

A search from the heart

Elizabeth Rynecki of California is on a worldwide hunt for the lost artworks of her great-grandfather Moshe Rynecki, a gifted artist in prewar Poland. As she tells **Peter Kohn**, some of the art might be in Australia.

AMERICAN Elizabeth Rynecki has never been to Australia but she hopes our Jewish community might hold a hidden clue to the search for lost art that she has made her life's work.

The Californian realtor has scoured the globe in pursuit of more information about her great-grandfather Moshe Rynecki, an artist of note in pre-World War II Warsaw, whose body of work – some 800 paintings and sculptures of the 1920s and 1930s – offer a poignant insight into a lost Jewish world.

When the Germans invaded Poland in September 1939, Moshe Rynecki arranged for his art to be divided and hidden in several bundles with friends around Warsaw. At that stage, he had every reason to hope that one day soon he would reclaim his works.

But history decreed that Warsaw would be almost totally destroyed and that Rynecki would perish at Majdanek, never to see his secreted artworks again.

After the war, his widow Perla discovered one of the hidden bundles, comprising 120 pieces. Fast-forward to California in 1992. The artist's son George, daughter-in-law and grandson, Alex, Elizabeth's father, had made a new life in the United States. When George died that year, Elizabeth Rynecki helped clear her grandfather's home, and discovered George's memoir of life in Poland before and after the war.

The pages turned in Elizabeth's hands, proving magnetic, and she began making phone calls and writing to people to locate more of great-grandfather Moshe's art.

"I built a website which led to telephone calls, but it also connected me

with information that had previously been unavailable to me," Rynecki, who has completed a masters thesis focusing on the children of Holocaust survivors, tells *The AJN* from her home in Oakland, California.

"As I learned that more pieces had survived, I became more obsessed, you could say, to reclaim my great-grandfather's history and rescue his art, his collection, his body of work and what he contributed to Polish Jewish art history," she says.

Her hunt, which she has documented in a book and a film, both titled *Chasing Portraits*, has turned up distant family members around the US, like a third-cousin in New York whose father in Israel was gifted some of the art by Perla. The cousin later brought the art with her when she moved to America. Rynecki has also discovered some of her great-grandfather's works in Canada, Poland and Israel.

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Great-granddaughter of Polish artist Moshe Rynecki

Rynecki emphasises the purpose of her quest is not necessarily to establish provenance and relocate the artworks, but to find out more about them, and what they reveal about her great-grandfather and his family.

"I'm interested in the history of the paintings because they're like mute survivors – they have stories to tell, and I'm trying to rescue those stories from history. I'm interested in the provenance because I want to know how people got those paintings, as I can then retrace their steps.

"But I'm more interested in rescuing the paintings from oblivion and [bringing] my great-grandfather's stories from out of the abyss and into



Elizabeth Rynecki and one of her great-grandfather Moshe Rynecki's paintings.

contemporary discussion, than I am in reclaiming the paintings by filing a legal claim. Most people who have my great-grandfather's paintings have been very kind to me and have opened their doors and allowed me to talk to them, to photograph the paintings, and to film for my documentary," she says.

Rynecki experienced a struggle with the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, which holds 52 of the paintings, but when she visited Warsaw, the management gave her access to her family's artworks. "They were wonderful and that relationship is much improved."

ONE of the paintings, *Refugees*, has been donated by the Rynecki family to Yad Vashem. "After much family discussion, we decided it was a wonderful place [for the painting] to be."

The stirring piece shows Jewish

refugees toting their belongings, evacuating Warsaw en masse after the Nazi invasion in the early days of the war. "I grew up with this painting. It's more than a foreshadowing of what's coming. It's haunting."

The original piece is in Yad Vashem's art museum collection and occasionally goes on display, but a copy is on permanent display in its history museum and is seen by around a million visitors a year.

"You can follow the history of the Holocaust through facts and film and artefacts," reflects Rynecki, "but Yad Vashem also wanted to give voice to those who were there and witnessed it in a unique way, in this case, through art. My great-grandfather painted in the moment and he created a time capsule."

Much of Moshe Rynecki's art captures the daily lives of Polish Jews before the war – scenes from weddings, town fairs, men playing chess,

women in the park with children. "We need to remember the loss and devastation but we also need to know what came before," she says, which is the purpose of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, where some of the art is on display.

Rynecki hopes some works might have ended up in Australia. With its relatively high ratio of Polish Jews, particularly in Melbourne, there is good reason to believe survivors and their families here might hold some clues, she says.

"Anything's possible," says Rynecki, who has cousins in Sydney who left Poland in the 1950s but do not have any of the art. "I wouldn't be surprised anymore by where it turns up. It could be forgotten in an attic, tucked away in a storage unit, or even proudly displayed in a family home."

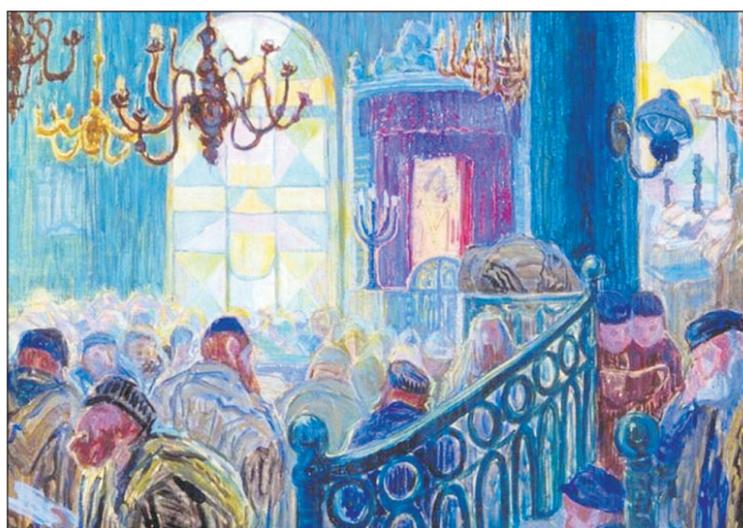
She was intrigued by the 2014 film *Woman In Gold*, the true story of an American Shoah survivor trying to reclaim a treasured family artwork from a museum in Vienna.

"I'm not a survivor like Maria Altmann, [the Helen Mirren character], so I won't compare myself to her. But there's a scene where she's looking out of the plane window at Vienna and all sorts of emotions are coming out. When my plane first descended over Warsaw, I had those same feelings."

Contact Elizabeth Rynecki on erynecki@yahoo.com or www.twitter.com/eryneck and visit her website www.chasingportraits.org.



Chess Players by Moshe Rynecki.



Synagogue Interior by Moshe Rynecki.

Watch *Chasing Portraits* trailer
Available on the iPad app and e-paper edition