In Lithuania, before the war

Photo album that survived is on display at Y.U. Museum
Annushka’s photo album included both posed and more informal pictures that allow viewers to trace the history of photography. Dr. Wisse explained that at least in Lithuania, photography was considered to be a bit disreputable — sort of like acting in western Europe — so its practitioners tended to be people with lower social standing. Like, say, Jews. So early Lithuanian photo studios often were run by Jews, and Jews often got their pictures taken.

Most of the exhibit is of photos in Annushka’s album, or of the people in those photos. We see heavily posed pictures, their subjects staring out at us as grimly as if their faces did not include muscles that allowed them to smile, whole families positioned like the Addams family, if the Addams family were eastern European Jews. We also see pictures posed with backdrops; one particularly charming picture is of a young man posed in a very early aeroplane.

In the less formal photos, we see a family at the beach. We see many photos of Annushka’s two daughters, the older one, Frida, more reserved, the younger one, Bella, so alive, so vivid, that the knowledge of what happened to her is even more unbearable than it would have been otherwise. Historians tell us — and we can see — that those early photographs often were turned into postcards. Many prints of each successful shot were produced, and families would send them out to far-flung relatives. It was, in a way, a physical connection.

Annushka and her family were involved in the arts,
so the photos include actors and singers famous in that time and place. (There's also one of Marlene Dietrich, famous also here and now.) They also ran a sanitarium, a summer camp in the country whose mission seems to resemble the Fresh Air Fund's.

It was a family with education, talent, wide-ranging interests, beauty, and obvious charm.

Seventy or so years after Annushka gave the album to her neighbor, Teresė Fedaravičienė's grandson, Juozas Fedaravičius, and his wife cleaned out their house; his father, Antanas, had died. The album hadn't been exactly forgotten — they knew it was there, in the house they'd inherited — but it had been left alone because they didn't know what to do with it.

Now, they were faced with a choice. There's a video of the grandson in the exhibit, sitting in front of a house so brightly, happily painted that it makes the viewer wonder what colors the clothing in the black-and-white pictures would have been. (Although black and white is more artistic, more evocative, more haunting, it also provides far less information to a viewer trying to imagine what life looked like.) The grandson says that it did occur to him for a second just to toss the thing — so much easier! — but his wife said no, and he realized that she was right. It was old, but it mattered.

So they gave the album to the local historical museum, and two people — neither of them Jewish, themselves driven, extraordinary, with backstories — an English photographer, Richard Schofield,
who is so obsessively interested in Lithuanian history that he moved to Kovno and devotes his life to it, and a local historian, Saulė Valiūnaitė, who works at the Vilna State Jewish Museum, decided that they had to trace it. The people staring out from it deserved their names. The two worked tirelessly to trace the links that led to more and more stories.

Another thread that shines through this tapestry is the loving and brave work that non-Jews do for Jews.

Eventually, through much sleuthing, much of it online and through Facebook, Mr. Schofield and Ms. Valiūnaitė were able to find some relatives who had survived the war. In a plot twist that might have seemed over the top had it been fiction, it turns out that one of the siblings had escaped Lithuania and then escaped Europe. She and her husband and children lived in Montreal. That family was Masha Matz Roskies, her husband Leo, and their four children, Benjamin, Ruth, Eva, and David; two of the siblings grew up to be famous Jewish academics. Dr. David Roskies teaches Yiddish and Jewish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary; his book “Yiddishlands,” with its stories of his family, including their names, was an important link in the chain that connected the Lithuanian Matzes with his family. Dr. Ruth Wisse, who teaches Yiddish and comparative literature at Harvard, is Jacob Wisse’s mother. (Dr. Jacob Wisse, the curator, is the director of the Yeshiva University Museum, one of the five institutions that make up the Center for Jewish History.)

Pieces of the story came together. Jacob Wisse and his siblings grew up with his grandmother’s album; many of the photos in that album either are exactly the same as the ones in Annushka’s or they clearly were taken at the same studio session, with different poses but the same clothing. The family can piece together their history.

Some of the side stories are fascinating, deeply human, mescapably sad. Annushka was married twice. She and her first husband, Samuil Isakovitsh, separated, and he left, went back home, on the other side of the border that separated Lithuania from Russia. She and her second husband, Leonas Warshawsy, who also was married, met at a reception. We do not know whether or not there were sparks between them; we do know that nothing seems to have happened then, but in a few years, they were openly in love and wanted to marry. Annushka needed a divorce.

So she found her estranged first husband in Russia – he was in the Russian army – and bargained with him. He agreed to a divorce, but she had to send their daughter, Lyuba, their only child together, to live with him in Russia when she turned 14.

Annushka went back to Leonas with her divorce documents, the two married, and had two daughters together; Leonas vanishes from history just before the ghetto is liquidated, and Annushka, Frida, and Bella, are murdered by the Nazis.

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Above, Samuil Isakovitch, Annushka’s first husband, when he joined the Russian army in 1910. Right, Ruth Wisse, now a scholar at Harvard and Jacob’s mother, then a child on ice skates in Czernowitz, in the Ukraine, in 1939.
What about Lyuba? She was a student in Moscow during the Russian revolution, and became a revolutionary; eventually she was rounded up and sent off to Siberia, where she too vanishes from history.

It's hard not to try to imagine yourself into her story, although it's impossible to imagine you're doing it accurately. Was Lyuba betrayed and abandoned twice, first by her mother and then by her country? Or did she want to go? Did her mother think that somehow she'd be safer in Russia than in Lithuania? Her face stares out at the viewer, and how she'd be safer in Russia than in Lithuania? Her face stares out at the viewer, and her story haunts. What is incontrovertible is that the branch of the family that survived has thrived. When the exhibit opened, they gathered, Masha's mother and then by her country, and now, and the art and beauty of those photographs, and the stories that they tell, and the stories of their discovery reveal, tell us a great deal about her, about her family, and about us.

Many of Annushka's relatives gather at the Yeshiva University Museum's opening.

COURTESY OF YESHIVA UNIVERSITY MUSEUM

Two of Annushka's grand nieces stand in front of a photo of Lyuba, left, Annushka's oldest daughter, and her first cousin Sala, at the Lost and Found exhibit.

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About the talk
Who: Dr. Jacob Wisse, the director of the Yeshiva University Museum
What: Will talk about the exhibit, “Lost and Found: Adventures of a Family Photo Album Lost in the Shoah,” now on view at the museum.
When: On Sunday, January 6, at 8 p.m.
Where: At Congregation Rinat Yisrael, 389 West Englewood Avenue in Teaneck
For more information: Call (201) 837-2795 or go to www.rinat.org

About the exhibit
“Lost and Found” is at YU’s museum at the Center for Jewish History, 15 W 16th Street in Manhattan, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. The exhibit will run through March 10. Information is online at www.yumuseum.org.

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Above, Annushka ran a sanatorium for children; here she stands with some of the children she hosted. Left, her dashing first husband, Samuil, on a faux park bench in a studio in 1914. COURTESY OF YESHIVA UNIVERSITY MUSEUM