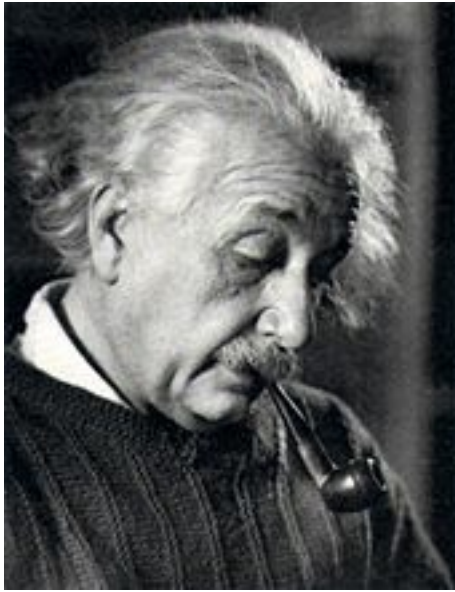


This article was written by Gilberte Jacaret for the Culture Juive 193



Roman Vishniac was a Russian-American photographer, best known for capturing on film the culture of Jews in Central and Eastern Europe before the Holocaust.

Vishniac was a versatile photographer, an accomplished biologist, an art collector and teacher of art history. Vishniac was very interested in history, especially that of his ancestors, and strongly attached to his Jewish roots; he was a Zionist later in life. Roman Vishniac won international acclaim for his photos of shtetlach and Jewish ghettos, celebrity portraits, and microscopic biology. His book *A Vanished World*, published in 1983, made him famous and is one of the most detailed pictorial documentations of Jewish culture in Eastern Europe in the 1930s. Vishniac was also remembered for his humanism and respect for life, sentiments that can be seen in all aspects of his work.

In August 2014, the International Center for Photography in New York City announced that all 9,000 of Vishniac's photos, many never printed or published before, would be posted in an online database.

Vishniac was born in his grandparents' dacha outside Saint Petersburg, in the town of Pavlovsk, and grew up in Moscow. To live in this city was a right granted to few Jews but the Vishniac family lived there because Solomon Vishniac, Roman's father, was a wealthy manufacturer of umbrellas, and his mother, Manya, was the daughter of affluent diamond dealers.

In 1918, Vishniac's immediate family moved to Berlin because of anti-Semitism spurred by uprisings against the Bolsheviks. Roman followed them and, shortly after arriving, married Luta (Leah) Bagg, who gave birth to two children, Mara and Wolf. In his free time, he studied Far Eastern Art at the University of Berlin. Vishniac researched endocrinology and optics, and did some photography. In Berlin, he also initiated his public speaking career by joining the Salamander Club, at which he often gave lectures on naturalism.

In 1935, as anti-Semitism was growing in Germany, Vishniac was commissioned by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC) in Central Europe to photograph Jewish

communities in Eastern Europe as part of a fund-raising drive to help support these poor communities. Vishniac developed and printed these pictures in his dark room in his Berlin apartment. Vishniac used both a Leica and a Rolleiflex camera in his photography. In 1939, his wife and children moved to Sweden to stay with Luta's parents, away from hostile Germany. He met his parents in Nice that summer.

Vishniac returned to Paris in late summer 1940, and was arrested by Marshal Pétain's police and interned at Camp du Ruchard, a deportation camp in Indre-et-Loire. This occurred because Latvia, of which he was a citizen, had been subsumed into the Soviet Union and Vishniac was considered a "stateless person". After three months, as a result of his wife's efforts and aid from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, he obtained a visa that allowed him to escape via Lisbon to the U.S. with his family. His father stayed behind and spent the war hidden in France; his mother died from cancer in 1941 while still in Nice.

The Vishniac family fled from Lisbon to New York City in 1940, arriving on New Year's Eve. He managed to do some portraiture work with mostly foreign clients; but business was poor. In 1946, Vishniac divorced Luta, and the next year he married Edith Ernst, an old family friend. A few years later, he gave up portraiture and went on to do freelance work in the field of photomicroscopy.

Even when he grew older, Vishniac was very active. In 1957, he was appointed research associate at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine and in 1961 was promoted to "professor of biological education". In his seventies and eighties, Vishniac became "Chevron Professor of Creativity" at Pratt Institute (where he taught courses on topics such as the philosophy of photography). During this time he lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan with his wife Edith, teaching, photographing, reading and collecting artifacts.

During his life, Vishniac was the subject and creator of many films and documentaries; the most celebrated of which was the Living Biology series. This consisted of seven films on cell biology; organs and systems; embryology; evolution; genetics; ecology; botany; the animal world; and the microbial world. It was funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation.

Vishniac received Honorary Doctoral degrees from the Rhode Island School of Design, Columbia College of Art and the California College of Art, before his death from colon cancer.