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# **An Event That Never Happened: The Holocaust for the Masses.**

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### An Event That Never Happened: The Holocaust for the Masses

This article constitutes my response to a discovery that has led me to rethink the question of the boundary between factual accounts and fictional texts. Recently I experienced a kind of shock – an ethical shock. Instead of truth, audiences received a story about the Holocaust that intentionally imitated truth, though it was not fiction but a forgery. Let me begin with the facts.

In a gesture of atonement for the reprehensible attitude of the French during the Second World War, President Nicolas Sarkozy proposed to the Ministry of Education that every primary school student should learn the story of a murdered or deported Jewish child as of September 2008. The program's slogan would be “Devoir de mémoire” – the “Duty of Memory.” In the end, the proposal was rejected at the development stage as too radical. Even Simone Veil – a former Auschwitz prisoner – questioned the wisdom of the idea.

Almost simultaneously with Sarkozy's proposal, the Franco-Belgian film *Surviving with Wolves* (*Survivre avec les loups*) hit French screens. Various political and cultural personalities attended the official premiere on 16 January 2008. Directed by Vera Belmont (the producer of several well-known films, including *Farinelli*), the film adapted Misha Defonseca's book of the same title, which had come out earlier in the USA (1997) and France (1998). Both the book and the film depict the experiences of a little Jewish girl named Misha, who crosses Europe – from Brussels to Ukraine – in search of her lost parents, who have been transported to a concentration camp. During her wartime wanderings through the snows of Germany, Poland, and Ukraine, she finds salvation in her compass and in a pack of wolves that adopt her into their family. Along the way, Misha meets various people who turn out to be more dangerous than the animals. She witnesses a rape, kills a German soldier with a knife, and secretly watches the execution of Jewish children. She sees a train transporting people to Auschwitz, while Polish children

hurl stones and yell at them: “Serves you right, Jews!” Yet everything ends happily, as the twelve-year-old Misha returns on foot from Ukraine to Brussels via Yugoslavia, Italy, and France. In total, she walks around six thousand kilometers. The film is beautiful. The girl’s adventures stretch the limits of plausibility, but the producers assure us that the story is “based on true events.”

I came out of the cinema moved. There were many children present. And now suddenly I discover that the action of the book – *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years* (the title of the American edition) – is a complete hoax. Misha Defonseca is not Jewish. Though her parents were deported for their part in the resistance movement, she herself remained in Belgium. The wanderings of little Misha were the invention of an adult woman. The Belgian daily *Le Soir* uncovered the deception. *Le Figaro* later repeated the news on 29 February 2008. The newspaper established that Defonseca had been born in 1937 and baptized by her parents as a Catholic. Her real name was Monique de Wael. She had not spent the war in the forests of Poland, but close to Brussels. Numerous historical errors came to light in both the film and the book – many of which had been circulating among readers for over a decade. Misha is eight years old in 1941 when her parents are seized in a street round-up. Yet the round-ups in Belgium only began in September 1942 – as Belgian Holocaust historian Maxime Steinberg points out. Monique de Wael was only five years old at the time, not eight. Her school and baptism certificates also emerged. Serge Aroles – who had lived in Brussels during the war and later wrote a book entitled *L’Enigme des enfants-loups* – began to examine the plausibility of her story, the possibility of a wolf pack adopting a human being, and the cases of so-called wolf children. He questioned the authenticity of the story from both historiographical and anthropological points of view. These first revelations appeared in the journal *Regards: Revue du Centre communautaire laïc juif en Belgique* on 20 January 2008.

So what was Ms. Defonseca’s response? In an interview with *Le Figaro*, she confessed to the hoax. Two separate lines of defense appear in her remarks. Firstly, she presents herself as the victim of a multi-faceted manipulation. She first told “her” story at an American synagogue, having been invited there for Yom HaShoah – the holiday dedicated to memory of the Holocaust. Later, she presented it at multiple American and European universities. Jane Daniel – an American editor – set about persuading her to publish it. De Wael (“Defonseca”) refused for two years, before finally surrendering – as she writes in the book – to the promptings of the Jewish community she had joined after settling in the United States. They told her to “do it for future generations.” The book’s success convinced her that she was helping young people understand the nightmare of war.

The second line of defense was more psychological. Since she was unhappy in post-war Belgium (her deported father had been accused of treason), she gradually became convinced that people were worse than wolves, because they were capable of killing their own children. This conviction became a kind of inner truth for De Wael. She expressed this “truth” in an allegorical fable about a little girl who takes refuge from cruel human beings in a pack of wolves. The psychoanalyst Serge Tisseron – author of *Virtuel mon amour* – characterized her case as one of “split personality.” Defonseca defended herself against the charge of deception for a long time. She appeared with Vera Belmont for

a sneak preview of the film at Le Bretagne cinema in Paris, where she answered an audience member's question with a speech about the childish courage that springs from ignorance and naive innocence. These qualities had helped her cross the lands engulfed by the Nazi inferno with a pack of wolves. She even showed the compass that had supposedly guided her eastward through Europe. Only after the article appeared in *Le Soir* was she forced to reveal the truth.

Here a third problem arises – not so much with the “inner truth” itself as with the translation of this “inner truth” into the obvious financial profits stemming from publication in eighteen countries, film rights, and collaboration on the film's production. In *Le Figaro*, we see pictures of Ms. Defonseca with the child actress Mathilde Goffard. Bernard Fixot – the French editor of the book at Editions Laffront (1998) – is outraged. He says that Ms. Defonseca misled him by presenting her tale as a true story, for which he then paid a lot of money (before selling the rights to the film). At the same time, he adds that the whole affair is essentially harmless and that the author has not hurt anybody with her evocative fable. The question of historical truth does not even enter his mind. Vera Belmont – the director of the film – talks about the situation with the same ambivalence. In an article published in the *Nouvel Observateur* on March 6, she claims to have believed Ms. Defonseca, though she still attempted to persuade her to omit certain implausible episodes – such as the scene where the little girl kills a German with a knife and her wanderings through the Warsaw Ghetto. Defonseca agreed to cut the Warsaw episode, but the scene in which Misha kills the German soldier receives a realistic depiction in the final film. The “excursion” to the Ghetto is replaced with shots of the train full of deportees, where the director chooses not to dispense with the scene in which Polish boys throw stones at the Jews. In the end, after the revelations in *Le Soir* and *Le Figaro* more than a month after the premiere, Vera Belmont decided to withdraw any information suggesting the authenticity of the story, as well as the epilogue, which states that Misha – now back in Brussels – is still searching through lists of names for her missing parents.

Personal motivation is crucial here. Belmont refers to the case of Roman Polański, who made the main character of *The Pianist* a symbol of his own murdered father. Yet Belmont makes no mention of Władysław Szpilman's memoirs, which form the authentic basis for the film's plot. Nobody has questioned their credibility. The director (who was a child during the war and also lost her parents in a concentration camp) lays the emphasis on the need to acquaint the younger generation with the reality of the Holocaust. Could there possibly be a better subject than the survival of a little Jewish girl wandering across Nazi-occupied Europe?

Here we reach a phenomenon described by the American political scientist Norman Finkelstein as “the Holocaust industry” (*The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*, 2000). Finkelstein opposes the exploitation of the Holocaust by the American media in their treatment of Israel's contemporary history, since this attitude would subordinate an unprecedented historical tragedy to immediate political ends. I am not overly concerned here with his controversial theses. Neither do I know whether Defonseca's “forgery” has anything in common with the phenomenon described by Finkelstein. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasizing that Defonseca's hoax is

by no means an exceptional case within the rich field of Holocaust literature – from the alleged Hitler diaries (published in 1983 by Konrad Kujau) to Helena Demidenko's book about two Ukrainians who join the SS (published in 1993 in Australia) to the scandal provoked by Binjamin Wilkomirski. The latter case deserves further elaboration.

Wilkomirski was really a Swiss musician named Bruno Dösseker, born in Zurich in 1941. In 1995, he published a book entitled *Bruchstücke: Aus einer Kindheit*, in which he described his “own” experiences in the Majdanek concentration camp. After three years of commercial success, the fraud was discovered and the author punished. The publisher withdrew the book from circulation (though only two years ago I saw its English edition in a Warsaw bookshop). Yet I have managed to purchase *Survivre avec les loups* today – 1 March 2008. The publication is still “warm.” Misha (the young actress Mathilde Goffart) is on the cover. The author thanks XO Editions (an imprint of Laffront) and her editor Marie-Thérèse Cuny for their help with the new edition of her memoirs. I describe it here as a “publication,” because – though I have known since yesterday that the book is not an autobiography – I am not inclined to call it a novel. The film is still running at the Paris cinema, in afternoon hours when children on their winter holidays can see it.

So Misha Defonseca has confessed? But to what? To lying or to the nightmares that have tormented her since the war, which she has dressed up in the form of a beautiful fable? As I read this book with film pictures on the cover, I cannot fight off the sense that we are dealing with a manipulation as ideological as it is financial. I feel embarrassed. Both Wilkomirski and Defonseca created falsifications that perhaps served the “inner truth” of their authors, but certainly have not served the historical truth about the extermination of the Jewish nation by a modern European state in a “scientific manner” (as Adorno and Horkheimer suggested). Neither have they served the truth about the tacit consent to genocide betrayed by other modern states, including France.

President Chirac's gesture of apology and the later declarations of President Sarkozy could be compromised in this situation. It would be enough for a primary school student to discover that the film *Survivre avec les loups* was based on a lie and that Misha's autobiography was a hoax. This young person might easily decide that various other stories “pushed on him by his elders” might also be untrue – that the Nazis did not kill children and that the death camps were mere conjecture. Here the “professional” anti-Semites and so-called “deniers” could get involved. Indeed, they regard any literary and cinematic discourse around Misha Defonseca as part of a global Jewish conspiracy. For them, this conspiracy also includes the solid archival work of French, American, and Israeli historians (incidentally, they classify the findings of Polish historian Jan Tomasz Gross in the same way), as well as *Les Bienveillantes*, the brilliant French-language novel by American author Jonathan Littell about an SS officer who witnesses and participates in the Holocaust. The borderline between lies and fiction is sometimes very fine, though it inevitably leads to ethical conclusions. Philippe Di Folco expresses the following opinion on the Dösseker-“Wilkomirski” affair in his book, *Les grandes impostures littéraires* (Paris: Vrin, 2004):

But now, when he has publically confessed to his lie, it is appropriate to discuss the accusations raised against him. None of this can explain why two films have been made about him with

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public money – and with the blessing of certain world authorities on psychoanalysis as well as various Jewish luminaries. In the end, he was able to make money on the memory of the victims of fascism, pretend to be a survivor... lie to his wife and children about his adoption, talk about the sufferings of a little boy lost in the Polish snows, and then – like a traveling salesman – go from conference to conference, accept money, and consider all this to be normal (275)

It is worth adding here that Wilkomirski's false identity was only discovered thanks to a DNA test.

Four years after the publication of Di Folco's brilliant book and ten years after the Wilkomirski scandal, history is repeating itself. In fact, Defonseca published her book two years after *Bruchstücke* (1995). Like Wilkomirski, she created a fable and wrote about something that never happened.

Yet here I fall into certain traps of writing that have become genuine dilemmas within literary theory. By writing about "an event that never happened," I evoke one definition of fiction. The title of this article refers not to the extermination of the Jews, but to a narrative about the Holocaust in a book pretending to be authentic. But is such a fake or forgery a work of non-fiction or fiction? Was the fact that both books functioned as personal memoirs – and that their authors presented them as such – the reason for the referential reading that yesterday turned out to be a referential illusion? The text of the book is the same, but its semantic dimension has changed. The truth has become lies. Or perhaps it has not become lies, but simply a plausible tale about something that might have happened (people wanted to kill a little girl, but wolves rescued her). Perhaps this is the beautiful fairy tale of Peter and the Wolf, a myth imposed upon a terrible reality? The cover of the American edition – *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years* – features a Barbie-like blonde girl with little wolves in her arms.

A question immediately arises that literary scholars have avoided. Who determines the "ontological" status of the world depicted in the text? Is it authorial intention or the reader? And what if the author hides his or her (deceitful) intention? As we weep at the film about little Misha, do we immerse ourselves in a story about human destiny in which miraculous events take place? Or do we grasp particular details like the Polish boys throwing stones at the train transporting Jews to Auschwitz? When we think that Misha Defonseca really saw this, we fall into various complexes associated with Polish anti-Semitism. But when we discover three weeks later that the author hiding behind the name Misha Defonseca invented the whole thing, do we cease to believe this fact or do we ask who told her that Polish boys threw stones at a train full of a Jews? In short, we ask not about the truth, but about the story serving as the basis for another story pretending to be the truth. We offload our complexes onto the person of the author. Since she spent the war in Belgium and never went to German-occupied Poland, we ask what right she had to depict such scenes. We ask what documents might have formed the basis for the constructions of the book and the film. In short, we move with a certain measure of relief to questions about plausibility.

With the same sense of relief, I set about reading the book. I feel that I have been duped, so I carefully search this text that pretends to be the truth. I search through it mercilessly, since by now I am deeply committed. I am fighting for the truth. The book

appears to be just as beautiful as the film. So it would appear, but in fact it is a mere compilation of popular literary tropes and clichés – from the motif of a child raised by animals (like Mowgli from Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*) to the tale of a little girl separated from her parents to the stereotype of an anti-Semitic Poland. As I read the book, I am not surprised that “ordinary” readers believed Misha's story. The fairy tale themes mingle here with realistic depictions, while the hero is a child. The book beguiles the reader like Kipling's tales. Yet publishers and even a famous director believed Ms. Defonseca (De Wael?). Nobody looked for consistency in the dates. Nobody asked questions about the child's physical capabilities. The author convinced everybody of her Jewish background, constantly rejecting the name De Wael in the book and claiming that she only received it at the beginning of the war as a child hidden by Catholics. Indeed, it is almost as if Monique De Wael – “Misha Defonseca” – had foreseen or anticipated her later exposure.

This suggestive narrative leads to another legitimate question. Perhaps the documents discovered and exposed in *Le Soir* were also fakes? After all, other documents speak of the production of such papers during the war, while the main character in the book also talks about the fabrication of documents for Jewish children. A vicious circle. Who are we to believe? According to the theories of “new history” (Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit), it is possible to destroy the credibility of records. Jacques Derrida repeats that lies can never be proven, since the liar may always respond that he believed what he said and was mistaken. Then the opposite of the truth is not lies, but error.

Literary scholars are presently mired in irresolvable questions about the textual signs of fictionality, the haze of interpretation, interpretive communities, intention and intentionality, the immanent ethics of the literary text, and a theory that one might alternately describe as narrative or dialogue. All these intellectual endeavors reveal their powerlessness in the face of the situation I have described. Theory becomes anti-theory not because scientific thinking has deconstructed itself, but because life constantly imposes questions that theory cannot handle. The average reader does not ask about the difference between truth and fiction. Yet he or she feels deeply injured when somebody attempts to deceive him, when a text pretends to be authentic when in fact it is not.

Be that as it may, a substantial portion of contemporary prose clearly feigns authenticity. So what is the difference between Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* and *Survivre avec les loups*? Both narratives are written in the first person. Both depict subjective experiences – those of an executioner in Littell's book and of a victim in Defonseca's. Both texts have undergone processes of verification – though Littell's fictional novel has not revealed any historical errors, while Defonseca's fake “true story” contains many.

And yet this is not the point. Ms. Defonseca has violated the communicative contract. The interpretive community for whom she wrote her text expected truth in the classic sense – not some hazy “inner truth” or the expression of nightmares. All these justifications may apply to literature, and indeed readers have become accustomed to this idea. They have given literature a license to spin fairy tales. But with texts about the Holocaust, they expect a clear and unambiguous vision. Even if they are prepared to forgive the author for errors and for gaps in his or her historical education, they still find the meaning of the text in its endeavors to reconstruct the past – and not in mere pretending. Lying violates

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the rules of the game. In fact, this is not quite the right expression. Lying excludes the very possibility of the game. Testimonies to the Holocaust are inevitably monotonous, dark, and sad. Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman have written recently about the silence of witnesses in their book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. In the case of Defonseca's work, the author dresses up this dark subject in new robes, depicting not the camps or deportations, but a child, animals, nature, the road. Here and there we find blood, but not often. The hero struggles with nature rather than with evil people. At a certain moment – as in a fairy tale – she faces a test, and – as in a fairy tale – she emerges victorious. She kills the enemy. Then she happens upon some good people. Defonseca has constructed the plot of a fairy tale. The fake true story of *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years* tells of an event that never happened. The author has created her own Holocaust.

We might mention two cases where the truth of a text – despite the author's intentions – became the domain of the reader. Firstly, we may recall the outrage in Poland at the reception of Jerzy Kosíński's *The Painted Bird*. Western readers interpreted this work – which the author himself characterized as a novel – as a true account of the German occupation of Poland. The second example is Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, a work of authentic prose that Frank's father edited for publication purposes after his daughter's death. In this case, the discoveries of researchers working on the manuscript in no way disturbed the referential reading of Anne's record. In the cases of Wilkomirski and Defonseca, all readers – in my opinion – should share my sense of shock. But will they? The answer is uncertain.

In contemporary times, the collection of reading testimonies is no longer the painstaking and impossible work of sociologists. The press broke the news of Defonseca's hoax. I found the reactions of various readers and viewers on the Internet. Literary scholars should not ignore this source of information. I looked at the FERUS website where Serge Aroles published his articles. The responses of internet users mainly referred to questions of the relations between human beings and wolves. Both the film and the book had convinced their audiences. People referred to Aroles' "scientific" research with irony. Many insisted that wild animals and people could live together. The plot roused no objections, while the question of the Holocaust disappeared from view. People noticed the physical limitations of the child more than any historical errors. Right up until the official exposure of the hoax, neither readers nor viewers questioned the authenticity of the story. Later they wrote about the right to subjective experience. The documents presented also raised doubts, since Jane Daniel – the American editor of *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years* – had posted them on the Internet after losing a lawsuit against the author.

The favorable reception of the film and the book – sometimes even ridiculing the findings of the "truth searchers" – is puzzling. Prominent Holocaust scholars have not generally concerned themselves with such matters. Instead, we find them deeply immersed in scholarly work on the reconstruction and redaction of documents, in disputes over research methodology, and in discussions about the differences between testimony and historical narrative. Yet perhaps they have forgotten that this subject – like all subjects – can fall prey to mass culture. If there has been any discussion of Wilkomirski's hoax, it



is only because the text has exceptional artistic merit. Philosophers and psychoanalysts have also written about this case.

Misha Defonseca's book circulated happily for thirteen years in print runs reaching millions of copies. Only the production of the film raised any doubts among Jewish groups in Belgium. I am not concerned here with precisely what happened to the film later in this country. For me, the problem is that eminent scholars have ignored the influence of hoaxes on the epistemological dimension, when supposed truth turns into lies and the audience for these lies includes young people and children. In the case under discussion here, the problem of the Holocaust gives way to the problem of a friendship between a little girl and a wolf.

French people with whom I have spoken tend to downplay the matter. I have already mentioned that the left-wing *Nouvel Observateur*, which wrote a favorable review of the film after the premiere, did not withdraw its positive appraisal a month later. Instead, the newspaper has interpreted the whole affair in "expressive" categories. The author had to give expression to what had lingered inside her after the war – the trauma of losing her parents. One critic described this process as a form of catharsis.

In her own explanations, the author emphasizes that she did not receive any money for the book, since she fell victim to the machinations of the editor. Of course, this would support the thesis of the book's expressive and cathartic genesis. But what does this catharsis have to do with the twenty-five million dollars that the American editor – Jane Daniel – now owes the author? In 2005, Misha Defonseca went to court demanding half the book's total royalties. The myth of expression had come to an end. As long as she transmitted her fantastic tale orally, even at synagogues and universities, nobody would speak about money. Only the written record of these Holocaust fantasies – a work fabricated by two (at least two) people for the consumer market and exposed as inauthentic years later by chance – could become a legal and financial scandal. I keep thinking about what Defonseca said as she showed her compass at the sneak preview of the film – after she had won the lawsuit against her editor. How can we speak here of catharsis?

The tangled tale I have presented has multiple dimensions. In discussing the literary facts of the case, I have examined only the most controversial moments. I leave the rest to other scholars – those who work on the Holocaust, those who write about the anthropology of literature and its reception, and those for whom the ethics of the text remains an important problem.

*Translation: Stanley Bill*