



SOUTHERN JEWISH HERITAGE

VOL. 17, NO. 2

SPRING 2004

Jewish Historical Society Of Memphis and the Mid-South

Annual Meeting

June 6, 2004 Jewish Community Center 2:00pm

Speaker: Helen Epstein

Election of Officers

Writer of "Literary Non-Fiction" to Speak at Annual Meeting

By Peggy Jalenak

Helen Epstein, a former journalist, writes "literary non-fiction." Epstein was born in Prague in 1947. Her family emigrated to the U.S. in 1948, in the wake of the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia. She grew up in New York City, was educated at Hunter College High School, Hebrew University, and Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

Epstein became a journalist while she was a twenty-year-old college student caught in the Soviet invasion of

Prague. Her personal account of the invasion jump-started her career as a journalist. For the next 25 years she worked as a free-lance reporter for the *Sunday New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and other national publications. Her profiles of cultural figures such as art historian Meyer Schapiro and producer Joseph Papp,



Helen Epstein

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JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MEMPHIS AND THE MID-SOUTH - FOUNDED IN 1986
P.O. BOX 242154, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE 38124

President's Message



Max Notowitz

It's hard to believe that almost two years ago I assumed the presidency of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid South. While the time passed quickly, a lot of memorable events took place. I would be remiss if I didn't say it has been a very worthwhile experience that has given me great pleasure and a sense of accomplishment as well as a sense of frustration when things didn't turn out as planned. Overall, it has been an experience for which I am very grateful. I want to express my appreciation to those who placed their confidence in me and stood by me for the duration of the past two years. While I may not have been all things to all people, I tried to do everything to the best of my ability and to the best of my understanding of the duties of the position and its priorities.

Having acknowledged what I undertook and what, I feel, I did with it, I can evaluate some of the positions taken and the importance they played in the success of our accomplishments. The most important thing I discovered was the dedication and hard work of some members who, when asked to do something, never failed to come forth and do all or more than requested. It was such cooperation and desire to help that made my job easier and my feeling that my dependence on these people was fully justified. It was such help from many volunteers that made for the success of the many undertakings and the smooth operation of the organization. I appreciate very much the help I got.

There are other benefits that one gains from participating in activities that may yield such rewards. If we do something worthwhile we may not always realize how and when we are rewarded and what form it takes to make us aware of it.

I can recall an occasion where I was present at a Bar Mitzvah of a relative. The grandparents, my contemporaries, were assimilated Jews with very little participation in any synagogue activities. Their children evidently felt the need for religious expression, becoming active members of their synagogue with regular attendance at services. And when the Bar Mitzvah boy came to the bima, conducted the service in both Hebrew and English, chanted not only the Torah portion, but also the whole Haftorah to the delight of his parents and to

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**Of Blessed Memory*

the amazement of his grandfather, it resulted in a warm feeling to have witnessed the rebirth of something so vital to being a member of the Jewish community. This was an opportunity the like of which cannot be experienced unless you're there in person.

So what does this prove? That there is a variety of activities into which we venture with hope and anticipation gaining rewards that outweigh the expected. And, finally, that leaves a feeling of saying to oneself, "I'm so glad that I was there and did what I did."

Max

"Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: Commemorating 350 Years of Jewish Settlement in America"

Make plans now to attend the joint conference of the Southern Jewish Historical Society, the Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina, and Brith Sholom Beth Israel congregation October 28-31, 2004, in Charleston, South Carolina. This will be an exciting weekend with outstanding speakers and programs. Activities will include guided bus and walking tours of Charleston and an optional day trip to Savannah.

as well as legendary musicians such as Vladimir Horowitz, Leonard Bernstein, and Yo-Yo Ma have received various awards.

Epstein has taught writing since 1974. For twelve years she was on the faculty of New York University, becoming the first tenured woman professor in their journalism department. She is affiliated with Harvard University's Center for European Studies, where, as a visiting scholar in 1982, she began her book *Where She Came From: A Daughter's Search for her Mother's History*. She also is an affiliate of the Hadassah International Research Institute on Jewish Women at Brandeis University, where she produced an audio anthology, *In Other Words: The Jewish Writer Reads Her Work*. In addition, she is on the faculty of the Prague Summer Seminars at Charles University and is active in the Cambridge public schools.

Helen Epstein has served as guest lecturer in a variety of venues including MFA writing programs; university departments of journalism, women's studies, European studies, and Jewish studies; mental health organizations, where she frequently has spoken on long-term psychological effects of war-related trauma as well as on family history; the U.S. Military Academy at West Point; and the U.S. Holocaust Museum. In 2001 she represented the United States at the 100th anniversary of the Nobel Peace Prize Writers' Conference in Tromsø, Norway.

Epstein is the author of five books. These include two memoirs: *Where She Came From* (1998), and *Children of the Holocaust* (1979), which has been used in university courses and by therapists treating children of alcoholics, immigrants, depressed parents, and survivors of sexual abuse. This was the first book to deal with second-generation and post-traumatic stress syndrome in children of Holocaust survivors.

Her biography, *Joe Papp: An American Life*, about the visionary and controversial theatrical producer of *Hair* and *A Chorus Line*, is also a cultural history of the American not-for-profit theater world from 1920 to 1990. Joseph Papp himself chose Helen Epstein to be his biographer. Her book, *Music Talks*, is a collection of profiles of classical musicians. In addition, she was the translator into English of *Under a Cruel Star: A Life in Prague*, a memoir of life in Stalinist Czechoslovakia by Heda Kovaly.

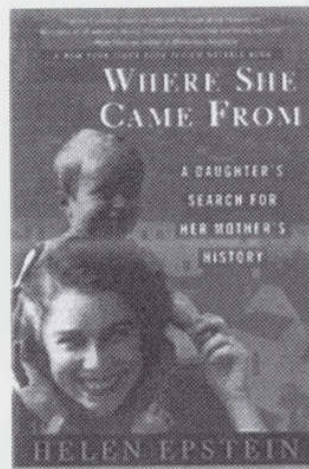
Epstein lives in the Boston area with her husband, Patrick Mehr, and two sons, Daniel and Sam. ☆

Book Review:

Where She Came From: A Daughter's Search For Her Mother's History

By Gloria Felsenthal

When Helen Epstein lost her mother, Frances, in 1989, she looked for a way to work through her grief. As a professional writer, she found a natural outlet in the written word. She became obsessed by a desire to learn about her mother's life in prewar Czechoslovakia and about the relatives she never knew. Aided by the fall of the Iron Curtain, her quest led her on journeys to Czechoslovakia, to cemeteries, interviews, hidden archives, museums, kindred spirits, long lost relatives, and postwar letters. She also relied on a twelve-page family history written by her mother



in the 1970s, an unpublished memoir, and an audio-taped oral history. The result is *Where She Came From: A Daughter's Search for her Mother's History*, a mixture of memoir and meticulously researched Czech history.

Epstein describes several hundred years of history in the area that was known as Czechoslovakia for most of the 20th century. Periods of Jewish ghettos and forced isolation alternate with years of relative acceptance and freedom in housing, employment, and interaction with Christian neighbors. She depicts the years between the two World Wars as a golden era under Thomas G. Masaryk, president of the new Czechoslovak Republic. Frances Epstein told her daughter "prewar Czechoslovakia was a freer, more progressive country than postwar America." Such a statement is astonishing from an American perspective. According to Epstein, however, many Czech citizens of the time believed in their country as the only "beacon of democracy" in central Europe. Frances felt that anti-Semitism was a "German invention, imposed on an enslaved and unwilling Czech nation." Helen's research, however, rejects such a simplistic reading of modern European history. She found "anti-Semitic texts written in Czech and liberal texts

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Even After Five Generations, Family Cradle Keeps on Rockin'!

By Marcia Fortas Levy

In 1890, upon the birth of his third child, Jacob Alperin purchased a sturdy wooden cradle. The infant, who was named Rose, never could have imagined that she would be the first in a long line of babies who would sleep in that same cradle, launching a family tradition which would continue for generations to come.

As the story has been told, Jacob Alperin came to Memphis from Kiev in the late 1800s with his father Moses Alperin, his wife Bertha (also called Brucha), and a baby daughter, Bessie. They entered the United States via Ellis Island and were headed for New Orleans on a Mississippi riverboat. When the boat made a brief stop in Memphis, the Alperin men debarked to stretch their legs. They saw some men standing on the cobblestones near the boat landing and happened to overhear their conversation, which was in Yiddish, upon which Jacob dashed back onto the boat, gathered his wife, baby, and family belongings and exclaimed, "Come on, Brucha, we're getting off! There are Jews here!"

Moses Alperin was a tailor, and he and his family initially lived in the Pinch at North Main Street and Mill. His first wife, who was Jacob's mother, did not come to America; presumably she had died in Russia before the family emigrated. Moses later remarried in Memphis and, according to a family source, gave Baron Hirsch Synagogue its first Torah.

As their family began to grow, Jacob and Brucha Alperin moved to a house of their own on Alabama Street. They had seven children. Bessie was the oldest, Ike was born next, then Rose, who was the first to use the new cradle. Although not documented, it is assumed that all the brothers and sisters who followed Rose—Dave, Joe (Yussel), Fanny (Fagel), and Belle—slept in the family cradle.

In 1901, Bessie Alperin, then nineteen years old, married Joe Fortas. He had come to Memphis from Melitopol, Russia, after spending several years in London, where he was an apprentice to a cabinetmaker. He opened a furniture store in downtown Memphis. The couple lived on Mosby Street and later bought a home on Hill Street. Later, when the Hill Street property was purchased by

the city to build a housing project, the Joe Fortas family moved to another home, at 1342 North Parkway. Joe Fortas served as president of Baron Hirsch in its early years, and Bessie was a trustee of the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Hebrew Educational Alliance, a group whose aim was to have a free Hebrew school and Sunday School.

Meanwhile, the cradle was welcoming a second generation of babies. Bessie and Joe Fortas' first

born was Harry in 1903, followed by Celia in 1905, Clara in 1907, Mildred (Millie) in 1909, and finally Edward in 1919. Although the cradle was much smaller in size than a standard baby crib, each child slept in it for about a year, and possibly even up to the time when it was needed for the next baby.

Unfortunately, no records were kept of any family members who might have used the cradle in the years immediately following the children of Bessie and Joe Fortas. Rose Alperin married Jake Bartnick, but they had no children. Sylvia Alperin Greif, daughter of Dave Alperin, recalls that the cradle was unavailable when she was born because it was still occupied by Edward Fortas. Fagel Alperin Wilenzick lived in Forrest City, Arkansas, and Belle Alperin Stein lived in Greenville, Mississippi; perhaps it would have been difficult at that time to transport the cradle for babies who lived away from Memphis.

Continued on Next Page



The cradle is a tradition for the descendants of Moses Alperin.

However, the cradle did not remain empty for too many years; soon the Fortas children began to marry and have children of their own. The third "cradle generation" resembles a list of Biblical "begats." Harry Fortas married Thelma Morris and had one daughter, Marcia; Celia married Sam Sheft and had two sons, Irwin and Barry; Clara married Al Tucker and had a daughter, Bettie, and a son, Eddie; Millie married Isaac Makowsky and had a son, Jerome, and a daughter, Brenda. All these babies were tucked into the family cradle for at least some part of their infancy.

Author's note: When I was born in 1937, the conventional wisdom was that if you rocked your baby, you would spoil it. So my father removed the rockers from the cradle and replaced them with rollers. When I was about a year old, my parents took me to Hot Springs. There was a rocking chair in the hotel room, and my mother held me on her lap and began to rock. Immediately she realized what she (and I!) had missed. Fortunately, the rockers had not been discarded, and when my children were born, I put them back on and rocked away!

Edward, the youngest Fortas child, became a dentist and married Mildred Bishin. They had two sons, Paul and Gary. Edward served overseas as an officer in the army dental corps during World War II and at some point worked on the teeth of General George Patton. Only a short time after his return to Memphis after the war, he was killed tragically in an automobile accident. The Edward M. Fortas chapter of AZA was named in his memory.

In about 1940, Harry and Thelma Fortas opened a children's furniture store at 1652 Union Avenue. Harry had gained his furniture expertise by working in his father's business, the Joe Fortas Furniture Company. The name of the new store was inspired by the family cradle: it was called "The Cradle Shoppe." As a result of the post World War II baby boom, numerous infants throughout Memphis and the Mid-South slept in cribs purchased from The Cradle Shoppe. Later, the store was expanded to include a wide variety of baby items, toys, and children's clothing up to size 14, but the name of the shop, which closed in the early 1960s, remained the same.

With the births of a fourth generation, the cradle began to travel. No longer was it simply a place for a wee one to rest its head. The cradle had become a symbol of family tradition and history, and almost every pair of new parents in the family wanted their babies to be a part of this heritage. Thus the cradle was sometimes disassembled, carefully packed in a corrugated carton, transported by car or shipped, then reassembled to be used by those



Some early occupants of the cradle: L. to R., Seated: Millie Fortas; Harry Fortas; Belle Alperin (holding Millie); Clara Fortas; Standing, Celia Fortas. Photograph taken about 1910.

who no longer resided in Memphis. The cradle would be sent on wherever it was needed, in time for the next new baby's arrival. As a result of improved nutrition and prenatal care, this generation of babies generally outgrew the cradle in about six weeks. Since most homes now had a camera, photographs of babies lying in the cradle began to appear in family albums.

The fifth generation of babies is still being born, but even as the family has multiplied, it is now scattered throughout the country from coast to coast. Some babies have slept in the cradle and some have not. Sometimes the cradle has remained in Memphis at the home of grandparents awaiting the visit of a new grandchild. The latest baby to use the cradle while visiting Memphis was Charlotte Rubenstein, born on July 29, 2003, daughter of Susan and Randy Rubenstein of Atlanta. Randy is the son of Bettie and Leonard Rubenstein; Bettie is the daughter of Clara Fortas Tucker and the great-niece of the first

Please see Cradle, Page 7

Music Was a Consuming Interest of Self-Taught Violinist Edward Freudberg

This is the second in a series of articles detailing Jewish involvement with Memphis Symphony orchestras. The following story is taken from an interview written by Nancy Crosby and published originally in an issue of Symphony Notes, the newsletter of the Symphony League.

In 1902, a six-year-old boy, watching his cousin writing notes upon a staff, asked what "those funny marks" were. The cousin answered, "That's music!" The child was Edward (Eddie) Freudberg, and music became a consuming interest in his life.

Eddie did not follow music as a profession. Merchandising was his business, and that is what brought him to Memphis, where he joined his brother, Irving, who was then president of Levy's, the women's specialty store founded in the 1920s by Joseph and Leo Levy. But playing the violin was always an integral part of his life. Though he never had a formal lesson, he claimed Elman, Zimbalist, and Kreisler as teachers because he always listened to their recordings so avidly, later hearing them in person. One of the joys of his life was listening to his large collection of violin recordings, particularly those of Heifetz, who became his favorite. As he put it, "I never lack for company."

Because his family could not afford to give all their children music lessons, it was Eddie's older brother who studied the violin with a teacher. Eddie said, "We didn't have much money but we didn't care. We just thought everybody was that way. What we did have was a good family and parents who loved music."

Eddie would sit outside the door listening while his brother had his lesson. The brother tried to share what he had learned, but after becoming frustrated with the younger boy once, he broke his bow over his head. That was the end of the tutelage. Taught scales and basic notes by his cousin and blessed with a good musical ear, Eddie then taught himself to play. He practiced intently, borrowing instruments from kids in the neighborhood

while they were outside playing games, because, as he said, "I had a feeling for the violin."

Eddie played in the radio orchestra of station WOR in Newark, New Jersey, as well as with the Newark Symphony for several seasons. He performed on the

summer vaudeville stage for a time with his twin brother Irving. The two were in a quartet which featured them in a soft shoe routine.

He also played for silent pictures in the early Memphis State orchestras and in Dr. Burnet Tuthill's orchestra. The principal cellist of that orchestra and its assistant conductor was a young man named Vincent de Frank, whom Eddie had met while attending concerts of the

Second Army Band, which de Frank conducted. Knowing how well Eddie played, de Frank asked him to be one of the charter members of the Memphis Sinfonietta. Along with the others, Eddie made posters, sold tickets, and played for no fee. Though Eddie traveled frequently, he arranged all his trips around his musical commitments, never missing a rehearsal or performance.

Music took a back seat when Eddie saw action during World War I. However, while serving with the army of occupation in Germany, he took a day's leave in Coblenz, bought a violin, and became a member of a five piece orchestra which played for troop shows.

Children were a great source of delight for Eddie. He enjoyed the company of grandchildren, nieces, and nephews, always accepting them just the way they were. At children's concerts played in the schools, he could always be found before the performance down front with the



Edward (Eddie) Freudberg with his Januarius Gagliano violin.

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children, making friends and playing the violin for them. "Music is important for kids," he said. "It adds something to their minds and gives a different and important element to their lives."

His friends and family loved to talk about Eddie. His niece, Jean Freudberg Ballin, said simply, "Uncle Eddie was a gem. We stood in line in the family to have him come visit."

Eddie had a great sense of fun. He joked, "I've played before all the crowned heads of Europe and before some very peculiar people in Pennsylvania." Practical jokes were not beyond him. Once, after hearing a beautiful rehearsal of Brahms violin concerto played by Joy Brown Wiener, Eddie rose from his seat, declared he could never play that well, and broke his violin over his music stand, breaking up the orchestra as well. However, the violin was a two-dollar instrument bought for the occasion. The one he actually played was a very fine Januarius Gagliano made in 1736. Eddie quipped, "I watched them make it." ☆

CRADLE, *continued from page 5*

occupant of the cradle, Rose Alperin Bartnick, affectionately called "Aunt Rosie" by almost everyone in the family.

The cradle is now 114 years old and still in excellent condition. Its dark brown wood is barely scratched. It has been outfitted with a new custom made mattress and special baby bumpers. Over the years, it has been infused with the echoes of Yiddish lullabies and the sweetness of five generations of slumbering babies. It stands ready and waiting to carry its next little bundle of joy off to Dreamland. ☆

written in German."

Epstein deftly weaves her prodigious historical knowledge into the life stories of her ancestors. Franz Epstein was the daughter of Pepi (Josephine) Rabinek, owner of a renowned fashion boutique in early 20th century Prague. Pepi's beginnings were anything but auspicious. She was orphaned at an early age, thrust into dire poverty, and subjected to anti-Semitism. She propelled herself from a poor seamstress into a fashion designer who traveled to Paris and Vienna to study the latest fashion trends. In her late thirties she married a man of some wealth, who encouraged her to leave her employer and open her own salon.

Pepi's husband, Emil, a Jew raised in Vienna, had converted to Catholicism at age twenty to further his military career. When his daughter, Franz, was born, he insisted that she be baptized so that she would never be held back in life because of being identified as a Jew. He desired that her education prepare her for university work. Franz spoke German to her parents and Czech with her nannies. To round out her linguistic education, he enrolled Franz, age five, in the newly established French school of Prague where Franz became Franci. As a teenager, she studied at a German gymnasium and later attended an English language school. She was registered in the Czech census, first as a Catholic and later, at her request, as an agnostic. Although her mother had Jewish relatives, who were open about their religion, Franci considered herself a Czech national. She did not consider herself Jewish until she was deported to Theresienstadt in 1942.

Pepi's health had deteriorated in the mid-thirties along with the political situation. Franci, at age sixteen, dropped out of school and began learning her mother's business and making frequent trips to Paris and Vienna. In 1938, at age eighteen, she became owner of the salon. After the war, she slowly picked up the pieces of her emotions and her life, eventually reopened the salon, and married. Her husband tried to persuade her to give up her business, but she wisely foresaw that the day might come when she would support her family. Only a short time later, as the Communists entered her beloved Czechoslovakia, she once again found her life turned upside-down, as she was persuaded by her husband to emigrate with their infant, Helen. Franci became Frances, designer for Metropolitan Opera stars and other celebrities. Her talent and her facility with language supported her family in their new life.

Helen Epstein is also the author of the well-received *Children of the Holocaust*, published in 1979. This work pursues commonalities among first generation American children whose parents were affected by the Holocaust. *Where She Came From* continues the search on a personal level. The title clearly refers to Epstein's mother. Just as clearly, the book is a search for Helen Epstein's own identity and the influences of these two strong women, her mother and her grandmother, who defied odds, forged professional careers, and became role models for their daughter and granddaughter. ☆

Nominating Committee Report

Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South

May, 2004

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