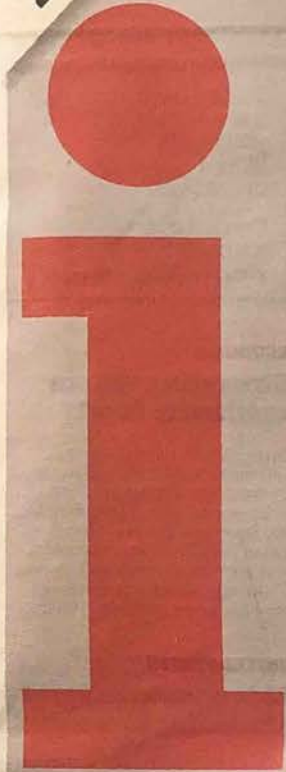


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Melanie Levensohn



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My lost namesake led me to Auschwitz

Changing her surname when she married gave **Melanie Levensohn** the same name as a relative of her husband's who disappeared in France in 1943. The bond she felt changed the course of her life

When I married my husband, Pascal, in 2013 and took his last name, Levensohn, I became the namesake of my husband's cousin once removed - Melanie Levensohn. Back then, I had no idea how deeply and irreversibly the change of my name would also change the course of my life.

I felt like Horatio in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Horatio is a down-to-earth scholar who doesn't believe in ghosts. After the soul of Hamlet's dead father appears, Hamlet tells his friend: "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Nearly a decade after getting married, I finally understand what Hamlet was trying to say: that there are many things we don't know, things we cannot imagine. Only now, I finally comprehend the extraordinary coincidence that was forged through my union with Pascal.

Pascal is Jewish, and his father was interned in a concentration camp in Romanian-controlled Transnistria (today part of Moldova) before he managed to escape and flee to Canada. But his cousin once removed, Melanie Levensohn, was not as fortunate.

Melanie lived in France as a young student in the early 1940s. In December 1943, at the tender age of 19, she was arrested by the French police, handed over to the Germans, and deported via the detention camp Drancy to Auschwitz. There is no trace of her release after the liberation of Auschwitz, and no death

certificate to prove the opposite, so nobody knows for sure if she survived the concentration camp or not. The more realistic assumption is that she did not.

Pascal's family never talked about the cousin in France who disappeared during the Second World War, just as most survivors couldn't speak about the horrendous atrocities they endured during this darkest period of German history.

Silence is often easier to bear than reliving a severe trauma by putting it into words.

Pascal found out about Melanie's existence as late as in 2005, at the bat-mitzvah celebration of his eldest daughter, Amanda,

when his other cousin once removed, Jacobina Löwensohn, finally revealed she'd had a half-sister, Melanie.

Jacobina's father, Lica, had told Jacobina about his first marriage, and his daughter Melanie, for the first time on his deathbed in 1984. At that sad and intense moment of his imminent passing, he asked Jacobina to search for Melanie. And Jacobina - shocked, stunned and moved - promised to do so.

She spent more than 10 years trying to find the half-sister she never knew. Her first destination was the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, which



Pascal's family never talked about the cousin in France who disappeared

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CC 2

17 DEC 1943

Nom : LEVENSOHN

Prénoms : Melanie

Date Naissance : 19.10.24

Lieu : Galatz

Nationalité : roum.

Profession : étudiante

Domicile : Nice
24 L. Hehold

C. I. val. jusqu' Nice 1.12.43

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**FAST FACTS
HOLOCAUST ARCHIVES**

The Arolsen Archives in Germany (arolsen-archives.org) is the world's most comprehensive archive on the victims and survivors of National Socialism.

The collection has information on around 17.5 million people.

To this day, the centre receives enquiries about 20,000 victims of Nazi persecution each year.

On International Holocaust Memorial Day in January this year, the British Government announced plans to make all of its records of the Holocaust available to the public for research and study.

The records will be moved to The Wiener Holocaust Library (wienerholocaustlibrary.org) in London, one of the world's leading archives on the Holocaust and the Nazi era.

and family bond captivated me completely. "Remember me," the ghost of Hamlet's father tells his son in Act I. And that's what I felt Melanie wanted to convey to me when I looked at her picture. Remembrance, not in the Shakespearean sense of bloody revenge, but by honouring her with a beautiful memorial, a book.

I did not just want to write a biography – I was looking for something deeper, something that also expressed my spiritual and historical connection to Melanie. Perhaps a novel? What an overwhelming thought. True, I had always wanted to write, since my early childhood days, and scribbled little stories into my notebooks as long as I can remember. But I never dared to become serious about it, fearing the magnitude of such an undertaking.

This time was different; I was on a mission, driven by a strong inner urge that wouldn't let go of me. Much later, I realised I had already embarked on a bigger journey, leading not only to finding Melanie, but also to finding myself.

What if I could link my life with Melanie's in a different way? By using the real facts of Jacobina's meticulous research and weaving them into fictitious dual love stories, one taking place in the past, during Melanie's time, and one in the present? My head was spinning as the scenes emerged in front of my inner eye.

But the writing was not all easy. To paint a truthful and credible image of the terrible times in which Melanie lived, I had to plunge deeply into her era and read everything I could about Parisian life during the German occupation from 1940-1945. What were the headlines in *Le Figaro*? How much did a bag of ersatz coffee cost? Which films were running in the cinemas? How did the Parisians perceive the German soldiers? When did the repressions against the Jews begin?

In addition, I needed to include countless laws the Nazis had introduced. Fashion designers, for example, were not allowed to make leather belts larger than four centimetres, according to German regulations. Most leather had to be sent to the Reich, and anybody who didn't follow this law lost their business. Clocks were put forward an hour to be in line with Berlin time, and, at night, the headlamps of cars had to be covered with dark blue fabric.

I also kept thinking of the story with the missing "dot" behind Melanie's name. For the briefest of moments, George Dreyfus had given Jacobina hope. By choosing to write fiction, I now had the unique opportunity to change Melanie's sad ending. Maybe Mr Dreyfus was right and Mr Klarsfeld was wrong. I often wondered. Maybe Melanie did survive, after all? I opted for a different ending. It is not an entirely happy one, but unexpected and bittersweet, showing once more how remarkable coincidences can shape our lives.



A Jewish Girl in Paris by Melanie Levensohn (Pan Macmillan, £16.99) is out now

ther indication of where Melanie could have gone after being freed. And soon afterwards, the American Red Cross in Baltimore sent Jacobina the distressing truth: "Melanie Levensohn did not survive the Auschwitz concentration camp. We have enclosed a copy of page 473 from Serge Klarsfeld's book. Klarsfeld put a small dot next to the survivors' names. Much to our regret, there is no dot after Ms Levensohn's name."

Jacobina kept the documents in a binder and, after accepting her half-sister's death at Auschwitz, gave it to my husband Pascal.

Years later I found the binder in his office and immersed myself in Melanie's tragic life. Reading my name on those documents, especially the ones written in German – my mother tongue – sent shivers through my body. And when I stared into Melanie's fresh, innocent face on the black-and-white photo, I couldn't help but imagine her back then, full of dreams and aspirations, and how her blossoming life was brutally ended.

The remarkable coincidence that, exactly 70 years after Melanie Levensohn became a victim of Nazi Germany, another Melanie Levensohn – from Germany – joined the family, and the fact that I studied in France, just like my namesake, caused an emotional upheaval in our family. "You're God sent," whispered Jacobina when I met her for the first time in New York. There are indeed more things between Heaven and Earth..., I thought, agreeing with Shakespeare.

I asked myself whether my coming into Pascal's family was a sign of the Jewish concept of "tikun olam", of repairing the world and turning it into a more tolerant and peaceful place.

Melanie's fate, our identical name

runs an extensive archive documenting victims and survivors. A researcher pointed her to Nazi hunter Serge Klarsfeld's *Memorial of the Deportation of the Jews of France*, which lists the names of more than 80,000 people, where Melanie is mentioned as being deported on a train, together with 850 other Jews.

Mr Klarsfeld himself almost became the victim of a Nazi raid, but he hid behind a wardrobe and evaded discovery. He and his wife devoted the remainder of their lives to tracking down Nazi criminals and collaborators. Thanks to them, many were brought to trial.

Jacobina also wrote to the American Red Cross Holocaust Victims Tracing Centre and the International Tracing Service in Germany (now the Arolsen Archives) as well as to the Shoah Memorial in Paris and many other organisations.

The responses were staggering and emotionally disturbing. The Shoah Memorial sent a copy of Mel-



By the Mur des Noms (Wall of Names), in Paris, where Levensohn is listed. Inset left: the author

Paris's Shoah Memorial found an entry card to Drancy detention camp (left) and photo of Levensohn (main)

nie's entry card to Drancy and a photograph that must have been taken shortly before her deportation. Furthermore, Jacobina received several photocopies of documents signed by high-ranking Gestapo officers confirming Melanie's departure on convoy 63 from Paris to Auschwitz on 17 December 1943.

The French Police Department even had a proof of Melanie's last address in Paris in the 9th arrondissement. Unfortunately, all traces ended in Auschwitz, suggesting she was murdered there.

Interestingly, one researcher came to a different conclusion. Georges Dreyfus, who in the 80s compiled a list of Holocaust victims similar to Mr Klarsfeld's, mentions Melanie Levensohn as a "rescapée", a survivor, igniting a flicker of hope in Jacobina. But there was no fur-