geschehen. Der Verlag hielt so lange am Wahrheitsgehalt von Dössekkers Wilkomirski fest, bis die laufende Auflage verkauft war. Dann zog er das Hard-Cover 1999 zurück und vertrieb nur noch das Taschenbuch. Siegfried Unseld bleibt bis heute die Antwort schuldig, weshalb er trotz der ihm vorliegenden Informationen und ohne jede seriöse Abklärung überhaupt je Wilkomirksi als echt, sprich autobiographisch verkauft hat. Er sieht nach wie vor nichts Ehrenrühriges dabei, stützt sich weiter auf den toten Ignaz Bubis, der ihn bis zuletzt darin unterstützt habe, an Wilkomirski festzuhalten.

Unterdessen wurde Wilkomirski von privater Seite wegen Betruges angezeigt. Die Leute, die ihm geholfen haben, gehen wieder ihren Geschäften nach. Und wir fragen uns: Was nun?

Denn eine Lehre steht jetzt schon fest: Es kann nicht gänzlich egal sein, von welcher Beschaffenheit die Erinnerung in zehn, fünfzehn Jahren und danach sein wird, wenn uns keine Zeugen mehr zur Verfügung stehen. Wo Auschwitz erlogen wird, kann es auch gelogen werden. Und wenn über Auschwitz erzählt werden soll, ist literarische Qualität gefordert. Dabei wären wir alle auf eine Literaturkritik angewiesen, die ihr Handwerk wieder ernst nimmt, das heisst, den Mut zum Urteil in der Sache findet und sich vor dem Thema Auschwitz nicht duckt. Wenigstens hier nicht. ←

**Dagmar Barnouw**

# The Certainties of Evil: Memory Discourses of the Holocaust

**Dagmar Barnouw** teaches intellectual history at the University of Southern California. Most recent publications: *Critical Realism* (1994); *Elias Canetti* (1996), on the modernity of Canetti's social thought; and *Ansichten zu Deutschland 1945* (1997), on the documentation of crisis situations. Work in progress: *Understanding Strangers*, a critique of post-colonial simplifications of encounter narratives since the eighteenth century.

**In his new book, *The Holocaust in American Life*, the historian Peter Novick reminds us that the most potent, collective memories are those that claim to express »some permanent, enduring truth« which can become central to the definition of a group's identity in the present. The circular dynamics of this process are familiar, at least in principle: »we embrace a memory because it speaks to our condition; to the extent that we embrace it, we establish a framework for interpreting that condition.«[1] Depending on the nature of the memory, a critical historical exploration of this circularity can produce a book that challenges powerfully entrenched conventions.**

Arguing from a wealth of evidence, Novick has located the growth of an ever more focused and exclusive Jewish Holocaust consciousness in a sequence of responses to certain political events and cultural trends beginning in the early sixties: The Eichmann trial that first presented to the larger world a Jewish identity shaped by a singularly fateful history of persecution and suffering; the Yom Kippur War that re-awakened anxieties about Israel's security which resonated strongly with American Jews; the growing power of Jewish economic and political influence and dwindling of any measurable anti-Semitism that, together with the increasing popularity of intermarriage, created anxiety about maintaining Jewish distinctness. Larger Western cultural trends of basing group identity on memory discourses of previous (and somehow enduring) →

victimization both contributed to and were influenced by Jewish Holocaust consciousness.

Before the Eichmann trial presented the destruction of European Jewry as the core event of the 20th century on the stage of world-wide attention, American Jews had interpreted their suffering in more universal terms as that of one group among others mourning their losses in WWII. The hugely successful representation of Jewish persecution during the fifties, the play and the movie based on the diary of Anne Frank, shared in and contributed to this universalism. Later the Hacketts' much praised adaptations of the diary for the stage would be attacked as »de-Judaizing,« »stealing our Holocaust« – to the point where Cynthia Ozick could argue in *The New Yorker* in 1997 that given the damage done by the universalizing of Anne's story, it might have been better if her diary had been »burned, vanished, lost«(117).

The useful provocation of Novick's study is its firm focus on the historical documentation of »the Holocaust« as construct of memory discourses and politics. The book's sharply divided reception reflects individual critics' reactions to the fact that this (as some see it) »obsessively« historical account of the remembrance of Jewish persecution reflects back on the historical status of the remembered events of persecution. And that is the crux of the matter. One of Novick's most prejudiced readers, the New York academic and intellectual Tony Judt, writes that he has »apparently trawled every archive and every publication of every American Jewish organization for the past half-century, and he has read what must be tens of thousands of pages of periodicals, pamphlets, and speeches by every American Jewish intellectual and spokesperson you can name, and many you could not name. If the result is frustrating and ultimately inadequate to its theme, no one can fault the author for effort. The problems lie elsewhere.[2] But what, in Judt's view, is the »theme«? He asserts that »there has to be a better way to sort out the dilemma posed by the Holocaust, to criticize the troublingly instrumental uses to which the catastrophe is put without abandoning to engage with it on its own terrible and fundamental terms.« Judt refers to himself as »a Jew and a historian«, yet he sees the remembered events of persecution as supra-historical and unique – a view that leaves no room for further discussion and allows him to dismiss the book's arguments in absolute terms. Novick's historical analysis of the practice and politics of Holocaust remembrance is then nothing but an (if profound) »irritation.«

Instructively, Judt complains that Novick »has spent a lot of time thinking about the uses and the abuses to which the Holocaust has been put in modern America; but he has devoted curiously little effort to thinking about the Holocaust itself. He might retort that the Holocaust itself is not his subject. Yet the result of his approach is a disturbingly superficial treatment, in which the Holocaust itself is largely incidental to the narrative.« It is true, »the Holocaust itself« is indeed not Novick's »subject,« Holocaust memory discourses are. However, the historical events that we now refer to as »the Holocaust« are by no means »largely incidental« to his narrative, because they are the substance of the development of American (Western) Holocaust piety that is Novick's »subject.« »The Holocaust itself« is another matter. Judt does not see it as the complex, still partly obscure historical phenomenon reflected over time in collective memory, but as a clear and enduring moral message badly needed in contemporary culture: »Because the Holocaust, for many people today, can speak to us mainly as a deracinated account of absolute evil, it has a special value in a world adrift on a sea of ethical and ideological uncertainty.« Speaking for others, Judt likes the current »ubiquity of Holocaust awareness« and wants it »encouraged.« »Is it good for the Jews?« he asks in conclusion. He is not entirely sure; but he is »absolutely« sure that it is »good for America.« Are, then, American Jews not American where it concerns the Holocaust? In Judt's scenario, they seem to be a separate group and, as guardians of Holocaust memory, eo ipso more righteous than the rest of America.

Novick, too, asks whether the current preoccupation with memory discourses of the Holocaust is good for the Jews, and his answer is unequivocally negative. It is an old question that reflects the insecurities of minorities – most singlemindedly, perhaps, in the case of Jews as a group because of their composite historical experience of dispersion, persecution and assimilation. It also ought to be a moot question in an immigration country: a recent immigrant to the U.S., Arendt noted with relief that here one could be a Jew and an American; not for her the currently fashionable mutually exclusive hyphenated identities. When Adam Bresnick praised Novick for having »produced an altogether admirable Jewish book«[3] – a (to me) somewhat

puzzling conclusion to an intelligent review – he may have had in mind the importance to Jews of Novick's argument for a non-exclusive, universalist Jewish attitude in these matters.

The moral certainties to be derived from »the Holocaust« are for Novick interesting, also troubling cultural symptoms to be studied with »curiosity and skepticism.« (The first sentence of the book). From this perspective, he has also looked at the historical events of Jewish persecution by the Nazi regime in ways which defy the scenario of »the Holocaust itself«: there are the various policies, shifting over time (and perceived differently at different times), of a criminal, increasingly totalitarian regime towards its perceived enemies, and those groups' various experiences at different times and in different places, as Novick documents in the first chapter »We Knew in a General Way.« There are also problems with the usefulness of survivors' memories as a historical source: »some may be [useful], but we don't know which ones,« Novick writes, quoting the director of the Yad Vashem archive about the unreliability of most of the 20,000 testimonies collected: »Many were never in the places where they claim to have witnessed atrocities, while others relied on secondhand information given them by friends or passing strangers« (275). And there is the historian's aversion to wringing »lessons« from the past since it is always qualitatively different from the present – most obviously where the chaotic end stage of a total war of unheard-of dimensions is concerned. But what Novick rejects as »the absurd maxim In extremis veritas«(181), has been at the core of the poetics and politics of Holocaust remembrance as we know it.

Accusations that Novick holds a »Jewish conspiracy«(institutions, associations, the media, lobbying groups) responsible for the politics of remembrance, or »disrespects« Holocaust survivors, are repeated in many reviews, including Judt's and can be easily refuted by referring to what he has actually written.[4] His denying the uniqueness of Jewish persecution, however, is another matter since it is based on his commitment to the historicity of human experience, no matter how extreme.[5] »Historization« of Jewish persecution has been routinely rejected by many professional historians of the Holocaust because it does indeed mean »relativization«: removed from the protection of supra-historical uniqueness, the events we now refer to as »the Holocaust« can be seen in the context of historical time, that is, in their relation to other events.[6] The persecution of Jews by National Socialism is then a historical phenomenon of great but not of singular importance. Insistence on the relative, temporal rather than absolute, enduring nature of these events makes them at least partially accessible to the rational arguments and historical documentation that historians like Saul Friedlander think both futile and undesirable. They want to extract lasting »lessons« from the memory of the Holocaust; but, as one perceptive reviewer sums it up, »Novick's harsh but unavoidable conclusion is that the Holocaust doesn't teach lessons at all.«[7]

Like every historical event, Novick points out, the Holocaust in some ways resembles events to which it might be compared and differs from them in some ways. These resemblances and differences are a perfectly proper subject for discussion. But to single out those aspects of the Holocaust that were distinctive (there certainly were such), and to ignore those aspects that it shares with other atrocities, and on the basis of this jerrymandering to declare the Holocaust unique, is intellectual sleight of hand. The assertion that the Holocaust is unique – like the claim that it is singularly incomprehensible or unrepresentable – is, in practice, deeply offensive. What else can all of this possibly mean except »your catastrophe, unlike ours, is ordinary; unlike ours is comprehensible; unlike ours is representable«(9).

Judt retorts that dismissing the debate over uniqueness in that manner »amounts to a sophistic sleight-of-hand« and »gets us around analytical categories such as ›genocide,‹ and around normative categories such as ›evil.‹« But there are clearly many other historical events that can be »categorized« as genocide. More importantly, »evil« as definition of a state of being rather than description of instances of social and political conduct is an import from theology, therefore not a »normative« category in a secular culture. As a secular Jew – a fact mentioned approvingly or disapprovingly in many reviews – Novick is critical of the Holocaust as sanctified arch-model for memory discourses of victimization. He points out that it »has become standard practice to use the term ›sacred‹ to describe the Holocaust and everything connected with it … Survivors' accounts are routinely described as sacred, as are the survivors themselves.« Elie Wiesel, the most visible and influential proponent of this →

position, sees (however subtle) anti-Semitism in all attempts to »desanctify« or »demystify« the Holocaust and insists that »any survivor has more to say than all historians combined about what happened.« Novick juxtaposes this extraordinary claim with a remark made »with some irritation« by the education director of Yad Vashem:»the survivor has become a priest; because of his story, he is holy«(201) – not therefore automatically a reliable witness.[8]

Novick is clearly concerned about changes in social consciousness and conduct that accompany the growing power of a religious Holocaust consciousness to which concepts like »sacred« and »evil« are central. In the ever more rigorous hierarchy of suffering, the greatest achievement, he observes with dismay, »is to wring an acknowledgement of superior Jewish victimization from an another contender. Officials of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum tell, with great satisfaction, a story of black youngsters learning of the Holocaust and saying, »God, we thought we had it bad« (l0). This »lesson« underlines his point that little of use can be learned from the Holocaust as long as the guardians of its memory insist on the absolute uniqueness and therefore unquestioned superiority of Jewish suffering.[9] If, as one reviewer pointed out rightly, Novick shares with Hannah Arendt the insight that »dire events do not necessarily reveal the truth about humanity,«[10] he also shares with her a secular abstinence from the certainties of evil.

The connection between *The Holocaust in American Life* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* has been made by several reviewers. The dustjacket blurb by Jonathan D. Sarna (Brandeis) calls it the perhaps »most brilliant, iconoclastic and controversial Holocaust study since Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.« Maybe so; but there are also important differences. In contrast to Arendt, Novick has had a comparatively large number of thoughtful and positive reviews that accepted, even praised his secular debunking of theological claims where they are not appropriate and can do damage. The high emotionality of his opponents and the circularity of their arguments is indeed grating: the Holocaust is unique and sacred and so is its memory, therefore any argumentation that adheres to current protocols of professional historiography is by definition morally wrong, »offensive,« sinful, heretical. As in Arendt's case, much attention has been given to the »tone« of Novick's argument: »heartless,« »cold,« »ironical«(Arendt); »strident,« »cynical,« »too colloquial«(Novick); both »offend« with their withholding of reverence. But in Arendt's case, negative reviews were the overwhelming majority, and the attackers more openly out to kill; in an oddly and disturbingly real sense she was »excommunicated,« deprived of all communal support, left to fend for herself. Her cool, crisp reporting for *The New Yorker* on the show-trial that celebrated the young theocratic state of Israel seemed truly unforgiveable, and it has taken almost four decades to accept her back officially into the flock – if only as a useful cult figure. It is indeed richly ironical that Judt, making an impassioned, conceptually muddled case for the existential challenge of »evil,« defers to the authority of the now celebrated Jewish woman philosopher for her »unerring« intuition regarding the post-WWII intellectual preoccupation with evil. It does not bother him that (as he writes) she was »wrong about the timing; it took thirty years before the question of evil found its way into the intellectual agenda of the West« – after all, »evil« is trans-temporal. But was not Arendt's point the intellectual preoccupation with »evil« as a historical cultural phenomenon? As Judt himself mentions, she compared it to the post-WWI intellectual preoccupation with death. Like Novick, Arendt did not believe in the usefulness of a concept of existential »evil« but was curious about its cultural status and meanings.

The »tone« of the argument, of course, varies with the reader. For Bresnick, Novick's »tone is disciplined, and his research is meticulous, yet it is clear that the book wants to pick a fight with the guardians of Holocaust memory, as he argues that the current obsession with the Holocaust is bad for the Jews on both moral and pragmatic grounds.« Arendt, too, wanted to »pick a fight« with what she thought was a counter-productive fixation on Jewish suffering through the centuries as it was re-enacted in the show-trial of Eichmann. She had analyzed the problems of this fixation in a series of articles (1945-48) where she clearly foresaw the consequences of founding a Jewish state in Palestine based on the memory of the Holocaust. As she and Judah L. Magnes argued during those years, such a state would make it too easy for its citizens to disregard the rights of the people among whom they settled, and too difficult for itself to act as a nation among others.[11] Arendt was to continue this critique in the Eichmann book with its

emphasis on individual rather than collective guilt, and on Eichmann's guilt as aggression against human diversity in general rather than against the Jewish people in particular. She also pleaded here for a judicious attitude towards witnessing: the need to check monological memory stories, whether they relate to individuals or groups, with the multivocal discourse of history. Her concerns were in many ways similar to those in the earlier essays on Arab-Jewish relations in Palestine where she had traced the political dynamics of entrenched solidarity fed by memory stories of persecution and oppression. She was wary of defining Jewish identity by a collective victim status – in short, the polarizing, potentially damaging power of hierarchies of suffering.

Forty years ago, the divide in the battle over the Eichmann book was largely between Jews and non-Jews.[12] Just beginning to move away from their more universalist view of the catastrophe of WWII, many Jews rejected Arendt's attempts to define Eichmann's guilt, especially where she argued for recognizing the consequences of acculturation to extreme situations – a totalitarian regime; a total war – with the inevitable moral inversion. Moreover, her provocatively phrased thesis of a »banality of evil« did not help much. As she herself said, Eichmann was a common man but an uncommon murderer – not unique, but certainly distinct.

Over the last four decades, mainstream Western culture has become more dependent on absolute certainties as they are amply provided in the Manichean scenarios of »the Holocaust.« At the same time, the debates of these issues have become much less open. Judt's self-protective rejection of Novick's arguments is mainstream, preaching to the converted: large general educated audiences to whom Novick's historical approach is heretical. It is a heresy that can best be dealt with by not making it a public issue in the way Arendt's arguments in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* became public. The fact that Novick's book has not been debated on the American Public Broadcasting System is quite instructive, because that system with its increasing investment in talk shows has become, in the last ten years, the arbiter of mainstream culturally »correct« opinion, including Holocaust remembrance.

The virulence of the attacks on the Eichmann book were certainly painful for Arendt, but they also insured that her argument would not go away. It was then, as it is now, an importantly secular argument – as is Novick's. But where she was confronted with the still raw emotion of her group's experience of precariousness after mass destruction, Novick has had to confront a by now monumental Holocaust discourse which has successfully ritualized that precariousness and, at least for the time being, may very well resist all attempts at historization.[13] The power of the Holocaust discourse of collective memory, it seems, has become much more important than the remembered events – a situation that Arendt did not yet have to deal with.

This shift in emphasis would have motivated Novick to document the circular dynamics of collective memory. It was not the aim of his inquiry to explore the relation between collective (public) and individual (private) memory. Yet this relation may in certain ways be relevant to the question underlying his inquiry, why the qualitative difference of the past – the core assumption of modern historiography – seems to hold so little interest for most people today, intellectuals very much included. This lack of interest has arguably made possible the currently dominant conjunction between largely unchecked collective memory discourses and definitions of group identity – a conjunction that in turn has weakened whatever is left of historical curiosity and imagination. The fact that nothing separates more inexorably than time seems particularly potent now: in late modernity, we are ostensibly grounded in historicity, yet also ideologically future-bound in ways that have undermined the cultural status of history. It seems to be getting harder for the dead to talk back to us; if they do, it is on our terms. Increasingly, when we draw on them for justification of questionable claims in the present, we draw on their awesome inarticulate innocence. We like them best purged of the ambiguities, the muddle of historical agency. It seems that the more Western cultures have become »respectful« of difference, the more bigoted they have become towards temporal difference, namely the more reluctant to engage with the cognitive distances and differences created by the passage of time. One might say that temporal discrimination is the only remaining ideologically founded and protected discrimination in Western culture. The more restricted the historical imagination, the more strained, it seems, are the relations between private and public memory, because the ➔

controlling narratives of public memory thrive on disregard for historical differentiations.

The explosive growth of Holocaust memory stories in recent years is clearly linked to current Western ideological multiculturism that supports multiple, often mutually exclusive monological public memories and histories of identity on the basis of former persecution. Taking the discourse of the Holocaust for their model, they share the tendency to exclude what might disrupt their respective preestablished coherence. In general, constructs of public memory, no matter how various in substance, extend the sameness of their control over private memories of the past into the future. Public memory preserves, by pre-authorizing them, only those private memories that will affirm its resistance to transformation in time. Thus it can promise enduring remembrance and thereby the enduring identity of those who remember – enduring Jewish identity in the remembrance of Jewish persecution. Normally fluid and incoherent private memories, in contrast, undermine such identity in that they alert to the separations, the changes marked by the passage of time. The fundamental conflict, then, between public and private memory derives from the hindsight perspective of public memory that seeks to deny the temporal, processual nature of memory and identity.

Yet, like private memory, public memory draws on the extraordinary emotional and, in a broader sense, moral energy of the plea «remember me« to claim cultural significance for the politics of remembrance. Pleading to be allowed to remain, for a time, in another person's memory that reaches back into a shared past, is a poignantly tentative affirmation of the desire for a continued presence in the familiar life-world. Responsible for the centrality of memory to cultural and individual consciousness, this desire connects public and private memory. And it releases the emotional energy that public memory needs for its construction: the anxiety of changes in time that lead to feared or mourned absence. The plea »remember me« made by one person to another expresses the perhaps primary, most urgent human need: to be allowed to emerge again, in remembrance, out of the shadows of absence. Since human consciousness is predicated on the awareness of death, a final absence, much of human culture has been driven by craving prolonged, renewed presence. Thus pleas for remembrance have had a powerful hold over the imagination, individual and collective; and never more so, it seems, than at the end of a century marked by mass destruction of human life. This may explain the curiously pure appeal of remembrance no matter the impurity of its uses. Intent on showing and analysing these impurities, Novick does not seem interested, perhaps does not wish to discuss collective memory in these terms since they are indeed mostly speculative, suggestive.

In the current situation, Novick's detailed documentation and shrewd analysis of the (mis-)uses of Holocaust remembrance is more needed than attempts to explain in more general terms the seemingly irresistible appeal of memory stories of victimization, the more »incredible« the better. Still it might be useful to offer some suggestions concerning a particularly spectacular recent example, the reception of the memoir of a child Holocaust survivor, Binjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments*. The German-Swiss author's descriptions in this slight volume of his remembered sufferings met with reverential admiration, and extraordinary claims were made for their cultural significance.[14] The *New York Times* promptly put *Fragments* on the list of notable books for 1997. As their reviewer saw it in early 1997, this »extraordinary memoir« »recalls the Holocaust with the powerful immediacy of innocence, injecting well-documented events with fresh terror and poignancy.«[15] But by the fall of 1998, discrepancies between Wilkomirski's authorial and legal identity had been mounting: it appeared that he might be neither Jewish nor a camp survivor. These doubts were duly reported in the *New York Times*, as were questions relating to the changed moral and literary status of the famous text.[16]

Adoration of the man and his book changed quickly to embarrassed ambivalence or outright rejection. Some promoters drew back earlier than others. The award-winning author had served as a successful poster child for unspeakable victimization on an extended fund-raising tour for the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington. Exquisitly sensitive to issues concerning publicity, they immediately removed all copies of Fragments from their giftshop.[17] The German Suhrkamp Verlag, whose 1995 publication of *Fragments* as a »memoir« had convinced many foreign publishers of the text's documentary authenticity, still saw no reason to mistrust Wilkomirski's explanations concerning the troubling gaps and contradictions.[18] But exactly

a year later, Suhrkamp announced the withdrawal of all hardcover copies of the book and removal of the title from the back list of Juedischer Verlag. Made at the Frankfurt Book Fair, the announcement was reported in the *New York Times* the next day (October 14, 1999). The »fraud« was big news in the huge cultural business of Holocaust remembrance.

Wilkomirski's case has raised intriguing questions of identity based on authentic or inauthentic memory in a situation where authority is easily granted to claims of identity on the basis of memories of persecution. On the seemingly most simple level one could ask, what if the text had been presented as fiction rather than memoir? Would the reception have been different? Would there have been a more critical attitude regarding its literary quality? The, in hindsight, deliciously silly reviews prostrated in adoration of the »authentic« memoirs, that instant »classic of Holocaust literature,« were obviously not concerned about either literary quality or documentary factuality. They were solely motivated by the fact that Wilkomirski's alleged memoirs contributed to the ever proliferating mass of Holocaust memoirs, particularly of the new and rapidly growing group of child survivors. What he presented as his memories both fit the currently »hot« topic – a child survivor's memoir that extends the memory of persecution for another generation – and added a new combined dimension of violence and innocence: a savage child lost, without sense of place, time and language, in the unspeakable dystopia of the camps. The most potent motivation for the disturbed adult to regain his memories was the extreme nature of victimization, the child's purest form of self-loss in that utter abandonment. Wilkomirski has not claimed any authority other than that of the remembered small child's, and he benefited from the extraordinary authority of Holocaust literature only after the extraordinary reception of his book. This may help to explain his seeming lack of concern when accused of false identity and inauthentic memories; his simply repeating that they are his memories and thereby his identity. Since they are of violently total, indeed »incredible« victimization, he is indeed the purest victim.[19]

The reviewers' religiously fervent response to *Fragments* was to the drama of regaining identity in the memories of its total loss – the core of Holocaust remembrance. To rob him, by questioning them, of his memories, would make him even more lost, an even purer victim. In the current culture of remembrance built on the memory of Jewish persecution as the singular defining event in Western modernity, Wilkomirski's lostness is in certain ways undistinguishable from that of a legitimate author of a Holocaust memoir, a persecuted Jew. Could the controversy really have been avoided (as has been suggested), if the collection of memory fragments had been called »Fragments from a Therapy«? But would not the then ›unattached‹ fragments too have been seen as a profoundly significant and authentic contribution to Holocaust literature simply by virtue of association: their archetypically violent images; their peculiarly literal relating of memory and identity? And would not the Suhrkamp Verlag (and other publishers following its example) have responded to the »hot market« for Holocaust literature with marketing strategies that emphasized these associations?

The most obvious but also most difficult question is the (in hindsight)astonishing lack of critical judgment reflected in the uninhibited celebration of Wilkomirski's »memoir«. Modern standards of documentary evidence are indeed a matter of increasing concern in our late modern high-tech culture that craves the immediacy of »true stories« but prefers the permissiveness of »docu-fiction« over the stricter »truth« conventions of straight documentary, historical fiction over »dry« historiography.[20] Wilkomirski's muddled case seems not so much a threat to the integrity of authentic Holocaust memoirs as sharing in their problems, namely the fundamental instability of memories and the uses to which they can and have been be put. The general tendency over the last half century to embrace all survivor memoirs, no matter what they actually say or how they say it, has had important, if perhaps unforeseeable, consequences. Among other things it has upheld an exclusive and limited cultural memory of the in many ways still obscure, incompletely understood political and generational catastrophe of WWII. The extraordinary success of films like *Schindler's List* and *Life is Beautiful*, the stellar rise of *Fragments* and the reverberations of its fall from grace, ought to raise urgent questions about current perceptions of time, memory, and historical understanding.

For the last half century there has been a tacit cultural consensus in the West that because of its extreme nature memory stories concerning →

Jewish persecution cannot and therefore need not be corroborated. Like fictional discourse, the Holocaust as a construct of memory stories has become a discourse of suspended disbelief. But where fictional discourse is by definition non-assertive in relation to a world shared with others, the supra-historical Holocaust discourse claims extraordinary authority regarding the truthful interpretation of life-worlds past and present, especially where it concerns the memories of those who were not victims of that persecution. The end of WWII meant absolute (Allied) victory and absolute (German) defeat; absolute innocence, therefore enduring goodness of victims, and absolute guilt of enduringly evil victimizers; absolute purity of victory and victim status and absolute corruption of defeat and non-victim status. The power of the collective (public) memory of WWII as the clean, moral, »holy« war has drawn above all on the purity of the enemy's victims. In her letters to Karl Jaspers of the immediate postwar period, Hannah Arendt pointed out repeatedly that no matter what the victims of Nazi persecution had done before or would do afterwards, the nature and the scale of their victimization had made them nothing but victims, forever innocent. This was in her view a potentially serious problem for German and US postwar culture, because it erased all consideration of historical agency for Jews and other groups who could claim large scale victimization.

Here is the connection to the »politics of innocence,« more than half a century later, that would give much needed moral support to Nato intervention in Kosovo. The connections drawn between ethnic cleansing in Kosovo and Nazi persecution of Jews were historically mistaken since they disregarded important differences both in scale and method of persecution and in the ideology of exclusion.[21] But the connection between the two events can indeed draw on the situation of absolutely and enduringly innocent victims at the end of WWII. The violent ethnic exclusion in Kosovo was habitually referred to as »Holocaust,« partly in order to shield Nato bombing from critical questions regarding their nature and justification.[22] But these events were in general presented in the established terms of Jewish persecution, namely absolute victimization, pure victimhood of Albanians, and thus for Nato nothing less than the absolute purity of victory. All Serbs, even declared dissidents if they were against Nato bombing,[23] naturally all Serbian conscript soldiers – like conscript »Nazi« soldiers – were put in the role of evil perpetrators. All Albanians, regardless of previous or subsequent conduct, were and remained victimized »innocent people,« as the Clinton administration repeated ad infinitum. Their plight, so the argument went, brought out the best in the American people and their leader: the enforced passivity of the innocent victims called for the enlarged activity of the righteous, their irresistible rush to the rescue. The counterpart to »these innocent people« were the innocent clean Nato bombings under US leadership – an innocence that protected the leaders from considering the connection between the dynamics of warfare in general and of this deadly state-of-the-art air show in particular, and Milosevic's increasingly brutal strategies. Underlying the enormous appellative power of the victims' a priori, absolute innocence – »these innocent people who cannot help themselves« – were the references, very clear in Clinton's war rhetoric, to Nazi Judeocide: »We don't want to make the same mistake«; we made the mistake in WWII to »let it happen«; »we will not stand back again.«

Trying so hard to conceal them, the tightly coordinated political rhetoric devised to sell Nato (U.S.) intervention in Kosovo, actually pointed to questions that are currently taboo, »unspeakable,« but not therefore less important to our emphatically embraced but little understood postcolonial globalism. They concern the victims' historical agency, their partaking in and thus being co-responsible for historical developments, to varying degrees and in various ways. At issue is the automatic identification of victimization and innocence at all times, in all places, under all circumstances – the supra-historical certainties of Good and Evil. Arguing »in the material of history,« Arendt raised these questions in the anti-Semitism chapter of her Origins of Totalitarianism. They are not Novick's concern; but his soberly reasoned historical account of the uses to which remembrance of Jewish victimization has been put since then might help us to have a fresh look at them now. ←

1 Peter Novick, The Holocaust in American Life (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 171. In an exchange about the book in the journal Slate, July 21, 1999, Novick points out that his concern was not, as one participant had maintained, to argue against a reprehensible ›instrumentalization‹ of the Holocaust: Jewish collective memory, religious and secular, has been selective, focussing on what were perceived to be useful lessons at any given time. Consequently, to say that a collective memory is ›instrumental‹ is to say nothing that isn't implicit in its being a collective memory – the term is indeed not used in the book.

2 Tony Judt, »The Morbid Truth: In Defense of Holocaust Obsession,« *The New Republic* (July 19&26, 1999).

3 *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, September 5, 1999.

4 Judt states that Novick does not claim any »conscious or central ›plan‹ to instrumentalize the Holocaust as a device for Jewish mobilization and as a new form of Jewish identity,« only to conclude »But the whole book is written around the deliberations, the minutes, the decisions, and the actions of various Jewish organizations in such a way as to convey the sense that the whole thing was indeed their doing.« In his response (which *The New Republic* refused to print), Novick takes issue with such replacing of argument with insinuation.

5 It was to be expected from conservative journals like *Commentary*, but all three reviews of the book in the *New York Times* and a (stunningly hostile) review in the *Boston Globe* are critical of Novick's arguments in general, and of his position on that issue in particular.

6 See Saul Friedlander's reactions to Martin Broszat's »Plea for a Historization of National Socialism,« that is, a historical approach that would focus on the entire Nazi period as experienced by Germans at the time – a perspective that would register changes over time and allow for more differentiation than the exclusive focus on the »final solution« *(Merkur* May 1985). Upholding the supra-historical uniqueness of the Holocaust, Friedlander also insisted on the impossibility of historical representation: if at all, the Holocaust can then only be represented in mytho-poetic discourse. For an analysis of this exchange see Dagmar Barnouw, Germany 1945: Views of War and Violence (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997), 210-212.

7 Jon Wiener, »Holocaust Creationism,« *The Nation*, July 12, 1999.

8 The review in *Commentary* (September 1, 1999) by David G. Roskies is more honest in this respect than Judt's. It takes issue with Novick, »a resolutely secular Jew,« that he »demonstrates no feel whatsoever for the processes of covenantal memory whereby Jews have always apprehended historical events under such constituent rubrics as exile, martyrdom, redemption.« Many have, many haven't; but there seems to be at least recognition of different positions.

9 Where this question is raised, Novick has repeatedly quoted Primo Levi: »The greater part of the witnesses ... have ever more blurred and stylized memories, often, unbeknownst to them, influenced by information gained from later readings or the stories of others. ... A memory evoked too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to become fixed in a stereotype ... crystallized, perfected, adorned, installing itself in the place of the raw memory and growing at its expense« (275).

10 Novick sees a clear connection between an increasing Jewish preoccupation with drawing on Holocaust memory discourses for group identity and an »inward and rightward turn of American Jewry in recent decades,« citing Cynthia Ozick's notorious complaint in 1974 that »all the world wants the Jews dead« and its implications that Jews should focus exclusively on their own persecution and survival (10).

11 See Dagmar Barnouw, Visible Spaces: Hannah Arendt and the German-Jewish Experience (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), chapter 3, »The Silence of Exile: Arendt's Critique of Political Zionism.«

12 See F.A.Krummacher, ed., Die Kontroverse: Hannah Arendt, Eichmann und die Juden (Munich: Nymphenburger Verlag, 1964).

13 David Van Biema in his *Time Magazine Review*, »Spinning the Holocaust: Has the Century's Signature Horror Been Misused?« quotes James Young, a Holocaust expert, who told him that Novick is ìa very good historian, and he wants to close the gap between the knowledge of historians and the public. And to that I say ›Great. But good luck.‹«

14 There were immediately many endorsements and prizes, among them the US *National Jewish Book Award*, the French Prix *Mémoire de la Shoah*, the British *Jewish Quarterly Literary Prize*.

15 *New York Times*, January 12, 1997.

16 Doreen Carvajal, »A Holocaust Memoir in Doubt,« *New York Times*, November 3, 1998.

17 See Novick, Holocaust in American Life, 193-95; 216-220; 233-34.

18 Carvajal quotes from a statement Wilkomirski sent to all his publishers shortly before the annual Frankfurt Book Fair in October 1998 where he acknowledged that the Swiss documents calling his Jewish identity into question were not a fake but had been tempered with by a third party no longer alive. He also complained about the debates surrounding his book as exhibiting »poisonous« »totalitarian« judgment and criticism. ➔

19 See Philip Gourevitch, »The Memory Thief,« *The New Yorker*, June 14, 1999, 48-68. His argument is most cogent where it tries to grasp Wilkomirski's panicked, at times psychotic search for, holding on to »his« memories. For Gourevitch, distinctions between authenticity and inauthenticity seem to remain clouded in this case: though Wilkomirski has borrowed, even stolen others' memories and thereby their experiences, he became a »memory thief« in the stricter sense only after his book had made him famous and a useful ally for Holocaust remembrance promoters.

20 See here Elena Lappin's thorough investigation of Wilkomirski (*Granta* 66 1999) that places Fragments explicitly in the larger cultural context of a troubling »post-modern« tolerance for fudging the distinction between truth and lies, facts and fiction. But the issue for her is the construction of Wilkomirski's false Jewish identity in remembered suffering to which others may have contributed, wittingly or not; not the larger question of the cultural status of victims' memory stories in general.

21 Where the Kosovo conflict was (and continues to be) based on an ideology of the territorial, Nazi ideology was supra-territorial: the perceived enemies of that utopian construct, the Third Reich, notably Jews and Communists, were international and had to be pursued everywhere to be excluded and finally annihilated.

22 This was clearly Tony Blair's motivation for speaking of a »racial genocide« in Kosovo: Interview with Lehrer, PBS, Lehrer News Hour, April 23, 1999. See also Clinton's emphatic remarks on the similarity between the events in Kosovo and »the Holocaust« in his speech to American veterans (May 13, 1999) after the American Legion's strong recommendation for US withdrawal from Kosovo.

23 See the instructively ambivalent analysis in Michael Ignatieff, »Balkan Physics: Behind the Lines of Europe's Worst Conflict Since 1945«, *The New Yorker*, May 10, 1999, 68-80.

**Sebastian Hefti**

# »Und die Moral von der Geschicht?«

## Replik auf Dagmar Barnouws »The Certainties of Evil: Memory Discourse of the Holocaust«

**Sebastian Hefti**, 1956, seit 1995 Leiter des freien BürgerInnenforums »Hannah Arendt Tage« bzw. des Veranstalters »politikinitiativen Zürich«, seit Anfang 2000 Generalsekretär des Deutschschweizer PEN-Zentrums.

**Meine Intervention beruht auf spontanen Einwänden**, die mir gegen Dagmar Baronouws *The Certainties of Evil: Memory Discourse of the Holocaust* eingefallen sind. An dieser Unmittelbarkeit festhaltend, räume ich ein, dass damit der kritischen Lektüre des von Barnouw referierten *The Holocaust in American Life* von Peter Novick jener Vorrang bestritten wird, den dieses wichtige Buch selbst verdienen würde. Soweit ich hier Novick streife, rede ich von Baronouws Novick. Es scheint mir so, als ob Novick – wie übrigens auch Arendt – von Barnouw in einen Streit gespannt wird, der nicht deren Streit ist. Ich bitte die Redaktion, die Novick-Debatte zu lancieren. Aufgrund der Schlüsselstellung von *Eichmann in Jerusalem. Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösen* versteht es sich von selbst, dass der Streit über Hannah Arendt in dieser Debatte eine herausragende Rolle spielen würde. Meine kleine Auseinandersetzung mit Barnouw hat an dieser Stelle ihre Veröffentlichung verdient, wenn sie einen Ausblick auf jene, in Europa noch nicht begonnene Debatte zu verschaffen.

### Nützliche Provokation

Akteure des gegenwärtigen Holocaust-Diskurses werden, sofern sie sich in freier Rede oder freier Forschung betätigen, als »Provokateure« vorgestellt. Immer rascher stellt sich jeweils heraus, dass eine »Provokation« nicht nur längst fällig, sondern auch für alle Beteiligten, ja für den Fortschritt der ganzen Sache längst überfällig und überdies