

# *In the Darkroom* by Susan Faludi – book review

Susan Faludi's father survived the Holocaust by passing himself off as a Gentile – and a Nazi.

By Alison McCulloch In **Books** (<http://www.listener.co.nz/culture/books/>)

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*Susan Faludi: was her violent father still “skulking beneath the dress”? Photo/Tony Rinaldo*

At 76, Susan Faludi's father became a woman, giving her estranged daughter the news in an email in 2004 with the subject line “Changes”. This wasn't her father's first reinvention, but it was the one that drew Faludi back into her life as both a daughter with unresolved grievances and a journalist with a story to pursue.

And it's a remarkable story. Faludi is the author of three previous books of non-fiction, including her bestselling 1991 debut *Backlash*, chronicling the post-Women's Liberation assault on feminism and its goals. But *In the Darkroom*, with its mix of the intensely personal and the unavoidably political, is quite unlike her previous works.

The story reaches back to her father's childhood as a Hungarian Jew coming of age in the midst of the Nazi horror, when identity was everything. Then István Friedman, he survived the slaughter by passing as a Gentile, even impersonating a member of the Hungarian Nazi Party in order to save his parents. The key to it all, Faludi's father told her many years later, is getting away with it. “I believed it. So they believed it. I took part in their game. If you believe you are whoever you pretend to be, you're halfway saved. But if you act funny, if you act afraid, you're halfway to the gas chamber.”

Friedman's next reinvention came just after the war when he changed his last name to Faludi, and moved to Denmark, then Brazil, where he and a fellow émigré worked as photographers and film-makers for the Brazilian Government. Five years later, in 1953, it was on to the US – to marriage, children and the suburban American dream.

Or nightmare. As a husband and father, Steven (his new American first name) was violent and controlling, a “household despot” who presided over his family “as imperious patriarch, overbearing and autocratic”. He and Faludi's mother – who is absent from this book – split when Susan was 16, and her own identity as a feminist emerged partly in response to those fraught years, and to her father's “identity crisis” – “his desperation to assert the masculine persona he had chosen”.

Given all these histories, it's not surprising that Faludi was wary when the email arrived. Is it possible the violent man she remembered had been expunged, or was “he” still there, “skulking beneath the dress”? Over the next decade, she made numerous trips to Hungary where her father, now Stefánie, lived, and set out to fulfil Stefánie's request to “write my story”.

As much as it is a memoir, a biography and a history, this clever, timely book is also an exploration of identity, in all its contradictions. “Is identity what you choose, or what you can't escape?” Faludi asks. Susan and Stefánie's stories suggest it is both.

**IN THE DARKROOM**, by Susan Faludi (William Collins, \$35)

*(This review follows the author in using male pronouns when referring to Stefánie before her transition.)*

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