

For a first-time author, albeit one who has played midwife to innumerable authors and their books, Carmen Callil picked an ambitious subject for her first solo opus. *Bad Faith: a forgotten history of family and fatherland* tells the ignominious story of one Louis Darquier de Pellepoix, a coward, bully, barrow-boy and fantasist; a failure who found his true destiny 'managing' the Jewish population of Vichy France and growing fat, literally and metaphorically, on the proceeds. Until now, Darquier, who died in 1980, was little more than a footnote in history and might have remained so had not Callil joined the dots of memory. For it was only when reading the subtitles of *Le Chagrin et la pitié*, the story of a French town during the Occupation, that the name Louis Darquier de Pellepoix rang a discordant bell. Darquier was the family name of Callil's psychiatrist, a young woman whose suicide in 1970 left her patient examining the clues she had left as to her own life and her comment that "there are some things and some people you can never forgive".

"the worst of all of them. I want people to know," she continues. "How can Anita Roddick say how charming they are!" she expostulates, referring to the Body Shop founder's sell-out. But in contrast to the anger that comes through when she talks about it, the book itself is cool and measured, frequently ironic and often funny. Coco Chanel, for example, is summarily despatched as "a horizontal collaborator" and the accounts of Myrtle and Louis before they hit their grim stride are recounted with vigour and wit. "I don't know if I'm a writer," Callil muses, heartened by early responses from the likes of Michael Burleigh. "I've got too much respect for writers to think that having been a publisher makes you a writer. We'll see." She'd like to write further books but not, she claims, her memoirs. "I can't see the point of them myself."

Lesser people than Callil have written their memoirs and she wouldn't be the first publisher to do so – recent precedents, though, are less than encouraging. She'd certainly have a story to tell and, with a childhood she describes as "my purgatory", it could ride the wave of so-called

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Sins of the father

Former publisher **Carmen Callil** is long-listed for the Samuel Johnson Prize with an ambitious first book. **Liz Thomson** found her anxiously awaiting judgment

"I have to assume Anne Darquier knew the full story," says Callil now. "I interviewed a lot of her friends: she didn't speak about her parents very much but she did say her father was simply appalling, a war criminal beyond belief who did terrible things to the Jews; that her mother took drugs and alcohol." Myrtle, an Australian who claimed to be many things, not least an heiress, was a bigamist who – unable to support both a child and the lavish lifestyle that she and her co-fantasist, would-be Baron Darquier de Pellepoix pursued – effectively gave her daughter away for £1 a week. At the time of the birth, the couple's peregrinations had taken them to London, so Anne grew up English in conditions of considerable hardship, eventually winning a place at Oxford.

The basic facts of filial relationship established, Callil began eight years of research in French, German and Spanish archives. "There was a great deal in Spain," where Franco provided cosy refuge after the German defeat. Gradually, Louis Darquier (de Pellepoix was his grandiloquent addition) emerged from the shadows. The French, Callil believes, have acknowledged their war crimes, "but I don't think they've contemplated men like Darquier, who were basically the scumbags who made the whole thing go." Both the Vichy government and the Nazis loathed him yet allowed him to become Commissioner for Jewish Affairs because each saw him as someone they could manipulate. "Much of the loggerheads between Vichy and the Nazis were to do with money, because the Germans were raping France for the German war effort. Vichy was concerned to keep it all back but, when it came to Jewish property, they both wanted it." Small wonder that Darquier, his eye forever focused on the main chance, thrived.

The story is a complicated one and Callil admits that she didn't realise the scale of her ambition when she embarked on it. But having dislodged any number of skeletons, she is determined the closet door remains open. Pierre Taittinger and Jean Hennessy provided inspiration and funds for Darquier and his ilk, and Callil boycotts their products. So, too, those of L'Oréal,

misery memoirs. Still, one suspects that confession, in public or in private, is not Callil's style. "It's all in the cuttings," she says, offering a *précis* of her publishing career and the founding of Virago. Ignorance was bliss, she agrees: had she known more about publishing she might have paused for thought. "I had to do all the accounts myself – I've got the books upstairs. It's like Dickens: 'six postage stamps, 3/3d'. I loved it. Still like doing accounts." It was, she reflects, "a hard decision to leave" to take up the reins at Chatto, though "I adored the books and loved the people I worked with. One of the causes of my grief and stress was that we were always being bought and sold. There was a new managing director every year, a different set of accountants, a different set of arseholes telling me what to do," she remembers, speaking of the Bedford Square days before Random House, before Bertelsmann. "That was awful, because I loved Max Reinhardt," the group's presiding genius.

In addition to her discovery and rediscovery of writers, Callil also revealed an eye for editorial talent and "Carmen's boys" – among them Jeremy Lewis, Michael Fishwick, Roland Philipps, Antony Harwood, Andrew Motion and Jonathan Burnham – have all forged impressive careers. She admits that life for them, and for her, would have been easier if "I hadn't been such an obsessively thorough person" but points out that "I did the best I could and I did some good publishing... When I felt wretched, I made other people wretched, but I honestly don't think I'm a monster and I don't fall out with everyone." She does allow that, today, "you need editors who are less peculiar than I was" and agrees that persuading a sales team why this or that book should be published wasn't her style. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, she believes that "publishing is so much better for authors now than it was in my day, because it's much less chaotic." She pauses, smiling broadly. "But you should ask me again in a few weeks' time."

Bad Faith is published this week by Cape, price £20

Callil: "I did the best I could"

Photo: Monica Curtin

