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THE JERUSALEM POST

DOCUMENTARY CHRONICLES SEARCH FOR FAMILY'S ART LOST IN HOLOCAUST

My family's story is one of those lesser-valued stories, but it's just as important because it's the story not only of art my family owned, but art my great-grandfather created.

BY VICKY LARSON/THE MARIN INDEPENDENT JOURNAL

JULY 19, 2018 11:29

Novato, California (Tribune News Service) — Like many [children of Holocaust survivors](#), Elizabeth Rynecki grew up hearing bits and pieces of her family's experiences but not much more. No one really wanted to talk about it.

But the walls of her parents' Sausalito home were filled with paintings that captured life in Warsaw, Poland, where her father grew up, before the Nazis arrived - images of a thriving Jewish community, the rituals within

the synagogues and intimate family moments painted by her great-grandfather, Moshe Rynecki.

She didn't think too much about them or the Holocaust until her grandfather George Rynecki, Moshe's son, died, and Rynecki helped her father Alex pack up her grandfather's Mendocino home. There, they stumbled upon a memoir that not only detailed his war years, but also had a special message for her.

"Some will say it will never happen again. Well, it's too easy. It did happen," George wrote. "There are hundreds of books on the subject. Nevertheless I am a Jew and I write. I'll do it until the end of my days. If only for my granddaughter, Elizabeth, to know the truth, and not be afraid of it."

It was a message Rynecki, then a recent college graduate, took to heart. And the truth she decided to explore was what had happened to her great-grandfather Moshe, a prolific painter who perished in the Majdanek extermination camp. The result is *Chasing Portraits*, a documentary film that will be screened as part of the 38th San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, which opens Thursday and runs through Aug. 5.

The documentary is a companion piece to a book by the same name that she published in 2016.

Reclaiming looted art

Rynecki is neither an author nor a filmmaker — a real estate professional, this is her first book and film — and although it seems narrowly focused on her family's story, there are numerous Holocaust survivors and relatives who are seeking to reclaim Nazi-looted art, which is why President Barack

Obama signed into law the Holocaust Expropriated Art Recovery Act in 2016.

“Restitution of Holocaust-era looted art is complicated for personal, emotional and financial considerations,” the 48-year-old Oakland resident says. “Most news stories gravitate toward the high-valued art restitution stories and far too often don’t hear the stories about art of lesser value and importance. My family’s story is one of those lesser-valued stories, but it’s just as important because it’s the story not only of art my family owned, but art my great-grandfather created.”

Moshe Rynecki was a prominent painter in the early- to mid-20th century, and had works published in newspapers and magazines, as well as exhibited in Warsaw and Brussels. As the Nazis began invading Poland in 1939, Moshe removed the canvases from their frames and divided 800 of his works into bundles that he distributed to trusted people for safekeeping. His wife, Perla, and their baby son survived the war by hiding; Moshe, who chose to remain in the Warsaw ghetto not knowing what was to come, did not.

After the war, Perla was able to recover 120 of his paintings. As Rynecki began her search for the rest of her great-grandfather’s paintings — including a trip to Warsaw in 2014, which the documentary captures — she discovered that they are in the National Museum and the Emmanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, as well as in private collections in the United States, Canada, Poland, Israel and France.

Too many obstacles

When she first began searching for his artworks, she was angry that they had gone missing and determined to reclaim them: They were her family’s

after all. But, as she learns in a revealing scene in the documentary, that was going to be impossible.

“As soon as I started digging around and talking to people, I just realized there were way too many obstacles,” she says, including the expense of hiring attorneys. Plus, she notes, “we know that he sold things and we know he probably gave paintings away. I didn’t have any list or photographs that proved it had been in my family’s possession before the war.”

As it turns out, that offered a hidden blessing, she says. “I could rescue the legacy and try to have a different sort of restorative justice by trying to rescue the memory and exposing more people to the art,” she says.

This will be the first screening of *Chasing Portraits* in the US; it premiered in Poland in May.

“It was lovely,” she says. “I had seen the footage so many times, and yet I started to cry.”

‘Lost legacy’

In a review of Rynecki’s book, the Jewish Book Council writes that it “provides insight into the haunting effect that a ‘lost legacy’ can have on survivors’ descendants several generations after the Holocaust.”

Rynecki hopes the film shows the long-lasting effects of war and conflict, especially as our nation debates our refugee policies.

“I want people to understand that war is devastating and that not everyone wants to talk about it, can talk about it or is willing to talk about it. While we do need eye witnesses to bear witness and record their histories for

future generations, not all survivors can do that and we must let them be for we do not want to cause further anguish in their lives,” she says.

She also hopes the film shows how art is more than just pretty pictures — it speaks to us.

“The art whispers its secrets, gently revealing meaning and its mysteries over time. We must listen carefully or we might miss its stories, the times and people to which it bears witness,” she says. “My great-grandfather’s art also survived the Holocaust and as survivors they, too, have stories that must be told.”

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