WILD CHILD

For most of the second world war, a young Jewish girl risked her life wandering through Europe. During her travels, she was adopted by wolves. Can Misha Defonseca's amazing story be true? By Christine Toomey. Photographs by Gigi Cohen

Her face pressed close to the wolf's muzzle, Misha Defonseca inhales deeply, filling her lungs with the overpowering, strangely sweet smell of the beast. Then she laughs and in her thick French accent declares: "For me, humans stink, you know. But this is better than Chanel No 5. It is the smell of my home." As the 10-stone wolf rises up on his hind legs and strains at the chain-link fence of his enclosure at Wolf Hollow – a sanctuary for 14 British Columbian timber wolves, an endangered species, on the outskirts of Ipswich, Massachusetts – Misha puts her hand against the mesh and strokes the pads and talons of his giant paws.

When the wolf wanders off to bask in the thin afternoon sun with the rest of the pack, Misha puts her hands to her mouth and lets out a bone-tingling howl. While most of the animals remain perfectly still, the leader of the pack, a lone grey-haired female, slowly throws back her head and answers Misha's call with a much lower and longer cry.

My first instinct on hearing an outline of Misha's childhood mirrors the reaction of most averagely cynical adults: how could it have been possible for a young Belgian child to have wandered alone for over three years across Nazi-occupied Europe in search of her missing Jewish parents? How could she, as a child of nine, have killed a German soldier in self-defence? Was it possible, as she claims, that during her 2000-mile odyssey she twice fell into the company of wolves and was fed and protected by them? Such stories seem to belong more firmly in the realm of tales such as Romulus and Remus, and Rudyard Kipling's Jungle ⟿→

PHOTOGRAPHS: NETWORK

Misha Defonseca, now 64, talks to the animals at a sanctuary for timber wolves (far left) in Massachusetts

Book. Talk of a film being made of Misha's memoirs further heightened my suspicions.

To meet Misha is to meet a generous and passionate but troubled soul. Listening to her talk for many hours, however, in great detail and with outbursts of barely controlled rage, it is possible to start believing that at least some of what she claims happened to her is true.

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Misha is 64 now, a petite woman with short, dyed-blonde hair and piercing blue eyes. She walks stiffly using a stick, because of hip surgery, and swears constantly at the inconvenience. Her home on the outskirts of Natick, 50 miles southwest of Boston, Massachusetts, touchingly reflects a character whose emotional development was brutally interrupted at an early age. It is a child's fantasy: from the rafters of the sprawling living room hang dozens of elaborate animal mobiles, wind chimes, mock dinosaur bones and butterflies. Large, multicoloured mock spiders crawl along the backs of chairs, and soft toy animals are draped across the furniture. Most of the immaculately kept house, however, is given over to live animals: 14 cats and kittens, three dogs and a blue jay with a broken wing rule different parts of the building. Outside, a series of shelters lined with thick sheepskin rugs has been arranged for stray cats, and feeders for squirrels, skunks and raccoons are full to overflowing. "This is my garden of Eden. It is the only place I feel safe," says Misha.

Not as safe, though, as she would wish. Since she started telling her extraordinary survival story in schools, synagogues, universities, and even a local army base, some have taken exception to her outspokenness. Her condemnation, for instance, of the warm welcome given by the American space programme to German scientists after the war has made her enemies. Last year an explosive device was placed in the letter box at the end of her drive, which blew it to pieces.

This was not the sort of welcome she envisioned when she urged her husband, Maurice, a senior executive in a multinational computer company, to seek a transfer to New England 13 years ago. The couple had already fled their native Belgium five years before for Holland, after neo-Nazis scrawled a star of David on the door of their Brussels apartment. "I thought in America I would escape the ghosts of war and prejudice of Europe," she says. "But now I know I never will."

It was not until she arrived in the United States that she began to talk publicly in her local synagogue of what had happened to her as a child. Like many Holocaust survivors, she says she preferred to "keep the door on that pain and misery shut". Her husband only learnt about her past little by little, when he pressed her about her repeated nightmares. Her son, Morris, knew only that his grandparents had perished in the war. "I did not tell him, because I did not want his pity as he was growing up. I wanted him to be able to get mad with me and fight with me as any son would."

She says she was eventually persuaded to write a book – Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years – when a small Boston publisher, Mt Ivy Press, approached her after hearing that wolves had sheltered her as a child during the war. She now says she regrets the decision, as she has become involved in a legal wrangle over money with her publisher. "My life has been made a misery by this. I learnt long ago that it was better to remain silent, and I should never have forgotten that lesson."

She says she was first taught the value of silence by her parents, who forbade her to use her real surname – she no longer remembers what it was – for fear this would reveal her Jewish identity. She remembers little about her parents, who were almost certainly illegal aliens seeking refuge in Belgium as Europe faced war. She knows only that her mother, Gerushah, "was Russian, had dark hair and was a tender, but anxious, woman", and her father, Reuven, was "tall with fair hair, spoke German and Yiddish" and, she believes, could have been involved in the Resistance.

Misha with Marthe, one of the people she stayed with in Belgium after her parents were arrested by Nazis in 1941

Misha, then called Mishke, last saw her parents in the spring of 1941. She was seven years old. Fearing they might one day be arrested, her parents had made arrangements for her to be looked after by the family of a Belgian dentist if they disappeared. The DeWael family, who took her in and renamed her Monique, made it plain that the arrangement was a purely financial one. As she lay in bed one night, she overheard the dentist's wife boasting: "If the allies win the war, we'll get points for saving a Jew. And if the Germans win, we'll get in good with them by handing her over."

After spending just six months with the DeWaels, the frightened child ran away and went in search of her parents. Taking only a knapsack full of bread and apples, and a tiny compass set in a small cowrie shell, given to her by a member of the DeWael family, a kindly uncle she called "Grandfather", she set off late one night. All she knew, she says, was that she had to head for the east. She remembers Grandfather showing her in a child's atlas that Germany was to the east of Belgium, and saying he believed that was where her parents had been deported. To a small child, Germany looked on that map as if it were just round the corner.

When she could not steal food, she foraged for seeds, berries and live insects

It was the autumn of 1941. Afraid that she would be caught and sent back to the DeWaels, she says she avoided human contact wherever possible by keeping to country paths and woodland tracks, sleeping rough at night in deserted outbuildings or making dens and hide-outs from leaves and branches. She fed herself by sneaking into farms and homes and filching supplies. If she was stopped, she says, she would pretend she was a mute beggar. When she could not steal food, she foraged for seeds, berries and, eventually, live insects, learning by trial and error what would make her vomit. As winter set in, hunger drove her to eat pigswill, leaves and dirt, until she stole a knife, which enabled her to skin rabbits she found caught in traps; as well as eating the raw flesh, she used their skins to line her boots and clothes. Although sleeping in the forest frightened her at first, she says ⟶ 47

she was "more frightened of being handed over to the Germans. The thought of finding my parents kept me walking day after day".

Eventually, Misha crossed through the Ardennes and into Germany. Having reached her destination, however, she realised she had no way of communicating with the people to ask questions about her missing parents and, anyway, she was too afraid of being arrested to seek help. So she continued trudging eastwards, avoiding towns and villages until, without realising it, she reached Poland. "I was afraid to go back and knew I had to keep moving to survive."

Over time, her survival tactics grew increasingly sophisticated. "I knew that when I heard church bells, it would mean people would be leaving their houses for a while and I had more time to steal food." She was caught unawares on one raiding mission by a farm hand, who hurled a rock at her back. She says she only just managed to escape by dragging herself into nearby woods, where she lay on the ground howling with pain. It was then that she was approached by what she thought was a dog, "long and thin, with shaggy grey hair and twice my size".

After prowling around her for a while, the animal wandered off. But the following day, and for many days after that, as she continued walking, the animal returned, each time edging a little closer, until they started sleeping next to one another for warmth. By this time, Misha says, she had realised the animal was a lone she-wolf, "because she never barked. She howled". Misha named the animal Maman Rita. Child and beast, she says, shared their food – hers, stolen cheese and meat, and the wolf's, freshly killed hares – and travelled together for several weeks.

This extraordinary alliance was shattered when a hunter shot the wolf and, Misha says, she fell into despair. "Maman Rita was so affectionate with me, licking me and protecting me, I had the feeling that she was my mother. When she was killed I erased human beings from my heart. It was a terrible feeling of hate."

She continued her journey eastwards until she came to the outskirts of a large city. Breaking her habit of avoiding human habitation, she risked entering the city in search of her parents, and saw a long line of prisoners with the star of David sewn onto their sleeves being herded along one of the roads into town. Ignored as a ragamuffin, she followed the procession until it reached a walled-off area of the city she now believes was the Warsaw ghetto. Believing her parents could be inside, she persuaded another child to smuggle her through a hole in the wall. Her descriptions of atrocities she says she witnessed once inside are among the most chilling in her book. Terrified, she escaped by hiding overnight in the ghetto's cemetery and then clambering over its back wall and following a railway track. Some weeks later, she stumbled into another town she believes was Otwock, where she saw soldiers standing on military vehicles and firing into a crowd.

After escaping once again into the woods, she continued walking east until she unwittingly crossed Poland's border with Ukraine, in what must have been the spring of 1943. There, she stumbled across a group of wolf pups playing on a rocky outcrop. When the elderly she-wolf baby-sitting the pups challenged her, she had learnt enough of the animals' behaviour patterns to avoid confrontation by "holding still in a crouch and averting my eyes and [looking] small". After an intense inspection by the adult wolf, Misha says she shared pieces of stolen cheese with the pups and rolled around with them on the ground.

Gradually she became accepted into this second pack of six adults and four pups. "I became the lowest in the pack hierarchy," says Misha, who believes she must have stayed with them for several months. She became so integrated into their ways, she says, that she fed with the other pups on their mother's regurgitated raw meat.

It was during this time that she endured one of her most harrowing ordeals. Separated from the wolves while foraging for wild berries, she witnessed a soldier dragging a young girl into a clearing, raping her at knife point, spitting on her and then shooting her in the head. As Misha crouched behind a bush, the soldier spotted her and came after her. Although she was little more than nine years old, she claims she drew her hunting knife as he leant over her, and stabbed him repeatedly in the stomach and neck. When he finally lay still, she says, she unstrapped his gold watch and ran, covered in the soldier's blood.

She describes how the wolves gathered round and licked the blood from her face. "That is what they do to each other when they have killed their prey. It was as though I had killed my prey too." Despite such appalling experiences, she describes this time as "the most beautiful days of my life". They were short-lived: after a power struggle between two of the male wolves, Misha struck out with the loser in the battle, and then he disappeared. Unable to stand the loneliness, she decided to make her way back towards Belgium. "I thought, if I had survived everything that I had and I was a child, that my parents must have survived too and would be back at home, waiting for me."

After first heading south, she began to follow her compass westwards. While she was still in Ukraine, however, she witnessed the atrocity that, she says, has haunted her nightmares most often over the past 50 years. As she was skirting the edge of a wooded area, she spotted soldiers herding a group of young children from the back of a truck into a field and lining them up alongside a long pit. After the soldiers had gone along the line, straightening the children's shoulders, they opened fire. "It hurt me so much on top of all the other things," she says. "At that moment it was like a switch. I made my account with humans. It was over."

Her faith in human nature was restored briefly when she encountered a group of Jewish partisans who had set up camp in dense woodland in western Ukraine. After catching her spying on their activities, they dragged her kicking into their camp, but they then showed her great kindness, feeding and sheltering her through the harsh winter months of what she has calculated must have been 1943-44.

She writes with great affection in her memoirs of the leader of this group – "a strong and dashing man" known to the others only as Misha. It was as a tribute to his kindness, she says, that many years later she changed her name to his. In one touching scene, she writes of the first time the partisans encouraged her to take a bath and laid out fresh clothes for her to wear. After she emerged from the curtained-off bathing area, they roared with laughter. "I had put on the clean clothes they'd given me well enough, but sticking out beneath them, right over my clean body, were my filthy old rags. Not wanting to give up their precious wolf smell, I had put them back on." When the partisans broke camp, she set off again on her own.

One wolf was so affectionate with Misha, 'I had the feeling she was my mother'

Misha's account of the journey she took westwards back to Belgium is sketchier than that of the route she took to the east. Over the past few years, by piecing together the events and the names of places she remembers, she has worked out that during the next 18 months she made her way through Romania to Yugoslavia and then to Italy and France, arriving back in Belgium in the spring of 1945.

Although she was reunited with her "grandfather", who broke the news that her parents had certainly perished, the old man was unable to look after her. But he did pass on the only photographs from her childhood that have survived: one of himself, one of Misha with his wife, Marthe, who had since died, and a formal portrait of the girl taken when she was seven, in preparation for papers identifying her as Monique DeWael.

As the war came to an end, Misha, then nearly 11, was fostered briefly by a pair of teachers, who quickly despaired of her after she insisted on urinating in their garden and kept breaking into their house even though she was given a key. She was then transferred to a convent, where she finished her education. As a young woman she worked as a teacher on cruise ships sailing between Belgium and the Belgian Congo, and she met her first husband, a merchant seaman. Shortly after their son was born, they separated.

"For many years, men were my prey. When my need was urgent I took them and then discarded them. I did not know what love was until I met Maurice," says Misha. This is her second husband, whom she met in 1970 after she took secretarial work in the computer company where he worked. Maurice, a tall, slightly stooped, soft-spoken man six years her junior, is clearly devoted to his wife. Though her desire to move from Belgium to Holland and then to the US has cost him dear – 10 years ago he lost his highly paid job, and he has been unemployed since – his support for and belief in his wife are heartfelt. "I have never doubted Misha, not for one moment," he says. "She is very different from other women. She relies a lot more on her instincts. When Misha gets frustrated, sometimes she will bite me, but that happens now less and less."

Evidence of his wife's insecurity is to be found in the impressive collection of hunting knives secreted around the couple's home. In the basement, she keeps over 200 pairs of shoes, neatly stacked in boxes. "I suffered terrible pain because I did not have the right shoes while I was walking in the woods as a child," she says. "Now I buy every pair of shoes I like. Many of them I have never worn." She has had repeated corrective operations on her feet to straighten deformed bones, and her hips now require urgent surgery, she believes as a result of having walked such long distances as a child.

Her wartime experiences have left her afraid of too much human contact. She says she only really feels comfortable with animals. "With animals you know where you are. If they bare their teeth you know they are angry. But humans can smile at you, then put a knife in your back. What happened in my young life changed me for ever."

When Misha first tried to write about what had happened to her during the war, she claims her Belgian foster parents made her burn her journal page by page. "They accused me of making it all up. In that moment I vowed I would never talk of this again." Now, she says, she wishes she never had.

While she says she is happy with the French version of her book, Survivre avec les Loups, adapted and expanded by a French writer, she says the American ⋙→

original is a "politically correct" version of her story, sanitised and sweetened for the public. "Mine is not a sweet story. It is full of rage," she says. She claims the legal wrangle with her publisher has deprived her of substantial royalties and a hefty advance on the forthcoming German publication of her book. This, she says, has left her so short of money she is threatened with foreclosure on her home.

She says she cares little for those who do not believe her story. "There are people who say, 'Unbelievable.' That is their problem, not mine. It is not me who asked to tell my story. I didn't want to." She had written it for her son. It was others who persuaded her to publish it.

There are those who care passionately, however, about whether she is to be believed or not. "I don't think Holocaust denial is a major issue, but we have to be on very firm ground with all of this," says Antony Polonsky, professor of Eastern European history at Brandeis University, near Boston. "The highest scholarly standards have to be applied to this material... If it can be shown to be in any way dubious it can be used to cast doubt on everything else."

Nobel peace prize winner Elie Wiesel, an author and leading scholar on the Holocaust and a survivor of Auschwitz, described Misha's memoirs as "very moving. Survivors have special testimonies which nobody else has and therefore they must be read and shared... How can I question their veracity?"

But the furious row that erupted recently over a book called Fragments, by Binjamin Wilkomirski, the memoir of a young Latvian boy's survival in a Nazi concentration camp, has fuelled an international debate about the authenticity of Holocaust memoirs. Historians argued that the work, which won the National Jewish Book Award in the US and the Jewish Quarterly Literary Prize in Britain, should have been published as fiction, after doubts emerged about whether the author was a

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Latvian Jew or, as some records seem to suggest, a Swiss Protestant who was never in a concentration camp.

Jane Daniel, of Mt Ivy Press, says she did consider publishing Misha's memoir with a disclaimer to protect the book from any disputes over its authenticity, but became so convinced of its veracity, "I felt that would do a disservice to Misha. Many of Misha's recollections of the layout of the Warsaw ghetto, for instance, are correct, as are the events she witnessed in Otwock."

While fact-checking the memoirs, Daniel also uncovered evidence to suggest that the leader of the partisans who briefly took her under their wing could have been Misha Gildenman, a prominent member of the Jewish underground in Ukraine. Gildenman emigrated to Israel after the war and died there in 1957 at the age of 60, but one elderly member of his family contacted by The Sunday Times says she vividly remembers hearing about a wild child who had been taken into the partisans' camp. Hannah Gildenman, 74, was married to Misha Gildenman's son Simcha, who fought alongside his father as a partisan in the war. Hannah lost her entire family during the Holocaust, but she survived Auschwitz and still bears the tattoo of her concentration camp number on her arm.

At her small, airy apartment in a town close to Jerusalem, she says both her husband and father-in-law spoke affectionately about the little girl. "They used to laugh about how the little girl was the dirtiest child they had ever seen, with very long fingernails," she says. "They said she looked as if her whole life had been spent with the wolves." Hannah has never had any contact with Misha Defonseca and it is hard to imagine another survivor of the Holocaust concocting this connection.

Watching Misha with the wolves at Wolf Hollow, mumbling, "*Doucement, doucement*" as they snarl and bite each other's muzzles, it is possible to imagine her alone in their company as a child. But whether her story of living with the wolves is true, or the embellished memories of a childhood grounded in loneliness and trauma, is impossible to establish with certainty.

Joni Soffron, education director at Wolf Hollow, who raised the sanctuary's pack from pups, is firmly convinced. "I have no doubt in my mind that what Misha says happened to her is true. There are certain behavioural patterns that she describes in her book that, in my opinion, even a person who has spent a lot of time with wolves would not necessarily pick up on. A child is not the threat to a wolf that an adult would be. Wolves are naturally afraid of people. They simply got a bad rap in wolf-hating stories like The Three Little Pigs, Little Red Riding Hood, and Peter and the Wolf. The truth is they have been hunted almost to extinction by man."

Misha says she learnt many lessons from the time she spent with wolves: "I learnt from them kindness and acceptance of others. When I came back and saw people not accepting others because of colour or religion, I thought of the wolves and how they accepted me, another kind than their own. Also, wolves never hurt their young in the way some humans do. Humans are very aggressive."

Her childhood traumas have left her deeply ambivalent about what she calls her "life back amongst the humans". Her fighting spirit is evident in the way she narrows her eyes and clenches her fists when she declares with defiance: "We have only one life, damn it, and every moment counts." But in a dark moment, she confesses: "If I had known for sure that my parents were dead, probably I would never have come back." ■