

An Interview with Helen Epstein

by Amy Yelin

Helen Epstein, a former journalist and writer of literary nonfiction, is best known for her groundbreaking work *Children of the Holocaust*, published in 1979. In 1998, she published *Where She Came From: A Daughter's Search for Her Mother's History*, a family memoir and social history of 200 years of Czech Jewish life which was also a *New York Times Book Review* Notable Book. She started her memoir while a visiting scholar at Harvard University's Minda de Gunzburg Center of European Studies in 1982. She is also the author of *Music Talks* (1987) and *Joe Papp: An American Life* (1994). She received her master's degree in journalism from Columbia University, has worked as a freelance cultural reporter for the *Sunday New York Times* and other national publications, and was the first tenured woman professor in New York University's Department of Journalism. Today, she is affiliated with Harvard University's Center for European Studies, and she teaches in Western Michigan University's MFA writing program in Prague.

Amy Yelin: In *Children of the Holocaust*, you write, "I would wander off into the woods by myself, moody, filled with thoughts and yet unable to articulate a single one. I felt as if I carried unwritten plays inside of me, whole casts of characters who were invisible and voiceless, who could only speak through me." Is this

Amy Yelin is a writer and marketing professional living north of Boston. She recently completed her MFA in creative writing at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she focused on creative nonfiction and memoir. Her essays and articles have appeared in the *Boston Globe*, the *Merrimack River Current*, *UNH Magazine*, and other publications.



Helen Epstein

foreshadowing your desire to write memoir? To give these invisible characters a voice?

Helen Epstein: Probably, although I didn't recognize it at the time. In high school, my teachers discouraged my writing and did not even admit me to AP English. I was neither on the literary magazine or the school newspaper. But I did write most of our class songs and our senior play.

Yelin: So when did you first know that you wanted to be a writer?

Epstein: Rather late, I think. I wanted to be a musician. If I could have been anyone in the world, I would have chosen to be Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, or Carole King. I love songs. I didn't think of being a poet because I always needed to make money. I was nineteen, in college, and

thinking about doing something with music, but had discovered that I wasn't a brilliant musician. Then, in 1968, I happened to be trapped in the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. I got locked into an apartment, and there was a typewriter there, and so I just wrote about what was happening around me. When it was over, I sent what I had written to two newspapers: the *New York Times* and the *Jerusalem Post*, as I was a student in Israel at the time. The *Post* printed my first-person account of the invasion and, when I went back to Jerusalem, the paper hired me as its university reporter. So I had an instant career as a journalist! I began by writing feature stories every week.

Yelin: Do you prefer one sort of writing to another—say feature writing versus memoir writing? Was it a conscious

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decision to move from feature writing to books?

Epstein: I knew that I didn't want to remain a newspaper reporter, that eventually I wanted to write longer pieces. I wanted to move from the superficial to the more profound, and to write serious books. I took a teaching job so I could do in-depth, freelance magazine writing and not worry about money. My first book, *Children of the Holocaust*, began as an article for the *New York Times Magazine*. Actually, all my books began as articles.

Yelin: What are a few of your favorite books, and who

are some of your favorite authors?

Epstein: My first favorite books, after fairy tales and the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew, were by Louisa May Alcott. I loved all of them but especially *Eight Cousins*. I reread it recently and wept, especially when Rose is encouraged by her uncle to throw away her belt and rebel against convention. As a teenager, I was drawn to the essays of James Baldwin. I'm also a lifelong Tolstoy fan. I've been rereading *Anna Karenina* every few years since I was thirteen. Same with *Jane Eyre*, and Amos Oz's best novel, *My Michael*. I tend to like passionate rather than cool writing. In the last couple

of years, I've been reading mostly women and mostly nonfiction. I have read men for so long in my life. As a student, we read almost no women writers—and I went to a school for intellectually-gifted girls! Maxine Hong Kingston and Toni Morrison had a big impact on me when I first read them, as did the journalism of Jane Kramer, Vivian Gornick, and Janet Malcolm. I like reading almost anything by Adrienne Rich, Grace Paley, Maxine Kumin, Alice Munro... I'm interested not only in how these writers write but what they choose to write about.

Yelin: In *Children of the Holocaust* you talk about reading so much of the Holocaust literature and case histories. Do you still read the new Holocaust-related literature that comes out?

Epstein: Very little. It has to be something really, really different. I've reached a point of saturation. Although, I'd be more likely to read a woman's story of the Holocaust than a man's.

Yelin: What do you think when you hear critics say that there is too much writing on the Holocaust being produced. Can an atrocity such as the Holocaust ever be "overdone" in a literary sense, and therefore lose some of its impact?

Epstein: I think it's silly. It's like saying there's too much Civil War literature. There are certain historical events that are so powerful that people will always want to write about them. What difference does it make how many books are written? The issue is how many good books are written about anything.

Yelin: Your writing is so rich, and has so many different layers. Would you classify it as memoir? Biography? Autobiography? Historiography?

Epstein: I don't think about it very much. It's just something I do. Is this memoir? Autobiography? If you are going to look into it in academic terms, there is such

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a cross-disciplinary tendency now in everything...in music, in writing, in art, that it's a waste of time to try and figure out what's what. The only distinction I care about is the one between what is made up versus what is trying to reconstruct actual events. I get very irritated by the melding of reality and fiction. I find it irresponsible.

Yelin: What are you working on now?

Epstein: I'm working on a new memoir called *First Love*. It's about my first adolescent love—falling in love when I was fifteen years old as seen from the point of view of middle age. It's about sex, friendship, memory, womanhood, trauma, and time, and how a relationship both develops and remains the same over a period of forty years.

Yelin: The subject seems pretty far-removed from your previous books... how did you choose it?

Epstein: Around fifty, you realize that you only have a certain number of books left—and I really wanted to write about my experiences of coming of age in the '60s, and becoming a wife and mother in the '80s. I feel only now, when I have a stable, happy family life, can I reflect back on all the failures and fiascos I experienced in earlier relationships.

Yelin: The author Alice Walker once said, "Writing helps you heal yourself. I think if you write long enough, you will be a healthy person. That is, if you write what you need to write." You write about subjects that are very close, dear, and potentially painful to your heart—for instance your family, and the Holocaust. Do you think your writing has ever been a healing experience for you? Is this one of the reasons you write what you write?

Epstein: Yes. Many writers have said that all creative work begins with a wound. Ted Hughes, the poet, believed that the writer is like a shaman—he goes down into the underworld and comes back again in a new form. While you don't really go into the underworld when writing memoir or autobiography, you do go back in time and in memory, and it's very grueling for most of us. But it is also healing and in the process of healing herself, the writer also heals other people. That is the function of the shaman in nonwestern cultures—and the function of some artists in ours. From the very beginning of *Children of the Holocaust*, I knew I wasn't just writing for myself but for a group of people.

Yelin: What inspires you?

Epstein: I think, in my twenties, it was learning... not so much inspiration as a desire to know. For example, I was fascinated with Joseph Papp as a person and personality. I was very interested in how a person comes from a very poor background with no network or connections, and becomes a major figure on the American cultural scene. I think lately what interests me more is trying to understand things that I don't understand. For example, in *First Love*, I explore what it was like to grow up a girl during the sexual revolution and the tremendous idealism of the '60s. Where did it go? Feminism really affected the lives of women, but what were its effects on men? And what has happened to the country? How could we have been so idealistic then, and so materialistic and cynical now?

Yelin: Do you have set writing habits or routines?

Epstein: Oh yes, I'm very rigid. I write in the mornings from 8:30 a.m.—12:30 p.m. or from 9:00 a.m.—1:00 p.m. I need that time that's very close to dream state. I don't see or talk to anyone in the morning. My husband makes the boys breakfast so I can go straight to the computer. Rebecca Walker wrote about how she was living with somebody who liked to talk in the morning, and there was this great disruption between her dream life and writing life. That would be a problem for me.

Yelin: Do you usually do a first draft straight through before revising?

Epstein: No—I should. It's a good idea. I urge other people to do it. I feel my writing needs to be at least 80% there before I can move ahead, so I go back over

from **WHERE SHE CAME FROM**

by **Helen Epstein**

When her new husband did not initiate sexual relations, my mother wrote, Pepi was surprised but relieved. She did not love Oskar Weigert and had not looked forward to the sexual component of marriage. She did not enjoy taking charge of her new household, and was frightened by the peculiarities of the man she now shared her home with who was so different from her brother Rudolf. Oskar Weigert walked oddly, would occasionally drag a foot or fall down and suffer short blackouts after which he did not know where he was. When one day he had to be taken to a hospital and Pepi was told he had progressive syphilitic paralysis, she confided in no one.

Syphilis was as widespread in Prague as everywhere else in Europe. Contemporary novels and plays are full of references to syphilis and its victims. The Wasserman test had recently been developed to identify the disease and the popular press was filled with advertisements of doctors who treated it. But there was no cure. Speaking of Lusteuche, or the "lust epidemic," was unacceptable in policy society, particularly among women, and British journalist Vera Brittain wrote that she found out what syphilis was only when she worked as a nurse during the First World War and came face-to-face with its victims. When Danish writer Isak Dinesen learned she had contracted it from her husband, she kept the nature of her illness a secret from her family.

Pepi kept the nature of Oskar's illness secret too. Silently, even as she conducted fittings and supervised her seamstresses, she worried whether her sharing of sheets, dishes, silverware, and bathroom with her husband would infect her as well. It was common knowledge that women—not only prostitutes but wives of infected men—died tortured and mysterious deaths from a disease. Pepi developed headaches, backaches, and constant fatigue. She found it difficult to concentrate on her work and began to behave in inconsistent, erratic ways. When she fainted on the sidewalk after leaving the store one evening, "Mr. Schiller determined to get to the root of the change and obvious hysteria in his directrice," my mother wrote. "He elicited the whole sorry story of her life and sent her off immediately to a Nervensanatorium in the mountains of Austria."

In 1908, word of Freud's "talking cure" had reached sophisticated circles in Prague. It is tantalizing to imagine Pepi Weigert, age twenty-six, as an early analysand and infuriating not to know with whom. The prospect, however slim, of finding Pepi's case history sent me to the library of the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute and I steeped myself in the Minutes of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, the memoirs of its members, and their

studies. Masturbation rather than syphilis seemed to be their overriding concern. Working women were rare among the patient population. According to Freud, Wilhelm Stekel wrote, there were six types of typical female anxiety neurosis: virginal anxiety, or the anxiety of the adolescent; anxiety of the newly wed; anxiety of the woman whose husband is a premature ejaculator; anxiety of the women whose husband practices coitus interruptus; the anxiety of widows and voluntary abstinent; and anxiety of the woman approaching orgasm. He and most of the other analysts I read paint an extraordinary picture of the tortures of marital life during the first decade of the twentieth century but I could not find Pepi or her concern in it.

During the first decade of the century, there were hundreds of Nervensanatoria in Central Europe, treating the "nervous illness" with rest, seclusion, an array of diets, hot-and-cold water therapy, massage, electric shock, hypnosis, exposure to light, as well as talk. It is fortunate that Pepi found a sympathetic and reassuring doctor who heard her history and calmed her fears. She told him her losses: eldest brother, mother, and father before she was nine; and marriage the discovery of her husband's disease. Her doctor was able to persuade Pepi that her anxiety was an appropriate response to her situation, that she would recover her equilibrium and find a way to lead a normal life.

But while Pepi was taking her talking cure, Mr. Schiller was talking with Aunt Rosa and Pepi's two older brothers about divorce. Divorce was rare in Prague. No Sachsel had been involved in one. But Aunt Rosa, incensed that her family doctor had known about Weigert's illness and not alerted her, declared that, under Jewish law, a marriage that had not been consummated could be annulled.

"When Pepi returned to Prague," my mother wrote she found herself installed at the apartment of a cultivated widow whose home had become too large for her after her husband's death and the marriages of her children. A friend of Mr. Schiller's, she was delighted to have Pepi as her companion and paying guest as she had to augment her widow's pension...

The sanatorium had done Pepi a world of good. Although psychoanalysis was still in its infancy, the progressive doctors had been able to make it clear to her that hers was just a case of hysteria and overidentification and assuage her guilt feelings over the impending divorce. The only residue of her marriage was an agoraphobia which appeared on her return to Prague.

In 1910, a civil court granted Pepi a divorce. At twenty-eight, she was once again a single woman.

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chapters and rewrite to get them complete before I continue. So, I don't follow my own advice.

Yelin: In terms of narrative, do you prefer telling your stories in chronological order?

Epstein: Sometimes in the first draft, the easiest thing is to write in chronological order. Sometimes it's not. There are often big holes in memory. Sometimes you just need to write what is most emotionally urgent and what you want to talk about. As a reader, I find it more difficult to read books like, for example, Arthur Miller's autobiography, *Time Bends*, where episodes are in nonchronological order. In music, I like a good melody. In writing, I like a sustained story. I think it makes it easier on the reader.

Yelin: I am impressed by the incredible amount of historical and biographical research in your books. Is this where your journalism training comes in handy?

Epstein: Yes. Everything begins with reading and research for me. Memoirists come from everywhere, but I think that as a journalist or an investigative reporter, you have research skills at your disposal that someone who comes to nonfiction from poetry or fiction may not have. Also tenacity, working under deadline pressure, concision—these are all tools from the reporter's trade.

In journalism, you are always taught to compress as much as possible and not to waste the reader's time. So I routinely self-edit, and I do a lot of drafts. By the time my new book *First Love* is done, almost every chapter will have gone through twelve drafts.

Yelin: Can you describe your research process? How do you know what to leave in or leave out when you have so much material to work with? Is it purely instinctual?

Epstein: I'm an extremely inquisitive person. Even as a small child, I never knew when to stop asking questions. In terms of how much research you can do, I think the keys are time and money—every writer has to make her own calculation about how much she can afford. I've been very lucky, first that I had a university job that paid my rent, and then a husband who paid my rent so I could spend a lot of time on the process. With *Where She Came From*, I would research a topic until I felt surfeited with information. Sometimes there is a limited amount of information—so you never feel surfeited. Like when I was researching my great-grandmother's life in 1840s Bohemia. I quickly got to a point where I just couldn't get more information—the well was dry. So it was a natural stop to my research—I wasn't going to bang my head against a stone wall.

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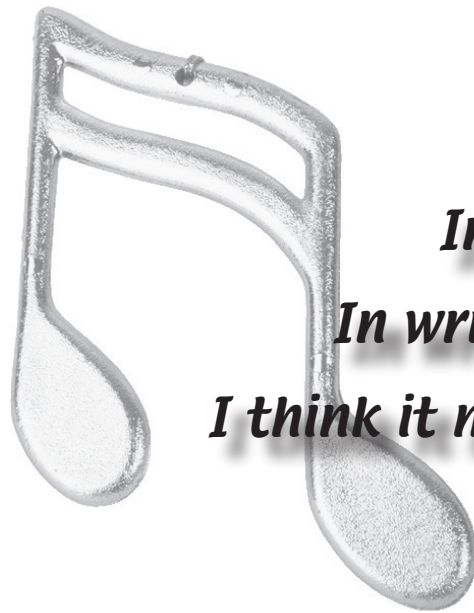
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Yelin: In your books, you do an excellent job of weaving together personal history, interviews, biography, extensive research, your own reflections, etc. into a flawless and compelling narrative. I guess this is a question about structure... How do you structure a book that has so many different elements running through it?

Epstein: It happens during the revision process. I figured it out with my first book—no one taught me how to do it. Because it was a new subject and no one knew much about it, *Children of the Holocaust* required a layer of straight reportage. I had to establish the subject. Then, I knew that I wanted to have a layer of personal memoir. And then, the subject was so new at the time, I felt that I had to have at least a dozen or so other people to contextualize my experience. I knew about oral history, and decided I would tape-record ten other people. That made a three-part structure. I knew, from feature writing in journalism, that you want to keep your readers' interest, and I began to think of it as a *challah*—a Jewish braided bread—structure. I had to keep alternating the strands—changing them so the focus changes, the rhythm changes, the tone changes, and the voice changes so that the reader doesn't get bored.

Yelin: Did you use the same process for structuring *Where She Came From*?

Epstein: Yes, but this time I thought of it more as laying down tracks, like in making a recording of music. I only worked on one track at a time, starting with the general historical track of Central Europe. So I researched and wrote the sequential history... for about two years... and you can imagine how boring that read, like a history textbook. That was the foundation, and then I laid down these different tracks: the history of fashion, the history of psychoanalysis, and the history of these three generations of women. The last part I focused on was



**In music, I like a good melody.
In writing, I like a sustained story.
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my personal experience—the travelogue and my story of writing this book. That really was what transformed the narrative. I put myself in wherever things got boring. The result is a very textured, very rich kind of writing. Kind of like bread pudding—where you find all these juicy parts in the middle of these bready parts. The process just kind of developed from book to book. I always begin with a ton of research, and then try to figure out my main narrative and then fold the rest into it. What it requires is an enormous amount of faith that it will all come together. It also requires patience, because very often I don't have a clue as to what I'm doing.

Yelin: So you don't always know where you're going when you begin or when you're writing your books?

Epstein: I hardly ever know what I'm doing when I begin. And then, the research often pulls me in many new directions. You just have to trust your instinct. Very often you sit down and think, what on earth is this book about? Is this piece of it pertinent? Is it important or trivial? It's an issue that besets every writer in every form, but perhaps the writer of memoir is more susceptible to it because memoir is so personal—you think, is this just my experience or does it have a wider significance? Even with *Children of the Holocaust*, I asked these questions. If you're a serious writer, and something keeps eating at you, it's probably eating at other people also. But it's very hard to know. And it's very hard to know on a bad day. It doesn't matter if

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you've been writing for thirty years or not. You are still susceptible to the same doubts as a new writer.

Yelin: How do you deal with those bad days?

Epstein: I am patient with myself. I keep a journal, so when I'm stuck, I can leaf through my twenty years' worth of journals and see that I've wrestled with self-doubt before. I try to do other tasks like rewriting and research. If I get really stuck, I read a good book by someone else. Reading usually gets me back to writing because I'm very reactive, and I tend to have intense responses to what I'm reading. And if I'm feeling extremely negative, and I can't trust myself to touch my manuscript, I go outside and exercise. I swim every day, and run. I'm a big believer in physical exercise when your writing is not going well. As a result, I've never experienced long periods of block because I don't fight it.

Yelin: How long did your books take you to write—*Children of the Holocaust* and *Where She Came From* in particular?

Epstein: They each took about seven years. It's highly variable, but in my experience, books take a long time to gel. Sometimes writing and gestation are simultaneous,

but I think, once again, a writer needs to be *patient*. Writing a book runs contrary to ordinary life—which is so fast-paced and always dependent on other people's needs and schedules, as well as your own. Good writing is like a good stew—it takes a long time to cook. You can't rush it. That's why I'm not a big fan of a lot of contemporary writing. It's not fully cooked yet. It's not thought through.

Yelin: I found you use powerful metaphors in your books—and as we've been talking, I've noticed you use them in conversation as well. For example, in *Children of the Holocaust*, you refer to the "iron box" inside of you quite often. At one point, instead of saying you were "swelling with pride," you say the "lid of the iron box was bulging and flattening out." How do you come up with your metaphors?

Epstein: I'm not aware of trying to come up with them. I've always thought in images. I don't think of myself as an intellectual, because I think so much in pictures rather than words. I could never become a psychologist or a psychiatrist because I struggle with theory. I don't often have abstract ideas. I know there are a lot of writers who start with an idea and put people in it. I never start out with an idea—my ideas grow out of things that I see. I guess, in that sense, I have more of

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a poet's sensibility. And in journalism, you are always observing and describing what you see. What you think is secondary.

Yelin: Your books also have very strong beginnings—which is very important because they can either engage or put off your new reader. Does this come easy to you, or does it take a while to figure out just where your books really begin?

Epstein: I can recognize a good beginning when it happens—but it doesn't usually happen in the 'beginning.' And usually, it's not something that I've thought through or reasoned. Although my later organization and structure of a book is a very thoughtful process, my first draft is unplanned. One of the reasons that I don't apply for grants is because I can never project what a book is going to look like or describe in advance what I'm going to do. Like this book I'm writing now, *First Love*—I don't have a contract because I was unable to do a book proposal.

Yelin: You seem to have a strong grasp of fictional techniques. For instance, I felt that much of the writing you did about your mother's young adult life in *Where She Came From* reads like in fiction. Does this come naturally, or have you had some training in fiction writing techniques? If so, have you ever written straight fiction?

Epstein: No, I've never written fiction or been trained as a fiction writer. I use many of its techniques and I think the writing is made more compelling because of the amount of research I do. During the research process, I read, do interviews, study paintings and photographs from the time—as I said earlier, I use all those tools that are available to the investigative journalist. When I interviewed a great aunt for *Where She Came From*, I asked silly questions such as: what color was the table cloth? Was grandfather really as snotty as people say he was? I get as many different

points of view from as many different people as possible. And I always give my writing to at least five people to read for feedback—they will tell me if something is missing or something seems artificial. If I have to leave out some details because I don't have them, I'll always tell the reader.

Yelin: Still, in some cases, when reading a memoir, you have to accept that certain scenes are fictionalized to a degree because the writer was not even born yet. This is especially true when there is dialogue being used—because no matter how much research and interviewing you do, it's not possible to know exactly what was said. Since you seem very adamant about truth in memoir, can you elaborate a bit more on this?

Epstein: I suppose that if it's understood and it doesn't affect historical accuracy, then yes, I can accept some invention in memoir. In a book such as *Angela's Ashes*, you understand that the dialogue is re-created. It is not essential to historical fact. But generally I think, you need to be more rigorous. I get very irritated with the melding of reality and fiction—particularly when it comes to history.

Yelin: In a recent article from the *Washington Post* entitled "As Best as She Can Half Remember," you write "Most good memoirs are like picaresque novels of the soul, journeys of intellectual quest where the author's gradual understanding of the meaning of experience is as interesting as the experience itself." Can you expand upon this statement?

Epstein: I think memoir is a lot like psychotherapy in that it explores the meaning of experience. You can write autobiography and just relay events, but I think what makes memoir rich is looking back on that experience and talking about what meanings you draw out of that experience. What you see now that you didn't see then. And the reader reads this and then reflects back on her own experience.

Yelin: Betrayal is a topic that comes up often for creative nonfiction writers. Do you ever worry about exposing too much about people in your writing—especially your family?

Epstein: Of course! That goes with the territory of memoir and much nonfiction. With *Children of the Holocaust*, one person that I interviewed threatened to sue me. Even though this person had agreed to be interviewed, he felt it would embarrass his family. My brother got upset with me over two sentences in *Where She Came From*. I wrote about my mother and her cousin Kitty masturbating with candles—you probably don't even remember this from the book, that's how brief it was. But my brother felt I was desecrating my mother's memory.

Yelin: Would you have been able to write *Where She Came From* if your mother was still alive?

Epstein: Probably not. I don't think I would have been able to write freely in her shadow. Overall, though, on this subject, I think it's not worth worrying too much about what other people are going to think. My friend Patricia Hampl says in her book *I Could Tell You Stories*, "the person who feels betrayed is the often person you'd least likely expect." You can't predict it, so why worry about it?

Yelin: In a review of one of your earlier books, *Music Talks*, Michael Ross writes, "Sometimes, through sheer tenacity, she prods and cajoles even the most reluctant interviewee into the surprising revelation." What do you think makes a good interviewer?

Epstein: Again, I'd have to say patience. I guess I think patience is the most important thing. And the ability to listen. I've wrecked interviews by talking too much. You'll know a good interview when you have one. It leaves you with the sense of having learned something that you didn't know before. AWP

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