surely the anguish must dull after constant repetition. "Just another day in Hell?" she suggested, smiling. Which answered the question pretty damned well, since obviously there can be no such thing.

And so I can't say that, if I had read Wilkomirski's story, any alarms would have gone off for me. I am not schooled in doubt in this field, and that's no bad thing. As everyone knows who lives in a system of law granting innocence until guilt is proven, there is always a risk of the guilty going free. Monstrous as that is, the alternative of imprisoning the innocent is too much worse to be risked. And so I had rather never doubt at all than doubt once and have it be once too often.

Which is why the occasional provable untruth in the field is greeted with howls of rage. It's a betrayal of two groups of innocents: those who trust and those who suffered.

There have been such betrayals. Not the occasional slips and stumbles of anyone writing of the past, let alone such a past as this. Dates can be mistaken. Conversations must be considered reconstructions at best. But the event itself is never in question, nor are the intentions of the survivor in telling the tale. Charlotte Delbo prefaced her memoir *None of Us Will Return* with a confirmation of this necessary doubt and certainty: "Today, I am not sure that what I wrote is true. I am certain it is truthful." And so are we.

But there are a few works that were neither true nor truthful. Blake Eskin mentions some in *A Life in Pieces: The Making and Unmaking of Benjamin Wilkomirski*. Martin Gray's *For Those I Loved*, a tale of bravery, escape, and vengeance, is a good case in point. The very title is startling, given the subject matter. Consider: Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* was originally titled *Is This a Man?* As well as *None of Us Will Return*, Delbo also wrote *Useless Knowledge* and *The Measure of Our Days*. Ana Novak, who was a teenager in the camps and remembered very little of her time there until she read her own diaries, published them as *The Beautiful Days of My Youth*. Elie Wiesel's fictionalized memoir of Auschwitz is titled simply *Night*. Sara Nomberg-Przytyk: *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*. Jean Amery: *At The Mind's Limits*, originally *Beyond Guilt and Atonement*. Frantisek R. Kraus' brief *But Lidice is in Europe!* Tadeusz

Borowski's truthful collection of fiction *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*.

Look at these titles. They are simple, plaintive, sometimes biting, often self-denigratory or ironic, even mocking. There is not the least romanticization of the events that led to these books being written and published. The stories are what they are, not what we would wish them to be.

Now look again at Gray's work. *For Those I Loved*. Such a strong title. Moving. Courageous. Undoubtedly prefacing a story of hope, of strength, of beating the odds. Such an exciting, action-packed story, in fact, that it was made into a feature film. Which, if one were able to have any kind of security system for lack of credibility in this sort of tale (and as I've said, most of us refuse to be equipped with any such thing), would set every alarm shrieking.

There was in fact a great deal of courage to be found in the camps, gestures of kindness and heroism magnified into greatness by their very context. But survivors rarely speak of having engaged themselves in heroic behavior. More often, one encounters in their memoirs statements such as this brilliant summation from Ella Lingens-Reiner's *Prisoners of Fear*: "How was I able to survive in Auschwitz? My principle is: I come first, second, and third. Then nothing, then again I; and then all the others."

Quite aside from such circumstantial evidence against him, Gray's "experiences" aren't consistent with the recollections of survivors of Treblinka, from which Gray claimed to have escaped, anymore than his title is consistent with the works of survivors whose tales may not be as satisfyingly noble and eloquent.

Gray insisted that his story is true long after his book went out of print. Helen Darville, who published *The Hand That Signed the Paper* under the name Helen Demidenko, did eventually confess that her novel, supposedly based on her family's own experiences, was entirely fabricated. It's also malicious, quite literally blaming the victims for their own hellish fate. One wonders why exactly the Australian Anglo-Saxon Darville had it in for Ukrainian Jews. One quickly decides she's not worth wasting one's time thinking about after granting her the quick and thorough dose of contempt she deserves.

Neither malice nor self-aggrandizement seem quite enough to explain the phenomenon of Monique Defonseca, whose *Misha*:

A Memoir of the Holocaust Years makes the above-mentioned works seem positively credible in comparison. At the age of seven, Misha, a Belgian Jew, runs away from her Christian foster family in search of her deported parents. She has a compass in her hand and a map of Europe in her head, which help her across Germany and into Poland.

So far, I actually couldn't protest. Novelist Aharon Appelfeld's mother was killed when he was eight; his father was sent to a labor camp. Appelfeld himself escaped from a camp and hid in the woods for three years, until Russian troops found him at the age of eleven. Years later he was reunited with his father, in Israel. Any survivor has a miracle story to tell, if only because surviving the holocaust was a miracle. If Defonseca's story thus far strains credulity, so does Appelfeld's. And his happens to be true.

But Defonseca's doesn't. I lose her when she takes another pair of foster parents in a Polish forest — specifically a pair of wolves. After their death and a truly dazzling list of escapes and witnessed horrors, Mishe is taken in by an entire pack of Ukrainian wolves.

This isn't the end of her story, except as far as I'm concerned. As a genuine child-survivor told Blake Eskin in the midst of his research, "It sent my BS meter through the roof." This is from a *survivor*, one so young when she was sent to Bergen-Belsen in 1944 that she didn't even know her own name. If she's not buying it, the rest of us can feel no guilt leaving it in the mud.

These are three books out of hundreds in the field. Darville's is a patent fabrication; Gray's book probably sprang from the same impulse that drove him to make a handsome living after the war selling manufactured "antiques."

And Defonseca? "What in the world," as Eskin wonders in *A Life in Pieces* about Wilkomirski, "could make a person represent himself as a Holocaust survivor when he wasn't one?"

Full circle, back to the original problem. Genuine survivors would give almost anything to have back the ordinary lives that were torn away from them. Chronic depression and feelings of guilt are drearily, if predictably, common. Survivor guilt, as it's called; and also a vaguer, more ominous sentiment that Primo Levi discusses in some length in his essay "Shame" in *The Drowned and the Saved*:

It was the same shame which we knew so well, which submerged us after the selections, and every time we had to witness or undergo an outrage: the shame that the Germans never knew, the shame which a just man experiences when confronted by a crime committed by another, and he feels remorse because of its existence, because of its having been irrevocably introduced into the world of existing things, and because his will has proven nonexistent or feeble and was incapable of putting up a good defense.

Who would choose to live in this state of mind? No one, sanely; no one who hasn't romanticized the lot of the survivor, who hasn't given in to the tempting idea that the suffering of the survivors has "sanctified" them (another idea Levi discusses long enough to ferociously oppose it).

And yet we have those women, my friends, attaching themselves voluntarily for their own reasons to this event; and we have, more dramatically, the Mishes and the Benjamin Wilkomirskis.

Wilkomirski's story is a strange and murky one. The long and the short of it, as Eskin's book makes clear, is that Wilkomirski is not Wilkomirski; he is Bruno Doessekker, not a survivor, not a Jew (though he claims to be both). There are those who believe that he is a deliberate con artist; there are those who believe that he is the real thing, in spite of a great deal of evidence to the contrary.

I believe there is room in the middle. Doessekker seems to me deluded, if willfully so. For whatever reason, he swallowed his own story, hook, line, and sinker.

I think his own belief in his survivor status is why his book has been considered so compelling that even those who would shelve it with fiction nevertheless believe it to be a necessary and important work. And those who believe in it now believe against all evidence because Doessekker's writing did an important thing: it validated the experiences of child survivors. It insisted that they existed, that they ought to have a voice; that they were more than a "peripheral concern," as Deborah Dwork referred to their treatment by scholars of the event. A child survivor Eskin spoke to mentions this slighting behavior, the more upsetting because it often came from fellow survivors. "To this day," she told him, "survivors will say, 'You were only a

kid'...People have said, 'You're not a survivor.' We have this hierarchy of pain: 'I suffered more than you did because you were in hiding,' 'I suffered more than you did because you were in hiding with your parents.'"

Another paradox: that it took a fraud to give a voice to those whose own stories, though never questioned on a basic level, had nevertheless been disregarded. Under certain circumstances, being ignored is worse than being doubted. If the truth can be hatched from a lie, perhaps we should be peculiarly grateful for Doessekker's rooster egg of a book.

But why did he write it? Why embrace this identity? One statement he makes, not in his book but in a lecture, may be a clue. He refers almost in passing to "the infinitely many books I read about the Shoah." We can never know why he picked those books up in the first place, but I wonder if, having immersed himself, he never quite came to the surface again.

It is difficult to explain just how compelling holocaust literature can be. I began reading, by no means infinitely many books, but certainly what high-quality works I could get my hands on, as research for a fictional work I wanted to write. I found myself — addicted isn't the term, but certainly under a strange compulsion to continue my reading. The "research" became almost an excuse. Neither sadistic nor masochistic, I felt drawn into "*l'univers concentrationnaire*," as one writer phrased it — trapped like an insect in amber. Once I put my books down, I would pick them up again only with the greatest reluctance; but having commenced reading again, I was utterly submerged. I didn't believe for a moment that I understood or ever could understand what it was like to truly be there. And yet I felt an irresistible urge to try. Sometimes I thought I would be a better person having at least made the attempt; now and then I would be possessed by the irrational idea that if I could feel, just for a moment, what it was really like, I would somehow be draining a measure of pain from the past.

This was not a healthy state. I was glad when the birth of my son interrupted all such studies. I still read in the field now, but I'm glad of the necessary limits placed on my time and concentration. Whatever that dark spell was, I don't want it cast on me again.

Though works have been written by and about children of survivors (Alan L.

Berger's *Children of Job: American Second-Generation Witnesses to the Holocaust* and Melvin Jules Bukiet's *Nothing Makes You Free: Writings by Descendants of Jewish Holocaust Survivors*), I've seen nothing on the experience of simply being a member of the first generation to grow up with the holocaust as an unquestioned fact, and the last generation that can know the holocaust on anything like a personal level. My son will, by the time he is old enough to hear or understand anything on the subject, probably have no opportunity to speak or listen to survivors. When he comes of age, the holocaust will already have taken its first irrevocable steps into the realms of history.

Just now, for a little longer, it is part of living memory. For whatever reason, there are those among us reluctant to lose it.

And perhaps there are some who, feeling the event to be still too close for comfort, wish, as Inga Clendinnen puts it, to "tame the tiger" — to make the holocaust somehow bearable, somehow even all right. And so we have the book I thumbed incredulously as a clerk, explaining to anyone who would listen that those we lost are not lost after all but born again among us. We have my friend shrinking the camps down to any unhappy childhood. We have, as an official at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum told Eskin, those who engage in "twinning" — mentioning at a bar or bat mitzvah the name of a child who died in the holocaust before their own bar or bat mitzvah. We have Mishe and "Wilkomirski" giving us just the sort of charged, romantic writing that one would wish to believe the event would generate. Who wouldn't rather hear the story of a girl nurtured by quasi-magical animals when people have turned into monsters, or believe that a boy would indeed be sanctified and ennobled by his sufferings and, against almost impossible odds, live to grow up and tell the tale, then listen to what the real survivors have to say?

The truth can be eerily beautiful. No one who reads the works of Primo Levi or Jean Amery in all their stark simplicity can deny that they've partaken of some of the most brilliant prose this century has produced. The writing of Charlotte Delbo is so fine that under other circumstances one would call it transcendent. But it tells us exactly what we don't want to hear — that the holocaust is past redemption, past romance, past hope. "So This Is What You Believed," one of her truthful tales says flatly.

So you believed that only solemn words rise to the lips of the dying because solemn rhetoric flourishes naturally on deathbeds a bed is always dressed for funeral rites with the family assembled around it sincere pain and the appropriate demeanor.

Having neatly assembled a picture of the universe as we would like it to be, Delbo promptly tears it to shreds, falling from poetry to blunt prose:

Naked on the charnel house's pallets, almost all our comrades said, "I'm going to kick the bucket."

...They did not realize that they were making the task of the survivors more difficult when they would have to report their last words to their relatives. Relatives expect something solemn. It is impossible to disappoint them. Trivial remarks are unworthy of inclusion in the florilegium of ultimate pronouncements.

But it was even more unworthy to exhibit one's weakness.

So they said, "I'm going to kick the bucket," in order not to rob the others of their courage and since they didn't expect that even one would survive they never left any kind of message.

We would like to be spared this.

We can be, if we like. No one is forced to hear the accounts of what occurred. A friend of mine once told me of a high school classmate whose parents kept her, without repercussions, out of school while the holocaust was being discussed. To know or not to know is entirely our choice.

But if we do choose to hear, let us listen to the real story. If we try to tame this tiger, we risk being devoured. Better to ride it, as Clendinnen praised Dan Pagis for doing in "Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car":

here in this carload
i am eve
with abel my son
if you see my other son
cain son of man
tell him that i

