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From Here To Kovno

For Upper West Side Documentary Filmmaker, Search for Grandfather's House Leads to Family Revelations.

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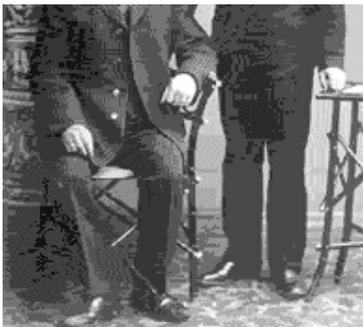
As a child growing up in Syracuse, Eileen Douglas faithdouglas@earthlink.net lived for the moments she could climb into her grandfather's lap and find the pennies he brought, special for her. A kosher butcher, her grandfather faithfully visited his grandchildren every day after work. On Friday night, his grandchildren would go to his house for Shabbos dinner.

Though Douglas adored her grandfather, she knew very little about his upbringing in Kovno, Lithuania. "I thought we weren't allowed to talk about it, that if you did, you would hurt the family," she recalls.

Some 25 years after her grandfather died, Douglas paid a visit to her childhood home and stumbled upon a series of forgotten family photographs. "These were people I'd never seen before. They dressed well, like they were from a city," recalls Douglas, who imagined her ancestors as "shtetl peasants. I was shocked. ... They shattered my identity. How could it be that I did not know my own story?"



It would be another 15 years before Douglas found herself knee-deep in passenger ship records, census counts and "The Hidden History of the Kovno Ghetto" as she searched for family roots. Finally, as a woman in her 50s, Douglas learned how her grandfather escaped conscription into the czar's army by fleeing to America. Two years later, his brother Max followed. She discovered how other relatives got herded into the Kovno Ghetto and how her great-grandmother Chaya had the good fortune to die of natural causes.



Douglas' grandfather, right, with his father
in Kovno (Kaunas), Lithuania

A broadcast journalist who spent her life telling the stories of other people, Douglas decided to apply years of professional expertise to her own personal history. The resulting documentary, ***My Grandfather's House***, records a family saga that many Jews will find familiar yet manages to remain fresh and poignant.

"It's a compellingly made, tightly woven story," says Ken Sherman, the director of film and media at Makor, who has viewed the documentary. "It's not an unfamiliar story but it has an emotional kick."

Currently under consideration at PBS, ***My Grandfather's House*** had been initially screened as part of the prestigious "No Borders" section of the Independent Feature Film Market. Still a work-in-progress, the film, written and narrated by Douglas, unfolds like a personal diary as it chronicles the events that lead to the filmmaker's trip to Kovno, where accompanied by her adult daughter, she searches for the home where her grandfather lived. "I leave New York, not even sure I have the right address. I don't know what possesses me," her voice narrates as the viewer watches her first cry in a taxi on the way to the airport and later, at the grave of her great-grandmother in Kovno.

Kneeling in a lush, green cemetery, bearing stones that relatives gave her to place on this ancestral grave, Douglas finally knows where her grandfather comes from and "where I come from. More importantly, I know who you loved ... I'm not in the dark anymore."

In the Upper West Side office she shares with her business partner Ron Steinman, the now-54-year-old Douglas, a youthful looking, contemplative woman with large, soulful eyes, attempts to address the issue of possession. "I'm a reporter, I don't like mysteries," she first says. Then, she delves further into the question of motivation. "My grandfather died suddenly when I was 12 and I never got to say goodbye. He was the first death I experienced. Afterwards, I saw our family shrink."

The detective work involved in making the film put Douglas in touch with over 30 family members in North America, Russia and Israel that she either never met or had not heard from in years. "I went looking for a house but instead wound up with all these relatives," observes Douglas, whose grandfather's house had been torn down. "That's the most important thing, that I've got my family back, both living and dead."

Rachel Zients, Douglas' 29-year-old daughter who lives in Los Angeles, admits that while she "was not the easiest person to travel with" to Eastern Europe, she never thought twice when her mother asked if she would accompany her to Kovno. "For some reason, my mother needed to go there and wherever she goes, I go," she says. "My mother was widowed at a young age and we spent so much time equating family with just the two of us. It's so ironic that we have family all over the world now."

The 66-year-old Steinman, a veteran news producer for NBC and ABC who co-produced ***My Grandfather's House***, views his partner's quest as "reversing the breaking of the glass, of restoring a family to one piece. At first, I didn't believe in the project," he says. "I didn't know much about my own family but it wasn't an issue for me. But then Eileen started feeding me all this archival material and I saw a subtext. I also saw how passionate she was about her own story and I thought, 'if you have these things going for you, then you can't miss.' "





Filmmaker Eileen Douglas, left and her daughter Rachel Zients search for roots in Kovno (Kaunas), Lithuania, in her documentary, **My Grandfather's House**

After working together on several projects for ABC-TV's Lifetime Magazine, Douglas and Steinman decided to form their own production company and shoot documentaries that would focus on personal histories and character studies. "I've done enough global stories in my life," says Steinman.

Working with Douglas on **My Grandfather's House** has inspired Steinman to interview his 91-year-old mother about his own family. "Before, I had never cared to ask how my mother's father had fled Odessa," he says. "Now, I'm learning things I never knew and my mother is opening up."

For Steinman, who grew up in the 1950s among relatives "who did not talk," making the documentary has led to a similar discovery of "aunts and cousins with wonderful stories to tell. It has also made me feel so proud to be Jewish," he says. "As a kid, I never experienced overt anti-Semitism but my family's way was not to let people know we were Jewish until it seemed OK to do so."

Finances permitting, Douglas and Steinman hope to complete the film by April. "My ultimate fantasy is to have a family reunion where the relatives from Russia, Israel and America are all in one place and we all watch the film together," says Douglas. For now, "I feel exceedingly fulfilled. There are no more unanswered questions or unresolved good-byes. There's a closure I'm grateful to have."

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