



Roman Vishniac in 1977

## Witness of a vanished world

### Roman Vishniac (1897-1990)

*His photographs of East European Jewish life, which he took in the mid- to late 1930s, are today among the most widely familiar images of this “vanished world.”*

*Though these photographs were but a small part of Vishniac’s lifework, they remain his best-known accomplishment as a photographer.*

### A biologist and a photographer

Born near Saint Petersburg, Vishniac grew up in a prosperous, Russian-speaking Jewish family that lived in Moscow. During World War I he attended the university in Moscow, where he studied medicine and earned a doctorate in zoology. Combining youthful interests in the camera and the microscope, Vishniac eventually became an important innovator in biological photography, especially photomicroscopy. After the Bolshevik Revolution, Vishniac and his family moved to Berlin, where he continued his scientific research and pursued his interest in photography.

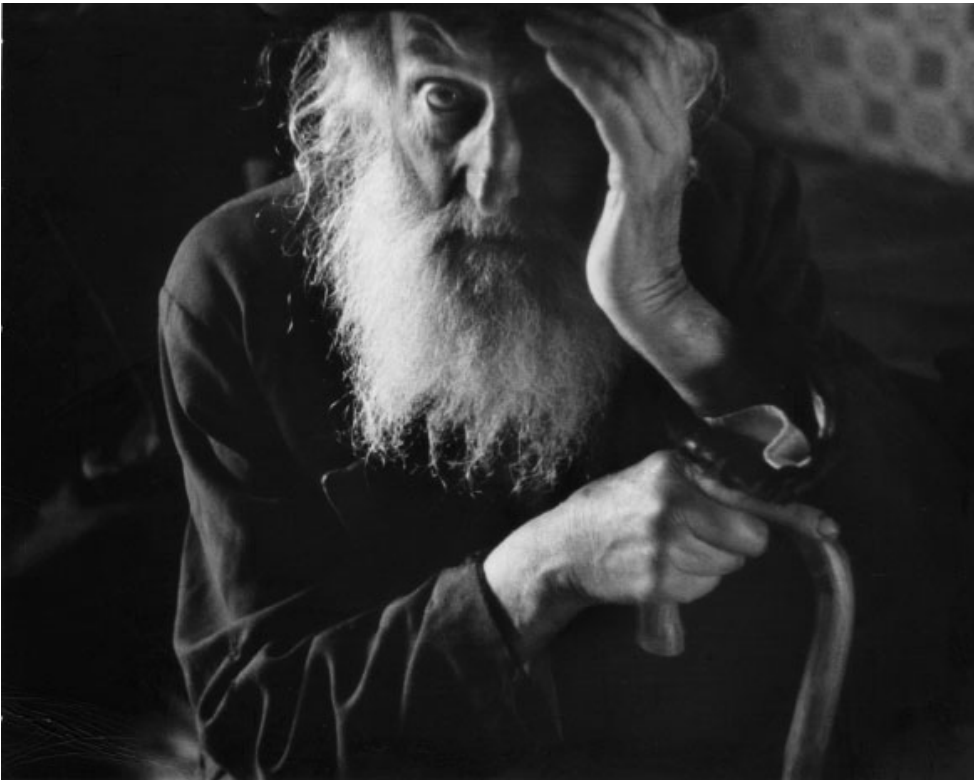


*Bar Mitzvah boy, Lublin, Poland, ca. 1935-1938.*

When Hitler came to power, Vishniac took photographs that documented the impact of Nazism on German Jewish life. Within a few years Vishniac had traveled to Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia to photograph local Jews. By 1937, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) employed him to supply the organization with photographs for public-relations efforts on behalf of beleaguered East European Jewry; Vishniac continued to do so up to the start of World War II. He also shot footage of rural Jews in the Carpathian region for the JDC to use in a fund-raising film that was never made. The JDC played an instrumental role in helping Vishniac reach the United States in 1940. He brought with him some 2,000 of his photographs of European Jewry, although he claimed to have left behind an additional 14,000 negatives.

Vishniac settled in New York City, where he continued to work as a photographer, mostly of scientific subjects. A selection of his prewar photographs of East European Jews was displayed at the YIVO Institute’s New York headquarters in 1945. Thirty-one of these images were published in a volume titled *Polish Jews: A Pictorial Record* (1947), with an introductory essay by theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel. That same year, Vishniac contributed more than 150 images to *The Vanished World*, a photo album published by the Forward Association. Not a decade has passed since then without a major U.S. publication or exhibition of Vishniac’s photographs of Jewish subjects, including a major retrospective of his career held at the Jewish Museum of New York in 1971.

Vishniac's pictures of East European Jewry on the eve of World War II offer a selective image of this community, as they emphasize piety, poverty, and persecution. Summarizing his aims, Vishniac repeatedly asserted that he felt compelled to create a photographic record of East European Jewry because he knew it was fated for extermination by Nazi Germany. He reported taking these photographs with a concealed camera so that his subjects would be unaware of his presence as a photographer. The distinctive aesthetic of his photographs has influenced postwar representations of Jewish life on the eve of the Holocaust, most famously cinematographer Janusz Kaminski's work on the 1993 feature film *Schindler's List*.



*An Elder of the Village, Carpathia, Ruthenia, Munkatch*  
1938

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**Source :** Jeffrey A. Shandler, « Roman Vishniac », *the YIVO encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*