

Looking at the Jews of Vilna

by Henry Moore, *Register Citizen Staff*

As a 10-year-old, Mira Van Doren had enjoyed a comfortable life. Her father was David Jedwabnik, a physician and prominent figure in the community. Her mother, Lydia, was an artist. Aboard the cruise ship S.S. Stefan Batory, Mira and her family were leaving their home in Vilna, Poland, to visit the 1939 World's Fair in New York. She had no idea that the Second World War would start six days later, preventing her from returning to her friends, extended family, and a way of life that would soon be destroyed by Nazi Germany.

The world was Ours is a movie that resurrects the achievements of the Eastern European Jewish community that existed within the city of Vilna. As it grew, 60,000 Jews enjoyed the cultural environment they had built, rich with the arts, education, healthcare, and literature. For Van Doren, Vilna had been home. More than 50 years after coming to America, Van Doren began assembling the pieces of her beloved Vilna for the film, which can be viewed at the upcoming Kent Film Festival, March 26-29.

"The research began in the early 1990's." Van Doren said in a recent interview. "I contacted Vilna residents that were known to have survived the war, many of whom were personal friends. I was fortunate to find that many of them had home movies and photographs from the prewar period.

Van Doren soon expanded her search for information by contacting film and photo houses in Europe, Israel, and the former Soviet Union. Some of the movie footage used in The World Was Ours was found in a German studio, a travel film that was shot, but never shown. While the amount of information, photos, footage and books continued to grow, Van Doren began writing the script that would bind the images with the experiences of the people that lived, and perhaps died, in Vilna. Over 80 hours of interviews with witnesses, survivors, and scholars were recorded to build the foundation of the film.

The research period required travel, purchases, and equipment. Money was a constant issue, as it is for all but a few independent film makers. "Films cannot be made without money." Van Doren said. "Even as we were making the film, I was continually looking for funding. You must present a potential contributor with a vision of your project, and display the confident passion that indicates your commitment to finish it."

Material soon arrived from a variety of sources, and Van Doren needed a script, or template, to organize the story for film.

"We continued to gather information and record interviews while the script was developed." Van Doren said. "My challenge was to condense everything into a one hour story, the time allowed us by the Public Broadcasting Service, who intended to air the film on television when we finished."

The process of reducing the accumulated information into a 1-hour format required additional help. Van Doren's family contributed time, resources, and talent to her film. Her sons, Adam and Daniel, joined the effort. Adam, an accomplished author and filmmaker, assumed the role as producer. Daniel participated in the filming crew during the initial trip to Poland. As director, Van Doren wanted as complete a story as was possible to emerge from her efforts.

"Probably one of the most difficult tasks for a director is to accept criticism and to cut material." Van Doren explained. "I love every detail, but some of it did not serve the story and was removed."

The World Was Ours has earned Van Doren, who maintains a family home in Cornwall, several awards and international recognition. The material that was gathered in order to tell the story is now archived and available as a resource for academics and scholars, through the not for profit organization, The Vilna

Project, that Van Doren established and maintains. She is pleased that her movie is included in the festival offerings.

“I did not want to make a film about the history of Vilna as a city.” Van Doren said. “I wanted to capture the soul and character of the community that I knew, a community that no longer exists.”

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