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SPECTATOR

Family Doc Unlocks Doors

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Contributing Writer

Growing up in Syracuse, N.Y., Eileen Douglas lived for the moments she could climb into her grandfather's lap and find the pennies he brought — special for her. He faithfully visited his grandchildren every day after leaving his work as a butcher. Yet he never really spoke 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," Douglas recalled. "My grandfather died suddenly when I was 12 and I never got to say goodbye."

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," Douglas recalled. "I was shocked ... they shattered my identity. How could it be that I did not know my own story?"

A broadcast journalist who spent her life telling the stories of other people, Douglas decided to apply years of professional expertise



Eileen Douglas on the block in Kovno where her grandfather lived. Photo courtesy Eileen Douglas

to her own personal history. The resulting 2004 documentary, "My Grandfather's House," records a poignant family saga that many Jews will find familiar.

Written and narrated by Douglas, the film, which screens Monday at the Skirball Center, unfolds like a personal diary as it chronicles the events that lead to the filmmaker's trip to Kovno. Accompanied by her adult daughter, Douglas searches for the

home where her grandfather lived. Finally, as a woman in her 50s, she learns how her grandfather escaped conscription into the czar's army by fleeing to America. She also discovers how other relatives got herded into the Kovno Ghetto.

Douglas Steinman, who co-produced "My Grandfather House," views his partner's quest as "reversing the breaking of the glass, of restoring a family to one piece."

The detective work involved in making the film put Douglas in touch with more than 30 family members in North America, Russia and Israel that she either never met or had not heard from in years.

"I've got my family back," she said, "both living and dead."

"My Grandfather's House" screens Sept. 19, 7 p.m., Skirball Cultural Center, 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd. \$5 (general). For information, call (818) 771-5554 or visit www.jewishgen.org/jgsla. ■