

## Van Doren: Vilna Archivist

by Masha Leon from *The Jewish Daily Forward*

I was en route to visit Mira Jedwabnik Van Doren, to talk about her film, "The Vilna Project: The Rediscovery of the Vilna Archives." As I rode up the escalator at the Lexington Avenue 51st St. subway station, I suddenly heard strains of "Papirosn"! Was I imagining it, or was this Mandy Patinkin's revenge? I took the down escalator back to the platform and followed the melody arriving at a grey haired man playing an accordion. "Papirosn?" said I. "You know it?" asked he. "Where are you from?" I asked. "Belorus Minsk." "Ir redt Yiddish?" I asked, and he nodded. "My parents came from Belorus-Byten, Slonim, Baranovitch." I told him. "Dos is parnose [This is a Living]?" I asked. He shrugged his shoulders. Saimon, an accordion teacher from the former Soviet Union is seeking students in America. How appropriate that "Papirosn," a song I used to sing in Warsaw and Vilno, should preface my meeting with Mira.

Mira led me into the huge living room of her office suite in the artists' co-op building on West 57th Street, built in 1907, with it's 22-foot high ceiling and 18-foot tall window. Black-and-white enlarged photos of Vilna scenes were on the walls as well as a table piled high with books about Vilno-Vilne-Vilna-Vilnius. Then onto the Vilna Project "War Room" with its computer terminals and filing cabinets, shelves of videotapes and color-coded binders full of letters and photographs. "I have 80 hours of interviews with survivors and 25 hours of film," Mira said. "I wanted to commemorate the vanished community of Vilna of which my family was a part. I wanted a documentary not about death, but about people who had lived there."

When I look at photo albums, I am taken by how completely unaware they were of what was going to happen.

"Several years ago I was told by a survivor, a doctor, about my father's colleagues who had been hiding in Vilna and [were] aware that they were doomed. They consoled themselves with the thought that at least David Jedwabnik, who had made it to America, would know that they had once lived," Mira paused. "All of them perished. I will always remember what he said to me, 'You must never forget this. It is your responsibility to remember.'" Mira had been to Vilna/Vilnius several times and, in 1993, attended the 50th anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilna ghetto.

We were about to share a bowl of gigantic strawberries when Woody Allen's film crew arrived to "case" Mira's 92-year-old mother's apartment on a lower floor for an as-yet-unnamed film about a 1920's-1930's artist. As we admired the enamel-on-metal work on the walls and door of the elevator, Mira noted with an artist's proprietary pride, "This is my elevator." Mira's mother's Russian-European, elegant high-ceilinged apartment with its red damask-paper walls, dark furniture, bibelots, painted fireplace, paintings and photos elicited "ooh's" and "ah's".

Born in Vilno, raised at Wilieska 22, apt.3, Mira attended a Montessori school.

Her father, a prominent lung specialist who ran a tuberculosis sanatorium had been a leader of Vilna's Jewish community. She and her parents left Vilno on August 22, 1939, en route to the New York World's Fair and on August 24 in Gdansk, boarded the Polish vessel *Batory*, on what turned out to be its final Atlantic crossing before Germany's attack on Poland. "I went to P.S. 54, High School of Music and Art, Queens College and Columbia..." *continued*