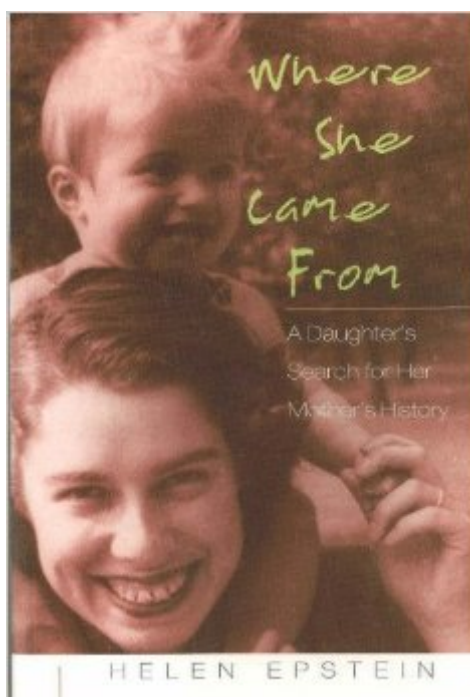


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# Where She Came From : A Daughter's Search For Her Mother's History



## Synopsis

Note: this is the current edition of ISBN 0452280184 which is now out of print

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

We read Helen Epstein's "Where She Came From" for our book group, and I cannot recommend it highly enough. The book has so many threads: Wonderful characters you wish you could meet in person; A view of the history of eastern Europe that is colorful and compelling; The chilling face of centuries of European anti-Semitism; Helen's personal story of discovery. It reads like a mystery at times and a love letter at others. The writing style is very clear and pleasant to read - the best of personal journalism. Having read the library's copy, I bought one of my own to share with my own family and friends.

Epstein achieves her goal of exploring her roots, but she accomplishes much more. She paints a fascinating, and very well researched portrait of life in Eastern Europe during the two generations before and during the Holocaust. The lives and times come alive for the reader. Most Holocaust literature focuses on the horrors of the period. Epstein concentrates on the people and their culture, and how the Holocaust effected the lives of her ancestors. It is a must read for anyone interested in this very challenging time in our history.

I was going to go to Prague (didn't make it, but that's another story) and a friend said to me, "I read this book \*after\* I went and I wish I'd read it \*before\*." Well, as I said I didn't go to Prague, but I did

read the book. It sucked me in and held me all the way through. I not generally generally wild about literature that focuses on the Holocaust. But this book is really a lot more than that. It's part history, part detective story, part memoir. I found it gripping, engaging and moving.

In *WHERE SHE CAME FROM*, Cambridge, Massachusetts-based award-winning author Helen Epstein has penned a meticulously-researched memoir to the four generations of Czech and former Czechoslovak women in her extensive family, from her mother's side of the brood. While today she associates her public persona to the proud and extensive line of former Czechoslovak Epsteins (see Ms. Epstein's fabulous [Short](#) available off of this site, *SWIMMING AGAINST STEREOTYPE: The Story of a Twentieth Century Jewish Athlete*), the writer stakes her claim to a noble and illustrious family line which once proudly sported famous Viennese and Prague-based surnames such as Rabinek, Solar, Weigert, Sachsel, Furcht, and Frucht. Like an experienced batsman for a World Series-winning major-league baseball team, Epstein managed to hang in that old batter's box, waiting for just the right pitch to slug out of the ballpark. In the book world, the analogue was when all the right moments fortuitously transpired to assist Ms. Epstein in securing many essential clues of research which she utilized handily in crafting this excellent book's narrative. Even she'll tell you, the process was far from easy. Thanks to a dedicated coterie of like-minded collaborators based in points all around the globe as you'll soon read (the former Czechoslovakia, Czech Republic, Israel, South America, and the United States), Ms. Epstein succeeded in cobbling together one of the most comprehensive Czech geneological histories on the public record. The work is not only emotionally remunerative for Ms. Epstein, to the extent that those missing links in her family chain were finally sewn together, but it's additionally a fine account of several strong women, renowned in their various fields of endeavour, who persevered during the best of times and the absolute horrific worst of the 20th century. Starting with Helen's great-grandmother Therese Sachsel, nee Frucht (Furcht), who lived during the reign of Franz-Josef in the last of the Habsburg-ian thrones, passing through her grandmother Pepi's life story during the turbulent First World War and the First Czechoslovak Republic, and finally overlapping the history of her own mother Frances Epstein, Helen pored over hundreds (if not thousands) of archival sources in constructing this cogent tale. Collectively, these three noble upstanding women belonging to the author's colourful past outlived the worst of the 20th century's ravages, passing fads, and tragic downfalls. We swoon with Therese Sachsel during the euphoria of Tomas Garrigue Masaryk's (TGM) storied first Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938), when all seemed possible for the Central European remnant of the former Austria-Hungarian powerhouses of Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, and Slovakia. Our hopes

and dreams are temporarily crushed alongside her grandmother Pepi Rabinek as we witness the invasion and subsequent occupation of Prague by Nazi hordes, who sweep unchallenged through the former Czechoslovakia's borders after the West's perfidy of Munich. We agonize alongside Pepi's daughter, Frances Solar/Rabinek/Epstein, the paragon of the family and Helen's stalwart mother, as she is dispatched to the Teresienstadt (in modern-day Terezin, Czech Republic) concentration camp, or in the colloquial Czech, the "koncentrak." We also rejoice when Frances is extricated from the hellhole of Auschwitz, and transported the West in wartime Germany as part of a labour brigade, towards the oncoming Allies from the West, liberated in Bergen-Belsen by British forces at the end of WWII. Finally, we are shocked to discover the insensitivity, sheer apathy, and in many instances -- outright hostility -- that Praguers demonstrated towards the surviving returnees from the Nazi camps, to which Frances and her future husband, famous former Czechoslovak Olympian swimmer, Kurt Epstein, counted themselves. Helen Epstein's lines draw us inexorably into this story, and once you start you'll have a difficult time finding excuses to stop. What staggered me as I made my way through this read was Ms. Epstein's formidable discipline. The sheer single-mindedness with which she approached the colossal task of the near-vertical climb to reach the bottom of her family's history. I read with awe how solace was found towards the end. WHERE SHE CAME FROM will stand as one of the foremost examples of the self-researched memoir. If you need any reason at all to read this book, then let it be thanks to the iron-willed determination which the answers gracing its pages were unearthed by Ms. Epstein. A book like this needs to be savoured for its significance, appreciated for its illumination, and respected for its purity. There isn't a single letter which graces these pages that wasn't typed, written, or transcribed in the absence of a labour which can only be termed love. I sit back and wish we all had the staying power of Ms. Epstein. The book is laudatory in the extreme. As if Ms. Epstein's family history were not enough, there are other benefits to this book too. For those with a keen interest in the past two centuries of life in Prague and the experiences of Bohemia's and Moravia's Jews and its Czech peasantry, WHERE SHE CAME FROM is chock-a-block with painstaking factoids and historical tidbits that'll nudge you gently towards further reading. It will also supply its readers with a glimpse towards the increasingly-distant Czechoslovak past, which, with the passing of the years and the keener integration of this country with the rest of the EU, slips further and further away from the grip of Czech youth. This book is more than just a reminder, it's a testament to a time which no longer exists. In that respect, it is now part of the permanent historical record. WHERE SHE CAME FROM is written in a language at once accessible and magnetic. For all ages, for all backgrounds. I can't do anything less than award this superb work of history my highest rating of 5-stars. I know you will too.-- ADM in Prague

I have just finished Helen Epstein's *Where She Came From* and I am unable to move. She weaves three narratives: personal, historical and Holocaust. It is one of the best books I have read, ever. I am in awe of the writer's skills and gift. It is the kind of book that makes you think about it for days, the kind of book that makes you not want to read another for a while, and certainly not one that isn't of its caliber.

I am of the same generation as Ms Epstein, born to Czech parents who emigrated to the U.S. in 1947. I appreciated her careful research going back to my grandmother's generation. Although every family's story has its own trajectory, the backdrop that Ms Epstein explains in such detail is both familiar and enlightening. I am grateful to her for sharing what she learned.

This book is not only a touching search for the author's roots. It is also a fascinating, well researched history of Jews in Central Europe. Very well written, and the detailed description of the search makes it a very readable book.

Ms. Epstein's book is a beautifully written, thoroughly absorbing look at the forces-- in particular -- the women who shape our being. Working through a range of sources, she pulls together a clear and compelling portrait of what life was like for Jewish women and families in Central Europe before, during and after WWII. This is a story of the Holocaust, but it is so much more, because it is a glimpse into family, marriage, work, love and faith in a rapidly changing, and terrifying reality, and how the strength of individuals can rebuild lives and a future.

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