

Eva Hoffman

Author of *After Such Knowledge* converses with Robert Birnbaum



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Eva Hoffman was born in Cracow, Poland, and with her family emigrated to Canada in the late fifties. She received a PhD in English and American Literature from Harvard and has been a professor of literature and of creative writing at several institutions including Columbia, the University of Minnesota, and Tufts. Hoffman was an editor and writer at the *New York Times*, including a stint as a senior editor of the *New York Times Book Review* from 1987–90. She has written four highly regarded works of nonfiction: *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, *Exit Into History*, *Stetl: The Life and Death of a Small Town and the World of Polish Jews*, and *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History and the Legacy of the Holocaust*, as well as one novel, *The Secret*. She is at work on a second novel and currently divides her time between London and Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she is a visiting professor at MIT.

After Such Knowledge is Hoffman's skillfully rendered rumination on the sixty-year aftermath of the Holocaust and the multifarious implications of the children of Holocaust survivors' (2 G or Second generation) experience. In this well-wrought explication, which melds the personal with the analytical, she questions the insights that can be carried from recent history to the troublesome present and argues for a transformation of the poignant and harrowing family stories into a conscious understanding of a dark historical era.

In an interview in 2000, Eva Hoffman observed, "I think every immigrant becomes a kind of amateur anthropologist—you do notice things about the culture or the world that you come into that people who grow up in it, who are very embedded in it, simply don't notice. I think we all know it from going to a foreign place. And at first you notice the surface things, the surface differences. And gradually you start noticing the deeper differences. And very gradually you start with understanding the inner life of the culture, the life of those both large and very intimate values. It was a surprisingly long process is what I can say." A process that seems not to have an end point, as the conversation below exhibits. It also, I believe, provides a clear picture of the acuity of Eva Hoffman's steady gaze, one that continues to look at the

world with an originality, clarity, and intellectual honesty that makes her a pleasure to speak with and to read.

Robert Birnbaum: What passport do you travel under?

Eva Hoffman: A very good question, because I have some passport worries right now. I have an American passport and a Canadian passport, which, fortunately, is completely legal these days. So when I travel to England I travel on my Canadian passport because that's where my residence in England is registered. The reason that might have been a vexing question until yesterday is because I had to renew the passport.

RB: Which one?

EH: The Canadian, and there was some uncertainty about whether it would be returned to me before I go back to England—the cost of being peripatetic.

RB: Why do you hold two? Those two?

EH: The reason for the Canadian passport is because that's where we emigrated to. But then I left for the States quite early on—although my parents and my sister remained there, so it was still a point of reference. But then I went to the States and I studied there and I worked there and when the time came to be an American citizen and I didn't have to jettison the Canadian passport, I didn't.

RB: You live in England.

EH: But I now live in England. [laughs]

RB: So why not get a British passport? Or at least consider yourself British?

EH: Yes. Well, it hasn't been long enough, in a way.

RB: Legally?

EH: Legally it has been long enough, as a matter of fact.

RB: [laughs]

EH: Psychologically. [laughs] In terms of identity. It's paradoxical because I don't know whether I will ever come to feel British. On the other hand, I feel very comfortable and quite at home in London. In a sense it's London, rather than Britain, which is my home. I think about it these days, about getting British citizenship, but I would not want to give up my American citizenship, frankly.

RB: Because you consider yourself American?

EH: Yes, because the American part of me is very central and very important.

RB: One could say that the passport is just an instrument of convenience. Even if you get a British passport, would that mean to you that were no longer an American?

EH: Well it's funny how much symbolic meanings get attached to these things. I mean, I have been surprised by that. So that when I wasn't sure whether I needed to give up the Canadian citizenship that became a kind of issue. But the need to affirm that I was an American citizen became quite important. They do have symbolic meanings, these things. But my Central European friends have four passports each and think nothing of it. [laughs]

RB: It does seem to be a contemporary attitude that people no longer identify as much with their country as with the metropolis. People see themselves as Parisian [rather] than French.

EH: Yes, well people do consider themselves French, I suppose. But, yes, this is the formulation that I arrived at, [at] one point. The great differences these days are not between one Western country and another but between the metropolitan centers and the outlying areas.

RB: New Yorkers don't see themselves as Americans. [laughs]

EH: Yeah, they ought to. [laughs] But nevertheless there is a considerable difference. When people ask me where is home I keep saying between NW6 and the Upper West Side, and here I am in Boston.

RB: Your surname is Germanic but you assert your Polish roots and you grew up in the Polish part of the Ukraine, but don't call yourself a Ukrainian.

EH: No, no, no. I did not grow up there. That's easily solved. My parents did. I grew up firmly in Poland [born in Cracow]. But also they grew up in the Polish part of the Ukraine. They were Polish affiliated.

RB: And your last name?

EH: Ex-husband. [laughs] My original name was awkward enough to pronounce and a source of constant irritation, so—

RB: *After Such Knowledge* seems a capping off, a completion, a culmination. Could this have been written before the other three books?

EH: Probably not. I didn't set out for this to be cathartic. But I think it has given me a sense of closure. You are completely right; there is a sense of completion about it. Now, I certainly could not have written it before *Lost in Translation*. And one reason I could not have written it [was] because the problem of being an immigrant covered over the problem of being a child of survivors. It was the kind of foreground problematic, and it took me a long time to arrive at these earlier problems and issues. So there is that. Also, I couldn't have written it while my parents were alive, I don't think.

RB: Would you have written it had there not been this loud, noisy Second Generation phenomenon.

EH: No, I would not have.

On the one hand—I don't know if this is just my critical perverseness—I was unhappy with the kind of reification of the notion of the Second Generation, the mystification of that. On the other hand, I was not completely happy with the tough-minded critical demystification of the meaning of the Holocaust.

RB: That triggered your thinking or coalesced your thinking?

EH: It situated it in a certain kind of cultural conversation. Absolutely. For a long time my parents did not think of themselves as survivors. I certainly did not think of myself as a child of survivors. So it [the Second Generation] dictated a certain kind of cultural discourse that provoked me into addressing that.

RB: Is your position one of resignation that you are a child of survivors?

EH: It's acknowledging that it has a great meaning and a great weight and at the same time trying to demystify the notion of being of the Second Generation, simultaneously. So it felt like not a completely easy balance to achieve or to think about. On the one hand—I don't know if this is just my critical perverseness—I was unhappy with the kind of reification of the notion of the Second Generation, the mystification of that. On the other hand, I was not completely happy with the tough-minded critical demystification of the meaning of the Holocaust.

RB: In Ruth Franklin's review in the *New Republic*, I thought she was very respectful to you, almost went out of her way, especially in light of how much she kicked [Melvin Julius] Bukiets around. I wondered—personalities aside—since I am not well versed in these issues: Is there an ongoing controversy about the Second Generation? Is it a controversial subject?

EH: There has not been a whole lot of controversy, in fact. It has been accepted as a kind of tab label, identity, etcetera. But occasionally there are these modificatory voices, or in this case critical voices, which I do think is needed.

RB: Oh sure. You were included in the Bukiets's *Nothing Sets You Free* anthology. Did you have any reservations about being included? Were you given any outline of what the book was or intended?

EH: No, it happened very much by remote control. He happened to call when I was on a highway in Italy, that he was putting together an anthology of writing about—I don't even remember how this was phrased. I said okay and referred him to my agent. He then wrote a very mean review of my book [*After Such Knowledge*] in the *Washington Post*.

RB: Really!

EH: So, you know, no good deed goes unpunished. [both laugh] So I don't remember how it was phrased. I don't think the phrase "Second Generation" was in there.

RB: I found the introduction to the anthology to be rather strident, almost belligerent.

EH: Yeah, quite strident.

RB: In the conceptual framework of *After Such Knowledge* you have seven divisions from the event of the Holocaust to the memory. Do you see these as actual stages?

EH: Yes, but this was a difficult structure to arrive at. A part of the difficulty was that on the one hand, there was kind of diachronic structure—that is, a structure of ideas. On the other hand, there have been and are stages, especially for children of survivors—let's say people

who come after. There are stages in understanding. So I wanted to build that in as well. It was not easy, but I was hoping to express the dialectic of ideas and the structure of the arguments as it exists now or perhaps always. And at the same time a sense of its trajectory, from a chronological and psychological trajectory.

RB: Some of my experience mirrors yours. My parents are from Lvov and reunited after the war in Germany, and in my early childhood my mother also took me to the library on a weekly basis. But the point here is that I have never been drawn to or interested in reading about the Holocaust. It's not a subject that I wanted to explore. But I was drawn to reading your book, and I was struck by the accuracy and precision of your language and description.

EH: Thank you very much. [chuckles] I am delighted to hear that.

RB: Especially with, my God, such a difficult subject in so many ways—perhaps made more difficult if you have a personal connection to it.

EH: Yes absolutely, and with relationships—and yet I felt I was not in a bad position from which to write about it. My experience was perhaps different from a lot of people who were very Americanized and who viewed this whole history from a very American perspective. At the same time, I think that from the greater proximity sometimes one can see—well, the human textures of it were very present to me.

RB: I was surprised that you were very shaken—moved by September 11. Because I am not convinced when people claim that everything changed, [that] after that U.S. invincibility and such has been shattered. I never saw it that way. I have always thought that war and conflict were never ending and to look around the globe at any point in time convinces me. You began the book with—

EH: "In the beginning there was the war—"

RB: So why that didn't—

EH: Yes, why didn't I take it as just the expected events? I was surprised myself. Very surprised. And it wasn't that it disabused me of some notion of American invincibility or of the notion that we live in peaceful times. It felt like an earthquake in our geopolitical arrangement. It did feel like a very fundamental change in the world. I suppose the apocalyptic images were there right in front of us. That was quite something. Also, I must tell you, happy though I am living in London and will continue to be, the immediate reaction of those among the *bien pensant*, liberal people, were very shocking to me. And there was a considerable degree of anti-American triumphalism.

RB: As in "they had it coming."



EH: Yeah. Very quickly after the event. Twelve hours after. I was very shaken by that.

RB: I have heard people claim that was implicit in the critique of American policies by [Noam] Chomsky and [\[Howard\] Zinn](#). I don't think that's what they mean; their issues are more subtle. But it's too bad that progressive views were quickly tarnished and discredited with that stance.

EH: I have heard the phrase quietly or in a circumlocutory way, but it was there.

RB: Maybe there is no way to present or be critical of U.S. policy without employing the phrase that got Malcolm X in such hot water, "The chickens have come home to roost?"

EH: I didn't think that was the right diagnosis, certainly not twelve or twenty-four hours after the event.

RB: Who actually said that?

EH: Chomsky has said that, straight out.

RB: That's also not the same thing as saying it was deserved.

EH: Tell me the difference?

RB: Let me think that one out. But as we were saying you were surprised by your own reaction. That's a good thing, isn't it?

EH: To be surprised? I suppose. I was surprised at how shaken I was. It must have been the familiar images of New York turning apocalyptic. I started watching it in real time and I thought it was some sort of H. G. Wells grisly joke—were it not for the newscasters who guided us through it. But the complete incredulity that this—

RB: Did you continue to watch for days?

EH: No, I was there in a state of complete incredulity and a kind of shock as it unfolded. So, as I say, I was surprised and I am not sure I can account for it. I do think the symbolic meaning of it was calculated on the other side. The Twin Towers, the Pentagon—

RB: Potentially the White House.

EH: Yeah, and let us not forget that at that time one didn't know what was going to follow. And it just felt to me like a complete upending of the known parameters of the world. An upending with which we will learn to live and have to cope, which was not more violent or atrocious than many things which have happened in the history of the world and to others, but nevertheless an upending in modern times.

RB: Gary Wills after the election wrote something about the end of the Enlightenment because in his view people seemed no longer to be accepting of creditable realistic reporting about the world.

EH: I had a conversation with a friend in London shortly after and we were saying this is going on and that is going on and then he said, "Tell me something cheerful." And I said the Age of Enlightenment is over. [laughs] And this was exactly my sense. I so much consider myself a creature of the liberal left, but it seemed to me the irrationality on both sides was quite disturbing.

RB: It would seem that currently the irrationality of the Right prevails.

EH: Yes, but we need a rational politics, to observe what is actually going on to derive our conclusions from what we observe to get some sane notion—

RB: You quote [Barbara Ehrenreich](#)'s book *Blood Rites [Origins and History of the Passions of War]* who observes that along with all the terrible things we associate with war there is the Dionysian aspect which is irrational—is that what people are embracing in their support of the Iraq war? How is it that Americans support it?

EH: I don't know.

RB: Putting aside the Enlightenment, are you optimistic about human progress?

EH: I have felt that in many ways have we have and we do [make progress]. It's all completely complicated by the fact that we now see the whole globe all the time. So we are aware of all the horrible things that go on everywhere, all the time. So it's very difficult to measure what happens. In Europe, we reached a kind of point at which that which can be done politically, internally, is being done, reached a kind of exquisite political—

RB: Social democracy?

EH: Social democracies, networks of safety. Great networks of safety. Benefits that the state gives you. This is amazing actually and quite impressive—to achieve a consensus of what should be done politically, at that level. That seems to me a great improvement. The whole thing may go to hell in a handbasket, but it got to a significant point. It seems to me our norms for what we profess we should do [laughs] for each other have improved.

RB: Really?

EH: Well, our norms.

RB: In what countries?

EH: Our norms, not our actions. I mean, we think we should not tolerate genocide.

RB: I like David Rieff's formulation of the phrase "never again" [in] referring to genocide, which he takes to mean that, "Never again will we allow Jews to be killed in Europe in the mid-twentieth century."

EH: Yes it has turned out to be that, unfortunately. At least in Sudan we are watching and we are trying—we have it in mind that it would be very culpable not to do something. What happened in Rwanda was astonishingly bad.

RB: And in Albania.

EH: In Cambodia and Yugoslavia.

RB: Odd that Central America is never mentioned, where there were genocidal policies to do away with the Indians there.

EH: I know, I know. But I don't know if we can go do the whole globe. It's very difficult. How have we made progress? Pain and anesthetics. [laughs]

RB: [In his book *Letters to a Young Contrarian*] [Christopher Hitchens](#) cites the inscription on the Sigmund Freud memorial in Vienna, "The voice of reason is small but persistent."

EH: Ah, one must persist. But it is all modified by the fact that we have always been aware of what's going on in our neighborhood and our country and sometimes things seem better and sometimes worse. Now we see everything, and aside from whether humankind is better off or not, it is actually very difficult to cope with—

RB: It's not a question of access now; CNN puts us there. But after World War II the opportunity to understand what was going on in the rest of the world was made so easy, and yet there was what seems like a retreat into rigid ideology and a zealous xenophobia. I'm not sure what access to information means as Americans continue to be xenophobic and chauvinist.

EH: There is a genuine difficulty when coping with that much information and knowing how to respond.

RB: Well, in this matter I am a [philosophical] materialist. We live in an economy and society that trains people to be consumers and that's what they know about. If you meet people and ask them about certain products and brands, they are quite aware and knowledgeable.

EH: Yes, yes. One thing I feel very fervently about is that education in this country should be priority number one. An insidious situation that the population of a country this powerful is not well-educated.

RB: What does *After Such Knowledge* mean to you in terms of the work you want to do and the thinking that you are doing? Is it the culmination?

I had a conversation with a friend in London shortly after and we were saying this is going on and that is going on and then he said, "Tell me something cheerful." And I said the Age of Enlightenment is over.

EH: I think, yes, it has provided me with a closure. I feel, in a sense, I have addressed these issues, and the issues arising from my Polish-Jewish background. I feel a certain kind of obligation has been fulfilled—that there was some sense of obligation. Sometimes conveyed to me, very literally, by my father, for example. So I am ready to move on to other subjects.

RB: You have been referred to as a memoirist. But you have written a novel [*The Secret*]—

EH: [laughs]

RB: Why are you laughing?

EH: I'm glad you noticed.

RB: At least in one conversation that I read [Berkeley] there was some clear talk about your interest in writing, dedication to writing. You have only been publishing books for fifteen years—

EH: Yes, a very late starter. There was immigration, having to learn English. But, there was immigration. So I was a late starter. But at some point I felt very compelled and impelled to go in that direction. I worked in journalism for quite a few years and that's very good training. But I want to do a novel next. I have done a play, which had a stage reading in London. But no, I started my professional life as a literary person.

RB: When you say you want to do a novel—for example Cynthia Ozick is facile in a number of forms and she will pick a form to work in based on what's in her head. She doesn't seem to say "I'm writing a novel." Or, "I'm writing an essay." But you deliberately choose—

EH: No, no—actually that's a bit of a misstatement. There is actually a novel that I started quite a long time ago. That has deflected me to other books. It's a daunting book to me in my mind because it matters to me a lot. But it's a novel because it's on a subject that needs a novel.

RB: What subject that you would choose to write about wouldn't be daunting, close to you, something that you were dedicated to? What makes this different than any other subject?

EH: Not in terms of the daunting nature of the subject, but because a novel still feels like a challenge.

RB: The British refer to the novel, to writing of fiction, as "the senior service," don't they?

EH: [laughs] Yes, one can take that stance as well.

RB: The stumbling point for many people who are excellent writers.

EH: Yes, it's a challenging form, still.

RB: I wonder if your experience also mirrors mine in that I look at using English with great specificity and find myself always taking things very literally. I often don't catch the [human] emotional nuance when I read it. I feel often trapped by precision.

EH: I love precision in language. That is one of the pleasures of English is that its vocabulary is so large and so nuanced and that as one moves toward something more expansive or abstract or metaphysical one moves through the precision and out of it. And this I actually value very much.

RB: Perhaps the English look at it that way. Do you think Americans see it that way?

EH: It's true that there is a more metaphysical tradition here. But I do love that about the language. I think it keeps you honest and encourages a kind of close work with language, which I think is important.

RB: I wonder if natural, vernacular languages are being degraded in an accelerated way? More colloquialisms that seem to muddy up the language at a greater rate than ever—as a result of mass media.



EH: You mean the creation of slang phrases and buzz words and all of that? Yes.

RB: And marketing.

EH: Indeed. There is a pleasure of a language changing and of innovation. But it's true there is a danger of a kind of reduction. One the one hand buzz words and on the other various specialized technical languages.

RB: What is the level awareness of your students and their ability to express themselves?

EH: Well, MIT is a very particular kind of university. Very intelligent. I find that in terms of personalities they are more mature than we were. Partly because they have seen a lot of varieties of adult behavior. [laughs] So they seem quite mature and quite knowing about the world. For MIT students, literature is not a primary concern. So they are not always very sophisticated about literature. But very willing to learn. And actually what I appreciate about them is that they are not pseudo-sophisticated. They know what they don't know.

RB: That's important.

EH: Very important. And they don't think they should know everything in advance. This the great merit of a scientific cast of mind, I find. So that's very nice to work with.

RB: Your life is divided into writing and teaching. And do you still play music?

EH: I do, I do. Yes, and it's the central subject of this novel I am going to write. I play for myself, not very much. But I need a piano in the house. So I can come down from my study and just play. Oh yes, all of that. And I do quite a bit of lecturing.

RB: It seems to me that your books form a kind of textual group—not quite canonical, but I would think that they are always being referred to and, thus, the call for you to lecture.

EH: It's true it has been based on that.

RB: *After Such Knowledge* is not a kind of flash-in-the-pan book and then turning dusty on the shelves.

EH: [laughs] Well, I hope so. Thank you very much. One never knows when one writes how it will resonate, will it have lots of reverberations—

RB: What has been the response from the noncritical community?

EH: Very heartwarming. [laughs] I have had lots of responses from people with similar histories, and occasionally from people with similar histories but which are not Holocaust histories. At one point [I was] on a radio panel in Scotland and a Palestinian guy was reading the book and responding to it quite intensely. I was very gratified.

RB: I was glad you referred to the Rwandan that you met at a garden party—though I am not sure why Ruth Franklin took you to task for that. I don't quite get that. One thing that seems to tick off people about Jews and the Holocaust is that they seem to claim it as the singular genocide in history.

EH: I know. This has to be changed. We have—

RB: My mother is like that.

EH: I think more should be expected from us than from survivors themselves. They have their experiences and they are very consuming and overwhelming. It takes an exceptional large-mindedness to see what happens to others after them. But no, we have to disabuse ourselves of this idea.

RB: I found [Samantha Power](#)'s book very valuable and surprisingly it received a decent a fair reading [and won a Pulitzer] for a subject that people don't always warm up to, a book about American policy toward genocide in the twentieth century.

EH: It came late in the writing of my book and I have been meaning to read it. I have read her essays.

RB: So you are alternating between Cambridge and London, and teaching and thinking about this novel—or you have pages somewhere and you are going back and forth on it. Is there anything that you have a sense of surprising yourself with in the future?

EH: In the future, if I am surprised, then by definition I don't know what's coming to me.

RB: How about an inclination to doing something different?

EH: One of the congenial things about the creative life in London is that you get asked to do various things. So I have done quite a bit of radio work and that has been a surprise, and surprisingly enjoyable. I have written and presented programs. Recently I have done a program with a composer and a producer for which I wrote a text on Memory and Music, which to our collective astonishment won the *Prix Italia*, which is a very good prize for radio. That was a great surprise, [laughs] you know, on every level—and hugely enjoyable for me to work with a composer. So you get asked to do things like that.

RB: Such unusual collaborations for unusual projects don't seem to happen often here.

EH: Yes, it seems to work better there or more frequently. It's a very intermingled world there. You know, I did this play working with actors for a stage reading. So, who knows? Let me add that Clifford Goertz, the anthropologist, did these studies of Javanese culture and the Javanese think [that] the worst thing—as far as they are concerned—in life is to be surprised, [laughs] is to be caught off guard. So I was going to make this proviso—

RB: Do you read a lot?

EH: Do I read a lot? I do read a lot. A lot of time is spent reading associated readings for my book, the research, professional readings—

RB: How about nonrequired reading?

EH: Well, what have I read lately? Novels? I like reading psychoanalytic writings quite a bit. There is a lot of good meaningful nontrivial writing going on. Good fiction? For example, I was reading Leonard Bernstein's Norton Lectures.

I like reading accessible science. People who explain science well are wonderful.

RB: I was at one of them. At a taping at the PBS studio. In 1973?

EH: Goodness, yes. A long time ago. How wonderful. I was reading that with my novel in mind but with great pleasure.

RB: The one thing I remember was Bernstein's emphasis on the importance of repetition in art.

EH: Yes, he was trying to develop a kind of Chomskyian model for music. Very interesting. Chomsky is an unsurpassed brilliant thinker in linguistics philosophy. Occasionally a book like *The Language Instinct* [Stephen Pinker] I pick up for pleasure. For example, at some point I was in a group of therapists and analysts which was reading in psychobiology or neurobiology and discussing that [book]. But again this was very pleasurable for me. I like reading accessible science. People who explain science well are wonderful. I like having it explained to me, even though I can't recreate it afterwards—I was trying to remember the last novel which I was reading with great pleasure while I was feverish in bed. Which affects one's reading quite a bit—*The Fountain Overflows* by Rebecca West, which was recommended to me and also has a musical theme in it. A wonderful novel, unaffectedly charming. I liked your [conversation with Cynthia Ozick](#), by the way.

RB: Thank you. Have you met her?

EH: I have met her, but that's about it. She was extremely nice to me after *Lost in Translation*.

RB: She is extremely nice. It was a great revelation that she was never asked by her publisher to go anywhere for her books.

EH: I was amazed. I was astonished, actually. Maybe that's the life of fiction, which I am about to discover.

RB: Have you set a deadline for yourself?

EH: No, no. I just started *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell, and he is clearly very talented. I can tell from the first few pages.

RB: It's an oddity that there will be so much yowling about how much junk is being published and then at the same time people will be excited about how they discover this one or that one.

EH: Well so much gets published and it is true that the junk occasionally covers things up. Did you meet Anne Patchett?

RB: No. But I liked *Bel Canto* very much.

EH: Me too. It was wonderful.

RB: Well, I hope that your novel is not too far off and that we speak again about fiction.

EH: Thank you, that would be a pleasure.