Childhood's End
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A Latvian Jew who spent his early years in death camps reflects on how the experience stayed with him.

FRAGMENTS
Memories of a Wartime Childhood.
By Binjamin Wilkomirski.
Translated by Carol Brown Janeway.
155 pp. New York:
Schocken Books. $20.

By Julie Salamon

MY 2-year-old son wakes up in the middle of the night in terror. What is it? I ask him. He replies feverishly, but I don't understand most of what he's saying. What is it? I ask myself, wishing I could see the world through his eyes for a moment, so I could explain his fears away. All I can do is hold him close until he falls asleep again. He usually does. I feel an irrational sense of power. I have overwhelmed the demons of his night.

But what if willful savagery, not night terror, produced those demons, and my son had no mother to hold evil at bay simply by wrapping her arms around him? What would he tell me if he lived in a place where mothers were too weak to lift their arms, where his cries would be met by slaps and kicks, where his very being would be regarded not as a blessing but as a curse?

Binjamin Wilkomirski found himself in such a place when he was a boy. Born to a Jewish family in Latvia, he spent his early childhood in death camps; he was discovered at Auschwitz, when he was about 5. He grew up, got married and became a father, but his night terror lived on. Well into middle age, as a musician living in Switzerland, he found a way to tell about it, not with "the ordering logic of grown-ups" but "exactly the way my child's memory has held on to it; with no benefit of perspective or vanishing point."

His extraordinary memoir, "Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood," recalls the Holocaust with the powerful immediacy of innocence, injecting well-documented events with fresh terror and poignancy. Constructed like flashes of memory, the book unfolds in bursts of association, the way children tell stories. Only here the evil giants are real, the endings rarely happy.

In addition to its value as Holocaust literature, this slender, lyrical book provides a fascinating psychological study of identity. It's amazing enough for adults to endure severe mental and physical cruelty and emerge with their sense of self intact. The author, born in 1941 (he thinks), was not much more than a toddler when he saw his father killed, was separated from his family and was sent to live in camps where filth and sadism ruled. He emerged from the war with only the vaguest sense of the most basic things: language, mother, the smell of bread, kindness.

His book is about more than the Holocaust; it is about the struggle for memory, especially difficult for a child who would find almost every postwar sensation linked to something horrible in his past. When Binjamin is taken after the war to a Swiss orphanage where the sheets are clean and food is plentiful, he is struck by a wonderful smell. He doesn't know what it is. And then he remembers. "It all came back in pictures which took me back to the day when I learned what the smell of bread was." Thus he unlocks a darkly Proustian memory: his last meeting with his mother, when they were both incarcerated in a concentration camp, in separate barracks. She had arranged for a guard, whom Binjamin refers to as "the gray uniform," to bring her son to her. She didn't speak; she was too weak. But before the guard whisked Binjamin off, his mother groped around the straw she was lying in and handed something to her son. On the way back to his barracks, the boy explored this unknown substance. "It had jagged edges and corners, and felt coarse and hard.

" 'What is this?' I asked the gray uniform as we reached my barracks.

" 'That's bread,' she said, and 'You have to soften it in water, then you can eat it.' Then she went away."

Slowly he chewed the bread, which he dutifully softened in his small ration of water, until both bread and water were gone. "Finally all that remained was the indescribably delicious smell of bread on my fingers as I held them to my nose again and again."

When he is grown and watches his wife give birth to their first child, he feels sick, remembering sitting in a barracks filled with dead women, watching a rat crawl out of a corpse's belly, wondering if dead women gave birth to rats. Not long after the war, when a woman comes to the orphanage planning to adopt him, the director asks a seemingly simple question about how she plans to take the boy home. "And what have you thought about transport?" he says. But as with so many things, the word "transport" has an entirely different meaning for Binjamin. For him, the word means only one thing — yet another train ride to a destination more hideous than the one he left behind. He goes wild, screaming and hitting and biting.

Yet, astonishingly, his behavior didn't invoke sympathy. On the contrary, the grown-ups hit him and scolded him for "appalling behavior."

SO, while this book is about the struggle for memory, it is also about the denial of it. After the war Binjamin is ordered by his foster parents and teachers in Switzerland to forget about the past, as if that could be possible. We don't know why, what their intentions were, because Binjamin didn't. He didn't even realize the war was over, that he was really safe, until he was a senior in high school and learned about the Holocaust. Throughout his childhood he remained ever on guard for reprisals from adults, with their untrustworthy track record. He told no one about hearing adults crush the skulls of babies, or about being afraid to empty his bowels at night in a common latrine because boys who accidentally made a mess would disappear the next day. He didn't tell about the kind grown-ups, either, the women inmates who hid him and other children in the piles of clothing they were sorting — or about what happened to the children who were discovered (they were tossed through a window and crushed with sticks and other weapons).

Occasionally, he slips up. When he is shown a picture of William Tell, a Swiss hero, at school, he is horrified. The teacher asks him to describe the picture and he says: "I see — I see an SS man . . . and he's shooting at children." As he tries to explain, the teacher finally cuts him off and tells him to "stop talking drivel."

With this book, Binjamin Wilkomirski has found his voice. He has said all the things he wasn't able to articulate before with courage and cinematic urgency. He says, "I'm not a poet," but in Carol Brown Janeway's translation he writes with a poet's vision, a child's state of grace.

Julie Salamon's most recent books are "The Net of Dreams" and "The Christmas Tree."

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