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Franci's War

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Speaker: Helen Epstein

Transcribed by: Rachel E Lieu

[Holocaust Living History Workshop](#)

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Time Transcription

00:00 [Read Write Think Dream / The Library UC San Diego Channel /
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00:09 Susanne Hillman: Welcome everyone to today's Holocaust Living History
Workshop featuring Helen Epstein. This is the first event of our new series, and I'm
delighted to be here to welcome everyone, everybody from the San Diego region,
from the United States, and, as I noticed, from Canada and maybe from even
farther afield. I would like to acknowledge the incredible generosity of Judi
Gottschalk, who has supported the Holocaust Living History Workshop for years
now. Judi is the survivor of two Holocaust survivors, she's the daughter of two
Holocaust survivors, and she has supported us for a number of years. Thank you,
Judi. A few words about today's program. Our speaker will be introduced by history
professor Helen, Deborah Hertz. I do apologize. This kind of flustered me, the tech
mishap. Deborah Hertz will introduce Helen Epstein and welcome everybody.

01:11 Deborah Hertz: Well, it's my pleasure to introduce Helen Epstein. I'm sorry, we're
still on Zoom. I cannot wait to be back in the Geisel Library, which is looking very,
very evolved since the pandemic. To introduce Helen is to bring myself back, and
I'll bring you all back with me, to November of 1984. I was an assistant professor at
SUNY [State University of New York] Binghamton on a post-doc at Harvard
[University]. Helen had recently been a Professor of Journalism at NYU [New York
University]. In fact, she was the first female tenured member of the, of the
department there. She had written a book in 1979 called *Children of the Holocaust*,
which I read as soon as it came out. It was only five years out by the time I met her
and we decided to get together and we went into the kitchen, the cozy kitchen,
that's the Center for European Studies at Harvard, which was very, very lovely and
cozy. We must have stayed there for about six or seven hours. We went through
everything. The Hebrew University, NYU, being Jewish, being a feminist, having a
family, and so it went. Some of the tips that she gave me that year I still remember,
she told me, Deborah when you're writing, a lot of your best stuff is going to be on
the cutting room floor, but that's fine. Helen was already a very professional writer
and had a lot of advice to give. So, today's talk is going to be based on her
wonderful, wonderful book, *Franci's War, a Daughter's Search for her Mother's
History*. So Judi, if you're out there, it's just a beautiful match here between you
and Helen. I want to say that Helen pioneered a form of memoir writing that was
historically informed, that is now really the rage for the civil war, for slavery, for
Holocaust, for World War II. And Helen does it in a way that is very remarkable.
She tells you a lot about her past and her personal past, but she's never
narcissistic and she never overshares, and it's always extremely artfully done.
Along those lines, I'd like to celebrate, even though it has nothing to do with Helen,
but I'd like to celebrate our colleague Professor Peter Gourevitch, who has given
many talks on his memoir in progress, and I'm delighted to announce that it's

coming out in print and the title is, *Dad, the Day You Left Paris, Was It Raining? Escaping Danger in Moscow, Berlin, and Paris and Reaching New York.*

Congratulations Peter, we hope to have a book launch soon. So, without further ado, I'm going to turn it over to Helen and just stay tuned. You're in for a great ride. Thank you, Helen, for sharing your work with us. Okay, bye, everyone.

- 03:49 Helen Epstein: Thank you very much, Deborah, for that wonderful introduction, and thank you Susanne, and Marci, and Yekta. I am actually going to be speaking about two books today. One is the one that Deborah showed you, which is the book, the memoir that I wrote about my mother in 1997. For it, I use as a source, my mother, Franci Rabinek Solar Epstein's manuscript that she wrote in the 1970s. Last year, I was finally able to get that manuscript published and that manuscript is published as *Franci's War*. My mother, Franci Rabinek Solar Epstein was a fashion designer and dressmaker like her mother, Josefa Rabinek, and her grandmother Therese Furcht. I broke the three-generation dressmaking tradition in my family to become a journalist. But I grew up with sewing machines and mannequins in the master bedroom of our Manhattan apartment and fashionable women having fittings in our living room. When I came home from school, I'd find the customers on our living room couch flipping through fabric samples and fashion magazines. They included actresses like Nancy Marchand, who worked as a model for my mother long before becoming famous as Tony Soprano's mother on *The Sopranos*, as well as *I Love Lucy's* neighbor, Ethel, in real life the actress Vivian Vance.
- 05:31 Helen Epstein: My athlete father was unemployed for a decade and our family depended on Franci's craft, her savvy, and her powers of persuasion for its subsistence. Before I tell you about her war memoir, I'll give you a quick historical view of the centrality of sewing for all women, but especially for Jewish, central European Jews, like my mother, Franci. Making clothes is one of the oldest of women's occupations. This is a painting of women sewing burial shroud for the Prague Burial Society around 1780. As I said, my mother, my grandmother, and my great-grandmother all supported themselves and sometimes their husbands by dressmaking. By the end of the 19th century, Jews in Central Europe dominated the entire spectrum of the clothing industry. From the, from the low end of pedaling old clothes to the high end of manufacturing textiles and establishing venerable department stores in Paris, Berlin, and Vienna. On the low end, traveling peddlers went from village to village with a bundle of old clothes on their backs. The 19th-century Czech author, Božena Němcová wrote, "Every day at twilight, tall Moses walked past. He was as tall as a pole and had a morose expression and carried a sack over his shoulder. Betsy, the maid, used to tell the children that he collected disobedient children in his sack."
- 07:18 Helen Epstein: The next step up from the old clothing peddler was a used clothing store, like the one run by Rosa Lustfeld in the small city of Kolín, east of Prague.

Rosa was my grandmother Pepi's aunt, an observant Jewish widow and one of the poorest members of the large Jewish Sachsel family. She had become my grandmother's guardian after both Pepi's parents died in Vienna and she taught my grandmother to sew and to repair clothes. This is a photo of my grandmother Pepi in Kolín, just before the turn of the century. By 1900, she had learned to speak Czech as well as German. She was eager to go to the big city, and she presented herself so well, that while visiting her older brother in Prague, she talked her way into a job with Moritz Schiller, a fashion emporium close to Wenceslas Square. Mr. Schiller was familiar with provincial Jews. Most Prague Jews had relatives in the Czech countryside. He assessed my grandmother and decided to teach Pepi how to deal with suppliers and customers, manage seamstresses, travel to fashion shows, and choose what women in Prague would like. He was responsible for transforming her into a sophisticated and elegant Prague woman. She married Emil Rabinek, an electrical engineer and partner in a large electrical supplies firm, who encouraged her to leave Schiller and to start her own salon, Salon Weigert. This was in 1919.

09:05 Helen Epstein: They lived a privileged life, traveling and patronizing the opera and the theater. Emil did not wish to have a child. When it became clear that Pepi was too pregnant to have an abortion, demanded that she give birth to a son. My grandfather was 42, and my grandmother 38 when my mother, Franci - named after Emperor Franz Joseph - Franci Rabinek was born in February of 1920. She too grew up in privilege. Traveling to Central European spas such as Marienbad and Ischl with a Czech nanny and a pet dog. She was photographed modeling her mother's line of children's clothing. Her father, for his part, had never really accepted the reality of having a daughter and on birthdays, gave her machines from his electrotechnical company instead of dolls as presents. He also encouraged her to fix things that were broken in their home. This quirk of my grandfather's would later play a major role in my mother's survival in Auschwitz. But her childhood was golden. A prominent Jewish painter, painted this portrait of her when she was four. When it was time to enter school, her parents enrolled her in Prague's French school, which she attended from the age of six to the age of 14 when, once again her father intervened, and because he found her German full of mistakes, forced her to transfer to the German gymnasium. By that time, the worldwide depression had bankrupted Emil Rabinek's company. But my grandmother's salon, Salon Weigert, continued to do well as women will buy clothing through every kind of circumstance. Emil, who had once regarded Pepi's business as his own feminist indulgence was now dependent on its income. He became Salon Weigert's bookkeeper. Pepi continued to design and sell glamorous clothes to Prague's elite.

11:34 Helen Epstein: This is one of the many photographs and advertisements for my grandmother's salon that this wonderful curator at the Prague Museum of Decorative Arts Eva Uchalová has found over the years. With a mother who was

designing clothes like that, Franci became passionate about fashion. At 15, she dropped out of the German gymnasium to apprentice at Salon Weigert. Every spring and fall, Franci traveled with her mother to fashion shows in Paris and Berlin. She was in Berlin during the summer of 1936, when she was 16, and so focused on the clothing that she barely noticed the Nazis. She saw herself then as a citizen of Czechoslovakia, the only democracy with a well-equipped army, a liberal government, and a haven for refugees from Nazism. She had fallen in love with an architecture student who had come to Prague as a refugee from Dresden. In February of 1938, she went down at birthday ski trip to the Austrian Alps. When her worried father cabled her to come home, she stalled because she wanted to attend one last ball. Two weeks later, Hitler annexed Austria. That's a photograph of my extremely fashionable mother at the age of 17 with her architecture student boyfriend Leo Oppenheimer. Take a good look at her nose because one of the interesting things in her memoir is she describes having plastic surgery on her nose in 1939, after the Nazi occupation of Prague, because she wanted to go to the movies and she thought that her so-called Jewish nose was a giveaway, that she was Jewish. So, it's now 1938, she's just come back from skiing, and thousands of Austrian refugees are now streaming into Prague. Like the German refugees of five years earlier, they told stories of beatings, suicides, and arrests. But the vast majority of Czech Jews still had faith in their democracy.

13:58 Helen Epstein: When her architecture student fled to America, Franci was brokenhearted. But she didn't fear for her life and she didn't think about following him. During that last normal summer of 1938, the Salon still offered an escape from reality. Then in September of [19]38, the Munich Pact [Agreement] allowed Hitler to annex the Sudetenland, the Northwestern part of Czechoslovakia. Franci was outraged. She and her parents had had faith in the Czechoslovak army and in their military alliance with France and England. My mother was a Francophile all her life, but she never forgot this big betrayal by France and England in 1938. She lived, and her parents lived, in what we would now call a bubble. Her fashion clientele included Jews and non-Jews, Germans, and Czechs. One of those people saved the photographs that you'll be seeing in this presentation. Most of her clients were as shocked as Franci was when the German army arrived in Prague in March of 1939. She was then 19 years old. In May, came a more personal disaster. A German army officer came to Salon Weigert to Aryanize it. After figuring out that this was not a business that he could take over himself, he advised Franci to sell it to an employee, pro forma, and her employee Marie would now be called Miss Marie and pay my mother a salary. My grandmother Pepi, was forced into retirement. Franci, had no aspirations to become a writer. But as a dressmaker and a businesswoman, she was accustomed to paying attention to and remembering every detail. The Holocaust memoir that she wrote in the early 1970s in New York City, reflects that and her lifelong observation and work with women.

- 16:13 Helen Epstein: It focuses almost entirely on women. Beginning with her arrest by the Gestapo in June of 1939, and I used it extensively in the memoir *Where She Came From*, that Deborah held up to you at the beginning of this presentation. In the beginning of this memoir that my mother wrote in the 1970s in New York, she writes, we were taken to Pankrác prison in June of 1939 and led off to different cells. I was put in with two middle-aged women. Marianne Golz had flaming red hair and the self-assurance of an actress, which it turned out she had been. She was also an early anti-Nazi and a Christian who had been married to a Jewish journalist in Vienna. He had fled Austria in March of 1938. Marianne had stayed behind in Vienna, obtained a quick divorce on racial grounds, and went to work to help her friends. She smuggled their money and jewelry into Switzerland while carrying on an affair with an SS officer in Vienna. This affair allowed her to cover her tracks and make a fair number of useful connections in the higher echelons of the SS. It had all worked beautifully until the day when the gentleman was transferred and Marianne decided to move to Prague, where she worked with the Czech Resistance and wound up in prison. The second woman in my mother's cell was Ludmila, the wife of a Czechoslovak army officer. My two cell mates could not have been more different, wrote my mother, where one's moral attitudes seemed at least questionable to a 19-year-old. The other had been married for 25 years to the same husband. The two women gave Franci Rabinek, an elementary education in the ground rules of German detention.
- 18:19 Helen Epstein: The first rule my mother wrote, was not to let your interrogators know anything they did not already know. Never admit anything, Marianne and Ludmila told Franci, especially not the truth. Never volunteer information, no matter what the promise of reward. Marianne, my mother wrote, explained to me the system of confiscation, humiliation, and finally deportation, which had already started in Vienna. She did not know exactly where these people had been taken, but she tried to convince me to escape Czechoslovakia when I got out of prison. She did convince me that it was foolish for my family to remain in the center of Prague because our apartment would be confiscated sooner or later. Two weeks later, I was released from Pankrác prison. Much later, I would learn that Marianne was beheaded that year. I never learned what happened to Ludmila. Following Marianne's advice, Franci convinced her parents to move to a small apartment on the outskirts of Prague and for over a year, Franci biked to her salon with a shoulder bag covering her star. In 1940 at the age of 20, she married her boyfriend, Joe Solar. Look at the nose. That's post-surgery, post-plastic surgery under Nazi occupation. In October of 1941, the first deportations of Jews began. Any of her suppliers, employees, or customers could have reported Franci to the Gestapo for working illegally, but no one did. The Czech clients were, my mother later wrote, a ray of sunshine. They kept Miss Marie aware that I was the reason they kept coming to Salon Weigert. They kept up my faith in the human race. Those Czech customers, by the way, are responsible for my being able to show you most of these photographs.

20:31 Helen Epstein: Life became narrower and narrower until the Rabinek family received transportation slips to Terezin. This is the last photo we have of my grandmother Pepi. This is the way my mother began her memoir, *Franci's War*. It was a hot day in the first week of September 1942 and the Industrial Palace of Prague was teeming with people. Most were sitting on the loose straw on the floor. Others were wandering around in a stunned daze. I had often come to the Industrial Palace when I was a child and my father's electrotechnical firm had a booth. I returned home with free samples, balloons, and stacks of glossy catalogs. This time, the Industrial Palace had been converted to the assembly point for the deportation of Jews by edict of the Nuremberg Race Laws. I was 22 and I had just had a tonsillectomy. I had not eaten for a few days. My mother kept stroking my hair and trying to make me drink water. My father was walking around from one acquaintance to another hoping to find out what was in store for us. When they told me in the hospital with my tonsillectomy that my parents and I had been called up for a transport, the nurse, who was a friend of ours, said we can get you out of this because of the surgery. I thought this over for a few minutes and then said, I'm not letting them go alone. They're too old and they don't have anyone else. My mother was 60 and my father was 65. I couldn't visualize those two people going alone anywhere. There was a little egotistical motivation too. My husband, Joe, was already gone. I would have been left all alone. Besides by September 1942, I was so fed up with all the restrictions in Prague that I thought any change of scene would be a relief no matter what was waiting on the other end. I was always like that, unfortunately.

22:47 Helen Epstein: *Franci's War*, which is the way her memoir that she wrote in the 1970s was published last year by Penguin, is at least the fifth narration of her experiences during the Holocaust. She wrote the first while she was still a prisoner in a Nazi slave labor camp in 1944 when Franci stole a notebook and kept a diary in the form of letters to her mother. After a guard discovered it, the camp commandant made her burn it page by page in his stove. Then in New York City in 1955, Franci retold many of her experiences to a Central Park West psychoanalyst. In the 1960s, she told the whole story again to the hostile reparations lawyer for the German government. In 1974, I interviewed her for the American Jewish Committee's Collection of Holocaust survivor audio testimonies in the United States, which are now archived in the New York Public Library. In the book, *Franci's War*, she refers to herself, after Auschwitz as the number A4116. Some readers find this a literary device, but for Franci, it was a defense mechanism and a consequence of trauma. Her description of the process is simple. Her cousin, Kitty, had left Terezin for Auschwitz first. Franci followed her, was quarantined and tattooed. This is how she describes Kitty in Auschwitz greeting her. Why did you come here? Don't you know we're all going to be burned June 20th? Nobody leaves here alive. The limit is six months. Why did you have to come? I was convinced that she had gone raving mad. This was not the social butterfly with beautiful eyes that always smiled. Now Kitty's eyes could not hold still

as she blurted out all this nonsense. I stared down at my tattooed arm. It became two arms, but only one of them had a tattoo. There were two of us, me and A4116, I thought. What's she doing here, poor devil? I know her. I feel sorry for her. Listen to me, said Kitty. I can see by your face that you don't believe a single word I said, I'll show you. Kitty showed her a group of chimneys spewing smoke and for the first time since her arrival, she became conscious of a peculiar odor in the air, like burning hair or burning bones.

25:35 Helen Epstein: This is a photograph, my mother is on the left, Kitty is on the right, and there is a British soldier in-between. The two cousins are shown shortly after liberation at Bergen-Belsen, by the British Army. In *Franci's War*, my mother wrote about the importance of relationships between herself and her cousin Kitty, about mutual aid between women, and also about the importance of beauty in the camps. In Auschwitz-Birkenau, she wrote, my Capo happened to be a friend from Terezin, where she had been a cook, and I had made a few clothes for her. She had a solid position in camp largely because she was exquisitely beautiful with blue eyes and long blonde hair, and because a criminal German Capo was deeply and sincerely in love with her. This way she was not only able to keep her mother with her and eat better, but our block also received less harassment than the others. Sylva, one of the prettiest girls of Prague, was Capo of Block 4. She took her function quite seriously, and ran it like the ruler of a good size Duchy, regarding the inmates as her subjects. As her knight and lover, she had Heiny, a Capo in another part of Auschwitz, who came to Birkenau regularly with deliveries of provisions. He was a criminal from Hamburg, serving a sentence of 99 years for armed robbery. Aside from this disturbing aspect of his personality, he had a heart of gold and was a truly fine human being. One of the best sources of information for the camp, not only in matters of immediate concern but for news of the war. One of the curiosities of Birkenau, my mother wrote, was the selection of its Capos. All of them were young. The SS ostensibly preferred to deal with pretty faces and good figures.

27:42 Helen Epstein: In July of 1944, Franci and Kitty were two of 1,500 Jewish women transported out of Auschwitz to labor camps. They were forced to strip and stand naked for selection by the infamous Dr. Mengele. Franci had an appendectomy scar and knew that he was rumored to dislike scars. Moreover, though she was an established dressmaker, dozens of women in search of a work skill that would help them through the selection were also claiming to be dressmakers. Here's her description of what she did. When she reached the dashing doctor, she writes, he fired questions at her: number, age, profession. She said, electrician. She joined Kitty who had already made it there and pulled on her clothes. The other girls crowded around wanting to know what had caused the change of pace in the proceedings. A4116 explained that the idea of declaring herself as an electrician had come to her when she was thinking of something original to distract the eyes of the doctor from the appendectomy scar on her belly. It wasn't an outright lie, she

said, since her father had been an electrical engineer, and had always encouraged her to learn how to fix faulty wiring or an appliance at home. Many other women had lied during this long afternoon, especially about their age and occupation. In her memoir, Franci describes the incredible excitement of leaving Auschwitz at the age of 24, with Kitty and their group of Czech Jewish women on a warm summer day. They were transported in cattle cars, but with open slats so that they could view the countryside.

29:34 Helen Epstein: That experience was followed by the surprise of arriving at a warehouse in Hamburg. A very strange scene awaited the travelers when the train stopped in front of a dark row of buildings. She writes in *Franci's War*, those doors and windows were hung like vines with young men. Boys of every shape and size wearing unfamiliar uniforms without insignia were laughing and shouting all at the same time, obviously delighted with the arrival of a trainload of young women. The ladies were puzzled, then smiled back and waved. There were some initial language problems since all the males were Italian, either deserters from Mussolini's Army or captured partisans who had fought with Tito against the fascists. Many of them spoke some French or broken German. On the Czech side, they spoke German-French and rusty school Latin. Franci wrote about the relationships that evolved between these two groups in Hamburg, as she had written about relationships in Auschwitz and Terezin, with a non-judgmental attitude that came from her experiences with customers in the salon. She observed all kinds of love: love between mothers and daughters, love between sisters and cousins, between friends, lovers for life, or lovers for the moment. She wrote about love for one's culture and country, and love for life itself. She was liberated by the British Army at Bergen-Belsen in the spring of 1945 and came down immediately with typhus. She was able to return to Prague only months later. In 1946, she met and married my father, Kurt Epstein, a fellow survivor. They remained proud Czech citizens, and together they tried to rebuild their lives in Prague, she as a dress designer with her own salon, he as a champion swimmer and coach.

31:42 Helen Epstein: They would have remained in Prague, and I would have grown up there, were it not for the Communist coup of 1948. They emigrated to America that summer. My two brothers and I do not know when Franci started writing her memoir. She didn't talk to us about it. It may have been around the time of my father's death at the beginning of 1975. It may have been when I interviewed her for her survivor testimony in 1974. We have never found any notes for the memoir, no handwritten manuscripts, just the final typed script in English on the onion skin paper she used for foreign correspondence. I had graduated from journalism school by then and was already writing drafts of what would become *Children of the Holocaust*. I had also interviewed her for the first survivor audio testimony collection that my father was part of as well. Here we are around that time at the beach. We know that one of Franci's clients, a well-known literary agent, shopped

her manuscript around in 1975 with no luck. It's always hard to say why a book is rejected, but I think her strong voice and her sexual candor might have been the reason no publisher accepted her memoir then. She was an unusual woman, the breadwinner of her family in the Betty Crocker 1950s, a secular Jew, the breadwinner. Her favorite Holocaust writer was Primo Levi because she often said he was never sentimental. But by 2018, the world had caught up with my mother. Books and television shows like *Orange is the New Black*, lifted the curtain on relationships between women in prison. In academia, Women Studies and Holocaust Studies were delving into the experiences of women and more, and queer historians were sifting sources for documentation of gaze. There is documentation of all of this in *Franci's War*. The Me Too movement was providing a vocabulary for an international conversation about the connections between sex and power.

34:07 Helen Epstein: As I write in the afterward to *Franci's War*, I decided to edit, document, and annotate her memoir after somebody in Berlin contacted me about Marianne Golz. Thirty years after my mother's death, I myself was a mother and a grandmother. I was able to take in what I had been unable to take in as a child, or an adolescent, or even as the younger woman. As a journalist, I knew a good narrative when I read one. As a reader of women's history, I knew that my mother's memoir had unusually rich source material. At first, I thought I'd send it to an academic press. Much to my surprise, it was snapped up by mainstream publishers. They saw it as an unusually contemporary Holocaust memoir told by a glamorous fashion designer who wound up making clothes for some of New York City's most interesting women. During these days of widespread racism, political violence, climate change, and the COVID epidemic, her matter-of-fact memoir can be read as a survival guide. How did she survive? She refused to take her situation personally, but saw herself as part of an unfairly targeted group, and refused to feel sorry for herself.

35:30 Helen Epstein: She kept alert, reading situations and people as best she could and acted accordingly. She kept her friends very close, formed alliances where she could, and volunteered to take care of others, including a young orphan named Gisela, whom she adopted while in Terezin and Auschwitz. She tried to find meaning in performing work she knew how to do, making and repairing clothing, both as the forced labor she was assigned to perform, and for favors and food. But she also risked her life by claiming she was an electrician and showed enormous daring and great risk when she learned on the job in extraordinarily difficult conditions. She sought solace in the memories of her parents, of her first love, of favorite poems, songs, and music. She took one day at a time and clung to the conviction that she would get through whatever happened. Franci often referred to the concentration camps as her university, where she had received a unique education in human behavior. Her greatest concern was that due to human nature, what happened to her could happen again in different form to anyone, anywhere.

She left that conviction as a legacy to her children, and I have all my life found it very helpful. Thanks.

- 37:01 Susanne Hillman: Thank you so much, Helen, for an inspiring talk. So, as Helen said, she's inviting questions, and maybe while you type some of them, I have a question for you. Would you care to describe your relationship with your mother? While you were talking about her, I got the sense that you learned a lot from her, admired her, was inspired by her, were inspired by her. Were there also more difficult aspects to that relationship?
- 37:36 Helen Epstein: Certainly. I think that, like many daughters of Holocaust survivors, I had an extremely complicated relationship with my parents, but particularly with my mother. My mother really exemplified that unusual combination of traumatic damage and great resilience that characterizes many Holocaust survivors. While she was the breadwinner of the family, she was also intermittently suicidal. And I grew up with a mother who often locked herself up into the bathroom and said she was going to kill herself. I also, because I resembled my mother, I look very much like my mother. I have many of the same interests and tastes as my mother. We were extremely close in what we loved and what we did. So I soon became the closest person to my mother. Had she married a different kind of man, perhaps she would have been closer to her husband than to her daughter. But like in many survivor camp families, I became the closest person to her. And while that was initially a great thing for me as a child, it became increasingly problematic in adolescents and in young womanhood. So our relationship became increasingly difficult, and I actually went into psychoanalysis in order to figure out how to separate from my mother.
- 39:11 Susanne Hillman: You said earlier that you broke the tradition of being a dressmaker. Somebody asked, somebody in the audience, why you chose to become a journalist. I would like to add onto this question, was this a way of distinguishing yourself from your mother to kind of separate yourself from that trajectory?
- 39:34 Helen Epstein: No, I don't think so actually. I think that the fashion gene is passed down from generation to generation, and in our family, my younger brother got the gene. He's an extremely fashionable person and I, it completely missed me. I was never interested in clothes. As a little girl, I was a tomboy. I liked wearing pants. I was much more like my athletic father, and so I was never drawn to fashion. That was not a problem for us at all. I never was interested in becoming a dress designer. In fact, the opposite was true. My mother was extremely frustrated at how indifferent I was to fashion and to clothing. So no, that was not my rebellion. As far as the journalism went, two of my mother's favorite customers were journalists. One of them was a woman named Maria Manas, who was extremely tall as I was and wore pants and capes at a time when women didn't do that. She was also something of a television personality like Vivian Vance. But instead of

being in a comedy, she was on David Susskind's panel shows discussing current events, and being incredibly smart and critical. She was really my model, and very much my mentor for journalism. The other journalist in my life was my mother's very close friend and at one time her lover, who was a very famous Czech journalist, who had been imprisoned in a concentration camp for six years because he had been an anti-Nazi journalist in Prague. And in the United States, he worked for Radio Free Europe. From an early age, he used to put me on his radio show, on Radio Free Europe. So journalism was very, very much in the air at our house. Of course, I lived in Manhattan, and so every morning both my parents read *The New York Times* and on Sundays, half the day was devoted to reading *The New York Times*. So, journalism was clearly something that was valued and valorized in our household. I became a journalist really by accident. I was caught in the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. I was asked to stay inside by my hosts, and because I had nothing else to do and there was a typewriter there, I started writing about what I was experiencing. *The Jerusalem Post* wound up publishing it, and that's how I became a journalist.

- 42:23 Susanne Hillman: What a beginning! I actually just remembered that some years ago, the Holocaust Workshop invited a Holocaust survivor from Germany and we were introduced to that person, thanks to a piece you wrote, and that was Marianne Burkenroad. I think you wrote a piece for *The New Yorker*, which was brought to our attention, and then we got Marianne Burkenroad to come speak at the Holocaust Workshop. That was wonderful. So, we have a couple of other questions. Ann would like to know what happened to Gisela.
- 42:54 Helen Epstein: Gisela was murdered by, in Auschwitz. Gisela's story is an amazing story. I had heard about her from the time I was little girl. My mother writes about her at length. And when I was, when I was editing my mother's memoir, I went online. I went to Jewish Genealogy Portal, which is a wonderful, wonderful tool if you're doing research, and I just sent out a note into the world. I said my mother adopted a Jewish orphan in Terezin. She was about 12 years old then. She had a brother. They were both orphaned. The parents were nowhere to be found. Would anyone have any idea who this person is? Sure enough, somebody on Jewish Genealogy Portal from Israel sent me a photograph of her. The photograph is, I believe, in the book that you're holding in your hand, of Gisela and her brother in, I believe, it's in Karlovy Vary, in Carlsbad before the war. Unfortunately, she was killed in Auschwitz.
- 44:06 Susanne Hillman: We have a question from Deborah. In your talk, you didn't say much about your mother's internment in Terezin. Would you care to say a little bit about how that experience turned out?
- 44:25 Helen Epstein: Sure. I think the Czech Jews in Terezin were a very privileged group. Terezin, as some of you may know if you've gone there if you've traveled there, is not that far from Prague. It's about a 50-minute train ride from Prague.

And so, Czech Jews because they spoke Czech because they were guarded by Czech policemen, were able to smuggle things in and out of the ghetto via Czech people from Prague. There were many Czech Jews from Prague who are married to non-Jews. So there was quite an underground traffic between the Czech Jews and the outside world. My mother was a married woman in Prague. She was married to Joe Solar. Joe Solar himself was a black market trafficker. He would smuggle letters and food in and out of the ghetto, and he was eventually caught, and she became a kind of ghetto widow in Terezin. But between her husband's activities and her own ability to sew, and to trade her sewing skills for food, she was able to live relatively well in that context. The other thing is, of course, the Czech Jews, many of them all knew each other from before the war. There were people in my mother's group where she, where she slept who had been her customers, or who had been her competitors as dressmakers. So, they were at an enormous advantage compared to say, the German Jews or the Dutch-Jews or the other, the other inmates of Terezin.

- 46:18 Susanne Hillman: Right, actually, that was a part of *Franci's War* that interested me, particularly because for some time I studied the life of a Czech-Jewish survivor, Dina Gottliebová-Babbitt. And that leads me to my question, do you know if your mother, in her memoir, if she used pseudonyms for some of the people she?
- 46:38 Helen Epstein: She did use pseudonyms and, as a journalist of course, I was very interested in finding out who the real people were. In some cases, I knew who the real people were. In other cases, I didn't. My initial impulse was to identify them for the reader. Afterwards, after, after thinking it through and talking to many people, I decided that this was my mother's book, not my book and that I would respect her wishes to hold on to the pseudonyms. And so, while I know who these people are, I will not say so in public.
- 47:15 Susanne Hillman: Okay. Judi has a very interesting question. Does your, she's wondering if your writing allows you to process your difficult or your complicated relationship with your mother.
- 47:29 Helen Epstein: Absolutely. I think that writing is always a way of processing anything. And for some of us, it's the only way of processing anything. I know that for me processing my relationship with my mother, I did a lot of it in psychoanalysis but there was a lot left over that I could only do in writing. And if you're interested in that part of this whole Holocaust experience, I've written about that extensively - about processing my relationship with my mother - in the last of the trilogy, which is called *The Long Half Lives of Love and Trauma*. If you do read it, I'd love to hear from you because that is the least known of my books. Yet I think it's, in some ways, the most intimate and the most significant one.

- 48:26 Susanne Hillman: I'll have to check it out then. Judi also wonders, what happened to Pepi, your grandmother?
- 48:33 Helen Epstein: Pepi, the Rabineks, my mother, and her two parents arrived in Auschwitz and they were immediately separated. And my grandparents were immediately sent on a transport East. They met a very quick but a horrible end. They were shot into an open ditch at a place called Maly Trostenets. My mother, of course, never saw them again.
- 49:01 Susanne Hillman: That is pretty terrible considering her age. I mean, it was terrible for everybody but she was advanced, of an advanced age. I have one final question that, oh, no, we have one more but in the meantime, I'll ask you my question. Do you actually identify as a second-generation survivor? Does that label mean anything to you or that designation, second-generation survivor?
- 49:26 Helen Epstein: Abso- well, I don't, I've never felt comfortable with the term second-generation survivor. I think that's a compound noun that doesn't sound very American to me. But in terms of second-generation, I can tell you how the term evolved for me. When I first began working on this subject, which was when I was a student in Israel in the late 1960s, it evolved because I went to Israel after the Six-Day War as a Mitnadvei, which means a volunteer, to help, help work in the Kibbutz, assuming that there were many young people who were fighting the war, but the Six-Day War ended very quickly. And there were thousands of us from all over the world who had come to Israel who now had nothing to do. And so what we did, many of us was go to Jerusalem and study Hebrew at the Hebrew University in an Ulpan that summer, and then we stayed and remained students in Israel. I graduated from the Hebrew University, even though I began my studies at college, at City College in New York. During that time, I met all these people from all over the world. It was like having a research pool outside my window. I had started noticing, even though I wasn't a trained journalist, that many of us had a great deal in common. We all spoke two or three or sometimes four languages. We spoke the language of our parents and then we spoke the language of the country in which we had grown up. We were multicultural. We lived in the culture of our parents and in our own culture. And of course, most of us had no, no greater extended families. In New York City, I grew up in a Jewish neighborhood, but most of the people on the Upper West Side were American Jews, and almost all of them had grandparents. I never had grandparents. I never had aunts or uncles or cousins. So, all of a sudden here I was in Jerusalem and I noticed that all of these people were like me. None of them had extended families. All of them were living in a strange combination of cultures. I had a friend who was Brazilian but he spoke Hungarian because his parents were Hungarian survivors. I had a friend who was Belgian but he spoke Polish because his parents were Polish survivors, etc., etc. I called these people, we who came after the war. That was my first formulation of this. Then I thought, oh, we're a peer group without a sign. And I remember I wrote

an article back in 1975, I think for the *National Jewish Monthly* called "A Peer Group Without a Sign". It was only much later that the term evolved to second-generation, but I'm comfortable with second-generation. I, you know, these things take on a life of their own. When you're a writer, you realize that you put out an idea or you put out a word, and then all kinds of things happen to it that are out of your control. So, while I'm not particularly comfortable with second-generation survivor, that's the way it is. What can I do?

52:42 Susanne Hillman: It occurred to me that it is a testimony to your or a testament to your lively retelling of your mother's story that a number of questions are about what happened to the people that you talked about, Gisela, Pepi. Somebody would like to know what happened to Kitty. That's Sherry. Sherry asked the question, what happened to Kitty?

53:03 Helen Epstein: Kitty is somebody I knew very well. First of all, Kitty came to America a couple of times. I don't know how she managed it because even during the Cold War, she was able to travel. My mother when she received her reparations money in 1964, went to see Kitty. Kitty and my mother returned to Prague together in the fall of 1945. Kitty was always a party girl. Kitty just went back to being a social butterfly as my mother describes her. Unfortunately, the man that she was engaged to, married somebody else and she was heartbroken. And so, she married a fellow concentration camp survivor, like so many survivors did for various reasons. He became an invalid and he was unable to travel. When my mother and father emigrated from Prague in the summer of 1948, Kitty was unable to leave the country, and so she remained in Prague. She remained in Prague until she died. She wound up working as the secretary to the chief rabbi of Prague, which was kind of amazing. She lived longer than my mother. My mother died in 1989 and Kitty lived to see the Velvet Revolution, which she reveled in. She lived to come to my wedding in 1989. She had a fine old time until she finally died of cancer in Prague.

54:41 Susanne Hillman: Thank you for sharing this. So now we have one, definitely the last question. Nina is wondering how your mother's relationship with Judaism, the Jewish faith evolved. Was she happy that once she moved to the United States, she could live her Jewishness openly?

55:00 Helen Epstein: My mother never had a problem living her Jewishness openly. I think if you look at the history of Czechoslovakia, you'll find that under Tomas Masaryk, who was the first president of Czechoslovakia, Jews had total equal rights along with every other religious minority. In fact, my mother often said that living in Czechoslovakia in the [19]20s and [19]30s was a far freer experience than living in the United States in the 1950s. She never had any problem living as a Jew. The problem was that her father had baptized her and had never given her any kind of Jewish education. She was a social Jew in the sense that most of the people she knew were Jews and she was culturally Jewish, she did all of the

things that Jews did in the Czechoslovak Republic and also what American Jews do now, but she never had a religious practice. She said that concentration camp had basically taught her Judaism as it did to many Czech Jews because in places like Terezin, they had seminars on Judaism, on Zionism, on Talmud, on Jewish writers, and she really became Jewish as a result of her war experience. When they, my father's was very different. My father came from a provincial Jewish family, a small-town Jewish family. My grandfather was president of his synagogue and the choir director of their choir, which tells you what kind of Jewish community it was, but the point is that my father had a bar mitzvah, my father knew the holidays, my father knew the Jewish calendar. My mother knew none of those things. So she learned that in Terezin. When she came to the United States in New York City, they did join a synagogue. They joined the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue, which was a reformed synagogue on the Upper West Side. We were sent to Sunday school. I and my two brothers went to Sunday school as children. My mother observed the Jewish holidays not as rigorously as many other Jewish mothers I know, but at least she did it.

- 57:21 Susanne Hillman: Thank you so much, Helen. I wish we could all applaud. This was a truly wonderful talk and I would like to encourage everybody to read this pretty unique memoir.
- 57:33 Helen Epstein: I would, I would ask only one thing. If you read the memoir or anything else that we've talked about, please leave a review because these are very important ways of getting your feedback. So, I would appreciate it.
- 57:48 Susanne Hillman: Thank you again, Helen. Thank you, Judi, for supporting this unique event. Thank you again, Helen. Thank you, everybody, for being here, and I'll see you in November. Goodnight. Bye, everybody. Bye, Helen.
- 58:05 Helen Epstein: Bye bye
- 58:07 [Franci's War / Featuring Helen Epstein, Journalist and Author / October 13, 2021]
- 58:11 [Presented by / The Holocaust Living History Workshop / Deborah Hertz, Director, The Jewish Studies Program, UC San Diego / Susanne Hillman, Program Coordinator, The Holocaust Living History Workshop / UC San Diego Library / Erik T. Mitchell, The Audrey Geisel University Librarian / Nikki Kolupailo, Director of Communications and Engagement]
- 58:15 [Read Write Think Dream / The Library UC San Diego Channel / www.uctv.tv/library-channel/]
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