



October 2001

Indomitable Subtext

Stephen Collins
Colby College

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Recommended Citation

Collins, Stephen (2001) "Indomitable Subtext," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 90 : Iss. 4 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol90/iss4/10>

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indomitable subtext

In the life and work

of Hanna Roisman,

the Holocaust is

an ever-present

undercurrent

By Stephen Collins '74



Though no one who knows her would describe Professor of Classics Hanna Roisman as conventional, her life has all the trappings of normalcy and success in turn-of-the-century America. Granted, reviews of her latest book suggest the way she is interpreting the classics is extraordinary. Her expectations in the classroom seem tougher than average. And her penchant for bridging

Roisman, arrived from Israel. Her research and writing have focused on motivation—on what makes classical characters tick. “What is unsaid is often more important than what is said,” she said.

What few colleagues and students know is Roisman’s own subtext: her extraordinary family history. Much of the tragedy, oppression and betrayal is unspoken because of

her modesty and professionalism. Some is simply unspeakable.

In an office she is using as a visiting scholar at Cornell University during a sabbatical, and later in the comfort of a sumptuous rented house nearby in Ithaca, she agreed to sit down and talk about her years growing up in post-war Poland, her immigration to Israel and her life as a child of Holocaust survivors. Much of her story was told matter-of-factly. Occasionally memories would gush out, evoking smiles and laughter; at other times her quavering voice trailed off, sentences unfinished, memories inexpressible.

“You have to remember that I am not a survivor of the Holocaust, but a child of the Holocaust, a child of survivors,” she began.

“There are many Israelis

and Jews around the world who are the children of Holocaust survivors, and it has an impact on all of us. The horror of our parents’ experiences is always lurking in the background, whether they talked about it or not. In my case it was my mother, Eugenia Zaphir, who thought it was important that I should know what happened to her, my father

and other Jews. But my father could not talk about it at all, for it pained him too much.”

For both parents it was a second marriage. Eugenia Zaphir was born in the Ukraine and Leon Maslowski in the Silesia region of Poland. Each had a family before World War II.

When the Nazis came to round up the Jews in the Ukrainian town of Yanov, where Roisman’s mother lived, Eugenia and her infant daughter—Hanna’s half-sister, Shoshana—were away trying to get milk for the child. They managed to hide in the woods for days and then headed for Krakow, Poland.

Roisman’s father was captured as a POW early in the war and spent five years in concentration camps and working as a slave laborer for the Germans. For a while he was in Auschwitz-Birkenau. “He must have been a strong man to be for five years in the various camps and not sent to be gassed,” Roisman said.

But while they survived, both of Roisman’s parents lost family. Her mother’s first husband, who had joined the resistance, was shot when Nazis found his bunker in the woods. Roisman’s grandmother Hanna Schlager was gassed in the death camps.

Of her father’s family, he alone survived the war. His first wife and their four children—Roisman’s half-brothers and -sisters, ages 3 to 14—were all killed in the Nazi death camps. “I would love to know. I had four siblings. I think it was both ways: he didn’t want to talk to protect me, and to talk about children who were killed—I don’t know—I can’t—” Her voice broke.

“Sometimes you can find in the ancient literature cases in which you can understand the rage I feel when I read about the Holocaust. Because what I feel is rage. The world stood there watching.”

After their narrow escape in the Ukraine, Roisman’s mother managed to get false documents in Poland that said that she and Shoshana were Aryan, and for three years



In 1957, shortly before they emigrated from Poland to Israel, Roisman (right) posed with her half-sister Shoshana and her mother Eugenia, in front of the expansive new cultural center in Warsaw. During World War II Eugenia and Shoshana were separated, but they both survived the Holocaust and were eventually reunited.

classical literature and popular culture has gotten some remarkable attention. But as a teacher, scholar, writer, mother and wife, Roisman is a model of success, balancing family life with an academic career based on her passion for classical literature.

Roisman has taught at Colby since 1990, when she and her husband, Professor Joseph

they survived the German occupation and the Holocaust. “The odyssey of her survival, imprisonment, escaping from prison is worthy of many hours of story telling,” Roisman said. Eventually mother and daughter were separated when Eugenia had to give Shoshana up to hide her from the Nazis. She was placed with a Polish-German nanny—a Catholic woman who was instructed to raise the blond-haired, green-eyed girl to pass as Aryan and Christian. At the end of the war, only after an intensive search, the mother and daughter were reunited.

It was during the search for surviving family members that Roisman’s parents met. They were married, and in 1948, before Hanna was born, they tried to emigrate from Poland to the newly founded Jewish homeland of Israel. But they were denied.

The climate for Jews in Poland remained threatening. Those who survived the Holocaust were the subject of state-supported prejudice and harassment, and Jewish families feared that another Holocaust could happen at any time. When Hanna was born her parents had her baptized as a Christian, and the same nanny that had taken her half-sister during the war was engaged to care for the new infant and to teach her Catholic culture. Against the possibility of another attempt to exterminate the Jews, the two fair-haired sisters were given the cultural backgrounds to pass as non-Jews.

Roisman spent her early years in Poland, much of that time in the company of her



As a young girl in post-war Poland, Roisman learned classical mythology from her beloved Polish-German nanny, who also told Catholic stories that might help the little girl pass as Christian if another purge of the Jews were to occur, as many feared. It would later be revealed that her caretaker betrayed her family during the war.

nanny, and she had only a child’s comprehension of the politics and hatred that still existed. It was this nanny, beloved and trusted, who introduced Roisman to the acts of heroism and betrayal in classical mythology. “She, to a large extent, was the one who imbued me with these stories. She also had terrific religious stories—Catholic stories,” Roisman recalls. “There were few kids who knew names like Achilles and Odysseus, but I did.”

Then one day her mother abruptly fired

the woman and sent her packing. “At the time—I was only six—my mother didn’t think she could explain why my beloved nanny was fired, and I raged against her with all a child’s sense of outrage and hatred. When I was old enough to learn what my nanny had done, it was a terrible shock,” Roisman said.

What the woman had done a decade earlier was only revealed to Roisman’s parents in the mid-1950s. They learned that, rather than protecting Roisman’s half-sister during the war, the nanny had tried to turn Shoshana over to the Gestapo. Only the girl’s fair hair and green eyes had saved her. Finally the true explanation of why Shoshana had gone to live with people in the mountains had been repeated. But for a 6-year-

old it was incomprehensible.

In 1957 the family finally was permitted to go to Israel as part of a wave of immigration sparked by more government-backed anti-Semitism in Poland. That and subsequent waves of Jews fleeing the country during the 1960s have left only a tiny Jewish population in Poland today.

Before they departed, Roisman’s mother organized a family pilgrimage to Auschwitz to show her children that face of the Holocaust. Roisman describes the camp in the

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In 1967, Roisman (left, with a high school friend) visited the Dome of the Rock, which is sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslim. When East Jerusalem was taken by Israel from Jordan, shortly before this visit, it allowed the two young women to visit the dome and the sacred Wailing Wall for the first time.

1950s as a deteriorating relic of the war. There had been no effort to make it a memorial, and she recalls huge piles of shoes that had been taken off of the prisoners before they were herded into the gas chambers to die.

"[My mother] talked about some pretty terrible memories, but my father's silence, bizarrely, seemed almost as expressive," she said, foreshadowing her scholarly work on the power in literature of what is implied but not said.

"I was eight years old. It was May 9, 1957, that we arrived in Israel," Roisman said. She describes going from being part of the oppressed Jewish minority in Poland to the role of ridiculed newcomers, fresh off the boat. "They were making fun of us: our Diamant bicycles and our crew socks. They laughed at our accents and our grammatical mistakes." But Roisman worked hard to master Hebrew and excelled in school.

"I remember my astonishment coming from stiff hierarchical Poland to my school

in Israel. Teachers were called by their first names, kids could say whatever was on their mind, and everyone's opinion mattered," she said. When a teacher asked her about a passage in the Torah, she reverted to the Polish notion that she must say the correct thing. She raced home to consult her mother so as not to jeopardize the family by speaking against the establishment. "My mother laughed and told me a very important thing, I think: 'They want you here to think—so think.'"

A revered high school literature teacher and poet, Itamar Yazo Kest, reinforced the importance of independent and original thinking that remains a hallmark of Roisman's scholarship.

When she enrolled in Tel Aviv University to study classics, she met a young native Israeli, Joseph (Yossi) Roisman, in her beginning Greek class. The two shared more than a love of the classics. They were married and have remarkable similarities on their résumés, up to and including "Professor of Classics, Colby College."

The Roismans both earned bachelor's and master's degrees (all magna cum laude) from Tel Aviv University, and in 1977 they came to the U.S., where they earned Ph.D.'s in classics at the University of Washington in 1981. "I didn't want to deal with modern history," Hanna Roisman said. "I couldn't, probably because of what happened in the twentieth century."

After teaching in Israel from 1981 until 1990—Hanna at Tel Aviv University and Yossi at Ben Gurion University of the Negev—the couple learned of openings at Colby. By then they had spent five or six years teaching and working at Cornell during the summer term, and they had tired of a situation in Israel that required Hanna to commute three hours each way to her job. They had looked at a map and talked about New Zealand as a place far away from the uncertainties of life in the Middle East, but then the opportunity in Maine came up. "The faculty at Cornell assured us [Maine] was not as cold as Ithaca," Yossi said, chuckling.

The Roismans have maintained their ties with Cornell, teaching there each summer and spending sabbatical years in residence, using the Cornell library's extraordinary classics collections and consulting with colleagues. Both of their sons, Elad, 20, and Shalev, 18, are enrolled at Cornell as undergraduates.

One Cornell graduate student with whom Hanna has consulted on her last two books is Christopher Roosevelt '94, who majored in classics at Colby and is on the home stretch earning a Ph.D. in classical archaeology at Cornell. Roosevelt recalled the intensity Roisman showed in the classroom. "She's no nonsense. When I first started taking classes from her as a sophomore, I was kind of startled by it," he said. "But there's certainly more to her than her toughness. She puts a lot into her own work, and if you put a lot into *your* work she really respects and appreciates that."

Putting a lot into her work has earned

“Sometimes an insight into life is explicitly stated [in classical literature], sometimes it is an implicit subtext, and it is my life-long awareness of subtext learned from my parents that guides my research. . . .

I knew that there were questions that should never be voiced unless brought up by my parents, that everything has a background which is not spoken but exists underneath what is explicitly stated, that people do not mean everything they say.”

Roisman some outstanding notices in the last year. After 103 scholars presented papers at the Classical Association’s annual meeting last April in Manchester, England, *The Times* (of London) chose to highlight Roisman’s analysis of classical themes in Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Terminator movies.

When she tackled Euripides’s *Hippolytus* in her latest book, *Nothing Is As It Seems*, a reviewer for the prestigious classics journal *Scholia* wrote: “Roisman guides us through

Euripides’ play, opening our eyes and arousing our minds to the implications, ambiguities and double-entendres . . . Roisman takes up many established views, turns them upside down and offers us fairly new insights on the *dramatis personae*.”

Though the title of her book, *Nothing Is As It Seems*, was selected to represent her approach to analyzing Euripides, she now sees how it fits her own life and work. “I had no clue when I wrote it. You work by nature,” she said.

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“In Israel we learned to read between the lines,” she said.

Roisman has avoided talking about her own history in the classroom and clearly is torn about sharing her story. “I am not unique,” she repeated.

But her motivation is not obscure. It is to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive in hopes of preventing a repetition of the abominations—“the excesses, the barbarity, the cruelty, the savagery.”

“I think the passage of time is important in looking beyond the atrocities to see how can we prevent this,” she said. “Now, when you learn about it, it will be a chapter saying ‘methods of extermination.’” But it is the personal stories that resonate most powerfully: people—relatives—who leapt from prisoner trains to escape, others who jumped into mass graves to hide among the corpses.

Clearly her visit to see the gas chambers and piles of shoes at Auschwitz, just before she left Poland as a child, was a traumatic experience. Now she agonizes over the prospect of returning there. If it were just herself, she probably would not return, she said.

But looking beyond her own comfort, her motivation in speaking, and in possibly revisiting the concentration camps, is an obligation to future generations. “I would go. I feel my sons, Elad and Shalev, need to see,” she said.

Hanna and Yossi Roisman, both classics professors at Colby, are on sabbatical, doing research as visiting scholars at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Hanna Roisman specializes in literature, particularly Homeric epic, Greek tragedy and classical themes in modern cinema. Yossi Roisman is a historian specializing in Greek and Roman history and historiography as well as ancient Jewish history and Greek drama.

