

Author of Best-Selling Holocaust Book Admits Survival Story Not True

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Almost nothing Misha Defonseca wrote about herself or her horrific childhood during the Holocaust was true.

She didn't live with a pack of wolves to escape the Nazis. She didn't trek 1,900 miles across Europe in search of her deported parents, nor kill a German soldier in self-defense. She's not even Jewish.

Defonseca, a Belgian writer now living in Massachusetts, admitted through her lawyers this week that her best-selling book, "Misha: A Memoire of the Holocaust Years," was an elaborate fantasy she kept repeating, even as the book was translated into 18 languages and made into a feature film in France.

"This story is mine. It is not actually reality, but my reality, my way of surviving," Defonseca said in a statement given by her lawyers to The Associated Press.

"I ask forgiveness to all who felt betrayed. I beg you to put yourself in my place, of a 4-year-old girl who was very lost," the statement said.

Defonseca, 71, has an unlisted number in Dudley, about 50 miles southwest of Boston. Her husband, Maurice, told The Boston Globe on Thursday that she would not comment.

Defonseca wrote in her book that Nazis seized her parents when she was a child, forcing her to wander the forests and villages of Europe alone for four years. She claimed she found herself trapped in the Warsaw ghetto and was adopted by a pack of wolves that protected her.

Her two Brussels-based lawyers said the author acknowledged her story was not autobiographical. In the statement, Defonseca said she never fled her home in Brussels during the war to find her parents.

Defonseca says her real name is Monique De Wael and that her parents were arrested and killed by Nazis as Belgian resistance fighters.

The statement said her parents were arrested when she was 4 and she was taken care of by her grandfather and uncle. She said she was poorly treated by her adopted family, called a "daughter of a traitor"

because of her parents' role in the resistance, which she said led her to "feel Jewish."

She said there were moments when she "found it difficult to differentiate between what was real and what was part of my imagination."

Pressure on the author to defend the accuracy of her book had grown in recent weeks, after the release of evidence found by Sharon Sergeant, a genealogical researcher in Waltham. Sergeant said she found clues in the unpublished U.S. version of the book, including Defonseca's maiden name "De Wael" — which was changed in the French version — and photos.

After a few months of research, she found Defonseca's Belgian baptismal certificate and school record, as well as information that showed her parents were members of the Belgian resistance.

"Each piece was plausible, but the difficulty was when you put it all together," Sergeant said.

Others also had doubts.

"I'm not an expert on relations between humans and wolves, but I am a specialist of the persecution of Jews, and they (Defonseca's family) can't be found in the archives," Belgian historian Maxime Steinberg told RTL television. "The De Wael family is not Jewish nor were they registered as Jewish."

Defonseca's attorneys, siblings Nathalie and Marc Uyttendaele, contacted the author last weekend to show her evidence published in the Belgian daily *Le Soir*, which also questioned her story.

"We gave her this information and it was very difficult. She was confronted with a reality that is different from what she has been living for 70 years," Nathalie Uyttendaele said.

Defonseca's admission is just the latest controversy surrounding her 1997 book, which also spawned a multimillion dollar legal battle between the woman, her co-author and the book's U.S. publisher.

Defonseca had been asked to write the book by publisher Jane Daniel in the 1990s, after Daniel heard the writer tell the story in a Massachusetts synagogue.

Daniel and Defonseca fell out over profits received from the best-selling book, which led to a lawsuit. In 2005, a Boston court ordered Daniel to pay Defonseca and her ghost writer Vera Lee \$22.5 million.

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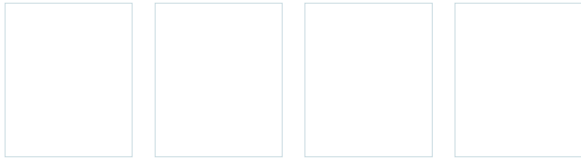
Defonseca's lawyers said Daniel has not yet paid the court-ordered sum.

Daniel said Friday she felt vindicated by Defonseca's admission and would try to get the judgment overturned. She said she could not fully research Defonseca's story before it was published because the woman claimed she did not know her parents' names, her birthday or where she was born.

"There was nothing to go on to research," she said.

Lee, of Newton, muttered "Oh my God" when told Defonseca made up her childhood and was not Jewish. She said she always believed the stories the woman told her as they prepared to write the book, and no research she did gave her a reason not to.

"She always maintained that this was truth as she recalled it, and I trusted that that was the case," Lee said. "I was just totally bowled over by the news."

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