

DISCREPANCIES
AMONG names
and dates
in different
translations
helped to reveal
the author's
true identity.

A genealogist reveals the painful truth about three Holocaust memoirs: they're fiction



Untrue Stories

BY CALEB DANILOFF

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IN HER 1997 autobiography, *Misha: A Memoire of the Holocaust Years*, Belgian-born Misha Defonseca claimed to have trekked war-pocked Europe for four years, starting at the age of seven, in search of her deported Jewish parents. Along the way, she wrote, she took up with a pack of wolves, slipped in and out of the Warsaw Ghetto, and killed a Nazi soldier.

In Europe, the book was a smash, translated into eighteen languages and made into a hit film. In the United States, however, it had sold poorly — so poorly that Defonseca and her ghostwriter successfully sued their publisher for \$33 million for inadequate promotion, one of the largest judgments in publishing history. Two years ago, publisher Jane Daniel fought back, twenty-first century style: she launched a blog, called *Bestseller*, questioning Defonseca’s story, hoping to nullify the

court’s decision by proving the author was a fraud.

It was there online, one day in December 2007, that Sharon Sergeant (MET’83), now an adjunct faculty member in BU’s genealogical research program, stumbled upon the controversy. And she thought she might be able to help.

Since then, Sergeant has become widely known as a hoax buster, putting to work the forensic skills she’s honed over twenty years to help debunk three fraudulent Holocaust memoirs.

The tools of her profession include photographic timelines and databases — vital records, census reports, property deeds, maps, newspaper interviews, obituaries, phone directories — and living relatives. Skype, online records, and blogs have also broadened her reach, and DNA testing is an option if she needs it.

“The generic view of genealogy is that it is about tracing relatives, the ‘begats,’” says Sergeant, a board member and former programs director with the Massachusetts Genealogical Council. “It’s evolved.”

But her involvement in cracking open three Holocaust hoaxes is about more than an interest in the latest technology. A former college dropout who raised a family and worked in computer engineering before discovering genealogy, Sergeant was drawn to the Defonseca case because it offered a rare opportunity to showcase her field and to set the record straight on what she believed were unconscionable attempts to exploit human tragedy for personal gain.

Red Flags and Zigzags



In her memoir, *Misha Defonseca*, born *Monique De Wael*, claimed that she spent four years of her childhood searching for her Jewish parents, who had been deported by Nazis from their native Belgium. After genealogist *Sharon Sergeant* began investigating, *Defonseca* admitted she had made up the tale. Here are some of the discrepancies.

1 Photos published only in the American edition of the book contradicted details in the French edition.



Misha Defonseca



2 In the French edition of the book, titled *Survivre avec les loups (Survival with Wolves)*, the author changed her surname from De Wael to Valle, but Sergeant could not find any record of the name Valle in likely street and phone directories.

Monique De Wael
 ↪ Monique Valle

3 School records showed that Defonseca was enrolled in the first grade in Brussels at a time she claimed to be trekking in Ukraine in the company of wolves.



“I got involved because I knew the solution would have two benefits,” she says. “It would illustrate the methodology in a high-profile case, whatever the results were, and it would raise awareness for other Holocaust families about what could be done with modern genealogy techniques and records access. Simply put, I viewed it as an opportunity for the profession.”

CONNECTING THE DOTS

It was one little thing that first raised Sergeant’s eyebrows about Defonseca: the peculiar omission, in the French edition, of photos used in the American edition. Sergeant worked with photo identification experts, including occasional genealogical collaborators Colleen Fitzpatrick and Maureen Taylor, to create visual and geographic timelines. Sergeant also wondered why Defonseca had changed what she said was her adopted name, Monique De Wael, to Monique Valle. Could it have been an effort to conceal the facts from people in that part of the

Records show that De Wael was enrolled in grammar school at the time she was supposed to be living with wolves.



world who might have known her?

“Part of figuring out the story is connecting the right dots,” says Sergeant. “When we do our research, we use lots of information in the form of names, dates, places, events, activities, but they can create lots of different stories. The true story can be mixed in with other stories.”

Sergeant mined the various translations of the book and used the discrepancies among names and dates to piece together Defonseca’s true identity, which was in fact Monique De Wael. She also noticed a number of Catholic references in the text, and through contacts in Belgium, including Evelyne Haendel, a genealogist who herself had been an orphan hidden during the war, she came up with a baptismal certificate proving De Wael was not Jewish. School records showed De Wael was enrolled in grammar school, along with the sister of Defonseca’s future husband, at the time she was supposedly running across the countryside, hiding from Nazis and living with wolves.

Official documents later showed that De Wael’s father was, in fact, a Catholic resistance fighter turned collaborator. In the end, it took Sergeant a little more than a month to expose Defonseca, who had moved to the Boston area in 1985 and who had been telling her tale of desperation for twenty years.

“It didn’t start out as personal,” Sergeant says. “Once I began working with Evelyne, it became personal. I felt horrible that Evelyne had to be reminded of so much to do this work. It was very difficult for her to stand on the steps of the Schaerbeek town hall — where her own mother had been rounded up for Auschwitz — and to be there to investigate a woman who had committed such a devious fraud.”

At the same time, Serge Aroles, a French expert on wolf child stories, was questioning Defonseca’s story on blogs and in a Jewish magazine. Sergeant posted the baptismal certificate and school register on Bestseller and sent a link to Aroles. Within two days, Belgian media picked up the story and *Le Soir*, Belgium’s newspaper of record, tracked down relatives and published several stories. Sergeant also produced a photo that contradicted Defonseca’s claim of deformed legs and feet. Less than two weeks after Sergeant’s posting on Daniel’s blog, Defonseca confessed to *Le Soir* through her lawyer.

Daniel, meanwhile, is still battling the judgment against her and her small publishing company and has turned her blog into a book, also called *Bestseller* (Laughing Gull Press, 2008). A \$425,000 inheritance, held by her father, has been written over to Defonseca, and Daniel has had to sign over her house, as well.

THE BIRTH OF A HOAX BUSTER

Sergeant’s path to her profession has been long and winding. After studying math and physics for two years at Northeastern University, she dropped out, had two children, and took work in computer software development. In the early days of minicomputer engineering, Digital Equipment Corporation, where Sergeant’s husband at the time worked, had partnered with Metropolitan College to host academic programs for adult students. Sergeant enrolled.

“I was in a classroom environment where the students were relatively homogeneous in that computer industry boom,” she recalls. “We were all juggling work and family. We were focused, serious, and practical.”

Later, divorced and raising her



- 4 Curious about many references to Catholic rituals and literature in the book, Sergeant’s team searched for and found a baptismal certificate for De Wael, who claimed to be Jewish.



- 5 Official documents showed that De Wael’s parents had been Catholic resisters arrested by the Germans, rather than Jews rounded up by the Nazis, as alleged in the book.

DEFONSECA PHOTO: AP PHOTO/MARY SCHWALM

kids alone, Sergeant chipped away at her university credits. It was a time, she says, when “the only stability and validation was my academic life through MET.”

In 1985, inspired by a genealogist cousin, Sergeant began exploring her home’s property records and dabbling in family history. “I realized, in the mid-1990s, that my father’s generation was beginning to die,” she says. “I knew I had better start gathering oral history to see what this generation knew about our ancestry.”

Sergeant listened to her father, wrote things down, studied her writings, and found herself smitten. After years in computer engineering and later marketing and consulting, she had finally stumbled upon a pursuit she found so compelling that it seems at times to pursue her, sometimes in unpleasant ways.

Detractors have called Sergeant a witch-hunter, a Holocaust denier, and even a Nazi. Worse, as longtime friend Marika Barnett, a Hungarian survivor and a founder of the Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust, points out, deniers love it when Holocaust stories turn out to be made up. A single fraudulent story, she says, puts the enormous, horrific truth in doubt.

“My own story tells how I was saved by the German SS,” says Barnett. “I expect a lot of people to say this is a lie. Why would the German SS save Jews? For money, of course, but I bet there will be people who don’t believe it. Do you? Just because I said so?”

ANGEL AT THE FENCE

In 1995, a now-retired television repairman named Herman Rosenblat entered a *New York Post* essay contest with a short story about his internment in a German concentration camp, where a young Jewish girl who was hiding nearby used to toss apples and bread over the fence to him. Years later, the story claimed, the pair met on a blind date in the United States and had been married ever since. The irresistibly moving tale won the contest, was included in *Chicken Soup for the Couple’s Soul* and led to an appearance on the *Oprah Winfrey*

Show in 1996. In 2007, Rosenblat and his wife, Roma, returned to *Oprah*, where they publicly celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary. The talk show host called it “the single greatest love story . . . we’ve ever told on air,” and it inspired a children’s book called *Angel Girl*.

In 2008, Rosenblat published a memoir (Riverhead). A \$25 million film adaptation was being readied for production.

Elsewhere, however, critical readers of Rosenblat’s book were asking probing questions and posting skeptical comments on blogs. Sergeant, who learned about the increasing online chatter from a friend, was intrigued. In November 2008, seizing another opportunity to highlight the power of forensic genealogy, she began delving into Rosenblat’s past, working backwards in time.

First, by checking immigration records she established the date Rosenblat arrived in the United States. It wasn’t long, she says, before red flags, or zigzags as Sergeant calls them, began appearing. Affidavits required for real estate transactions in Florida showed that the golden wedding anniversary Oprah was heralding on television had yet to occur. The couple was celebrating a full year early.

Sergeant also found that, starting in the 1970s, Rosenblat had been putting his holdings into Roma’s name, a move that could render him judgment-proof. She also uncovered naturalization documents that showed Roma Radzicky had come to the United States with her father, mother, young sister, and brother, who was born after the war.

“That’s important,” she says, “because usually it’s just a fraction of a family that survives. Roma’s mother and father were at an age the Nazis found useful as laborers, but the children often didn’t survive because they weren’t useful. The men would be



WEB EXTRA Watch a video of Sharon Sergeant talking about the methods she used to crack Holocaust hoaxes at www.bu.edu/bostonia.

split off from the women. That’s what happened in Herman’s family. He and his brothers were useful as laborers. But in Roma’s case, it was really strange that that large a group in a little village would survive.”

Meanwhile, Sergeant had been talking with Kenneth Waltzer, director of the Jewish Studies Program at Michigan State University and an expert on child inmates at Buchenwald and its subcamps, including Schlieben, where the apple-tossing purportedly took place. Waltzer knew from camp schematics that it would have been impossible to approach the fence without being spotted by a Nazi guard. Transport lists and survivor testimonies cast even more doubt. One notable survivor, Ben Helfgott (who later competed in the Olympics for England), was with Rosenblat through transports, labor camps, and liberation. “He told us the story was, without a doubt, a figment of Herman’s imagination,” Waltzer says. “He’d known Herman for fifty or sixty years and never heard the story until the mid-1990s.”

For Sergeant and Waltzer, Helfgott’s word went a long way toward undermining Rosenblat’s story. But not all the way.

“The worst thing you can do is make an accusation without having the proof,” Sergeant says. “We knew where Herman was, but where was Roma?”

Sergeant reconstructed the Radzicky family on both the maternal and paternal sides and traced their migration after the war. Through documents from Yad Vashem, Israel’s

Holocaust memorial and archive, and U.S. records, she tracked down Roma's sister and then her sister's son, a professor of Middle Eastern studies at Princeton. As a fellow scholar, Waltzer got in touch with Roma's nephew, who revealed that the family had been hiding hundreds of miles away from Schlieben during the war — and he said he could prove it. He had helped his mother apply for aid through the Conference on Material Claims Against Germany, which required a signed deposition of her story. For Sergeant, that was the smoking gun.

"Sharon's a crackerjack," Waltzer says. "She knows how to find pieces of evidence and how to put them together in a pattern and to develop a narrative from them. She's active, aggressive, and smart. I learned a lot from her."

While Sergeant was digging through records, Deborah Lipstadt, a respected confronter of Holocaust deniers, had been posting her doubts about Rosenblat's story on her well-read blog, called simply Deborah Lipstadt's Blog. Sergeant began using the blog to post her evidence, such as Nazi transport lists that contradicted Rosenblat's timeline and his length of internment at Buchenwald.

In late December 2008, writer Gabe Sherman got wind of the investigation and broke the story online at *The New Republic*.

In the face of the evidence posted by Sherman, Rosenblat's publisher canceled the book two months before its planned release, and his agent issued an apology. Rosenblat has apologized too, but he insists that his intent was to educate the world on the Holocaust and to promote tolerance. As with other memoir frauds, including Defonseca's, he has tried to carve out wiggle room by claiming the story was a survival tactic, a series of events that were true in his mind at the time he wrote them.

"It wasn't a lie," he told ABC's *Good Morning America* in February. "It was my imagination. And in my imagination, in my mind, I believed it. Even now, I believe it, that she was there and she threw the apples to me."

Sergeant had already moved on.

Last year, at the prompting of a European publisher, she quietly debunked another Holocaust memoir that was about to be published. The "autobiographical novel," titled *Rachel Sirai's Vineyard* and written by Dutch-born writer Deborah Rey, told the story of Rey's birth mother, a Jewish violinist, who had allegedly been sent to Auschwitz by her stepmother.

"It's a really ugly, bitter story," Sergeant says. "A *Mommie Dearest* type of thing." Sergeant tracked down Rey's brother in Canada, who told her that he and his sister had the same non-Jewish mother, and he offered to take a DNA test. The book was withdrawn, reluctantly, and not without a few "witch-hunters" and "Fascists" thrown Sergeant's way, the genealogist says.

THE POSITIVE STUFF

"Frankly," Sergeant says, "I have more experience with this than I thought I would. I really don't want to be a hoax expert. I'd rather do the positive stuff."

The positive stuff, for Sergeant, involves applying her skills to such conundrums as missing heirs, disputed artifact collections, and the whereabouts of adopted children, and helping others to do the same.

To that end, Sergeant signed on as an instructor in the new Certificate in Genealogical Research program at MET's Center for Professional Education, which will also be offered online. The program, whose faculty includes fellows of the respected American Society of Genealogists (ASG), caters to serious hobbyists as well as genealogical professionals, aspiring and working. There was record demand in this spring's debut semester, and administrators increased

the class size to accommodate all the students, who represent a range of professions: library science, law, medical research, journalism, and social work.

Students in the program learn how to identify random old photos by analyzing details — shadows, the type of camera used, even the significance of body parts captured on film — that might identify place and approximate date. Other exercises include tackling real open cases, such as locating an heir to \$60,000 and identifying an unclaimed dead body, the victim, perhaps, of foul play, which has stumped New Hampshire police for decades.

At the core of the program, says director Melinde Sanborn, who is a vice president of ASG, is the Genealogical Proof Standard, a set of criteria for evaluating evidence and validating proof, which Sergeant used in the Rosenblat and Defonseca cases. "It's very laudable for BU to have embraced genealogy," Sanborn says. "It's the first major university to put out a program like this that is based on a standards manual, so that people understand that there's a process and that it can have fabulous results."

Next year, drawing on techniques honed in her fraud cases, Sergeant will teach a course on researching Jewish ancestry, through the Holocaust and beyond.

"Holocaust frauds are popular," says Sergeant. "Lots of reporters have said, 'So what if the Rosenblats embellished the story? It's a nice story; they're an elderly couple.' But the problem, from a Holocaust standpoint and from the standpoint of survivors who tell their real stories, is that it's really not fair. It's not fair game to lay a fairy tale on the Holocaust stage." ■

Rosenblat insists that his book was not a lie. Rather, he says, he believed it in his imagination.

