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The Lost Expressionist: Nick Yudell's Journey in Images

A hidden cache; a world seen through the daring eye of an unknown photographer

by **Marlin Zeilig, Voxair Photojournalist**

"A woman touches her beret on a windy day, calming regarding us," says the printed information next to the photograph of Ruby Rabinovitch.

Another portrait shows a 26 year old woman, Mary Ginsberg, seated on a patterned sofa reading a thick hardcover book with the contrasting images of a long white curtain and dark wall, separated by a partially rolled up dark drape, in the background.

The photo of Ms. Rabinovitch, who left home by 1928 to become a writer in New York City where she wrote for The New Yorker magazine (and later moved to Montreal), was taken "prior to 1930" at the Rabinovitch House, Morden, Manitoba; while the photo of Ms. Ginsburg, the photographer's older sister, was shot in the winter of 1938 at 383 Alfred Avenue in North End Winnipeg.

Those are just two of the photographs in The Lost Expressionist: Nick Yudell's Journey in Images. A hidden cache; a world seen through the daring eye of an unknown photographer-- an inaugural exhibition hosted by the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, located in the Asper Jewish Community



Centre at 23 Doncaster Street, just north of the South Site RHUs. A multimedia presentation was held in the Berney Theatre at the Asper JCC on September 26 by the exhibition's curator, Celia Rabinovitch, Ph.D.

The free exhibition runs until October 11, 2017.

"Newly restored negatives from a concealed cache reveal a young photographer from Morden and Winnipeg, who became an RAF pilot, shot down in the Western Desert of World War II, who created a powerful legacy," says information on a panel at the exhibition.

"Imagine opening a box of negatives shot before World War II by a young man from a small town in Manitoba, who died during the war. No one has seen these negatives since the 22-year-old enlistee closed the box he made for his life's work in August, 1940, and left, first to Shilo, Manitoba, then to Alberta, to fly for the R.A.F. and to defend freedom. His fountain pen inks the surface of each aged brown envelope with the time, date, place, lighting conditions, and names of people in the negatives inside. Enclosed lives a world unseen, captured by a young Jewish photographer from rural Manitoba during the Dirty Thirties, whose work aspires to a modern vision that parallels the art emerging from Europe then."

The photographer was Isador "Nick" Yudell-- born on June 16, 1916 to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents, Sophie (Netty) and Alexander Yudlitz (a former coronet player in the Czar's army), 321 Dufferin Street in Winnipeg.

"Nick Yudell's dramatic photographs capture aspects of life -- spanning the Jazz Age -- when he was twelve and received a camera -- and the Great Depression, bridging the 1920s through 1930s," says information written by the curator, an artist and writer whose work has been exhibited in Canada, the United States, and Europe. "His works are rarely candid or documentary, yet he created stunning black and white images that make those times vivid. He depicted himself and others in striking filmic portraits. He anticipated avant-garde art with double exposures and experimental lighting. Nick Yudell is a lost artist whose images have been brought to life. His work is a major discovery.

"During the Depression, people made their own entertainment. Nick's camera created exchanges with his subjects, shot in natural light or dramatic chiaroscuro. His work echoes German Expressionism and anticipates the development of film noir. They reflect the postures and gestures of men and women emulating gangsters or babes. Others pose with confidence, in portraits of singular power and expressive intensity, far from the stiff studio portraits taken then. He connected

with others through his lens, making images that strike the heart."

Nick became a pilot and a Warrant Officer with an international group of Commonwealth airmen: British Squadron Leader, Ivan Cornelius Strutt, Tommy Lonsdale, and Australian gunner Geoffrey O'Keefe, said Ms. Rabinovitch, who was interviewed by The Voxair photojournalist at the exhibition on September 24.

"The squadron moved to numbered locations in the Western Desert from Egypt to Tunisia, enduring desert heat during day, cold at night, with little to eat," she writes. "On January 6, 1943, Ivan Strutt and Nick Yudell piloted a Vickers Wellington II from Malta to Tunisia in the charge to stop General Rommel's supply lines from entering the Mediterranean. Returning from their night mission to bomb the docks at Sousse, German flak hit their plane, igniting it. According to Operations Records, it appeared as a flare in the sky, 60 miles south of Sousse.

"Nick's RAF attestation papers show he tried to enlist the previous year. After the war, he intended to open a photography studio. He played lacrosse, hockey, baseball, and built model airplanes. He excelled in all aspects of the interview, yet was ranked average, perhaps a result of the lingering antisemitism of the interviewing officer. Nick was one of nearly 500 Canadians soldiers of Jewish faith who died in World War II. Contrary to superficial ideas, Jews were not all victims in WWII, but heroic fighters. Nearly 20,000 Canadians of Jewish faith subscribed in the military.

"The RCMP in 1940 reported, 'The Jewish community ... has subscribed generously, way out of proportion, not because they consider it a 'Jewish' war, but because they understand the clear-cut policy of decency versus brute force much better than people who take their freedom for granted.'

Ms. Rabinovitch called Nick Yudell's life and experience "a prism of everything" -- of all his many interests.

"Almost all his peers went to war, and a lot of them died in combat overseas while flying planes," she said. "I think it's important to remember these people. Nick's photographs document the kind of freedom people had living in rural (and urban) western Canada at that time. He came from a more innocent time with little class structure. Here was someone who could make fine art photographs with little technical means and far away from major art world centres. He was a true original. He lost life in the Second World War defending freedom. It showed that he had a great deal of courage."

"You feel like you know him personally after viewing this exhibition," Rabinovitch remarked.

