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Holocaust hoax author asks court to ignore her deception

An author who fabricated a best-selling memoir about surviving the Holocaust by living with wolves has asked a US court to ignore the book's veracity in a £17.7 million battle against her former publisher.

By Tom Leonard in New York

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Misha Defonseca, a 71-year-old Belgian, told a judge in Massachusetts that whether Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years was true or not should have no bearing on a seven-year-old court verdict that she and her ghost writer won in a fight over the book's profits.

Jane Daniel, the memoir's American publisher, claims that the 2001 court award against her should be reversed because it later turned out that the book was a hoax.

She also argues that Defonseca only won because the jury was sympathetic towards someone they thought to be a Holocaust survivor.

Her harrowing tale, which was translated into 18 languages and made into a French feature film, was exposed as a fraud in February this year.

Defonseca, who was born Monique De Wael, confessed that her parents had never been sent to Auschwitz and weren't even Jewish.

She also admitted that, contrary to the book, she was never adopted by wolves, she did not kill a German soldier in self-defence and she did not walk 3,000 miles across Europe.

Defonseca said at the time that she had always "felt Jewish" and, representing herself in Middlesex Superior Court in Woburn, argued on Thursday that she had never consciously misled anyone.

"Nothing was concocted to defraud the court. I had been telling my story for years and believed it to be true," she said.

She and Veronica Lee, her ghost writer, argue that the statute of limitations has expired on Mrs Daniel's case.

However, Joseph Orlando, the publisher's lawyer, said the statute did not apply as the jurors had "based their decision on lies".

Mrs Daniel, who persuaded Defonseca to write a book and later worked with a genealogist to expose the fraud, says that the original contract had stipulated that the story had to be true.

Despite its European success, the book only sold 5,000 copies in the US. The jury in 2001 found that Mrs Daniel had failed to promote the book and had hid profits from the author.

Mrs Daniel was ordered to pay Defonseca \$7.5 million and Lee \$3.3 million.

A judge later tripled those amounts after finding Daniel and her small publishing company had misled the authors and tried to claim the book's royalties.

Judge Timothy Feeley did not indicate when he would rule on the case.

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