

CHASING PORTRAITS

A film by Elizabeth Rynecki

77 min / English, Polish / 2018 / Color / USA / Digital



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CHASING PORTRAITS

Produced, Directed, and Written by Elizabeth Rynecki

OFFICIAL WEBSITE

<http://www.ChasingPortraits.org>

SOCIAL MEDIA WEBSITES

<https://www.facebook.com/MosheRynecki>

<https://twitter.com/erynecki>

<https://www.instagram.com/erynecki>

Download CHASING PORTRAITS high resolution stills at: <http://bit.ly/2j0tYXQ>

LOGLINE:

One man's art. One woman's unexpected path to healing.

An American woman's emotional quest to find the paintings of her Polish-Jewish great-grandfather, lost during World War II.

Filmography: Elizabeth Rynecki is a first time filmmaker. She worked quite closely with a team of people (see below) with a great deal of experience in the documentary film world.

SHORT SYNOPSIS:

Moshe Rynecki (1881-1943) was a prolific Warsaw based artist who painted scenes of the Polish-Jewish community in the interwar years. Sadly, he was murdered at Majdanek. After the Holocaust, Moshe's wife was only able to recover a small fraction of his work, but unbeknownst to the family, many other pieces survived. For more than a decade his great-granddaughter, Elizabeth Rynecki, has searched for the missing art, with remarkable and unexpected success. Spanning three generations, this documentary is a deeply moving narrative of the richness of one man's art, the devastation of war, and one woman's unexpected path to healing.

LONG SYNOPSIS:

Moshe Rynecki's body of work reached close to eight hundred paintings and sculptures before his life came to a tragic end. Decades later, his great-granddaughter Elizabeth sought to rediscover his legacy, setting out on a journey to find what had been lost but never forgotten...

The everyday lives of the Polish-Jewish community depicted in Moshe Rynecki's paintings were a constant presence in Elizabeth Rynecki's home when she was growing up. But the art grew from familiar to extraordinary in her eyes after she discovered journals detailing the losses her family had endured

during the Holocaust... including most of Moshe's paintings. Knowing that her family had only managed to save a small fraction of Moshe's works, and that many more pieces might still be out there somewhere, Elizabeth set out to find them.

Before Moshe was deported to the Warsaw Ghetto, he entrusted his work to friends for safekeeping. After he was killed in the Majdanek concentration camp, the art was dispersed all over the world. With the help of historians, curators, and admirers of Moshe's work, Elizabeth began the incredible and difficult task of rebuilding his collection.

Spanning three decades of Elizabeth's life and three generations of her family, this compelling documentary is a deeply moving narrative of the richness of one man's art, the devastation of war, and one woman's unexpected path to healing.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

[Note: excerpted from the book *Chasing Portraits: A Great-Granddaughter's Quest for Her Lost Art Legacy* by Elizabeth Rynecki. Copyright © 2016, published by New American Library.]

I was born in San Francisco on a summer day in 1969, just over 25 years after my great-grandfather perished in the Holocaust. My life began in a modern hospital with the prospect of a war-free childhood. Until I was forty-five I had never visited Poland. I tell you this to emphasize the fact that I am not a Holocaust survivor; I cannot bear witness to a past I did not personally experience and which seemed distant and tangential to me. I am, however, distinctly connected to the history of the Holocaust through the legacy of my great-grandfather's art.

I grew up with many of my great grandfather's paintings on the walls of my childhood home. Moshe Rynecki (1881-1943) painted scenes detailing the everyday lives of Polish Jews in the 1920's and 1930's. His depictions of woodworkers, water carriers, women sewing, men studying the Talmud, even street performers, were the background of my childhood.

Moshe was a prolific artist whose work was exhibited in Warsaw and featured in a number of newspapers (both Polish and Yiddish) in his lifetime. Although he was known in Warsaw before the Second World War, he was not particularly famous.

Moshe was never supposed to be an artist. He had been born into a religious Jewish family in Poland, and painting was not on the short list of acceptable career options. My great-grandfather didn't care. He loved to draw and paint, even if it got him in trouble, which it sometimes did.

Moshe eventually grew up and left home. He lived in Warsaw, in a non-Jewish part of town and led a surprisingly assimilated life. He and his wife, Perla Rynecki (née Mittelsbach), ran an art supply store. To be fair, Perla managed the store and family life, while Moshe went out into the world to paint. He painted constantly. By the time the Nazis invaded Poland on the first of September in 1939, he had painted more than eight hundred artworks and sculpted a number of pieces as well.

Moshe continued to paint after the Nazi invasion, but as conditions for Jews worsened, he became worried about protecting his body of work. At that point my great-grandfather made the fateful decision to divide his paintings and sculptures into bundles and to ask friends and acquaintances to hide them. To those who agreed, he promised he would return after the war ended (whenever that might happen) to retrieve the bundles. Soon after, Moshe willingly went to live in the Warsaw Ghetto. His son, my Grandpa George, who lived with false papers in a Polish neighborhood in Warsaw, begged his father not to go. And when conditions in the Ghetto worsened, George offered to find a way to get Moshe out. But Moshe didn't want to leave—he wanted to “be with his people”—and whatever happened to them would happen to him. “If it's death, so be it,” he said the last time he ever spoke with his son.

Though Moshe was ultimately deported and murdered by the Nazis, his wife, Perla, managed to survive the Holocaust. After the war she did her best amidst the near total devastation in and around Warsaw to recover her husband's art. Ultimately, she found only 120 paintings, stashed in a cellar in the Praga district of the city. Grandpa George wrote in his reminiscences of the war years that his mother finding them was a “miracle.” For more than fifty years, my family assumed all that remained of my great-grandfather's collection was the work Perla recovered.

In 1999 I built a website dedicated to sharing my great-grandfather's art. At first not much happened, but over time, with the help of information I found posted on the internet, friendships I made on social media, and the kindness of strangers, I began to find clues that more of my great-grandfather's paintings had survived the Second World War. Sometimes I discovered accession numbers of works held by museums, but no other information; other times I found photos of the works but no clues as to the location or holders of the originals; and sometimes I lucked out and private collectors with my great-grandfather's paintings contacted me. Of course, not everyone who had my great-grandfather's artwork wanted to speak to me. Some were afraid of the great-granddaughter asking for pictures and

information about how the paintings were obtained. Others were more generous, sending photographs of Rynecki paintings in their possession and even allowing me into their homes to see the works and interview them. As my project gained momentum, and I spoke to more people about my search, I heard from others what I'd always felt personally: not only was the story amazing, but the art was beautiful.

There would be no story to tell if the Holocaust had not happened, but this story is less about the Shoah and more about my great-grandfather's art and what happened to his body of work in the aftermath of the Second World War. If the paintings could speak, it would be their story to tell. But they cannot, and so I wrote this book to share my story of discovery.

I am uniquely situated to tell the Chasing Portraits story. I grew up surrounded by my great-grandfather's paintings. I studied his art and learned to discern his ethnographic and impressionistic documentation style of Polish-Jewish life from a young age. For more than fifteen years I have researched and written about Moshe's work to make the archival information, history, and narrative connections come alive.

Over the past several years, there has been a lot of publicity about lost and looted art from the Nazi era. While much of the recent interest centers around the astronomical value of famous artworks both lost and found, there are much greater numbers of lesser known pieces that vanished during the war, and each has its own tale to tell. Chasing Portraits seeks to tell one of those stories in order to share the rich history in the scenes my great-grandfather painted as well as what the paintings themselves represent as survivors.

PARTIAL NEWS COVERAGE

[For complete coverage, please visit: <http://rynecki.org/in-the-news/>]

[A Crusade to Recover Jewish Art Lost During the Holocaust](#) - (*Haaretz*, November 2018)

[Family Looks for Lost Art in 'Chasing Portraits'](#) - (*St. Louis Jewish Light*, November 2018)

[Free Screening: 'Chasing Portraits' Paints a Moving Story](#) - *OnLine Athens*

[6 First Person Docs to See at the 30th Boston Jewish Film Festival](#) - WBUR November 2018

[SLIFF Spotlight: Chasing Portraits](#) - The Cinema St. Louis Blog

[A Conversation With 'Chasing Portraits' Director Elizabeth Rynecki](#)

(Jewish Film Institute on Medium, July 2018)

[Searching for Her Great-Grandfather's Lost Pictures](#) (*The Jewish Chronicle*, May 2018)

[A 'Moral Imperative' to Recover a Lost Art Legacy](#) (*New York Times*, August 2016)

['Chasing Portraits' recounts journey into lost world](#) (*J, the Jewish news weekly of Northern California*, September 2016)

[A Search From the Heart](#) (*The Australian Jewish News*, August 2015) (PDF)

[Lost and Found](#) is the Arts feature about the Chasing Portraits project. (*Hadassah Magazine*, April/May 2015)

[A Lost World, on Canvas: Oakland Woman Reclaims Her Great-Grandfather's Legacy](#) (*J, the Jewish news weekly of Northern California*, January 2015) (PDF)

[The Quest for Paintings from a Lost Jewish World](#) (*Times of Israel*, January 2014) (PDF)

[Artworks Lost in Nazi Era at Heart of Hunt](#) (*San Francisco Chronicle*, January 2014) (PDF)

[Search for Lost Pre-WWII Art Bears Fruit in Toronto](#) (*Canadian Jewish News*, October 2013) (PDF)

Radio and Podcast Interviews

[Writer's Bone Interview](#) (November 2018)

[CapRadio Reads](#) (November 2017)

[Deerfield Public Library Podcast](#) (October 2017)

[The Jewish Hour with Rabbi Finman](#) (May 2017)

[KERA's Think interview with Krys Boyd](#) (March 2017)

Blog Interviews and Profiles

[Elizabeth Rynecki on Chasing Portraits of pre-Holocaust Jewish Poland](#) (*Laurel Zuckerman's Paris Weblog*, October 2016)

[Q&A with Elizabeth Rynecki](#) (*Book Q&As with Deborah Kalb*, September 2016)

PRAISE FOR CHASING PORTRAITS [the book]



“A page-turning personal history of Rynecki’s search for her great-grandfather’s legacy....A wonderful story beautifully told. Rynecki’s yearslong search, successes, frustrations, and failures are a study in perseverance.”

– **Kirkus starred review**

“*Chasing Portraits* is a miraculous story of heartbreaking loss and spine-tingling discovery. In her search for her great-grandfather’s paintings, Elizabeth Rynecki becomes a genealogist, an art historian, a detective, a crusader for justice, and a time traveler, peering through windows and into paintings to unearth her family’s past. Her memoir will break your heart, but it will have you cheering wildly too because every new discovery is a triumph of art and love over hatred and loss.”

– **Amy Stewart, *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *The Drunken Botanist***

“A heartfelt, vivid account of a hunt for lost masterpieces painted by a great-grandfather that prove to be unforgettable relics of a rich world swept away by war, taking readers on a lusciously detailed international journey that reminds us that the search for missing paintings is, at heart, a search for missing history.”

– **Anne-Marie O’Connor, National Bestselling Author of *The Lady in Gold***

“Elizabeth Rynecki’s *Chasing Portraits* is part of a gathering wave of stories by the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of Holocaust survivors and Holocaust victims—stories that accept the burden of carrying this legacy forward, with all the anguish, the unanswered questions, and the unexpected joy of recognition this entails. With devotion and determination, Rynecki movingly demonstrates that, even after such unimaginable loss, even seventy years later, fragments of individual lives—and so the untold stories of individuals—can still be recovered . . . if only you keep searching.”

– **Glenn Kurtz, Author of *Three Minutes in Poland***

Q&A with Director Elizabeth Rynecki

[Note: These questions were originally posed by [Laurel Zuckerman](#) and [Deborah Kalb](#) for interviews on their blogs when the book was released in 2016.]

(1) You wrote in your book, "In 1999 I built a website dedicated to sharing my great-grandfather's art." How much did you know about his art to begin with, and how did your original project turn into this book and a companion documentary film?

I grew up with a lot of my great-grandfather's paintings hanging in both my parents' and grandparents' homes. It was always around me, in the background even if I wasn't really paying attention.

I understood from an early age it was the work of my great-grandfather, Moshe Rynecki, who perished in the Holocaust, but that's about all I knew--my parents and grandparents didn't often talk about the war, and even less about what came before.

It wasn't until I read my Grandpa George's memoir (discovered in 1992, after his funeral), that I learned much about Moshe himself. Even then, I didn't really get a good perspective on his life and work until I began digging for more information.

In late 1998 my Dad proposed we build a website to showcase my great-grandfather's art. His thinking was this: we have the art in our home, very few people see it every year, and putting it online would make it more accessible to people around the world.

In retrospect, it was a pretty novel idea. While most museums had something of an online presence in the late '90s, finding private collectors and their collections online was exceedingly rare.

It was hugely serendipitous; as people saw the site, they started contacting me and telling me about paintings they had or had seen. It became clear that many of Moshe's works had survived the war.

Several years later, as YouTube started to become a household name, making a video for our website seemed like a good idea. But I didn't know what to put into a video nor how to actually make a short film.

I sought advice from some documentary filmmakers that I knew because our sons went to the same preschool. When I described my story and ambitions they encouraged me to interview my Dad so I'd have "footage in the can."

That turned out to be excellent advice! The footage was used to create an initial nine-minute trailer for the film project, a proof-of-concept piece I used to gain 501(c)3 non-profit status with the National Center for Jewish Film, and used to generate early funding for the film.

The idea for the book came about because raising money for the documentary proved far more difficult than I ever imagined. While I wasn't ready to just shelve the documentary, Dad was getting older and historical ties to the past seemed to be fading. I wanted to capture those moments and connections before they were gone.

Writing a book seemed like a good solution – I could record the stories and fragments I knew and I didn't need a whole lot of money for travel, film crews, and equipment.

Given the book's publication date and the fact that the documentary was finished later means people will probably say the book came first. But from where I stand, the two will always be inseparable. Filming informed my writing and as I worked through my emotions and perspectives on the written page I began to realize what was important to capture in filmic moments. They really are companion pieces.

(2) Can you talk about the challenges of interviewing your own family – in particular your father - for information?

Memories are rarely linear. Recall is often fragmented and populated by snippets of information that are difficult to contextualize. If you talk to three different people who experienced the same events, you also get at least three stories of what happened. Sometimes they conflict only in the details; other times it is hard to understand what happened at all. In addition, early on I didn't always know enough about the war to properly comprehend my family's stories within the larger sweep of history. Finally, and most importantly for interviewing my family, is that I didn't want to cause unnecessary emotional suffering.

In a way, there is an impossible balancing act between finding out what happened, with the fear that the history could be lost forever, and feeling like you are hurting those closest to you. Consequently, I tried to feel my way around emotional boundaries. Even when they felt able to share, they didn't always remember the stories I was so desperate to extract. My Dad was not quite three when the war started and was nine when it ended. He just didn't remember everything I wanted to know. I have learned that, despite my best efforts, some of the history is likely lost forever, and that holes and gaps are part of the story.

(3) When you were only 16, your grandfather showed you some of the memoir he was writing, which you only rediscovered much later, after his death. Can you speak about what you learned from this experience, knowing what you know now?

I'm grateful grandpa George ignored me and continued to write. He was wise, and I was a foolish teenager who didn't appreciate the importance of his story. You can't go back in time and change things, but I strongly regret not being able to understand what he was trying to say.

What I have learned is that if someone has a story to tell, it is imperative to encourage them to write it down in whatever format they can, and worry later about how to clean it up. First person testimonies are the cornerstone of recorded history. These are the sorts of documents historians want and need to gain perspective of events. Rough drafts are notoriously difficult in and of themselves, and putting thoughts to paper can be emotionally difficult. But it's easy to go back and edit something that has been written down. If there's nothing on the page, then the details get lost over time, and ultimately both the story and the perspective vanish forever.

(4) You say that nothing prepares you for searching for lost art. Do you think a support group for family historians and claimants would be helpful? Have you reached out to others in a similar situation?

I've been very fortunate in my journey to find people who were willing to share their knowledge and experiences with me. Some were lawyers, law professors, or provenance researchers. A few of the people I met were working on similar projects. I wrote about them in this blog post: [Jewish Heirs Searching for Lost Family Art](http://rynecki.org/jewish-heirs-searching-for-lost-family-art/) [http://rynecki.org/jewish-heirs-searching-for-lost-family-art/] Knowing you're not alone, and leaning on those who can help – art historians, researchers, museum experts, and sometimes just friends who care about you – is enormously helpful. I also have an office full of books I turned to time and time again looking for inspiration and guidance. Many of those books are listed in the Selected Bibliography at the end of the book.

(5) What message do you have for museums and private collectors who hold your great grandfather's artwork today?

If you have my great-grandfather's work, or think a piece you have might be my great-grandfather's work, please contact me: Elizabeth@ChasingPortraits.org. I'd like those that have my great-grandfather's work to understand that the story is larger than the pieces in their possession. If they don't step forward, if they don't share at least photographs and what they know of the paintings' stories, we all lose a piece of our rich, shared cultural history. It's why I wrote at the front of my book, "Culture belongs to all of us." I wanted to gently remind those that have his work that while the work may be in their possession, it will last longer than any of us, and is conceptually part of a broader whole. So much of what Moshe painted is gone, that any given work may provide another perspective, a critical piece of insight into the art and the lost community it portrays.

(6) Why the title, Chasing Portraits, and what does it signify for you?

I first needed a title for the short trailer we made in 2009. I ultimately went with "Chasing Portraits," because I wanted to emphasize my role in pursuit of information and answers that always felt just out of reach.

As a genealogist, art historian, and detective, I often felt like I was running around trying to grab on to elusive bits of facts and history. Sometimes, people who knew the answers to my questions were already gone. Sometimes, those who could help me weren't interested in extending a helping hand.

The word "Portraits" also carried a variety of meanings for me including the actual portraits of individuals my great-grandfather painted, the portrait of a community he knew and loved, as well as the portrait of my great-grandfather gleaned from my understanding of his body of work.

The subtitle for the book, "A Great-Granddaughter's Quest for Her Lost Art Legacy," is meant to acknowledge that my goal was not to re-possess my great-grandfather's paintings, but to rescue his art legacy from obscurity.

CAST

Elizabeth Rynecki

Alex Rynecki

Carla Shapreau

Lecturer, Art & Cultural Property Law, U.C. Berkeley, School of Law

Moshe Wertheim

Private Collector

Tyler

(Elizabeth Rynecki's son)

Teresa Śmiechowska

Head of the Arts Department - Jewish Historical Institute

Paweł Śpiewak

Director - Jewish Historical Institute

Violetta Bachur

Art Conservator - Jewish Historical Institute

Piotr Rypson

Deputy Director for Research - The National Museum in Warsaw

Edward Napiórkowski

Private Collector

Renata Piątkowska

Curator of the Museum Collection - Polin

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

Advisor to the Director, Chief Curator, Core Exhibit - Polin

Alex Wertheim

Moshe Wertheim's Brother

Yehudit Shendar

Retired Deputy Director and Senior Art Curator, Yad Vashem

Elinor Kroitoru

Head of Asset Location and Heir Search Division - Hashava

Shula Eliaz - Distant Rynecki Cousin

The Filmmakers



ELIZABETH RYNECKI, Director/Producer/Writer. Elizabeth Rynecki is the great-granddaughter of Polish-Jewish artist, Moshe Rynecki (1881-1943). She grew up with her great-grandfather's paintings prominently displayed on the walls of her family home and understood from an early age that the art connected her to a legacy from "the old country": Poland. In 1999, Elizabeth designed the original Moshe Rynecki: Portrait of a Life in Art website. Elizabeth has a BA in Rhetoric from Bates College ('91) and an MA in Rhetoric and Communication from UC Davis ('94). Her Master's thesis focused on children of Holocaust survivors. Her book, also titled CHASING PORTRAITS, was published by Penguin Random House in September 2016.



JOHNNY SYMONS, Consulting Producer. Johnny is an Emmy-nominated independent film and videomaker based in the San Francisco Bay Area. His documentary *Daddy & Papa* (2002), about the personal, cultural, and political impact of gay men raising children, premiered at Sundance, aired on PBS and international television, and garnered multiple Best Documentary awards. *Ask Not* (2008), an award-winning feature-length documentary about the impact of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy in the US military, broadcast in 2009 on PBS' *Independent Lens*. Johnny is the co-producer of the Academy Award-nominated *Long Night's Journey Into Day* (2000), about South Africa's search for truth and reconciliation, which won the Grand Jury Prize for Best Documentary at the Sundance Film Festival. Johnny graduated with honors from Brown University and has a master's in documentary production from Stanford University.



TINA NGUYEN, Editor. Tina worked extensively in documentaries and commercials in Los Angeles before moving to the Bay Area. Her documentary credits include "Fed Up," which premiered at Sundance and was theatrically released in 2014, and "Seeking Asian Female," which premiered at SXSW in 2012 and was broadcast by PBS as part of the "Independent Lens" showcase in 2013. Her credits include the documentaries "Off the Menu: Asian America," which aired on PBS in 2015, "Out Run," and "Breathin': The Eddy Zheng Story." Tina studied film at Vassar College.



JOSH PETERSON, Consulting Editor. Josh has worked as a freelance editor for clients ranging from KQED to Lucasfilm to Apple and many independent documentary producers making films for PBS, ABC, the Sci-Fi Channel, National Geographic Explorer, and others. He edited the award-winning *Born This Way* and *The Welcome* and co-edited *The Island President*. He was nominated for a national Emmy for Outstanding Achievement in Editing in 2009 for his work on *Soldiers of Conscience*. He also edited *The Rape of Europa*, which was short-listed for a Best

Documentary Academy Award. Between editing projects, he produces and directs narrative films of his own.



SLAWOMIR GRUNBERG, Director of Photography. Slawomir, an Emmy Award winning documentary producer, director, and cameraman is a graduate of the Polish Film School in Lodz. Born in Poland, he immigrated to the US in 1981 and has since directed and produced over 45 documentary films including: “Shimon’ Returns,” “Castaways,” “The Legacy of Jedwabne,” and “Saved by Deportation.” Grunberg’s film “School Prayer: A Community At War”, screened on PBS, received an Emmy Award and Jan Karski Award. Grunberg is a recipient of Guggenheim Fellowship, the New York Foundation for the Arts and Soros Justice Media Fellowships. His credits as director of photography include over 70 documentaries including five Emmy and two Oscar nominations for “Legacy” and “Sister Rose’s Passion”. His most recent film is “Karski & The Lords of Humanity.”



MATTHIAS ZIMMERMANN, Composer. A Swiss native, Matthias pursued his passion for film music composition and continued his studies at Berklee College of Music in Boston, MA where he graduated with honors in Film Scoring. Matthias works as a freelance composer, arranger, orchestrator, conductor and music teacher. He has been commissioned in his capacities on various projects ranging from commercials, song arranger, to composer, orchestrator and conductor for feature film scores.



JAKE BLOOMFIELD-MISRACH, Composer of Additional Music. Jake has a dual degree from NYU for Classical Clarinet & Jazz Guitar. After school he entered the world of film as a sound engineer and [composer](#), leading him to mix, design and compose audio for dozens of films. Some highlights include writing music for features like Lead & Copper, produced by Paul Haggis, The Long Shadow, The Death of Ethan Rice, Chasing Portraits, Your Story Is Making You Sick, Evolutionary Blues, as well as shorts International Women's Awareness via Planned Parenthood, Sensatori Resorts and The Ranch.



JAMES LEBRECHT, Sound Design & Mixer. James has over 40 years of experience as a film and theater sound designer and mixer, author, disability rights activist and now as a filmmaker. He founded Berkeley Sound Artists (BSA), an audio post-production house, in 1996. He quickly found a home in the documentary and independent film community. LeBrecht’s and BSA’s credits are full of Bay Area projects. Notable collaborations include Ruby Yang and Thomas Lennon’s *The Blood of Yingzhou District*, which won the Academy Award for short documentary

in 2006. In 2016, Jim joined forces with Nicole Newnham to co-direct and co-produce (along with producer Sara Bolder), *Crip Camp*, the story of a summer camp “for the handicapped” about disabled teens and the legacy of the community that thrived out of the revolutionary Camp Jened.