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Helen Epstein on “Intergenerational Effects of Genocide: A Survivor’s Daughter Reflects”

Presented by Northeastern University's College of Social Sciences and Humanities and the Northeastern Humanities Center with the Holocaust Awareness Committee

THE IMPACT OF THE HOLOCAUST ON THE NEXT GENERATION

The 23rd Annual **Robert Salomon Morton Lecture**
Featuring the esteemed author



Helen Epstein
“Inter-Generational Effects of Genocide:
A Survivor’s Daughter Reflects”

Monday, April 13, 2015 **5:30 p.m.** Northeastern University,
Raytheon Amphitheater, Egan Research Center,
120 Forsyth Street, Boston, MA

Northeastern University
College of Social Sciences and Humanities

FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC
For information about parking and other questions,
please contact nuhumanities@neu.edu.
For additional Holocaust awareness programming,
visit northeastern.edu/hac.

The Robert Salomon Morton Memorial Lecture is sponsored by The Robert S. Morton Lecture Fund at Northeastern and the Gustel Cormann Giessen Memorial Fund.

Time: 5:30 pm to 7:00 pm

Location: Egan Research Center

Sponsored By: Part of Holocaust Awareness Week. Sponsored by the Gustel Cormann Giessen Memorial Fund and the Robert S. Morton Lecture Fund at Northeastern University.

Helen Epstein is Author of *Children of the Holocaust* and *Where She Came From: A Daughters Search for Her Mother’s History*.

The following article about the event appeared in “News@Northeastern.”

Author and academic Helen Epstein discussed the inter-generational effects of genocide on Monday evening at Northeastern University, delivering the [23rd Annual Robert Salomon Morton Memorial Lecture](#) to students, faculty, and staff in the Raytheon Amphitheater.

The daughter of Holocaust survivors, Epstein explained that her family's past had shaped her future, molding her art and her friendships, her fashion sense and her teaching style, her parenting skills and her belief in social justice.

“Over the past 50 years, I have become more aware of how pervasive my Holocaust heritage is, and I struggle to find a balance between living in the present and being preoccupied by the past,” Epstein said. “There is no question that I became the kind of writer I am because of my family's past.”

Her talk on the inter-generational transmission of trauma served as the centerpiece of Northeastern's Holocaust Awareness Week, which is presented by the [Humanities Center](#) and the [College of Social Sciences and Humanities](#) in partnership with the Holocaust Awareness Committee. Titled “The Impact of the Holocaust on the Next Generation,” the educational series of events aims to explore the Holocaust's legacy in the 21st century.

Epstein has made a living out of examining the topic through her writing, penning the groundbreaking nonfiction book *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors* and the memoir *Where She Came From: A Daughter's Search for Her Mother's History*.

Both of her parents grew up in the Czech Republic and were the sole members of their families to survive the Nazi occupation: The woman who would become her mother was liberated by the British at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Northern Germany, while the man who would become her father was liberated by the Russians at a work camp in Poland.

“My parents had no work and no place to live,” Epstein said, “but the war had not changed their attachment to the Czech Republic.”

Both remained in Prague in the immediate aftermath of the war, meeting in 1946 and then bringing Epstein into the world in 1947. But the Communist coup forced the family to flee, and the trio moved to New York City's Czech community in 1948. Epstein's mother became the family's breadwinner, designing dresses for the well-to-do, while her father, a two-time Olympic swimmer, eventually became a fabric cutter in the city's garment district.

Epstein was in awe of her parents, wonderstruck by their improbable story of survival. She clung to them and to their traditions, rather unlike her American counterparts who yearned to distance themselves from their filial obligations. As a teen, Epstein developed a liking for her parents' favorite central European literature; hit the slopes in deference to their unrequited love of skiing; and dressed in her mother's handmade clothing, which, she said, had made it difficult for her to develop her own sartorial sense later in life.

“In many ways, survivor families are different from the American model,” she explained. “In the United States, it is about separating from parents and staking out your identity among your peer group. Among survivors, separation was equated to painful loss and death.”

Her parents, she said, instilled in her a keen sense of morality. Her mother, she noted, went out of her way to employ African-American women in her dressmaking business, while her father rarely let a racial slur go uncontested. Their sense of right and wrong influenced whom she did—and whom she did not—bring into her inner circle. “It was important to me that my friends be ethical, responsible, loyal, and fair,” she said. “I had enormous tolerance for sad, wounded, or eccentric people, and little interest in frivolous ones.”

Years later, she became something of a confidant for the traumatized and bereaved. As the first tenured female professor in New York University’s Department of Journalism, she listened with sensitivity to the marginalized students that approached her with their problems. “I believe that my background as a daughter of survivors infused my teaching with a sensitivity to students struggling with all kinds of trauma,” she said.

In the Q&A, one attendee asked her to explain whether Holocaust survivors have a responsibility to share their stories with their family. Epstein replied in the affirmative, but noted that survivors should be careful not to over-share, especially with children.

“My mother over-shared and I knew a lot of this stuff when I was 3, which was too soon,” she said. “But as a parent, I would not lie nor keep secrets from my children.”

-By Jason Kornwitz