

Whose life was it, anyway?

By Amnon Reuveni

*...and die With Heroin, Fragments etrus Latens"
I, And the Wolf Howled, Fragments of an Autobiography,
By Barbro Karlin, Farnes Verlag Basel, pp.227,
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When she was two, the author of this extraordinary book (and on being called "Anno" although her name was Barbro. Her parents, living in Gullowberg, Sweden, were not exactly thrilled when their daughter began asking when she could "go home." Asked by her mother if she knew any other names she had been called by, the lost girl her "second name" was Frank, Anne Frank.

Barbro Karlin, born in 1954, displayed rare literary talent from a very young age, but she was discovered by the publishing world only at 11 when a friend of the family wandered into her room and found it littered with stories, poems and philosophical essays on subjects like human nature, death, sin and forgiveness. From her first publication, Karlin was considered as a child prodigy and the sale of her books broke every record in Sweden. Scarcely a day went by that she was not interviewed on television or in the newspapers. At that time, very few people knew the young writer's disturbing secret.

Breaking a 20-year vow of silence, Karlin has now written a book about the terrible anguish that has been her lot ever since she can remember herself. She describes her recurrent nightmares about men in uniforms breaking into the house where she is hiding with her family and brutally dragging her into a waiting vehicle. She cannot shake the fear. Her nights are hell.

When she was four, Karlin's parents took her to a psychiatrist who pronounced her perfectly normal. But Karlin learned her lesson. She knew she must keep silent and never speak about these memories again. When she was 10, the family went on a trip to Paris and Brussels, the girl left a stranger. In Amsterdam, however, she had a sudden sense of being in familiar surroundings. She said nothing, having learned long ago not to speak her parents. Walking out the door of their hotel to visit the Anne Frank House, the family was about to flag down a taxi when Karlin could not restrain herself. "We don't need a taxi," she said. "The house isn't far from here and I can take you there."

Her strained parents watched as Karlin strode confidently down the street. Ten minutes later, they were standing at the entrance of the building where the Frank family had hidden from the Gestapo.

Without going into Karlin's traumatic experience inside the house, suffice it to say that when certain details were leaked to the Swedish press some years later, it created a great stir.

Karlin herself never spoke about the matter openly and tried to keep out of the public eye, hoping that her troubled past would somehow be forgotten. For a long time, she was successful, but then things happened that joined her cruelly out of anonymity. People in Sweden bent on raising her reputation began spreading stories that Karlin was treating her heroics as cruelty — she, who had always preached the importance of protecting the environment and being kind to animals. She even received threats as her life. Her nightmares returned with a vengeance. Clear memories of life in a Nazi concentration camp came back to her. Karlin suffered a nervous breakdown and retreated on the brink of despair.



Barbro Karlin: nightmares of the Nazi period.

Swiss magazine, Elias describes that meeting: "I am generally very skeptical about people who claim to have been this or that person in another life. With Barbro, I was different. Our meeting was very emotional. I felt something very special and positive while I was in her presence. I felt like I was being reunited with a kindred spirit. The impression she made on me was of someone I could trust. I don't rule out that possibility that she could have been Anne Frank."

Only after Elias and his family expressed their full support did Karlin seriously consider publishing her autobiography. Today she admits it would have been much easier if her memories were not bound up with such a well-known historical figure. Her message, she says, is that people can deal more effectively with the problems they face if they learn to approach certain situations as the outcome, at least in part, of deeds and experiences in a previous life.

Barbro Karlin has appeared recently at symposia in Zurich and Basel exploring the central promise of her book — reincarnation — Past or Pseudo? Naturally, the Swiss media has been drawn to the more sensitive issues. Despite the fact that Karlin enjoys the moral backing of Anne Frank's blood relatives, two young Swiss Jews, self-appointed defenders of the feelings of the Holocaust survivors (never mind the feelings of Anne Frank's cousins), have raised an important point. Acceptance of the idea of reincarnation, they argue, could be used as an excuse by those who seek to detract from the seriousness of the crimes perpetrated by the Nazis. If souls can migrate to other bodies, then the Nazis' final solution was not final after all.

While surveys have shown that an increasing number of people in the Western world believe in the permanence and transmigration of the soul, one does not have to believe in such things to take part in the discussion. Those who read Karlin's book with an unjaunty eye will find what may appear to be a surprising answer: Not only does her reincarnation revive the unspeakable atrocities of the Holocaust period, but it turns the experiences of her present life into a direct outgrowth of them. Karlin is reviving the barbarity of those times, in an almost forceful, of course, but her perceptions of the horror are so keen that the adhesion deeds of the Nazis almost do come alive.

Thus the notion that souls are reborn does not diminish the horrors of the Holocaust, it intensifies them and doubles their consequences. For that reason, and out of respect for those who perished, this book deserves to be taken seriously. In the 50 months since its appearance in German, "Fragments of an Autobiography" has been translated and published in Holland, Norway and Sweden. An English edition will be coming out soon.

Barbro Karlin ends many of her interviews with the same remark: "I do not matter to me whether or not people believe I lived as Anne Frank. I know that I did, and for me, that is sufficient. What is important to me is that people understand my message about the profundity of life. That in what will give them the strength and hope to cope with whatever unfolds they must face."

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Acceptance of the idea of reincarnation could be used as an excuse by those who seek to detract from the seriousness of the Nazis' crimes. If souls can migrate to other bodies, then the Nazis' final solution was not final after all

Two things saved her at the last moment. One, she says, was the decision to write a book. The act of writing restored her self-confidence and allowed her to reflect on her experiences from the sidelines. The second was her relationship with the family of Anne Frank. As luck would have it, Anne Frank's cousin, Teddy Elias (who appears in her diary as "Berni") lives in the same neighborhood in Basel where the offices of Karlin's publisher are located. On one of Karlin's visits to Switzerland, a mutual friend introduced them. In an interview in a popular