

# Holocaust deception in Australia: a review

## Abstract

Is Holocaust deception an event *sui generis*, or merely another incarnation of deception, a universal phenomenon that assumes multiple guises depending on the social environment? The worst aspect of Holocaust deception, one that puts it on a scale sliding towards Holocaust denial, is that it devalues the experience of the victims and survivors. It raises a special question as a corollary: why would anyone want to claim or exaggerate Holocaust experiences that never occurred? The Holocaust is an event of such magnitude that the establishment of a finite truth for those involved will always be problematic. While not in the same category as the cases listed above, there is deception displayed by some leading figures involved in portraying the Holocaust.

In conclusion, Holocaust deception is the most visible aspect of a growing phenomenon, namely seeking heroic status by claiming involvement in traumatic events. One certainty is that, in the age of social media and the internet, such behaviour will continue to flourish. This paper reviews cases seen in Australia, with additional cases from elsewhere - eg., USA - that illustrate the theme of Holocaust deception. Other cases that illustrate the difficulty in establishing finite truth in an event like the Holocaust are listed in the Discussion with several examples to indicate how widespread the phenomenon is of deceptively claiming heroism from involvement with traumatic events.

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## Introduction

The Holocaust is undoubtedly the most traumatic event experienced by any group of people and, in its sheer horror and industrial-scale destructiveness, the extreme mass violence in history. If nothing else, this conveys a unique quality: the ultimate survivor experience, one that conveys on its victims a special status, however unwillingly sought. Holocaust deception is the phenomenon of claiming false involvement in the traumatic experiences of the Holocaust. It is the search for exceptional validation through being perceived in heroic terms by individuals whose lives are otherwise mundane. The question to be asked is whether it is an event *sui generis*, or merely another form of deception, a phenomenon that goes back to the beginning of history and assumes multiple guises depending on the social environment?

The worst feature of Holocaust deception, one that puts it on a scale sliding towards Holocaust denial, is that it devalues the experience of the victims and survivors. To deny someone the moral exceptionalism of such suffering is nothing less than calumny of the worst order. It raises a special question as a corollary: why would anyone want to claim or exaggerate Holocaust experiences that never occurred? Australia, as befits a country with relatively high number of Holocaust survivors,<sup>1</sup> has been more prone than most to such deception. The first incident to achieve publicity is that of Donald Joseph Watt. Taken prisoner in the disaster of the Crete campaign, Watt was held in several POW camps in Germany and released after the war, returning to live uneventfully in Queensland. In 1987, the Australian Government agreed to compensate soldiers who had been in concentration camps, mostly Japanese. At the time, Holocaust survivors were starting to discuss their experiences before they died. Investigations were being made to launch prosecutions against war criminals who had come to Australia after the war. It was in this setting that Watt made his first disclosures when, in a 55-page submission for compensation to the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA), he stated that he had been forced to act as a sonderkommando at Auschwitz, stoking the ovens in which the corpses of gassing victims were cremated.<sup>2</sup> He then wrote

his book *Stoker: The Story of an Australian Soldier Who Survived Auschwitz-Birkenau*, describing his experiences in detail.<sup>3</sup> Watts' explanation for the late announcement of his experiences was that he had suppressed the traumatic events, but began dreaming about what had occurred and, with the help of hypnosis, 'recovered' the devastating memories of Auschwitz.

Watts became a media sensation, if not a celebrity, making headlines around the world. He was feted by Jewish organizations, giving talks to an appreciative audience at the Sydney Jewish Museum and was described as a Righteous Gentile. The rights to his story were purchased and director Barrie Kosky announced that a movie was to be made of *Stoker*. Historian Konrad Kwiet then showed that there was no basis for Watts' claims. No Allied POW's were ever held at Auschwitz, and there was no evidence that they were involved in extermination of the Jews.<sup>4</sup> His aura rapidly fading, Watts attempted to defend himself, the movie was cancelled but it was clear that that he had lost all credibility.<sup>5</sup> Undeterred, Watts adamantly maintained that his Auschwitz experiences were genuine and deserved vindication until he died.

In this case, motives and mechanisms are evident. Watts' recovered memories occurred in a setting of publicity about the Holocaust and there was a clear incentive: the possibility of financial reward, to be followed by celebrity, not just locally, but world-wide. At the time, the epidemic of recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse was coming to a head and there was a widely held perception that terrible traumatic events could be repressed, to gush forth once released through a combination of dream analysis, hypnosis and repressed memory therapy.<sup>6,7</sup> Had Watts picked up on the growing tide of scepticism about recovered memories, he may not have gone for such an obvious means of explaining how his claim arose.

After the Watts controversy came the bizarre story of Helen Demidenko who wrote an award-winning novel *The Hand that Signed the Paper* purporting to be an account of a Ukrainian man involved

in the Holocaust and portraying communist Jews involved in the Ukrainian famine in the thirties in a negative light.<sup>8</sup> The novel was one thing; the author's pretence at being the daughter of Ukrainian migrants, complete with folk costume, was entirely another. When it was revealed that she was in fact Helen Darville,<sup>8</sup> the daughter of English migrants and had a history of plagiarism, the acclaim crumpled into a welter of controversy and dismay.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately what did the most damage to the author's case was her predilection for right-wing causes, culminating in a sympathetic interview with David Irving at the time of his defamation trial.<sup>10</sup> The Demidenko Affair, as it became known, raised questions about truth in literature that continue to rumble unabated.<sup>11</sup> Darville, plagiarism and right-wing views notwithstanding, continues to present to the media in various roles.

The story of son Mark (since deceased) did research in Eastern Europe which allegedly confirmed the story and published it in the book *Mascot*.<sup>12</sup> The book caused a sensation, received multiple translations and the rights bought for a film.<sup>13</sup> Problems arose in Kurzem's dealing with Holocaust survivors in Melbourne.<sup>14</sup> He reacted strongly to questions about the authenticity of his account, demanded money and refused to cooperate with tests to confirm his story, such as a DNA test to establish links with his putative Jewish half-brother.<sup>15</sup> He appealed to a US body, but other experts cast further doubt on the story.<sup>16</sup> Two features of the case are of note. Firstly, Kurzem was documented to have financial problems at the time he began to seek publicity for his claims and reacted in a more than mendicant manner when his request for more money was refused. Secondly, just as questions were being raised about his story, which was often remarkably vague on critical details, he claimed to recall some important information about his mother in a dream.

## Other cases

An extreme case is that of Misha Defonseca who alleged in her book *Misha: A Memoire of the Holocaust Years* that she had spent 18 months escaping persecution as a Jew in the company of friendly wolves who protected her, entering the Warsaw Ghetto and killing a German soldier.<sup>17</sup> The book sold well, was translated into 18 languages and made into a movie *Survivre avec les loups* (Surviving with the Wolves). In February 2008, Defonseca admitted that her memoir was false.<sup>18</sup> In fact, she was not Jewish and spent the war living safely in Belgium. Her real name was Monique de Wael; her Catholic parents were killed by the Nazis because they were Belgian resistance fighters and she did not leave her home during the war to find them.<sup>19</sup>

de Wael said that the story of Misha was "not actual reality, but was my reality, my way of surviving" and that at times she "found it difficult to differentiate between what was real and what was part of my imagination".<sup>20</sup> She had a difficult upbringing growing up as an outsider, raised by relatives and called the "daughter of the traitor" because her father was rumored to have given up information under torture. She reflected that she always hated the people who cared - she always "felt" Jewish - and was fascinated by wolves during her childhood. 'There are times when it is difficult for me to tell the difference between what was reality and what was my interior universe.' de Wael's case reiterates the theme of a disturbed childhood with unsupportive, if not hostile authority figures leading to identity disturbance with an over-active fantasy life. Such individuals frequently develop hysterical or borderline personality disorders where a pattern of compulsive lying arises from a disturbed and extreme fantasy life.

Binjamin Wilkomirski, the author of *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (1995)<sup>21</sup> claimed that he was born a Jew in Latvia, separated from his parents at age three and incarcerated in Auschwitz and Majdanek camps.<sup>22</sup> Liberated at the end of the war, he was adopted by a Swiss family from which he took the name Bruno Dössekker. The book won a raft of glittering awards including the National Jewish Book award (USA), *Prix Memoire de la Shoah* (France) and Jewish Quarterly Prize (Britain). It was then revealed that Wilkomirski, who was not Jewish, spent the entire war in Switzerland.<sup>23,24</sup> Born Bruno Grossjean near Bern, Switzerland in 1941 to an unmarried woman, he was a public ward until 1945 when he was taken in as a foster child by Kurt and Martha Dossekker and raised in Zurich. He attended university, worked as a musician and instrument-maker, became an amateur historian of the Holocaust, and changed his name to Binjamin Wilkomirski in the 1980s. His adoptive parents died in 1986.<sup>25</sup>

Significantly, when challenged, Wilkomirski claimed he had recovered his "origins" with the help of a therapist and detailed research on the Holocaust.<sup>26</sup> In short, like Watts, it was, at least in part, a result of recovered memory therapy. To add to the complexity of deceit a woman named Laura Grabowski whom Wilkomirski claimed to have known in the camps, was revealed as Lauren Stratford aka Laurel Rose Willson. Wilkomirski and Willson went on some lecture and concert tours together, which must have led to some interesting conversations. Stratford was a professional fantasist who had first written about alleged satanic ritual abuse before being debunked and then turning to Holocaust claims.<sup>27</sup> To no great surprise, she had a long history of mental illness and making false allegations.

A variation on the theme is that of Jewish persons who were at a camp, but falsified aspects of the experience. Herman Rosenblat claimed that he met his future wife across the barbed wire fence at Buchenwald and she sneaked him food that enabled him to survive. His book "Angel at the Fence" was scheduled for publication by Berkeley in 2009,<sup>28</sup> but cancelled when it was exposed as a fake.<sup>29</sup> Rosenblat was certainly a camp survivor, but he first met his future wife on a blind date in New York. He raised a family and kept in touch with his relatives. There was no mention of the story until 1992 when Rosenblat and his son Ken were shot by armed robbers who broke into his Brooklyn store, leaving his son paralysed in a wheelchair.<sup>30</sup> Rosenblat was recovering in hospital from his bullet wound when he claimed his mother came to him in a dream and told him to share his story. His wife Rosa, who passively shared in the ruse, had a history of depression, with suicide attempts and psychiatric hospitalization. Rosenblat started talking to friends and then events took over. In this case we see two elements: the allegations of recovered memories (Herman) and the presence of psychiatric illness (Rosa). The opinion of commentators is that there was not as much a malign motive as a garrulous tendency in the attention-seeking Herman Rosenblat that got out of hand once the media became involved.<sup>31</sup>

## Discussion

Holocaust deception is unstudied as a phenomenon (as opposed to discussion of cases) and there is much to be learned. It is also a time-limited phenomenon as there will soon be no one, except the very aged, who could claim to have been involved. What we learn from these cases is the complexity of deception. It seeks, like a virus, a body of events, heroic or extreme, to attach itself to in order to flourish. Holocaust deceivers vary widely, but certain factors appear to be common. The individuals involved, if not marginal, are disgruntled

with their lives and often have problems with relationships, work or money. They have problems with identity, difficulty dealing with authority, a tendency to engage in excessive fantasy and, in all likelihood, unhappy if not depressing personal lives.

While psychiatric difficulties are not always evident, there is often hysterical, narcissistic or borderline traits; psychopathic traits cannot be excluded either. The dysfunction arises from poor parenting in childhood, leaving a residue of intense hostility to authority and, at least in some, a tendency to extreme fantasy. An unusual exception to this rule is a case of Holocaust delusion encountered in a patient with late-onset schizophrenia (currently submitted for publication). The behaviour exhibited by deceivers is similar to that displayed in Munchausen's Syndrome.<sup>32</sup> These patients simulate illness in order to get treatment. The dramatic tales of their suffering (*pseudologia fantastica*) are intended to elicit the sympathy of the listener and obscure questions about their past. The motive for their behaviour is often obscure, although driven by a desire to receive care and attention with secondary goals of access to drugs and accommodation. When threatened with exposure, they become belligerent, if not aggressive.

All cases of Holocaust deception arise in the cultural context of contemporary trauma. This is heavily influenced by the recovered memory epidemic which came to a peak between the seventies and nineties. Through a variety of tropes - dreams, somatic representations and directive therapy - lost traumatic events could be restored to memory with the accuracy of a video tape playback. That this could lead to catastrophic legal injustice and was shown to be scientifically dubious, if not misleading, did not change the dogmatism of those who believed in the verity of the memories they recovered. The recollection and revelations are deeply influenced by the pervasive victim mentality in which there is acclamation of the individual who publicly discloses their suffering from an event that was widely recognised as an atrocity.

Once their claim is publicised, there is something of a reverberating effect. The claimant, reinforced by the benefits of celebrity and monetary reward, will inevitably exaggerate the claim. At the same time, other agents involved in the matter - such as academics, publishers and reporters - will facilitate their behaviour. By the time doubters emerge, it is easy to portray them as further victimizing the claimant. The stakes rack up, defensiveness becomes more dogmatic and the inevitable denouement is followed by angry denial. Holocaust deception involves assuming the mantle of suffering experienced in the most extreme form of mass murder in history. In doing so, the deceiver is claiming of the suffering of six million dead for themselves, thereby denying the victims their unique validity. In comparison to other events, they are seeking heroic status which repugnant as it is, is quantitatively and qualitatively different. The attitude of deceivers to Jews is confused and inconsistent. There is no indication they have actual empathy for Jews, but rather a projective identification with them as a group that have received admiration and sympathy for their suffering.

The phenomenon has, like the serpent's egg, spawned numerous imitators. Cases of deception regarding combat in wars including Viet Nam, Iraq and Afghanistan are starting to multiply to such an extent that there are now websites instructing people how to check on the credentials of suspicious cases.<sup>33</sup> The ex-POW Association of Australia president Arthur Rex Crane alleged that he had been captured by the Japanese and sent to work on the Burma Railway during WWII in order to claim service and disability pension

payments. After occupying a leading role in the association, often receiving publicity, it was revealed that Crane was at school in Adelaide during the war and never served in the military.<sup>34</sup> A similar case is that of Gordon Tisdell, who achieved national prominence posing as a Viet Nam veteran before being exposed as a fake.<sup>35</sup> These activities reached a nadir with the case of Tania Head (aka Alicia Esteve Head) who became a prominent activist for survivors of the 9/11 disaster, appearing regularly in the media with celebrities, until she was exposed as a complete fraud who had not even been present in the building, let alone lost a husband as she claimed.<sup>36</sup>

A defining principle is that the Holocaust is an event of such magnitude that the establishment of a finite truth for those involved will always be problematic. An indication of this is the degree of deception displayed by some leading figures involved in portraying the Holocaust. The two most eminent Holocaust psychologists were both, in their own different ways, imposters. Bruno Bettelheim was arguably the most famous psychologist to emerge from the Holocaust. Incarcerated twice in Dachau concentration camp before the War, he used influence to get freed and go to America. Here he wrote a series of best-seller books and achieved fame treating autistic children at his Orthogenic Centre. However, by the end of his life, Bettelheim's reputation was under fire and since his death a series of revelations have revealed him to have been an abusive, insecure, self-aggrandising and deceptive personality who falsely claimed, among things, that he had trained as a psychoanalyst under Freud's direction.<sup>37</sup>

While Bettelheim established his reputation as a teacher and therapist in Chicago, for many the definitive book to explain how human beings could survive a death camp was Man's Search for Meaning by Viennese psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl. After World War II, Frankl wrote an existential explanation of survival in the death camps based on his experiences at Auschwitz. Frankl's books were used in counselling courses; his existential therapy became a standard in many psychology courses. Yet, after his death, Timothy Pytell revealed that Frankl had spent less than four days in Auschwitz, had dubious Jewish affiliations and engaged in ethically unacceptable work with suicidal Jewish patients in the only Jewish hospital permitted by the Nazis in Vienna.<sup>38</sup> Towards the end of his life, Frankl publicly received an award from Austrian President Kurt Waldheim at a time when many countries had withdrawn diplomatic recognition in protest at Waldheim's role in the SS. The Painted Bird, the supposedly autobiographical Holocaust memoir by Polish writer Jerzy Kosinski turned out to be fraudulent.<sup>39</sup> In the book, a nameless Jewish boy goes from village to village - first in central Poland, in later edition in Eastern Europe - to escape persecution only to be the victim of appalling cruelty by peasant villagers. In fact, Kosinski's family has survived the Nazi oppression in a situation of relative comfort; protected by Poles they knew.<sup>40</sup> This later led to comparisons with Wilkomirski's Fragments.

In conclusion, Holocaust deception is a time-limited phenomenon that, by attaching itself to the worst mass murder in history, devalues the experiences of true survivors, putting it on a sliding scale towards Holocaust denial. Furthermore, it is the most visible aspect of a growing social phenomenon, namely seeking heroic status by claiming involvement in traumatic events. One certainty is that, in the age of social media and the internet, such behaviour will continue to flourish. The cases described above vary widely although there are some common themes. The only action that can be taken is public exposure by historians and Holocaust researchers. Once there is

exposure of the deception, the impact is lost and genuine survivors can tell their story. They deserve nothing less.

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## Conflicts of interest

None.

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