

## Careers: Artist & Documentary Film Maker Mira Van Doren Immortalizes Vilna

By Emily Sherwood, Ph.D.

How do you immortalize a childhood of which you were robbed, a childhood steeped in rich Jewish culture that disappeared off the face of the earth in a matter of years? For Mira Van Doren, who in 1939 left her home in Vilna, Poland at the age ten with her parents to visit the New York World's fair and found herself unable to return due to the outbreak of World War II, you become a documentary filmmaker and offer a window into the little-known world of Vilna, once the capital of Jewish Eastern Europe.

"Vilna is my nucleus," explained the now septuagenarian Van Doren when interviewed in her midtown apartment on West 57th Street, which serves as an office for The Vilna Project, a nonprofit organization she created ten years ago to preserve the memory of Vilna's proud Jewish heritage. Sepia-toned photographs from pre-World War II Vilna cover the walls of the majestic 22-foot high living room, offering a haunting reminder of a now extinct society once vibrant with intellectual Jewish urbanity, known as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania." Here, Van Doren, masterminded her remarkable film, "The World Was Ours," a portrayal of Vilna's pre-eminent Jewish community, once home to some 80,000 Jews in twenties and thirties, which virtually disappeared in the sweeping rampage of Nazi extermination in the early 1940's.

To view Van Doren's documentary is to take a journey through Eastern European history. The 58-minute film combines archival photographs and live video footage with interviews of dozens of Vilna's survivors and scholars, supplemented by excerpts from diaries, letters, poems, newspaper stories, and other contemporary accounts. A voice-over narration by award-winning actor Mandy Patinkin weaves these disparate threads into a compelling story of a community that by the 1920's had become "the land of Yiddish," a language that successfully united all classes and vocations of Jews in high-level discourse in areas of politics, poetry, literature, philosophy, and science. In 1925, Vilna scholars created the Jewish Scientific Institute, or YIVO, providing a locus for research and education in all areas of Jewish study, an ethnographic Library of Congress as it were.

"That exhilaration was tragically short-lived," portends the ominous voice of Patinkin midway through the documentary, as Jews became the "primary target of a campaign to expel all minorities" during the thirties. Although many Jews fled to Vilna for safe haven from the atrocities of persecution in Poland, by 1941 German troops had occupied Vilna, rounding up those 40,000 Jews not yet killed and herding them into walled quarters. Four hundred years of history had become, in the space of a year, "little more than a holding pen." The film portrays the final, valiant efforts of a doomed society to harness its resources, creating medical clinics, libraries and schools "even with the stench around them." In the face of orders to send their written archive to Frankfurt for sure destruction, Jews secretly formed a "paper brigade," smuggling books and documents back to their ghetto for clandestine safekeeping. Miraculously, these papers were discovered 50 years later in a monastery in Vilnius (the modern name of Vilna) and delivered to New York's YIVO, where they provide a rich archival legacy for modern Jews and historians worldwide.

For Mira Van Doren, "The World Was Ours", which opened triumphantly in April 2006 at Brandeis University's ninth annual film festival, became not just a documentary about a vibrant Jewish community in which she lived ever so briefly, but a very personal opportunity to learn

more about her family. "In 1993, when I was interviewing people in Vilnius, a man came up to me and said, 'I want you to know that your father was not only a great doctor, but a doctor with a Jewish heart.' I probably treasure that more than anything else." Van Doren's father, the late David Jedwabnik, was a noted lung specialist and arts aficionado in Vilna who provided free medical care to the poor.

Doren, an artist by profession who was commissioned to create a series of enamel topped cocktail tables for the S.S. United States while still a young woman in her twenties, explains her late-in-life decision to become a documentary filmmaker by saying, "I like to take on large projects. I think if I have a good idea, it's possible to do." Although she is widely acclaimed for her prolific, high profile vitreous enamel on steel architectural artwork that she creates for hotels, synagogues, and churches-- including murals, doors, elevators and furniture-- the transition to documentary film was "monumentally difficult...I am not a Jewish historian. I needed to have historical knowledge, so I turned to the best scholars I could find. I read. I amassed a major library, an archive of photographs...This knowledge became the foundation, the strength to say what I had to say," explains Van Doren. Her advice to other first-time filmmakers is this: "Know what you're doing. Be serious about your capabilities. Find the truth...You have to be critical. Accept that there's a lot of very good stuff going on. Weigh your abilities against those."

In the end, Van Doren's immortal contribution to the tragically doomed society of Vilna is perhaps best expressed by one of the interviewees from "The World Was Ours":

*"I feel that if I am alive, at least I have to remember all the people who perished, and not remember them as dead. They have to live for me in my work, in my dreams, in my writing, in my relationship with people.*

*I am obliged to represent them, because they were a noble people."* --