

In Search of Truth: An Interview with Helen Epstein



Annalisa Cosentino

Sapienza University of Rome, Faculty of Arts, Department of European,
American and Intercultural Studies
annalisa.cosentino@uniroma1.it

For years it lay in an iron box buried so deep inside me that I was never sure just what it was. I knew I carried slippery, combustible things more secret than sex and more dangerous than any shadow or ghost. Ghosts had shape and name. What lay inside my iron box had none. Whatever lived inside me was so potent that words crumbled before they could describe. [...] There had to be other people like me, who shared what I carried, who had their own version of my iron box. There had to be, I thought, an invisible, silent family scattered about the world.

I began to look for them, to watch and listen, to collect their stories. I set out on a secret quest, so intimate I did not speak of it to anyone. I set out to find a group of people who, like me, were possessed by a history they had never lived. I wanted to ask them questions, so that I could reach the most elusive part of myself (Epstein 1979, pp. 1, 5).

This is the very personal opening of *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors*, a rigorous and sound investigation, one of the first conducted about the children of survivors of the Nazi concentration camps, published in 1979. Most people at the time probably did not know that its author, a journalist and a professor at New York University, was writing the first part of a trilogy.

Helen Epstein, born in Prague in 1947 to survivors of Terezín and Auschwitz, grew up in New York City, as her parents left Czechoslovakia after the communist takeover of 1948: 'In February of 1948, there was a Communist coup. Kurt saw the Communists as Nazis in a different color uniform and was determined to get out. My prescient father had applied for an American visa right after returning to Prague from *koncentrák* and with the help of relatives in New York, we flew out of Prague and joined the Czech refugee community there' (Epstein 2017, p. 25).

Children of the Holocaust has been translated into many languages;¹ in Czech it has been published once, in 1994, as *Děti holocaustu*. The third Czech edition of the second part of the trilogy, *Where She Came From: A Daughter's Search for Her Mother's History* (1997), in Czech translation *Nalezená minulost* (2000), is expected in 2021.

1 Details about Helen Epstein's bio-bibliography can be found at <http://www.helenepstein.com/>.



The opening of this new book as well, a new investigation, as rigorous and documented as the first, is characteristically personal:

Whenever a telephone rings late at night or at an odd time of day, I still — even now that Frances has been dead for almost a decade — think someone is calling to say that my mother has taken her life. I grew up with stories of women who wanted to die. My mother’s grandmother jumped from a window in Vienna at the end of the nineteenth century. My mother repeatedly threatened to commit suicide in Prague. My mother locked herself inside the bathroom in New York, saying she had had enough, that she could not go on (Epstein 2005, p. 3).

In more than 300 pages full of carefully researched and checked facts, we find not only an impeccable (‘almost scholarly’, Epstein 2017, p. 69) historical reconstruction, but also a narrative masterpiece. After the death of her mother, Epstein feels again the urge to ‘reach the most elusive part of herself’, as she wrote in the opening of *Children of the Holocaust*. In her impressive ‘search for her mother’s history’, Epstein reconstructs the history of three generations of Central-European Jews from an original angle, going back to the past along a female line. As already was the case of *Children of the Holocaust*, she provides a new perspective in this book on biographical writing and on the history of European Jews. The Holocaust is of course a relevant part of Helen Epstein’s mother’s (and father’s) history, but the book is not exclusively on that topic. In fact, the focus is not on the Holocaust at all, as one could expect, but on what preceded it and somehow surrounded it, helping us to understand at least some of the reasons leading to a monstrous tragedy: from ghettos to assimilation, and to genocide.

Epstein began by collecting the voices of other people (of children of the survivors in the first book), then she wanted to listen to more intimate voices, to hear again her deceased mother’s voice, to encounter her grandmother and great-grandmother. In the last part of the trilogy, *The Long Half-Lives of Love and Trauma: A Memoir* (2017), she listens to her own voice; finally she gets closer to ‘the most elusive part of herself’:

When I listen to myself, I’m struck by how I’m still throwing dust in my eyes, acting things out rather than naming them, leaning on other people’s stories rather than telling my own. I’m grateful to be living in the 21st century when so many stories that were suppressed are being told and shown, but impatient with myself. How much longer will it take me, I wonder, before I can say what I mean (Epstein 2017, p. 228).

Written over fifteen years and published while the Me Too movement was beginning in the United States, Helen Epstein’s ‘own’ memoir uncovers a sexual child abuse: it doesn’t recount its story, but rather recognises that it happened. Among the main themes of the book is the author’s psychotherapy, recollected with astonishing precision, in the author’s straightforward style, leading to the long suppressed, remote and still present truth.

According to the French philosopher Simone Weil, cultivating a keen attention and thus gaining a state of ‘luminous consciousness’ (Weil 2019, p. 53) provides access



to the truth: 'Every time a human being accomplishes an effort of attention with the sole desire of becoming more able to seize the truth, this aptitude is extended' (ibid., p. 156 [*Attente de Dieu*, 1969]). Evidently this is relevant for Epstein's way of thinking and working: she doesn't simply pay attention to the person she is interviewing or the concept or story she is writing about; she confronts them without compromise, exercising attention, reaching a deeper consciousness and knowledge, what Simone Weil defines as truth. Not concealing herself, she prevents truth from concealing itself, and involves the reader in her own search.

We asked Helen Epstein for an interview about the relation between her work as a writer and the 20th century's traumas — 'literati facing wars, revolutions, regimes', to quote the subtitle of our volume. Her experience reveals a deep bond between one's self, one's personal experience, and the choice of dealing with particular themes. It helps provide an answer to one of the leading questions of the present research: can the researcher's and scholar's approach be objective and fruitful in spite of 'wars, revolutions, regimes'? Yes, it can, so long as the scope and boundaries of her/his activity, depending on both inner and external conditions, is acknowledged.

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Annalisa Cosentino: *Your path as a journalist and a writer started in 1968. You were still a student in that crucial year in the XXth century history. Were the historical moment and situation decisive in your choice to write? Why and in what sense?*

Helen Epstein: YES, the Soviet invasion was decisive. I am the descendant of two Czech Jewish families that trace their roots to the 17th century in Roudnice nad Labem and Kolín, two of the four major seats of Jewish settlements outside of Prague. I was born in Prague in 1947 and when I returned for the first time in 1968, I was treated as a precious heirloom by my hosts and slated to move from one family to another that morning of August 21, 1968 when my hosts woke me up at dawn with the words, 'we're occupied'.

I didn't understand what *obsazeni* meant. I thought they meant they were 'busy'. Then I heard the strange crunching noise coming in from the windows and understood they were talking about military occupation. International telephone connections had been cut. There was, of course, no internet then. I was 20 years old, alone, and frightened but also possessed by a sense of the historical moment and a belief in the power of the written word. There was a typewriter in that apartment and I decided to write about what I was experiencing. Until then I had not given much thought to becoming a writer but I put a piece of carbon paper between two sheets of blank paper and began to type my observations. When I finished, I folded my 'article' into two envelopes. After being evacuated by train to Paris, I sent one to the *New York Times* and the other to the *Jerusalem Post*, because I was then a student at Hebrew University there. The *Post* accepted it and asked me to become their University reporter until I graduated in 1970.

My journalistic debut launched what would become 50 years of publishing and teaching.



AC: *As a journalist and daughter of survivors you investigated the inter-generational transmission of trauma in your first book, Children of the Holocaust (1979). You wrote several biographies. Why and how do you investigate and write lives? An answer to the first question (why) can be found in each of your biographies and of course in your essay Writing from life (2009); the second question (how) has to do with the subject — could you describe how you investigate lives as related to history?*

HE: I enjoy learning history through writing biography. In every profile and biography I write, I begin with an interest in the person and what he or she has done, or what they represent: in Joe Papp, I was interested in how he created a theatre and major American cultural institution; in Meyer Shapiro, I was interested in how an art historian learns to see. When I was a journalist, I had to persuade my editors to approve a subject and I was often given subjects to write about. In my books, I was the one who chose the subjects. Typically for a magazine profile I spent six months researching and writing. For a book it can be anywhere from two to ten years.

How do I research? I start by reading everything already written by or about or related to my subject: first, primary sources like letters and diaries and anything the subject has written or produced; books about the subject (fiction and non-fiction), articles in newspapers and magazines, academic journals, sometimes visual materials. I interview anyone who knows anything about my subject including scholars. I cast my net as widely as possible, following my hunches and interests, and I do not stop until I literally can't tolerate doing any more.

AC: *Among your books the most 'historical' is perhaps the memoir Where She Came From: A Daughter's Search for Her Mother's History (1997), translated into many languages. It is amazingly beautiful, revealing, truthful — when I started reading it, I couldn't quit, deep into the night until the last page. Besides your storytelling skills, the book is powerful in rendering lives in history and Central-European history (or maybe histories) through individual lives. In which way the specific Central-European historical context influenced your work?*

HE: My parents were both very identified with Czechoslovakia. My mother was in the first generation of Czechoslovak citizens and my father was a national Czechoslovak swimming champion and coach. He did not speak English when he arrived in New York at the age of 44, so Czech was the language in which he spoke and sang to me. Czech was my first language and I think it is the most natural to me although I never went to school in Czech and make many mistakes in grammar. I also have a child's vocabulary. Although I grew up in New York, Czech was my first language and I think it is the language in which I knew songs and poetry and cooking. I was always very drawn to European history rather than American history and I liked to listen to the stories of the many central European émigrés who lived in New York City in the 1950s and whom I met everywhere.

AC: *In which way and to what extent does your training and experience as a journalist help in 'investigating memories'?*

HE: My experience as a journalist helps me to pay attention to what I see and hear, to ask good questions, to find good sources (people and archives) and to think carefully about all of it and how it fits together. Whether I am researching my own memories

or other people's memories, I have learned to return to the same material many times to check all memories against other sources.

Very important to me is that journalism allows me to use my personal attributes. I am an extrovert, a gregarious and a very curious woman. To be a journalist is to have permission to indulge one's curiosity and to ask almost any question that comes to mind under the guise of professional obligation. Conducting interviews as a journalist allows you to delve far deeper into a person's private thoughts and feelings than is possible in a social or even a family setting. You can ask the same question over and over again, claiming that you don't entirely understand the answer or that you are certain there is more to it — in a way that would be rude in other contexts.

I have always been interested in things outside myself. This is true of me as a person as well as a journalist.

AC: *Among your recent books, The Long Half-Lives of Love and Trauma (2017) is apparently more personal and less related to history than Franci's War (2020), your mother Franci Rabínek Epstein's memoir that you edited. Is this true?*

HE: Yes, *Half-Lives* is a book about memories but also a book about psychoanalysis which is a form of psychotherapy that interests me very much. In that respect, it is about personal history and family history and the relationships between children and adults; children and parents, analyst and analysand. My great-grandmother was an analysand in Vienna in the early 20th century. My mother was an analysand in NYC in the 1950s and I became one in the 21st century. I believe that all three of us found it helpful. That book was the hardest for me to write and I spent nearly 20 years doing it!

Recently, due to an email from a stranger in Berlin who wanted to know more about an episode in *Where She Came From*, I took another look at the manuscript my mother wrote in the early 1970s about her experiences between 1939–1945. She called it 'Roundtrip' because it began and ended in Prague via Terezín, Auschwitz, Neuen-gamme and Bergen Belsen. When I reread it in 2018, I thought it would be excellent source material for scholars of women's history, Central European history and Jewish history. I edited it lightly and added an Afterword, but did not think it would be a mainstream general readers' book. But much to my surprise, retitled *Franci's War*, it was published in nine countries, including Slovakia (Ikar) and the Czech Republic (Albatros) — they were the first to buy it. My mother wrote about women in the camps, about love, friendship, transactional sex, abortion, as well as the more conventional themes of camp memoirs. Her point of view is very different from that of Primo Levi or Elie Wiesel or Arnošt Lustig. I think it is grounded in her experience as a young but experienced dress designer and dressmaker.





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