

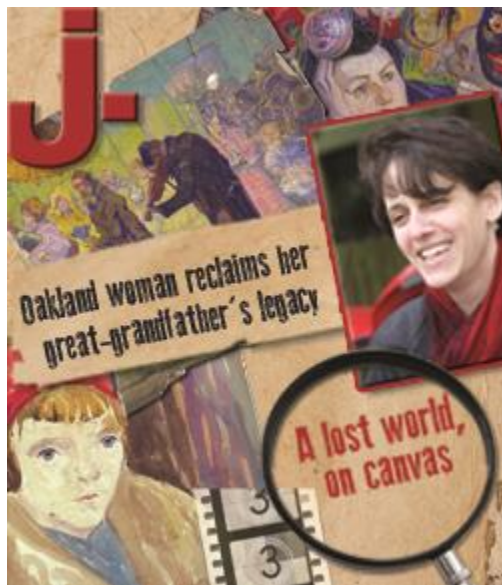
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A lost world, on canvas: Oakland woman reclaims her great-grandfather's legacy

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Elizabeth Rynecki grew up in a house full of ghosts.

Paintings — scores of them — adorned the walls of her childhood home in Oakland, each depicting scenes from Jewish life in Poland before the Holocaust.



Old men draped in tallits. A woodworker at his lathe. A flower girl selling bouquets. A blind musician playing his accordion on a cobblestone street.

All were painted by Elizabeth's great-grandfather, Moshe Rynecki, a man she never knew. How could she? A Polish Jew, he spent his last years in the Warsaw Ghetto and later perished in the Majdanek death camp years before Elizabeth's birth in 1969.

But not before he acted to save his legacy. Knowing a roundup of Warsaw's Jews was imminent, Moshe Rynecki hid approximately 800 of his pieces — oil paintings, watercolors, sketches and sculptures — in several bundles scattered across Warsaw, with the hope they might be found after the war.

Rynecki's widow, Perla, survived the Holocaust and rescued one bundle — some 120 paintings — stashed in a cellar outside Warsaw. Fast-forward to late 20th-century Oakland three generations later: Those canvases ended up as standard-issue home decoration pieces as far as the young Elizabeth was concerned.

"As a kid you grow up and it's just there," she recalls. "You don't think about it."

Her indifference didn't last. Over the past 17 years, the 45-year-old Oakland resident has devoted countless hours to tracking down her great-grandfather's work. It's an effort that may have no finality for her, as a majority of his paintings appear to have been lost forever. Yet it's a cause that motivates her every day.

She will talk about her project in a lecture at the Jewish Community Library in San Francisco on Thursday, Jan. 8.



"Party With Violinist," undated, torn, by Moshe Rynecki

"I feel this incredible obligation to my family and to the Polish Jewish community that perished," Elizabeth says. "I can't bear witness, but I can give the paintings a voice. They sit on a wall and cannot tell their stories. But their stories are really important."

In her early 20s, two events converged that inspired her to learn more about her family history. First, she read her grandfather's unpublished memoir, which brought Moshe to life for her as never before. Writing her master's thesis on "Maus," a seminal graphic novel by Art Spiegelman about his relationship with his Holocaust survivor father, sealed the deal.

She has met with collectors, archivists and historians. She launched a website devoted to the art of Moshe Rynecki and began making a documentary film she will call "Chasing Portraits."

The documentary has been in the works for close to a decade and is nowhere near completion. Financing is hard to come by, even in the best of circumstances. But Elizabeth's combined efforts have paid off. In addition to canvases found by her great-grandmother, Elizabeth has tracked down dozens more, mostly through sleuthing on the Internet and by individuals and institutions finding her on the Web.

Today, Rynecki paintings are part of the collection at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, which possesses 44 watercolors and eight pen-and-ink works, as well as at Yad Vashem, Israel's memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, in Jerusalem and the Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life in Berkeley. Private collectors around the world also own a few. The works have not been appraised but Elizabeth says the dollar amount is not important.

Though Moshe Rynecki never enjoyed the renown of other Jewish artists from the era, such as Chagall and Modigliani, his work has drawn praise throughout the art world.

"People are really moved by it," Elizabeth says of her great-grandfather's work. "They haven't seen anything quite like it. Some say 'Oh, this reminds me of Chagall or Picasso.' I'm not always sure what that means. I think it's a compliment, an effort to say, 'Wow, he wasn't just a weekend painter. He was good.' "

Had he lived, he might have been regarded as one of the greats. Moshe Rynecki enjoyed only modest success in life, but over time his reputation has grown, thanks in large part to his great-granddaughter.



Elizabeth Rynecki with one of her great-grandfather's paintings in Warsaw photo/catherine greenblatt

Moshe Rynecki was born in 1881 in the Polish town of Siedlice, east of Warsaw. His family practiced strict Orthodox Judaism, yet Moshe's talent for art revealed itself early on.

In a memoir written years later by Rynecki's son and Elizabeth's grandfather, George, the artist reportedly once said: "God gave me talent and I truly don't believe in breaking that natural trend. I simply have to do it. If He wouldn't want me to paint, I wouldn't have that tremendous urge and desire to immortalize on paper or canvas what I see."

After attending the Warsaw Academy of Art for a year, Rynecki embarked on a career as a painter, moving away from the shtetl of his father into the urban modernity of Warsaw. But the subject of his paintings rarely strayed from the Yiddish world he left behind. He painted Jewish life, reconstructed, Elizabeth theorizes, largely from memory.

Through her research, Elizabeth learned that her great-grandfather had wedded Perla in an arranged marriage. His father then set him up in an art supply business, with Perla running it. That allowed Moshe time to paint.

And he took advantage of it. His brush lay heavy on the canvas. Thick, untidy brushstrokes captured dirt floors, rumpled clothes and candlelit study sessions. But the faces he painted, both young and old, shine as if backlit by a mysterious bioluminescence. The man could paint.

"Although my great-grandfather was not super famous, he was known in Warsaw," Elizabeth says. "He was published in various newspapers and sat on several committees that tried to promote Jewish artists."

Rynecki sold and gave away many works of art. More than 50 were included in a 1935 art exhibition held in Brussels, and some of those surely passed into other hands, which may explain how canvases have continued to pop up over the years.

After the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939, the Rynecki family scrambled for safety. Perla and the children hid in plain sight with false papers. But Moshe chose not to save himself. He entered the Warsaw Ghetto, where he continued to paint.

"He wanted to be with his people," Elizabeth says. "He thought, 'I need to be with my brothers and sisters. If it [means] death, so be it.' Today I want to yell back in time, 'Get out!'"



"Study," undated, by Moshe Rynecki

But his fate was sealed. With the liquidation of the ghetto in 1943, Rynecki was sent to his doom.

After the war, Rynecki's surviving family members, including Elizabeth's father, Alex, made their way to Italy and then the United States. The 120 rescued paintings came with them. Years later, Elizabeth grew up in Sausalito and Oakland, hearing little about the family's dark chapter in Europe.

With no surviving photos of Moshe, and the general silence about the Holocaust in her home, Elizabeth's great-grandfather's paintings on the wall just became part of the house's interior, like furniture.

Finding and reading the unpublished memoir of her grandfather, George, who died in 1992, shook her out of complacency. So did that master's thesis project. Starting in her early 20s, Elizabeth began her searching.

"In the memoir, my grandfather wrote, 'My granddaughter needs to know the truth.' At first I thought, 'I'm not a survivor. What am I supposed to do with this history?' It never occurred to me there were other people out there struggling with these questions."

In the late 1990s, her father had the Rynecki paintings in their home photographed. Recalls Elizabeth, "The photographer said to me 'There's this new thing called the Internet and maybe you want to put [the paintings] online.' "

She did, and soon she heard from people around the world: art historians, collectors and curators who knew of other paintings. It turned out Moshe Rynecki was not as forgotten as she feared.

Over time, Elizabeth married and had two children. She earns a living managing the family real estate business. But her passion remains reviving her great-grandfather's legacy, though her goals have changed.



Elizabeth Rynecki with her father, Alex. Behind them, paintings of her grandfather and grandmother. photo/shoey sindel photography

At first she simply wanted to reclaim the lost artwork as part of her family's birthright. She felt then that the paintings rightfully belonged to her family.

Reality turned out to be much more complicated.

"When I first realized there were other pieces, I was mad," she recalls. "I thought, 'Ship them back!' But then I talked to people who knew a lot more than I did."

Representatives who helped Jews recover lost or stolen Holocaust-era art asked her which specific pieces were missing. What medium did the artist use to paint them?

Obviously, she had no way of knowing.

"There were all these strikes against me," she says. "Because artists sell paintings and give them away, I had no way to say of any picture, 'That was in my great-grandfather's home and it was his.' "

Another stumbling block: assessing value. It was impossible to say what a Rynecki was worth. Two paintings sold at a Sotheby's Arcade auction in the early 1990s for a combined price of less than \$2,000.

That's when Elizabeth turned to attorney Carla Shapreau, a lecturer at U.C. Berkeley's School of Law and an expert in art and cultural property law.

"Families often don't know what their ancestors owned and lost under horrendous circumstances," Shapreau says. "Facts vary. Things can be stolen. American claimants have to navigate foreign law. Until we know all the facts, it's hard to move forward."

In the end, Shapreau told Elizabeth her legal case to reclaim her great-grandfather's art was not strong. Instead, she should shift her role.

"She said I could be a claimant or a historian," remembers Elizabeth, who chose the latter option. "That's what I'm doing now. My goal is to find the missing pieces. I ask people [who own Rynecki paintings] to open their doors to me, give me digital images and allow me to share them with the world."

Her efforts have paid off. Some collectors found her through her Website, including one in Canada who owns four pieces. Another in New York has six. One woman in Israel owns eight. Museums in Poland have several in their possession. She found newspaper clippings and photographs of other pieces, though the whereabouts of the actual art is unknown.

Occasionally she experienced pure serendipity. While lecturing at a Toronto university a few years ago, she was informed by an attendee that the university had a collection of prewar artifacts that included photos of previously unknown Rynecki works, as well as letters written by her great-grandfather in his own hand.



"Synagogue Interior," 1930, Moshe Rynecki

Her most cathartic experience came in November when she traveled to Poland to retrace her great-grandfather's steps and to film footage for her documentary, "Chasing Portraits."

In a two-week itinerary, she spoke at the Jewish Community Center in Krakow. In Warsaw she toured the newly opened Museum of the History of the Jews of Poland and the Jewish Historical Institute,

where 52 Rynecki works are stored and occasionally put on display. She also visited the desolate fields of Majdanek, the place where Moshe Rynecki died.

"I accomplished everything," Elizabeth says. "I'm sure there is plenty of anti-Semitism in Poland, but the people I met — museum professionals, art historians, private collectors — cared about my great-grandfather's art. You chase ghosts, haunted by a past that isn't yours and try to make sense of it all."

She also paid a visit to a Polish art collector who had purchased what appeared to be a Rynecki original. Elizabeth and the man chatted for an hour, sipping tea and talking about their lives. The man showed her the painting he owned, one that closely resembled another in the museum.

At the end of their visit, the man surprised her by giving her the painting.

"There are questions about whether the piece is really by my great-grandfather," Elizabeth says, "but in that moment it didn't matter. This man took this incredible moment to try to make up for history."

Elizabeth is back home, with a lot more footage for the documentary. She cannot say when it will be completed. She plans to create a new trailer in the months ahead, which she hopes will attract both interest and financing. There are collectors to meet in Israel, New York and elsewhere, and the travel doesn't come cheap.

But she always has those canvases on the wall staring her down and reminding her of a promise she made to herself: To tell the world that once upon a time a great artist captured on canvas a beautiful world, cruelly extinguished.

"He was passionate about painting," she says of her great-grandfather. "It wasn't that he was painting portraits of individuals. He painted a community."

Elizabeth Rynecki will speak about Moshe Rynecki at 7 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 8, at the Jewish Community Library, 1835 Ellis Street, S.F. Free. <http://www.jewishlearningworks.org>

on the cover

Elizabeth Rynecki (inset) surrounded by her great-grandfather's paintings