

A family tragedy sparked Melanie Levensohn's creativity, she tells Joy Sable

ACCORDING TO the saying— frequently attributed to Albert Einstein — coincidences are God's way of staying anonymous. If this is true, there may have been divine intervention in the creation of Melanie Levensohn's debut novel, as an extraordinary coincidence kick-started the whole project.

When Melanie Zipperer married, she took her husband Pascal's surname, Levensohn. She then found out that she was the second Melanie Levensohn. The first was the half-sister of Pascal's cousin, Jacobina Löwensohn, who was only been told of her half-sister's existence by her father on his death bed.

"He had lost all contact with Melanie during the war and then he left for Canada and never knew what happened to his eldest daughter," says Levensohn. "He made her promise to search for Melanie and Jacobina spent ten years trying to find the half-sister she never knew."

Despite years of intensive research, contacting various Holocaust organisations, the International Tracing Service, the Red Cross and other experts, all leads ended with the first Melanie's transport to Auschwitz.

"Jacobina kept the letters and historical documents she compiled during those years in a binder, entitled 'Melanie Levensohn'. She gave it to Pascal who kept it in his office. I opened it and it was extremely moving to see. It is my name, on a fax in German written by an SS Obersturmbannführer in 1943 telling his headquarters that a certain Melanie Levensohn is on a train from Drancy [the French transition camp for Jews] to Auschwitz, and that there are 843 other women on that train. The other moving moment was when I saw a copy of Melanie's registration entry card to Drancy. It had her parents' address, her age and her profession, which was a student back then.

"The fact that I, Melanie Levensohn, came into this family exactly 70 years after the first Melanie Levensohn disappeared; me coming from Germany of all countries, and having studied in Paris just like her, that was just too much.

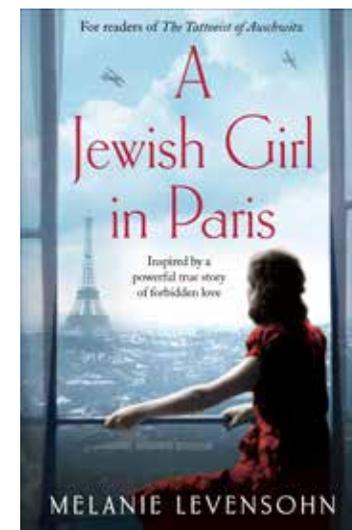
"In addition to strengthening my understanding and appreciation for the Jewish people it also gave me a belief that there is something bigger that I cannot understand." The fact that her own daughter was due to be born on the same day as the original Melanie's birthday "sent shivers through my body", says Levensohn.

For Levensohn, the mystery of the fate of her namesake spurred her to write her first novel. *A Jewish Girl in Paris* is her fictionalised account of young Melanie's life under Nazi rule, interwoven with a modern-day search for the truth by an enterprising French woman.

"I always wanted to write, but I never dared to," says Levensohn. "I wrote my first book when I was eight or nine, I had an old typewriter! I studied literature but I never became a writer. When I read this



Namesakes: Melanie Levensohn and (inset) the lost student with the same name



vineyard in California—all experiences which have found their way, to a greater or lesser extent, into her writing. She has now completed two more novels.

"They are not historic novels. My second novel is a story about motherhood and refugees. I care deeply about the whole refugee situation, the plight of those people who cannot stay in their countries and have to leave everything. My third novel is a completely different story involving the International Criminal Court of Justice and the question of whether child soldiers are perpetrators or victims."

That these books have been written at all is due to the influence of the first Melanie, who in a strange way fanned those initial flames of creativity. "Melanie Levensohn posthumously made me become a writer, so thanks to her I could finally realise my childhood dream of becoming a fiction writer."

The sad fact remains that no one ever found out the first Melanie's fate, though in all probability she perished in Poland. "All traces end in Auschwitz and nobody knows whether she was released or not. I believe she was killed in Auschwitz, but there is no proof."

Levensohn sometimes ponders what she would have said, had she been able to meet her namesake and sip coffee with her in a café in Paris.

"I would have told her, 'Everything will be fine, don't worry.' She would be scared. I would have tried to encourage her to keep going because, in spite of her end, there would be peace and Hitler will be defeated—and she will be remembered."

A Jewish Girl in Paris by Melanie Levensohn is published this week by Pan Macmillan (£16.99).

folder and learned about Melanie Levensohn, the inner urge to do something became very intense and I had to write something. I didn't want to write a documentary, that was not me. Then I started thinking about how to weave these real facts into a fictitious story using the world I know and working it into a plot that would be an interesting read.

"I didn't know what to do, exactly. I was also very worried about writing the historical part because I had no idea about anything of the daily life, what was going on in Paris in those days. I was worried that I would write something wrong so I had to do huge research and dive deep into that time period. I had to read books—not just the historic facts but also the little daily life facts: what did they have to eat, what was the

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price of a baguette, how was the life of the Jewish population step by step restrained and what exactly happened to them.

"My mother tongue is German, I always think in German. I tried to write in English but the German was just pouring out of me. So I thought I would never be a good fiction writer if I don't write in my mother tongue. I started the book in 2015 and it took me about two years to write it. It was published in 2018 and subsequently it was published in Italian and then in French. My big dream was to get it out in English, so my husband, who is American, can finally read the book, and his remaining family too. So it is a very big moment for me that the book is coming out in English.

"Next year the book is coming out in Spanish and Portuguese. It

is memorial to all victims of the atrocities of the Nazis and to the brave people who dedicated their lives to trying to find lost people and reconnecting them to their families. There is so much amazing work going on. It was very interesting to learn, to go to the Holocaust Museum to see the work that has been done and the people who have these archives. You give them a name and they try to search and help you...they are amazing."

Levensohn had a career as a spokesperson for the World Health Organisation, reporting from crisis hotspots such as Liberia during its civil war, Haiti after the devastating earthquake in 2010 and Banda Aceh after the 2004 tsunami.

She also worked as a communications expert at the World Bank in Washington and once owned a