

# Vilna's Jews Depicted in Gripping Documentary

Lakeville Journal  
by Karen Bartomioli

Mira Jedwabnik Van Doren of Cornwall was just 10 years old when she sailed to New York with her parents to visit the World's Fair. She was privileged not only with wealth, but with parents who took her along on their many travels. She had no way of knowing this trip abroad in September 1939 would mark the beginning of the rest of her life.

"A few days after we arrived in New York, World War II broke out, when the Germans invaded Poland. My beautiful home, the city of Vilna was under siege," Van Doren said, with a trace of her accent remaining. "Every Jew there was taken prisoner and nearly every one of the 80,000 of them would eventually be killed."

What followed would be years of not knowing. Of letters from family and friends that suddenly stopped. Of eventually coming to the realization that they could never return to Vilna.

Nearly 60 years later, Van Doren has completed, with support from family and a crack cinematography crew, the documentary "The World Was Ours." It will air on CPTV April 9 at 8 p.m. An additional broadcast is scheduled for April 11 at 11 p.m.

The documentary format of old photographs and footage laced with present-day interviews brings the time and place to life. One is quickly brought beyond the generalized horror at Nazi atrocities to being out in the shoes of people who survived horrors that they recall in mostly matter-of-fact tones. But their eyes reveal more, and the occasional pauses as their minds reluctantly drift back.

The goal of the 58-minute film is to tell the whole story, Van Doren said. It's not just about death and pain, but about how the Jews of Vilna celebrated life even as they faced certain death.

Van Doren lets viewers know right at the beginning of the film, narrated by Mandy Patinkin, that stereotypes of Eastern European Jews as backward and uncultured are just not true.

In 1633, Vilna, once the capital of Lithuania, then a part of Poland and Russia during the war, granted its Jewish population all the privileges of the general citizenry. They were restricted only as to where they lived. They fostered an impressive lifestyle enriched by education and the arts. They produced great philosophers, poets, artists and performers.

"My memories of Vilna are of the wonderful sights and sounds," Van Doren said. "There were many, many churches in the city, and the church bells were always ringing. Many of the streets remained cobblestone and people still used horses and carriages, and I loved the sound of hooves on the cobblestones."

"It was a wonderful place, full of intelligent people who celebrated life. I'm not surprised that even while the Jews were held captive in the ghetto, and made to work at the worst jobs, they still put on plays and concerts and poetry readings. Their doctors pulled themselves together at once and gave lectures on hygiene to avoid things like the plague. They never gave up hope. Their spirit was never defeated."

Indeed, even as they were searched daily on returning to the ghetto, many risked death to rescue and smuggle back into the community page upon page of literature from their heritage.

Van Doren began the project with the same sense of responsibility, and with a book of photographs from Vilna.

"I looked at them and I thought how happy the people looked; that they didn't know what their future would be. I thought the world should know who they really were. I knew I had to memorialize an extraordinary world that will never be again."

Her oldest son, Daniel, traveled with her to Vilna, and as an attorney, was later helpful with the project. Younger son Adam, an architect and artist, became the film's producer. They are her children with John Van Doren of Cornwall, whom she married 50 years ago.

Van Doren shot about 100 hours of footage. It does its job in telling the story, often very effectively in the most subtle ways.

There was the teacher who convened school every day while her class got smaller and smaller. No one talked about it, but the students knew their classmates had been killed.

"She started out with 27 students, and continued on until the class was down to four," Van Doren said, calling the teacher (also named Mira) a hero.

One survivor describes how he was among the first group to be brought to the forest for a mass killing. It wasn't until the first shots rang out that they felt truly in danger. He described how he tripped and fell, avoiding the rain of bullets. Another man was shot and fell on him, offering a hiding place until the soldiers left.

Through the voices of those who lived through it, one can only try to imagine what it felt like. It's not possible to truly imagine, and that is the most telling thing.

### **A life in America**

In the United States, Van Doren went on to become a renowned artist. She painted and designed large-scale architectural installations for major companies and institutions. Her work in enamel on steel led to an unexpected foray into a long career creating more than 900 distinctive elevator doors installed primarily in hotels. Some have been rescued from renovation projects as valuable art pieces and will be part of an upcoming exhibit at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York.

In 1989, she founded The Vilna Project Inc., a non-profit group with the goal of preserving the legacy of Jewish Vilna and publicizing memories of a remarkable city and time.

Van Doren is quick to say she is not a filmmaker, and will never take on another project like this.

"I'm ready to move on to the next thing," she said, with a determined grin.

### **What the Future Holds**

Yet she had about 80 hours of film left that she wants to have edited for The Vilna Project's collection.

"All it needs is seven to eight months of editing and \$80-90,000 to produce."

A study guide, funded by a grant, will be completed as a tool to be used by schools and libraries.

Loftier ambitions for the film and related projects pale in comparison to the letters Van Doren receives following screenings of the film, though.

"The letters from my friends and others who survived or were connected to Vilna are incredible. They tell me how grateful they are to me for telling their story."