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A Closer Reading of Roman Vishniac



Photographs by Roman Vishniac, from Mara Vishniac Kohn/International Center of Photography

“JEWISH MAN LOOKING THROUGH IRON DOOR, WARSAW, CIRCA 1935–38” Paired with the picture of the little boy at the right, this was one of Vishniac’s most famous shots. “BOY PLAYING, LODZ, CIRCA 1935–38” New evidence suggests that the two pictures are not connected.

By ALANA NEWHOUSE
Published: March 29, 2010

In 1983, Farrar, Straus & Giroux published a book of pictures of prewar Eastern European Jewish life by the photographer Roman Vishniac. Titled “A Vanished World,” the book evoked what many have come to imagine as life in the shtetl: elegiac images of small cities and provincial villages, their hunchback rabbis walking cobblestone streets, Talmud prodigies studying by candlelight, men whispering in courtyards — a vision lighted with authenticity and charged with nostalgia. Through this and other books, Vishniac’s body of work has come to be thought of as the last photographic record of a universe on the cusp of being comprehensively and cataclysmically destroyed. His pictures were used in so many influential books about Jewish life before the Holocaust — as illustrations for books by [Isaac Bashevis Singer](#) and Irving Howe and later serving as what [Janusz Kaminski](#) called the “guiding force” for his Oscar-winning cinematography of “Schindler’s List” — that Vishniac, who died in 1990, has

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virtually become, in the words of [Leon Wieseltier](#), the literary editor of The New Republic, “the official mortuary photographer of Eastern European Jewry.”

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[A New Examination of Roman Vishniac](#)

If you were to pick up a copy of “A Vanished World” in a contemporary American Jewish home and turn to the final spread, you would see two photographs. On the left, a man peers anxiously from a window in a metal door; on the right, a boy of no more than 3 or 4 points a small finger across his eyelid. The caption reads: “The father is hiding from the Endecy (members of the National Democratic Party). His son signals him that they are approaching. Warsaw, 1938.” An index at the front of the book, which features additional commentary on the photographs, fills out the frightening tale: “The *pogromshchiki*” — a lynch mob — “are coming. But the iron door was no protection.”

It is a poignant scene — haunting and full of narrative pathos. But it almost certainly did not happen. The pictures in that spread, it turns out, came from different rolls of film, probably shot in different towns — which means, of course, that its characters were presumably not only unrelated but also most likely did not even know each other.

Vishniac’s archive is being acquired by the [International Center of Photography](#). The collection — which includes thousands of negatives taken during forays into Jewish communities in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Romania and Czechoslovakia, along with reams of correspondence and personal documents — will become part of an elite canon, one of only a handful of archives housed at the museum and research center in Midtown Manhattan. Others belong to [Cornell Capa](#), the institution’s founder; his brother, [Robert Capa](#); and Arthur Fellig, a.k.a. [Weegee](#), the 20th-century street photographer. The center will be sharing the Vishniac archive with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

But the center will not only be acquiring Vishniac’s entire life’s work; as the father-son spread suggests, it is also inheriting a fascinating set of ambiguities and unanswered questions — all unexpectedly uncovered by a 34-year-old curator named Maya Benton. As Benton has discovered, Vishniac released, over the course of a five-decade career, an uncommonly small selection of his work for public consumption — so small, in fact, that it did not include many of his finest images, artistically speaking. Instead the chosen images were, in the main, those that advanced an impression of the shtetl as populated largely by poor, pious, embattled Jews — an impression aided by cropping and fabulist captioning done by his own hand. Vishniac’s curating job was so comprehensive that it would not only limit the appreciation of his talents but also skew the popular conception of pre-Holocaust Jewish life in Europe.

Sometime in 1989, Maya Benton, then a 14-year-old living in Los Angeles, had an epiphany. The daughter of a single mother, a psychoanalyst who as a child lived for years in a displaced-persons camp in Germany, Benton grew up in a household that was a relative rarity in American Jewish life: Yiddish speaking but cosmopolitan, well off and not Orthodox. As she lolled on the couch of her grandparents’ home, Benton started sneaking chocolate rum balls from a sterling silver box — one of two family heirlooms from, she had assumed, Novogrudek, the historic Jewish town in what is now Belarus from which her grandparents hailed before the Holocaust. As Benton stared at the weighty birthright from the *alte heym*, or Old World, bafflement struck: she knew, from an interview she conducted with her family members for a history class, that they fled the German invasion, hid in nearby forests, were interned at multiple labor camps and

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trekked through miles of often snow-covered forest in the east. How on earth, Benton thought as she considered the ornate container, did they manage to schlep this through Siberia? The confusion grew when she considered the second heirloom: a full set of Rosenthal china.

As it turned out, the box and the china had not been in the family for generations, nor were they from Novogrudek. As Maya's grandmother, Tonia Benton, explained that afternoon, they were among the things that she and her husband bought from impoverished Germans after the war; bartering the chocolate and cigarettes they received in the displaced-persons camp, they were able to buy valuable items that could be used as currency to get the family to America. That day, Maya Benton says, she learned a lesson about people's need for, and uses of, mythical narratives.

It was a lesson she would be reminded of 11 years later as a graduate student in art history and museum education at [Harvard](#), when she was assigned to research a book of photography. Her mind alighted on Roman Vishniac, whose books had been familiar — almost familial — objects of her childhood, filled as they were with the masterful, plaintive portraits for which he was known in Holocaust-survivor circles and beyond. Plus, she said, she thought she was already pretty conversant in his life story.

Roman Vishniac was born in Russia in 1897 to wealthy, secular Jewish parents. His father, one of Russia's leading manufacturers of umbrellas and parasols, and his mother, the daughter of a diamond dealer, raised him in Moscow. The family lived comfortably, especially in contrast to other Jews, many of whom roamed the city looking for work. "They had a special kind of face, those people, a special kind of whisper and a special kind of footstep," Vishniac told a writer for *The New Yorker* in 1955. "They were like hunted animals."

In 1918, prompted by post-revolution turmoil, Vishniac's family decided to make their way west. Vishniac at first stayed behind to continue his university studies in biology. But he eventually joined his family in Berlin. In the 1930s, as [Hitler's](#) anti-Semitic campaign began in earnest, Vishniac, armed with both a Leica and a Rolleiflex, set out east to document the world from which his people had fled. It is unknown when exactly Vishniac traveled to the Pale of Settlement, but his trips most likely began around 1935 and ended in 1938, a period marked by the increasing poverty of Jewish communities and culminating in the German takeover of Poland and its three million Jews. Vishniac later claimed that he took 16,000 photographs — many of them, he added, with a hidden camera used to elude the local police and Orthodox authorities who forbade photography as the creation of "graven images." He said he was arrested multiple times.

"My friends assured me that Hitler's talk was sheer bombast," Vishniac said in 1955. "But I replied that he would not hesitate to exterminate those people when he got around to it. And who was there to defend them? I knew I could be of little help, but I decided that, as a Jew, it was my duty to my ancestors, who grew up among the very people who were being threatened, to preserve — in pictures, at least — a world that might soon cease to exist."

This was the accepted biography of Vishniac, told and retold in his own books and others, as well as in numerous newspaper, magazine and radio interviews. But in casting around for academic research, Benton came up short. "In my Yiddish-speaking, secular environment, Vishniac was essential," she says. "And yet I could find no scholarship." Benton decided to begin researching Vishniac's story herself, from the beginning — starting with a book she had never seen before: his 1947 collection, "Polish Jews: A Pictorial Record," the first published book of Vishniac's Eastern European photography.

Considering it for the first time, Benton immediately noticed a tottering imbalance: an overabundance of pictures conveying piety and poverty, especially shots of boys in *cheder*, or religious school. “Rabbi, rabbi, rabbi, followed by — my favorite — the sad shopkeepers with nothing to sell, then *cheder, cheder, cheder*, followed by one *alte frau* in a babushka,” Benton trilled, prattling off an inventory of the book’s images in a recent conversation in the Upper West Side apartment she shares with her husband, Daniel Reich, a lawyer. “I thought to myself, This is a very odd publication. You would think that right after the Holocaust they would choose the images that readers could identify with. But these images are most *other*.”

They were also, when taken as a whole, misleading. Jewish life in Eastern Europe, especially in the interwar years, was roiling and diverse. All kinds of people — secular and religious, urban and rural, wealthy and poor — consorted freely with one another in all aspects of what many of us would consider the pillars of a modern society: a lively and contentious political culture, a theater scene that rivaled those of most major European cities, a literary tradition comprising not only Yiddish and Hebrew work but also European fiction and a thriving economic trade that successfully linked cities and countrysides (one of Vishniac’s unpublished pictures shows a store in a tiny Eastern European town selling oranges imported from Palestine). Even Hasidic life, so easily caricatured as provincial and isolated, was nothing of the sort: yeshivas, like today’s universities, often attracted students from all over Eastern and Central Europe. The concentration of poverty and piety in Vishniac’s pictures in “Polish Jews” created a distinct impression of timelessness, an unchanging, “authentic society” captured in amber.

Benton soon encountered something else that was peculiar. Vishniac claimed that he had gone east on an “assignment from God,” as he put it in one interview, implying that his work was undertaken without financial support or an institutional mandate. But in a biographical note in a book published after Vishniac’s death, Benton came upon a sentence that suggested otherwise: “The Joint Distribution Committee representatives in Berlin asked Roman, who was known for his photographic work, to travel to Eastern Europe, in order to document daily life in the shtetls.” The Joint Distribution Committee was founded in 1914 as a relief organization primarily committed to helping Jews around the world who were threatened by poverty, natural disaster or persecution. It was also, not incidentally, the same organization that fed Benton’s grandmother and mother in the displaced-persons camp after the war.

Within weeks of this discovery, Benton was on a train to the committee’s headquarters in New York to investigate Vishniac’s relationship with the organization. What she found in its files shocked her. Vishniac had indeed been sent on a very specific assignment: to document not the fullness of Eastern European Jewish life but its most needy, vulnerable corners for a fund-raising project. It was a noble cause, to be sure, but very different from how he later represented his work. The committee had contracts, receipts and telegrams. Benton later heard that the organization may even have produced a donation tin decorated with one of Vishniac’s most famous shots, “Sara, the Only Flowers of Her Youth.” Recognized for excellence at an international photographic exhibition in Lucerne, Switzerland, in 1952, the picture showed a heart-rending image of an unhappy-looking young girl in bed, with a smattering of flowers painted on the dingy wall behind her. Vishniac explained that its subject, Sara, had to spend the winter in bed because her parents did not have money to buy her shoes. “The picture of the world I had recreated in my mind — the world my whole family came from — was actually from a commission to document only the poor and the Orthodox,” Benton said.

In California for winter break not long after making these discoveries, Benton phoned Vishniac's daughter and the executor of his estate, Mara Vishniac Kohn, who was 74 and living in Santa Barbara. Though skeptical of scholars who she feared would pigeonhole her father's work as kitsch, Vishniac Kohn, whom I met not long ago, was moved by the combination of Benton's youthful energy, scholarly ambition and Yiddish kindredness. The day they met, Vishniac Kohn offered to drive with Benton to the mini-storage facility in Goleta, Calif., where she revealed a collection that included hundreds of her father's negatives, as well as a lifetime of correspondence. As Benton started sifting through the materials, it dawned on her that she was looking at work that had not been seen — including negatives of a young girl with a recognizable smudge on her cheek. It was Sara from "The Only Flowers of Her Youth," still poor but smiling and — lo and behold — wearing shoes.

"I stood there," Benton said, "and thought, This is the real photographic record of Eastern European Jewish life."

Shtetl is the Yiddish word for "town." In the taxonomy of Eastern European Jewish habitats, it fell somewhere between a *shtot* (a city) and a *dorf* (a village). According to the Holocaust scholar Yehuda Bauer, about 30 to 40 percent of the three million Jews in Poland before the Holocaust lived in shtetls. Many other Jews lived in large, cosmopolitan cities like Warsaw and Vilna and Krakow. And yet in the popular imagination, the word *shtetl* has become nearly synonymous with pre-Holocaust life — a romantic image characterized by homogeneity and quaintness. This sentimentalization — driven in part by secularized, often prosperous Jews troubled by the sense that their hard-earned modernity may have come at the price of tradition and authenticity — began as far back as the 19th century and traveled with Jews from the Pale of Settlement to the shores of America. At the start of the last century, Yiddish newspapers and plays in America treated the shtetl with both love and condescension — too close a memory not to feel homesick for, yet too obviously backward to reclaim.

But this delicate balance was upset by the Holocaust, which twisted ambivalent affection into paralytic grief. After the war, it became difficult to view prewar images as anything but a prelude to destruction — a backshadowing that distilled the complicated, multifaceted reality of prewar Jewish life into a two-dimensional shrine, one that deserved all the mournful appreciation that could be mustered. In January 1945, the rabbi and philosopher [Abraham Joshua Heschel](#) gave a seminal speech at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York about prewar Eastern European Jewish life. It was not a factual exploration of this historical subject but rather a lyrical interpretation of what Heschel claimed was the essence of Eastern European Jewish life: its soul. "Heschel argued that though the Eastern European Jews were destroyed, their spiritual legacy lives on," explains Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a professor of performance studies at New York University who has done scholarship on Eastern European Jewish culture. "It is indestructible, unassailable — something the Germans could never get their hands on." In fact, she added, the physical destruction was barely mentioned. At the end of Heschel's speech, the audience broke into a spontaneous recitation of the Kaddish, or mourner's prayer.

As audience members filed out of the hall, they may have seen an array of prewar photographs by Vishniac, which were on display at the institute at the time. And so it is most likely no accident that an edited version of Heschel's speech would be used two years later as the foreword to a book conceived that year: Vishniac's "Polish Jews," published by Schocken. The lack of detail in Vishniac's captions made his pictures the perfect partner for Heschel's argument. Both men set aside the earthbound conventions of factual detail in service of a more profound takeaway message, one that reached

beyond history to elegy. Together they offered a representation of this universe radically slanted toward the poetic — “a life abjectly poor in its material condition, and in its spiritual condition, exaltedly religious,” in the words of the preface to “Polish Jews.”

Shortly after the book was published, Vishniac returned in earnest to his first love: photomicroscopy, the photography of specimens as seen through a microscope. A pioneer in the field, Vishniac was known for his expertise in capturing images of live subjects. In 1955, *The New Yorker* published an extensive two-part profile of Vishniac, focused primarily on his scientific work. “No one who hasn’t tried it can comprehend the careful planning, the diabolical perseverance and the incredible skill it takes to obtain the results he gets,” the magazine quoted Philippe Halsman, former president of the American Society of Magazine Photographers, as saying of Vishniac. “The man is a special kind of genius.” The profile also described Vishniac’s domestic life. After arriving in New York in 1940, he and his family settled on the Upper West Side. Six years later the couple divorced, and Vishniac remarried. The story mentioned Vishniac’s pride in his son, Wolf, a Ph.D. in microbiology and a professor at Yale, whose accomplishments were detailed in almost a full paragraph. The section ended with only a brief mention of the photographer’s other child: “Vishniac’s daughter, Mara, seems to have been less stirred by the world as seen through a microscope; she is married to a mechanical engineer named Otto Schiff, has two children and lives in Ohio.”

Indeed by that time Mara Vishniac was fairly uninvested in her father’s work. For starters, her parents’ divorce had not been easy on her. “My mother lived on 72nd Street, and my father lived on 81st,” she recalled recently. “I must have paced a groove on Broadway between those streets.” Though she avoids discussion of her father’s flaws, he was, by the accounts of many others, a difficult man. In addition to his charisma and obvious talents, he was also known to possess what Howard Greenberg, Vishniac’s longtime gallerist, identified as “one of the bigger egos on the planet.”

But Mara Vishniac’s involvement with her father’s work would eventually be forced upon her under tragic circumstances. In 1973, Wolf Vishniac, on an expedition to Antarctica, fell off a 500-foot cliff and died. Aside from the pain of losing her only sibling, Mara was left with responsibility for the family’s legacy. “It suddenly hit me, I’m going to have to deal with this,” she said. “It was an overwhelming shock. There were literally thousands of items that I knew nothing about.” In addition to his scientific work and Eastern European photography, her father amassed numerous collections: Far Eastern art, coins, textiles and more than 600 rare books. By the time Benton found her in January 2001, Mara had divorced her first husband, remarried (to Walter Kohn, a 1998 Nobel laureate in chemistry) and moved to Santa Barbara — all the while heroically caring for her father’s vast, unwieldy inheritance.

As Benton has learned, Vishniac’s inheritance is large, with many parts undated or randomly annotated. Strips of negatives have been cut into individual shots, which has made it grueling to reconstruct rolls.

But the collection is also a gold mine. Not only do the unpublished photographs offer a kaleidoscopic view of prewar Jewish life — women in modern dress and men without hats, religious people comfortably consorting with secular people, shopkeepers with plenty of wares — they also convey a fuller sense of the photographer’s artistic abilities. The result is surprising: Vishniac, who often strained to present himself as superior to others, in fact never showed the world some of his best work. He shot in a variety of styles, not simply the plaintive perspective for which he became famous. Benton cites a picture of two houses in a Carpathian mountain town. “No one would look at this and think Vishniac,” she said. “There’s a compositional acuity about this photo that is just

tremendous — and shocking.” As far as Benton is concerned, she has stumbled upon an artist who deserves to be in the canon of great 20th-century social-documentary photography, on par with [Henri Cartier-Bresson](#), [Walker Evans](#) and Dorothea Lange.

But not all of her discoveries have been flattering. Benton has also found evidence that Vishniac did not take nearly as many pictures as he claimed, that certain photographs may have been staged and, most difficult for some of Vishniac’s ardent fans, that he most likely did not use a hidden camera. Taking a loupe to certain pictures, Benton noticed, in the eyes of the subjects, the reflection of Vishniac standing before them with a camera over his face. Other claims have required only common sense to refute, like Vishniac’s assertion that he took moving footage with a camera hidden in a valise. “Have you seen film cameras from that time?” Benton notes. “They’re not exactly camcorders you can just stick in your purse.”

The most extensive falsification, however, is in the captions, the bulk of which Vishniac wrote after the war. Many include incredibly vivid details — too vivid — as well as dramatic narratives that either could not have happened or could not have happened the way Vishniac presented them. Even the selection of what Vishniac chose to publish now seems, broadly, like a distortion. “It’s as if we took pictures of homeless people in New York and then the city fell into the sea, and 50 years from now people looked at those photos and thought, That’s what New York was,” Benton says.

When Benton raised the subject of the falsifications, Vishniac Kohn expressed little surprise. Her father always spun tales, she told me, particularly about his own experiences. Still, Vishniac Kohn had not seen proof that her father’s penchant for storytelling extended to his work. And yet, rather than suppressing the coming revision, she encouraged Benton to press on, to construct as accurate an understanding of her father’s archive as possible — no matter the consequences. She knew that Benton was approaching her father’s work with the utmost respect. “The first time Maya came to work here,” Vishniac Kohn says, “she found a negative that was partially destroyed. She walked out the door into the garden and cried. It told me everything I needed to know.”

Benton also began talking with Vishniac Kohn about the archive’s future. It seemed to make the most sense to offer it to the International Center of Photography, which already had a substantial number of Vishniac prints — the result of his long friendship with the institution’s founder, Cornell Capa.

The two men met in 1966 — at which point, Capa later told *The New York Times*, he “discovered how undiscovered” Vishniac was. Capa, who saw Vishniac’s work in the context of his own philosophy of social-action photography, set out to rectify this situation. In 1971, Capa curated an exhibit of Vishniac’s work at the [Jewish Museum](#), and a year later he included Vishniac in a volume he edited of work by leading “concerned photographers,” including Bruce Davidson, Hiroshi Hamaya, Donald McCullin and W. Eugene Smith.

Capa’s “rediscovery” of Vishniac could not have come at a more propitious moment. Two years before the two men met, the atomized Jewish nostalgia for Eastern Europe that was percolating for decades reached a culmination of sorts in “*Fiddler on the Roof*,” the wildly successful musical loosely based on a series of short stories by Sholem Aleichem. Over the course of its eight-year run on Broadway, the play solidified the shtetl as an icon in the popular imagination. In 1974, a sales executive at Schocken Books penned a memo supporting a proposal for a new book of Eastern European Jewish photography with Vishniac’s work as its core. He couldn’t have been clearer about his motivation: “With a good text . . . we would have an illustrated book of social history that would also

appeal to a popular Jewish nostalgia market.”

A few years later, Michael di Capua, an editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux who worked on Isaac Bashevis Singer’s “Day of Pleasure”— which was illustrated with 17 Vishniac photographs — began editing a new volume of Vishniac’s work, under the title “A Vanished World.” But by the 1980s, the attention Vishniac received in the wake of his friendship with Capa had enhanced the photographer’s natural tendency toward self-aggrandizement. When Vishniac gave di Capua his captions, a red light went off. “In the course of many hours working with Vishniac, it began to seem that he had become a mythmaker of his past — telling stories that were better than what really happened,” di Capua told me in January. Since it was assumed that many of the subjects in the pictures had been murdered, di Capua could no more prove that the captions were false than Vishniac could prove they were true. So di Capua came up with a solution: he would feature Vishniac’s fantastical commentary in an isolated index at the front of the book. “If I could keep that baloney away from the pictures, at least that would solve something,” di Capua said. “I do believe I managed to get the worst of it out.”

When I spoke to di Capua, now an award-winning publisher with his own imprint at Scholastic Books, he sounded almost relieved to hear of Benton’s discoveries. As we were about to get off the phone, he reached for his copy of “A Vanished World” and opened it. “I’m cringing that I even let this go in,” he said, referring to a photograph of a man carrying a Torah. The caption asserts that the scroll was needed by a family sitting shiva. “Well,” di Capua said, “it could be true, but really, who the hell knows?”

Late one Sunday night in January, I met Benton at the International Center of Photography. She desperately wanted me to see a set of vintage Vishniac prints recently lent to her by a man whose father worked at the Joint Distribution Committee in the 1930s and ’40s. As she laid them out on a conference table, with the lights of the city flickering behind her, I saw everything in them that she saw. They were luminous and exciting: a shot of a young boy dunking his hand in a bucket overflowing with herring; a female weaver with a modern bob held back with a glowing bobby pin; a pastry-filled bakery that could easily be mistaken for one of Eugène Atget’s Paris scenes. At the far end of the table, I recognized something — or, rather, someone. It was the “father” from the father-and-son spread at the end of “A Vanished World,” here rescued from the strictures of the crop in which I first encountered him. In the fullness of this original shot, he appeared not as a man crazed with fear but as one simply looking curiously out onto the world beyond the metal door.

For some, the repositioned Vishniac archive will, when revealed to the public in an exhibition in 2012, be a litmus test of a sort: embracing it requires the abrogation of nostalgia, but in return it offers engagement with the true past and the enrichment this brings to life in the present. “Jews should be absolutely elated — and not at all surprised — to discover that Jewish life in Poland was like human society anywhere, in that it contained all the human types and all of the human experiences,” Wieseltier, the New Republic literary editor, says. “Will they resent being deprived by the full historical record of the holy beards and the mystical sparks, or will they have the wisdom to say, ‘Good, they were blessedly like all of us’?”

For Benton, too, the remaining mystery is not about Vishniac but about his audience — then and now. “What’s interesting to me is less Vishniac’s tendency toward mythology than the Jewish need to have those mythologies and the attachment they have to them, even in the face of evidence to the contrary,” Benton says. “Why are people so attached to the other story? The real story is so much better.”

Alana Newhouse is the editor in chief of [Tablet magazine](#), an online publication devoted to Jewish life and culture. This is her first article for *The Times Magazine*.

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