



## The Rights to a Life

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**DATE RECEIVED:**

April 05, 2016

**KEYWORDS:**

life writing, Helen Fremont,  
Holocaust studies

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In *After Long Silence*, Helen Fremont tells the story of growing up in the Midwest as the daughter of Polish Catholic parents.<sup>2</sup> She recounts some of the stories they told of their courtship in eastern Poland, which was occupied by the Germans, then occupied by the Soviets — who deported her father to Siberia — and then occupied again by the Germans. She recounts the stories they told of her father’s escape back to Poland and, from there, to Rome, where he was reunited with her mother, who had escaped from Poland disguised as an Italian soldier. She recounts the stories they told of their marriage in Rome and eventual emigration to the United States. She tells her own story of growing up in the shadow of her parents’ wartime ordeal. She tells the story of coming out as a lesbian to her parents and her Italian aunt.

Helen tells the story of discovering, in her thirties, that her parents were actually Polish Jews — her mother, the daughter of an Orthodox rabbi. She tells the story of gradually uncovering the true history of her parents’ separation, escape, and reunification. She recounts that hair-raising history, including all of the cover stories that her mother told in order to elude arrest by the Germans, who had reoccupied eastern Poland; including her mother’s new identity as a Polish Catholic girl named Maria, finally married in the Church to her revenant fiancé; including the cover stories that she told to her daughters as a way of fending off their questions about the past.

Helen tells the story of confronting her parents with what she had learned; she tells the story of their initial denials, their sleepless nights of returning memories, their grudging help in her project of reconstructing the past. She tells the story of discovering, and then explaining to her mother, how her mother’s parents, Helen’s grandparents, had died — not “in a bomb”, as her mother had always said, but in the gas chambers of Belzec. And, finally, she tells the story of telling all of these stories in a book of which her parents disapproved.

Helen tells these stories in telegraphic, Tralfamadorian style, jumping from wartime Poland, to postwar Italy, to Michigan in the 1950s, to Boston in the 1990s, and back again, unstuck in time.

Helen also enumerates the stories that she cannot tell, because they have been suppressed or repressed or simply forgotten by her parents: she doesn't even know her mother's given name. And in telling the history of her parents' wartime experiences, she deftly hints at the ways in which she is embroidering on shreds of evidence for the sake of telling a good story.

As a child, Helen heard many true stories from her parents and very few lies; they denied their heritage mainly by omission. Did her parents owe her the full story? Was it in any sense her story as well as theirs? What right did Helen have to undo her parents' repression and then to publish their story against their wishes? What right did she have to embellish the story with narrative details that were fictional, despite her insistence that they recreated some narrative truth?

More than most of us, Helen's parents lived through experiences that had the formal structure of a story: meeting and courtship, separation and trials, triumph and reunion: beginning, middle, and end. These events are "their story" in a sense in which their later life in America is not, because the latter doesn't make for a story at all; the former make a story, and it is theirs.

The historiographer Hayden White says that the story form never inheres in events but can only be imposed on them.<sup>3</sup> My view is that the story form is in essence an emotional cadence — an arc of emotions aroused, complicated, and resolved — and I would say that the wartime experiences of Helen's parents had an overall emotional arc of the right shape.<sup>4</sup> These emotions were the main engines of her parents' progress across Europe, and so the story form really was inherent in their journey.

Helen and her sister were told the outline of this story from their earliest childhood:

Their love story I had been fed early and often, until it seemed part of my bones. I knew that they had fallen in love before the war, and they had been separated for six years without knowing if the other was alive; my mother escaped Poland dressed as an Italian soldier, and my father walked across Europe after the war, found my mother in Rome, and married her ten years to the day after they had first met. That was the tale they liked to tell and retell, the story they used to summarize their lives. It was a good story, because it ran a thread across the war and connected the two lovers before and after. [p. 8]

Thus, Helen's parents exploited the arc of this story to distract attention from matters unspoken.<sup>5</sup> These matters included facts about the past, but they also included emotions that were very much in the present. Helen says:

I had been living my life with flawed vision, stumbling in the dark, bumping into things I hadn't realized were there. No one acknowledged anything. Yet each time I walked into my parents' house, I fell over something, or dropped into something, a cavernous silence, an unspoken, invisible danger. [p. 31]

The point of this and similar passages is not that Helen was continually stumbling into the six-year lacuna in her parents' story. There was indeed a narrative lacuna, because narrating those six years would have required her parents to reveal that they were Jewish; but that lacuna is not the "invisible danger" of which Helen speaks here. The invisible danger is not even the danger that her parents faced as Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland. It is rather the danger of unleashing the emotions they retained from that experience. When she says, "No one acknowledged anything," she means that her parents didn't acknowledge the grief and fear they still carried with them. So whereas the often-repeated love story skipped but never falsified facts about the past, it did falsify emotions felt in the present, since their parents were not in fact living happily ever after.

When Helen discovers her Jewish background, she begins attending synagogue, and she eventually seeks instruction in Judaism from a rabbi. There are many reasons why Helen might have tried to enter Judaism, which after all remains foreign to many who identify themselves as Jews. What she suggests is that she was trying to fill out a newfound self-understanding: "All our lives," she tells her mother, "there's been something that just doesn't fit. This explains so much about who we are, our childhood, our family" (p. 45). Her sister Lara tells her, "It's not just about *them!* ... It's about *us!* About who *we* are!" (p. 159).<sup>6</sup> The prospect of explaining who she is leads Helen to embrace her Jewishness:

I had to admit, I wanted to be Jewish — if for no other reason than because it simply made *sense*. I began to recognize myself as a person with roots and a past, with a family history, with an identity. The stories of my childhood suddenly took on new meaning — everything seemed to be shifting, an underground movement of tectonic plates slowly clicking into place, finally *fitting*. [p. 32]

When it comes to explaining how things suddenly began to fit, however, Helen can offer little more than clichés about "cultural" Jewishness. Voicing her first suspicions to her mother, she says, "I don't know why ... but I have the feeling that I'm Jewish":

"Like that time," I said, "I went to visit Rachel after my first year of law school." Rachel's mother was a Jewish Holocaust survivor. I'd spent a weekend at their house twelve years earlier. "Remember what I told you when I came back? That it was just like being at home. With her father listening to a violin concerto in the other room, and the living room filled with books, and all her mother's plants in the window. And we sat at the kitchen counter, Rachel and her mother and I, and sipped coffee and talked and talked — and for a moment I thought I was with you and Dad — it was so much like *home*. I can't explain it — but I remember I told you about it — there was a deep resonance somehow." [pp. 24-25]

After these suspicions are confirmed,

Lara and I laughed with recognition: the challah bread of our youth ... the smoked fish that my father loved; potato pancakes. The matzos that we had always eaten at Easter. [pp. 34-35]

These passages fall flat. It's hard to believe that Helen gained much self-understanding from recognizing that her family's potato pancakes were latkes.

Similarly, Helen describes her parents' past at a level of detail that cannot be relevant to her self-understanding. Why does it matter to her that her grandfather was a rabbi? I can hardly believe that his membership in the clergy left any mark on Helen herself. Indeed, very little of her parents' life as Jews left any mark, precisely because they suppressed, repressed, and forgot it. Yet Helen herself regards it as worth reporting that her mother's family in Poland lit Sabbath candles, and that her grandmother shaved her head and wore a wig.

I doubt whether Helen's detailed reconstruction of her parents' past actually accounts for anything significant about herself or her childhood. When Helen says, "I began to recognize myself as a person with roots and a past, with a family history, with an identity," I suspect that she is describing, not a recognition of who or what she already was, but a fresh *cognition* of herself, as having some roots or other, some past or other, some history or other — and hence some identity or other — where previously she had nothing at all, because of the regime of repression in which she grew up. Embracing Judaism may not be a way of recovering a pre-existing identity; it may rather be an attempt to construct an identity for the first time.

What shaped Helen as a child may have been no more than the fact that her parents had lived through persecution and loss, ultimately emerging with an iron determination to leave it all behind. Helen was also shaped, I think, by inheriting characteristics of her parents that made them survivors, starting with the sheer will to survive but also including, for example, a remarkable facility with languages, which enabled them to pass themselves off as Germans or Italians; an insight into others' motivations, which enabled them to recognize who could and could not be trusted; a capacity for self-denial and self-control; and, finally, a talent for composing stories. In writing her book, I would say, Helen was employing a gift for self-narration that she had inherited from parents who self-narrated their way out of Nazi Europe.<sup>7</sup> And in fashioning her new identity as a Jew, she was employing the gift that enabled her parents to fashion their identities as Catholics, with the difference that Helen was aiming for consistency with an actual past. In achieving consistency with that past, however, Helen was not necessarily achieving consistency with a pre-existent self.

Helen embellishes the narrative of her parents' history with rich fictional details, as she herself reveals. In the midst of a fifteen-page narration of her mother's escape from Poland, she remarks:

I don't know if he said this. I don't know Polish, or Yiddish, or whatever language they spoke to each other. I wasn't there. My mother didn't tell me. The way she told the story was like this: "And so I cut my hair short, dressed up as an Italian soldier, and marched out of Poland with the Italian army." [pp. 233-234]<sup>8</sup>

Introducing the narration of her father's arrest, she says:

It's not clear exactly what happened. But nothing is ever exactly clear. History is a card table full of illusions, and we must sort through and pick the ones we wish to believe. And so I choose this one. [p. 130]

When Helen says, "I choose this one," she is speaking of one among many versions of a particular episode, but the same statement applies to her entire project. Her book is subtitled "a memoir", but the story is not her own: she has appropriated it — chosen it — as the narrative on which to found a self-conception. And this appropriation raises the question of Helen's right to tell a story that had been buried by its actual protagonists.

Maybe by embellishing her parents' story, Helen gains the right to tell it, because it is now partly her creation. And maybe by revealing that the story is partly her creation, she blunts her parents' objections to its being told. For when she confesses to embellishing some parts of the story, she casts doubt over every part, any one of which could be fictional, for all the reader can tell. Once she has undermined her own credibility with the reader, she can no longer give the reader credible information about her parents. She thereby cloaks her parents in the reader's confusion about what to believe.

More pressing than the question of Helen's right to publish the story is the question of her right to confront her parents with repressed details of their past. Her mother implores her not to do the same to her Italian aunt, but she goes ahead anyway. These confrontations can seem like paternalistic "interventions" of the sort that are partly benevolent and partly hostile. It's as if Helen is punishing her elders for keeping secrets from her, by forcing them to face the secrets that they have been keeping from themselves.

That repression is enacted in the crucial scene, as Helen and her sister Lara reveal the fate of their grandparents:

"I wrote away for information," Lara said, "and I got back documentation about our family. We know what happened to your parents. We know what happened to Dad's mother."

"What happened?" my mother suddenly cried. Her hands started trembling with a terrible urgency, while her face remained frozen — a wide-eyed mask of incomprehension. "Then you know more than I do!" she exclaimed.

Lara nodded slowly, confused by my mother's sudden shift from anger to bewilderment.

"Tell me," my mother cried. "What happened? I don't even know what happened to my parents!" She turned desperately from Lara to me and back again, her hands shaking. "What happened?"

I hadn't been prepared for this. I had expected my mother to refuse to talk about it; I had been prepared for her to deny it, to get angry, to scoff at me and dismiss it, but I did not expect her to beg us to tell her how her parents were killed.

"Tell me!" my mother repeated. "What happened to them?"

I screwed up my courage, looked directly in my mother's eyes, and spoke as calmly as I could: "We found out," I said evenly, "that your parents were gassed at Belzec."

My sentence dropped like a bomb into a terrible silence. I bit my tongue. I hadn't meant to be so blunt, so harsh. Lara kicked me under the table, and with growing panic I waited for my mother's reaction. Seconds ticked by, and I was consumed by an excruciating sense of guilt that I had just shattered my mother's world.

But my mother did not react. She stared at me with the same puzzled look on her face, as if I hadn't spoken. "Tell me what happened to them," she repeated, hands outstretched.

I kept quiet, shaken. I can't continue with this, I thought. I can't bear to do this ...

"I don't even know what happened to my parents!" Mom cried. "Tell me!" [pp. 42-43]

"My sentence dropped like a bomb into a terrible silence," Helen says. Her mother had always dismissed questions about the fate of her parents by saying, cryptically, that they had died "in a bomb". Helen is now, so to speak, killing her grandparents all over again, by dropping a verbal bomb. She drops it into "a terrible silence", a brief fragment of the "long silence" that had enabled her mother to un-know her parents' deaths. And Helen's mother bravely persists — perseverates — in not knowing.

At the end of the book, Helen is visiting her Aunt Zosia in Rome, writing the book. So she is simultaneously writing the story and living what she writes. On the same visit, she reveals her discoveries about the family to her Roman cousin and faces the ire of her aunt for doing so.

The reader wonders to what extent the writing of this chapter influenced the living of it — to what extent it was lived so as to be written. Did Helen tell her cousin of his Jewish background for independent reasons, or she did tell him in order to write about it? And this question, raised by her contemporaneous narration of writing the book, echoes back through the preceding chapters. How much of her research was undertaken by the daughter and how much by the aspiring writer? In plotting with her sister to pry information out of their parents, was she also plotting her memoir?

Could it be that Helen came out as a lesbian in order to have the parallel story lines of uncovering her parents' secret and disclosing her own? Her mother refuses to believe that Helen is a lesbian, just as she refuses to take in the revelation of her parents' murder. As they say, you couldn't make that up — unless, of course, you made it up in order to make it happen in order to write it.

Or maybe it's the reverse. Maybe Helen wrote it in order to motivate herself to make it happen. In writing the book, she wrote herself into a corner, so to speak, since her friends and lovers would see the hypocrisy of her remaining closeted while outing her parents. How better to resolve her own indecision about whether to come out?

Or maybe Helen just researched her parents' past, came out as a lesbian, and wrote a book about it all.

*After Long Silence* is a book of stories about silence. Silence is the villain of the piece. The human villains, Nazis and Bolsheviks, make only the briefest appearance. Even Helen's description of the Petlura Days pogrom in Lvov, as witnessed by her mother and aunt, reaches its climax in Helen's own unwillingness to ask her mother whether she was raped. In a scene of horrors, silence takes center stage.

The book has many heroes: Helen's father and mother, and those who helped them to escape. But the real hero of the book is the narrated truth, which triumphs over silence in the end. The book is one long testament to the healing power of The True Story.

Yet with some truths, there is nothing to do but forget. I believe in virtuous Holocaust deniers — namely, the survivors, many of whom, like Helen's parents, managed to achieve a merciful forgetfulness. "Forget the past, live for the future," Helen's mother says. Hers was a past worth forgetting.

Once remembered, some of her mother's past can be domesticated by being told as a story, especially since it has an outwardly happy ending. But one part cannot be told as a story, because it has no narrative ending. It goes: "And so they were herded into a windowless chamber and gassed to death." One cannot imagine punctuating that sentence with "The End". It's a finish that isn't an ending, because it brings no closure. In the minds of the survivors, the final scene never ends.

Surely, this narratively intractable passage of history is the one that Helen's mother is struggling hardest to repress. Helen can't domesticate it for her, and so I continue to wonder whether she was entitled to tell it at all.

As for Helen's right to publish the story, she says that she is honoring her forgotten ancestors and expressing love for her parents:

My family is greater than just my parents and Zosia — my family extends backward in time and space. I want to put them on record, however imperfectly — I want them to be seen and heard.

And strangely enough, on the page I begin to recognize myself in my parents — a gesture here, a question there. My attachment to them grows stronger with each sentence that arranges itself before me. Perhaps this is the ultimate irony of my family: I express my love for them in ways that are invariably the opposite of what they would wish. [p. 318]

A complicated passage. The declaration of wanting her relatives to be seen and heard is an implicit rebuke to her parents, survivors who did not bear witness for the dead: they lived to tell the tale and then refused to tell it. Helen then disclaims responsibility for this rebuke: the sentences arrange themselves on the page, she says, as if the tale is telling itself. Finally, she expresses the mixed motives behind the whole complicated project, an

expression of love that is also an expression of defiance.

I believe Helen when she says that writing her book is an expression of love; I believe the same of her family interventions. Still, I finished the book wishing to know more about how her parents received it. We are told only that they did not approve. As for the details, Helen is silent.

When I was a child, I was told that my father's sister Emma had perished in the Holocaust. That phrase made the Holocaust sound like a vortex into which people just disappeared, like sailors who are said to have perished at sea. The poetic vagueness of it expressed my father's perfect ignorance as to when, where, and how his sister had died.

When Germany invaded Western Europe in May of 1940, Emma was living with her husband and young daughter in the Dutch village of Borculo, which was close to the German border and immediately overrun. My father was living in Antwerp and was able to escape, together with his other sister, Molly, and their parents. They made their way through France and Spain to Portugal, and thence to the United States, where my father spent the war working for the O.S.S. in Washington, D.C. He traveled to Borculo immediately after the war, on one of the first postwar visas issued to civilians. When he knocked on the door of Emma's house, he found strangers sitting at her table, eating from her dishes — and claiming never to have heard of her.

In the early 1990s, an amateur genealogist in Holland wrote to my father in New York and to me in Ann Arbor, Michigan, seeking information about people with the last name of Velleman. He told us what he already knew about my father's family history, including many names and dates that my father could confirm. He also included information that my father had not previously known — in particular, the names of the camps where various aunts, uncles, and cousins had been killed, and the dates of their deaths. No such information was included for Emma, but we reasoned that information about Emma's death might have eluded his researches because it was recorded under her married name. My father wrote back, supplying Emma's particulars and asking the genealogist to apply his methods to the question of her fate.

One day my father called to say that a letter had arrived from our correspondent in Holland. He then began to read: Emma, her husband, and their daughter had been interned at the concentration camp Westerbork, in Holland; they had been placed on a transport bound for Auschwitz on November 24, 1942; and the mother and daughter were presumed to have died on arrival, three days later. My father began to sob and dropped the phone. I had never before heard my father cry.

When my parents next visited Ann Arbor, my father silently handed me a manila folder full of yellowed correspondence. It had been given to him by his surviving sister, Molly, when he told her what he had learned about Emma and her family. In the years immediately following the war, Molly had corresponded with international relief agencies on behalf of the family in America, seeking information, in particular, about Emma's daughter, Rita, who might have survived without knowing how to contact her relatives. The folder now handed to me by my father contained carbon copies of Molly's inquiries, along with the original replies. The latter were all dead-ends, with one exception. A letter from the

International Red Cross, dated 1955, informed the family that Rita had been interned in the concentration camp Westerbork, in Holland; had been placed on a transport bound for Auschwitz on November 24, 1942; and was presumed to have died on arrival, three days later.

So my father had known Emma's fate all along. Why, I asked, had he recruited the genealogist to investigate what he already knew? Why had he reacted to the information as if hearing it for the first time?

He replied, "I had repressed it."

When I was a teenager, I quizzed my father about the war, and he told me the story of his escape: the chance encounter with a rich uncle who owned a car, which carried the family to safety; the time in Bordeaux when he helped stamp passports for the Portuguese consul who was defying orders from Lisbon by issuing transit visas to thousands of refugees; the night they spent in a broken-down castle where the beds were full of lice; how he and his mother crossed the Spanish border on foot, mopping their brows with handkerchiefs holding diamonds from his father's workshop. (My grandfather was a diamond cleaver, and his occupation was noted in his passport, so that he would be searched.) My father also told me about his trip back to Europe after the war — a long story, mainly about coincidental meetings on board ship.

After learning how he had repressed his knowledge of Emma's death, I realized that my father had turned his wartime experiences into a picaresque. Yes, his sister and her family had perished — he told that, too, though not, of course, the details that he had not yet recovered. But the central, significant event was lost in a series of adventures, all of which were bathed in the glow of a happy ending on the horizon.

Our brush with genealogy prompted me to start researching the family's history. This was just a few years before the Internet transformed genealogical research, and so I spent many hours in the basement of the local Mormon center, reeling through microfilmed records of mysterious Mormon rites performed for my ancestors. Like Helen Fremont, I had found religion, though in my case, it wasn't Judaism.

Also like Helen Fremont, I was taking on the self-image of the so-called second generation, whose childhoods were touched in some way by their parents' brush with the Holocaust. And I was adopting that self-image by hitching my life story to that of my father and, more importantly, to that of his sister Emma, whom I could never know. I even visited Borculo during a break from a conference in the Netherlands. But what is it to me, what is it about me, that I had an aunt who died in Auschwitz ten years before I was born?

I think that the death of my aunt is meaningful to me because she meant so much to my father, who meant so much to me. I would like to say that I grieve for her in solidarity with him, but the fact is that I doubt whether he ever really grieved for her. I once asked my father whether, after receiving confirmation of her death, the family had held a memorial of any kind. The idea had never occurred to him.

So I suspect that my father passed on to me an emotional task that he could not bear to

do himself. And I suspect that Helen Fremont was given a much heavier emotional task, with the added burden of not knowing what it was. In this sense, discovering her parents' history really was a discovery of her own identity, after all. She was Jewish despite her Catholic upbringing because she was carrying the unresolved grief of Jewish parents for grandparents who were murdered for being Jews. Even if our parents don't pass on their stories, they still pass on emotions that only their stories can help us to resolve. To that extent, at least, their stories are ours.

<sup>1</sup> Originally published in *On Life-Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) edited by Zachary Leader, using a CC BY-NC-ND licence. For permission to reuse this material outside the scope of the CC BY-NC-ND licence, please visit <http://www.oup.co.uk/academic/rights/permissions> or contact the author.

<sup>2</sup> Helen Fremont, *After Long Silence: A Memoir* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> For Hayden White on the story form, see *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); and *The Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> I present this analysis of narrative in "Narrative Explanation", *The Philosophical Review* 112 (2003): 1-25. At one point in her book, Helen says, "Something happens, then something happens, then something happens. This is called a story" (p. 247). I disagree.

<sup>5</sup> "The past was always like this, an empty space in our lives, a gap in our conversations, into which our mother tumbled from time to time, quietly, without warning" (p. 145).

<sup>6</sup> Helen tells her aunt, "We needed to know about this, to understand our family, to know who we are" (p. 321).

<sup>7</sup> Helen says that her mother escaped from the Nazis by "making up stories to save her life, spinning a tale of herself, shifting colors and sequences to suit her needs. She had invented herself a hundred times over by the time the war was over" (p. 47).

<sup>8</sup> Also: "I can't explain it, and I won't stop trying. I will fill this vacuum with words until I recognize them as memory" (p. 186).

Originally published at <http://dx.doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0061.10>