

# Helen Epstein

## Growing Up Czech in New York

**B**orn in Prague in late 1947, three months before Czechoslovakia went communist, baby Helen Epstein emigrated legally in mid-1948 with her parents, Kurt and Francisca, who, as their families' sole survivors of the Nazi concentration camps, already had been granted entry into the United States. Waiting for them in New York were the Herbens: Helen's godfather, Ivan, a Radio Free Europe broadcaster, and his wife, Milena, who became her nanny while Helen's mother supported the family for the next 10 years.

Kurt Epstein, who spoke only Czech, was a water polo champion and two-time Olympic competitor who had served in the 1938 mobilization as an army lieutenant in the Terezin garrison and three years later was sent back there by the Germans as prison labor to rebuild it as the Theresienstadt concentration camp. In 1948, the New York Athletic Club graciously allowed him to watch just one of their water polo matches, but made it clear that since they didn't then accept Jews as members, they certainly weren't going to hire one as a coach. He wound up as a cutter in the garment district.

Helen's mother, on the other hand, was a third-generation Prague dressmaker who picked up the pieces of her old Czech clientele — starting with Metropolitan opera soprano Jarmila Novotná — in New York. (A later customer was Ivana Trump.) Franci Epstein was equipped by her prewar education in Prague's French and German schools to speak

four languages, including English, by the age of 8. She often told her children (two sons were born in New York) that joining Manhattan's Czech émigré community had brought her the richest social life she'd ever had. And little Helen, who spoke English with an accent until she was 10, grew up in that tightly knit world where "half our friends were Christian, like the Herbens, and half were Jewish and everybody spoke Czech and most were doing something different from what they did in Prague."

Helen was a precocious, verbal child who entered "the terrible twos" — when the recurrent query is *Why?* — well before her second birthday. And her first question was to ask her mother why she wore a blue number tattooed onto her forearm. That was when Helen first heard of evil places called Terezin, Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, where her mother had lived and managed not to die.

When Helen was three and about to enroll in nursery school, she asked Milena Herben to pretend to be her grandmother when she called for her because everyone else had grandparents and she didn't. Milena took this as an honor. Helen takes it as "early evidence of an obsession with the past and how much I felt the absence of a family and wanted to replace my grandparents."

Upon finishing high school, Helen "wanted out of America" in her quest to regain her roots and a Jewish identity. A European education was too expensive, and the logical place, Prague, was sealed off by the Iron Curtain, so she went instead to Hebrew University in Jerusalem on a full scholarship from the Israeli government and studied musicology.

In July of 1968, she set out with two friends — one Greek, one Hungarian —

to hitchhike up through Greece and Yugoslavia to Hungary and then into Czechoslovakia, where she arrived in Prague on Aug. 16. The Soviet-led invaders arrived five days later.

Until then, Helen had been in heaven: "I couldn't believe that a whole country was speaking the language of my childhood. And I liked what they were saying in what was left of the Prague Spring. I talked to everybody and felt on intimate terms with them. So, because I spoke a childish Czech, I *rykated* everybody [in the familiar form] instead of *vykating* them [formally]. People adored it. Everybody talked to me. So I took the invasion very personally."

For fear she'd be locked up or shot by the Russians, her local hosts instead interned her in their flat, so she turned to their typewriter for solace:

"I had never written anything for newspapers before, but I sat down and wrote a personal account of the invasion from my room [while] listening to the radio and looking out the window. I was evacuated on Friday the 23rd of August by train to Paris and when I got there, I sent copies of what I'd written to *The New York Times* and to *The Jerusalem Post*, which was my other hometown paper. *The Times* never responded, but two weeks later, I was standing on line to board my flight back when I heard two Israeli women in front of me talking about the article they had just read in *The Jerusalem Post* about the invasion of Czechoslovakia — and that's how I launched my journalistic career."

Back in Jerusalem, she went around to the English-language *Post* to collect her payment and was offered a job as their university correspondent. Upon winning her bachelor of arts degree from Hebrew University in 1970, she took her master's in journalism at Columbia University in New York.

After a couple of years as a researcher, she snared a job as a professor of journalism at New York University. "I was very lucky," this lanky, energetic Czech-American acknowledges. "I caught the wave of feminist hirings. They didn't have a woman, so I became the first tenured woman journalism professor at N.Y.U. by the time I was 30."

For a dozen years, she taught journalism and wrote articles on music and other cultural themes for *The New York Times Magazine*, the *Washington Post*, *Esquire* and *ARTnews* while teaching full-time. A collection of her interviews with Leonard Bernstein, Vladimir Horowitz, Yo Yo Ma and other artists was published as *Music Talks* in 1986, and in August, Little, Brown is publishing her biography of the producer who introduced playwright Václav Havel to New York audiences, *Joe Papp: An American Life*. But the arts were not her obsession; her roots were.

"Our family tree had been burnt to a stump. Whole branches, great networks of leaves had disappeared into the sky and ground. There was no stone that marked their passage. All that was left were the fading photographs that my father kept in a yellow envelope underneath his desk.

"When I'd lived in Israel, I'd become

aware that many of my fellow students were the sons and daughters of Holocaust survivors. None of them came from the same country as their parents — my Belgian friend had Polish parents; my Argentinean friend's folks were Hungarian. Very quickly, I realized that though I'd grown up feeling unique, I did belong to some kind of weird, global Jewish community of children without grandparents and with families that had been displaced by the Second World War. There were half a million of us.

"Nobody wanted to talk about it, so I started interviewing them very informally in Jerusalem by inviting them for coffee, and then throughout the 1970s in Europe and America, too. It took a very long time, for there was a great deal of denial by the Jewish community that there even was such a category of people, let alone a specific subculture without an organization or even a letterhead. Their parents, in particular — the survivors themselves — wanted to believe that the war was over and a lot of them, including my own parents and [Nobel Peace Prize laureate] Elie Wiesel, felt that focusing on their kids as a group was giving Hitler a posthumous victory. So it was an uphill struggle."

In 1977, however, *The New York Times Magazine* published a cover story by her called "Heirs of the Holocaust." It elicited some 500 long, personal letters from the subculture she'd unearthed. This enabled her to complete her project, *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors*, a modern classic of Holocaust literature published by Putnam in 1979 and still in print in Penguin paperback as well as newly issued in Czech by Volvox Globator as *Děti Holocaustu*. It has also been published in German, French, Swedish, and Japanese.

What gratifies Helen the most is that her book "has been used exactly as I wished it to be used: not only by the Jewish population, but by many immigrant groups, including children and grandchildren of the [1915] Armenian genocide, by Cambodians and Vietnamese, and by American psychotherapists dealing with children of alcoholics or depressed people. The reason is that the real subject is not the Holocaust, but how trauma is passed from one generation to another and how cultural inheritance works."

An "extremely high percentage" of people she interviewed went into "helping" professions: teaching, social work and "lawyering for public causes rather than private firms." She also found that

"many kids of Holocaust survivors grow up in intense nuclear families with no grandparents or aunts or uncles to defuse the intensity of parent-child relationships. As a result, some are wary of starting families themselves and avoid intimate involvements altogether or conduct long-term affairs with people uninterested in marriage or unacceptable to their families as marriage partners."

Helen acknowledges that she did this "by having long-term relationships with men who were clearly unfit for marriage. [Her affair with a drunkard who was born in the wartime Warsaw Ghetto, is described quite frankly in *Children of the Holocaust*.] Finally, though, I read my own book and decided I needed psychoanalysis. I did it for two years with great success and decided that I *did* want to be married and have children. And, of course, no sooner did I finish the analysis than I met a son of survivors, Patrick Mehr, a French Parisian Jew whose parents are Romanian. We were married in 1983, when I was 36. I had our first son at 38 and our second son at age 40."

Mehr is a management consultant in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he and Helen started a cottage industry, Plunkett Lake Press, on their dining-room table. In 1985, they published a memoir written in Czech by their neighbor, Harvard Law School librarian Heda Margolius Kovaly, who survived Auschwitz only to have her husband hanged by the communists. Translated by Helen and her mother, *Under A Cruel Star: A Life in Prague* was reprinted by Penguin and translated into French, Dutch and Japanese.

For the past five years, Helen has been reconstructing "the other side of my Czech Jewish ancestry" by retracing the lives and deaths of four generations of women in her family: an ambitious work spanning nearly two centuries of women's history, Jewish history, Czech history, fashion history and the history of psychiatry (her grandmother took the "talking cure" from a Freud disciple in a Moravian sanatorium in 1909). Commissioned by Little, Brown, it is a good two years from completion. In the meantime, anyone who has information about her maternal great-grandmother, Tereza Furcht, who threw herself out of a fourth-story window in Vienna in 1890 when her eldest son died, or her grandmother, Josefa ~~Schickel~~, born in Kolin in 1882, should contact Helen Epstein at the Harvard University Center for European Studies, 27 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138, U.S.A., where she is starting a study group in Czech literature and culture in September.



She read her own book and sought help.

Antonin Novy/The Prague Post



by Alan Levy

*A child of the Holocaust chronicled a generation without grandparents*