

Fragments: Memories of a Childhood, 1939-1948. by Benjamin Wilkomirski, trans. by Carol Brown Janeway. Schocken, \$21 (160p) ISBN 0-8052-4139-6

At once horrifying in its details and beautiful in its simple, elegant prose, this Holocaust survivor's narrative is a small masterpiece. Wilkomirski's memoir is the result of his efforts to recover, with the help of a psychiatrist, hitherto repressed memories of a childhood spent in concentration camps. The book begins with his earliest memories of family life in Poland, when he was a toddler. As the title suggests, the recollections he has managed to salvage truly are fragments, ranging from the vague (how many brothers did Benjamin have?) to the gruesomely specific (the brutal murder of Wilkomirski's father in his tiny son's presence). The very young boy (he is three, perhaps four years old) is led away by a woman who promises to take him to a place with the lilting name of Majdanek. It was, of course, a concentration camp. There, with the aid of benevolent strangers, he learns how to endure, albeit at the cost of a shattered soul. At a Polish orphanage after the war, Wilkomirski, his family gone, is again led away by a woman--one who promises him a better life in beautiful Switzerland. Meanwhile, young Benjamin still partially yearns for the familiar world of the camps, the only world he knows. Wilkomirski's narrative style blends the child's viewpoint with the mature understanding of the adult, unsentimentally recreating situations with arresting poignancy. Thrust into the cozy, comfortable Swiss way of life, the author is haunted by fears of betrayal. Has he betrayed his mother by calling another woman "mother"? Has he betrayed those who perished by living among the enemy, those "who live in whole houses and who don't wear striped shirts"? Considering the high literary quality of this book, its admirers will no doubt lock horns with critics of the "recovered memory syndrome." Wilkomirski's voice is brave and lyrical, and his memoir is a piercing window onto the past.

"Fragments: Memories of a Childhood, 1939-1948." *Kirkus* 1996: N. pag. *Titlewaye*. Follett. Web. 9 Oct. 2009.