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They are virtually all gone—70,000 Jews from Vilna, Poland, annihilated in the Holocaust, the few aged survivors now inevitably exiting life's stage. But the Jews will live through the efforts of one woman, Mira Jedwabnik Van Doren of Cornwall and New York, who returned to her native land 60 years after her precipitous departure, determined to record the memories of fellow survivors and tell the story of the rich culture that had informed their youth.

Mira Van Doren has created an hour-long documentary, "The World Was Ours" which will air Wednesday at 8 p.m. on CPTV. It will repeat on April 11 at 11 p.m.

I felt I had to tell the story of these people who can never tell of themselves," said Mrs. Van Doren as she sat before the warm hearth in her Cornwall living room. "I just wanted to show respect for them—for their living and their dying. They had hopes and dreams, loves and hates, and they were wiped out. There was a time, there was a community, there was a city, and the only way that it will continue is in my story."

Mrs. Van Doren, an only child, left Vilna in late August 1939, scion of the last Jewish family to gain a safe exodus. Pulling her 69-year-old travel documents from a file, she points to the date on the bottom, Sept. 1, 1939, the very day the war began.

As she tells it, the family's departure was almost accidental. Her father, a prominent physician, decided on a whim that he would take the family to the World's fair in New York. "My father had just published a book and he was in Warsaw for a book-signing. On a lark, he thought we should take a vacation to see the World's Fair."

Dr. Jedwabnik approached the U.S. consulate in Warsaw, applied for the necessary papers, and plans were laid to sail from France in August aboard the Normandy.

Mrs. Van Doren said her father "wasn't an innocent," but that in their enlightened little Polish city he had been isolated from the brewing threat in Western Europe. In Paris during that summer of 1939, "he was told he was a damned fool; didn't he know there was going to be a war?" Mrs. Van Doren recalled, "They said, 'What are you doing out there?' Smelling the wind?'"

Perhaps alarmed by what he had heard, Dr. Jedwabnik rethought his original plans to take his family across Europe to depart from France. The family had always protected its young daughter from anti-Semitism, and her parents may have chosen not to alarm the little girl even now. Ostensibly without motive, the doctor made an abrupt decision to leave from a Polish port.

Luckily, the travel agency he called had just received a cancellation for a cabin for three and he quickly booked it. Apparently reflecting a feeling prevalent in the city that common sense would ultimately prevail, the little family left on Aug. 22 with no idea that they would never see the pre-war city, their friends or their family again. “I didn’t even have a winter coat,” Mrs. Van Doren recalled. “My mother liked to travel light and she said, ‘Who needs a coat in New York in September and October?’”

But there were ominous signs of conflict ahead, even as they took the overnight trai north to the seaport. Mrs. Van Doren remembers seeing soldiers at the rail stations saying goodbye to their loved ones. “It scared me when I peered out the windows of the train,” She remembered.

At the port a friendly steward who had served them on a previous cruise told her father that doctors were being detained. The physician covered his title with his thumb when presenting his presenting his passport and succeeded in getting a stamped boarding pass. He told his wife and daughter to get on board and stay there no matter what happened. They watched on the deck as the same steward found him in the crowd and escorted him on board through the kitchen.

“I was told we were the last Jewish family to leave”, she said. Mrs. Van Doren is well aware of their extraordinary luck. “It was as if my life stopped on 1939 and another started in 1939,” she said. “In a way I was distant from what happened to the people who stayed behind. I went to school, I lived with my family, I ate my sandwich for lunch, And for a long time we received letters—my father even had his fur-lined coat sent to this country by his mother. No one imagine the disaster that was to come.”

But disaster did come and the losses were registered in the United States thousands of miles away. Mrs. Van Doren has never been able to discover the fate of family members that disappeared in the Holocaust, but she has heard stories from the few friends who did survive and is well aware of her phenomenal luck. She said she woke up one day in the early 1990’s, after a life with artistic successes, amid the security of her family and thought, “Lady you don’t get it for nothing. You didn’t get on that ship; you didn’t get all your good luck without an obligation.”

That obligation was to recreate, for the world to know and remember, the vibrant intellectual, artistic and social life she had known in her youth. Mrs. Van Doren is a well-known artist but had no experience in filmmaking when she was inspired to commemorate the lost life of her lovely city. She was undeterred by her lack of knowledge, however.

“I am a project person,” she said. “I get ideas and I really believe in them and think I should do them. One day I thought I should do a documentary about Vilna, which was insane because I had never made a film. But I was never discouraged,” she said. “I thought I would just start and go step by step.”

“At first I did a lot of reading because I was only a child when I left Vilna. I did not know the city the way the older people had. I wrote all over the world for materials and did a lot of research. “I started interviewing people. I knew I had a serious obligation.”

Helping her to recapture that world was a small circle of Vilna survivors who had immigrated to the United States following World War II—only about 1200 survived the war out of the more than 70,000 crowded into the city in 1939. She said these survivors had sought each other out upon arrival in their new home. “My father headed an organization that helped survivors,” she said. “We would hear this one survived or that one survived. People searched.”

“With luck I got a film editor who was wonderful and who spoke Polish, English and Yiddish,” she continued.

Yiddish was a particularly important component because in the decades just before World War II the Jewish community of Vilna had blossomed, transforming the city into a center for Yiddish culture. The city had Yiddish newspapers, Yiddish theaters, schools, literature and social organizations. “Yiddish was the language of the Jews of Vilna and they were extraordinarily proud of it,” Mrs. Van Doren reported. “If they had continued, it would have been much more serious than a folk language. It is a combination [of German, Russian, Lithuanian and Polish] and it is a very rich language, but it is often associated with poverty, with immigrants, with foreigners. In Vilna, middle-class Jews and intellectuals were proud to speak it. They even performed Shakespeare and Checov in the theaters, all translated into Yiddish.

She said there is a common misconception about Eastern European Jewry that the people lived deprived lives, in shtetles that everyone wanted to leave. When I used to hear people talking about the Jews of Vilna they were not talking about the city I lived in,” she said. “I lived in a serious, sophisticated, creative, socially alive community, a city of wonderful parks, theaters, and art—an exciting world, a proud Jewish world. I believed anything was possible—and I was not unique. We were middle-class professionals, but the Jewish arts didn’t come from the middle class. The poets were all poor Jewish kids.”

She remembers the sounds and sights of her childhood home “The architecture was Baroque and Italian Renaissance,” she relates. “It had a university and was not an industrial city, so there was no noise. Your could hear things—the sound of horse hooves on the cobblestone streets, of people talking on the street in many languages. We had wonderful trees and parks…”

It was the sights and sounds of this long-ago world that she wanted to recapture in her documentary. “The city still exists, but no more the life,” she said sadly. “another group pf Jews now lives there, but not the Vilna Jews with the traditions, the loves, the hates…I wanted to get the Vilna Jews with the sounds of the city, the sounds of Jewish Vilna. All the survivors say that I was able to recreate that life.”

Production of the documentary went on sporadically over the next decade and a half, and Mrs. Van Doren praises her sons, Adam ad Daniel, and her husband, John Van Doren for helping her to finish it.

"I might have given up without the support of my family," she said, adding that Daniel and his wife had accompanied her to Vilna in 1993 for the 50th anniversary of the liquidation of the Jewish quarter. Her family helped he to secure grants and patiently read and reviewed the materials she produced.

Later her son Adam, who had made three previous films about James Thurber, Harold Ross of the New Yorker and his own grandfather, Mark Van Doren, became her producer. Working with editor Dina Potocki and narrator Many Patinkin, they began to put the final product together.

"We worked seven days a week for seven months," Mrs. Van Doren related. "The three of us put it together. We had a good script and then we made it tighter, made a better story. And I was incredibly lucky to get Mandy Patinkin as the narrator."

"It was more work than I could have imagined, but once I made the commitment, there was no way I could stop," she concluded.

With the film completed and ready to be broadcast, she feels there is more to be done. "We had maybe 7 hours of interviews that we had to edit down to 4 or 5 minutes.," she said. "We had to keep the documentary to 58 minutes, and I wanted to present a story based on ideas. Now I would like to do another film, "The Last Voices of Vilna" with maybe 10 hours of those interviews…"

Still, having achieved her first goal fills her with pride because she believes she has created a lasting memorial to a way of life that was cruelly cut short. "My greatest reward is that more than 100 [PBS] stations will show my documentary," she said. "That's 60 million households that will learn about Vilna—and all because I had to tell this story."