

Jewish Heritage Centre exhibit

A Playful World in a Perilous Era

A hidden cache of photographs taken by a Manitoba creative photographer who was shot down in North Africa in World War II unveils a world of glamour and grit.

Introduction

“The Lost Expressionist: Nick Yudell’s Journey in Images. A hidden cache; a world seen through the daring eye of an unknown photographer.” The inaugural exhibition and multimedia presentation by Celia Rabinovitch, Ph.D., hosted by the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada. 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.

A Hidden Cache

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.



NICK YUDELL, 1940

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. 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.

Provenance of the Negatives

Milton Rabinovitch (1909-2001) of Morden and Winnipeg, was Nick’s cousin and close friend. Nick enlisted in the military in 1940, and became an RAF pilot flying in North Africa and Malta, until his tragic death in Tunisia in 1943. He left a wooden box of negatives and his photography magazines with Milton, who preserved Nick’s negatives in their cache until his death in 2001.

Seeking to understand Nick’s vision, Milton’s daughter, Celia Rabinovitch, artist professor and author, selected, restored, and printed the negatives with digital processes. She investigated Nick in Morden, Winnipeg, researched letters in Russian and Yiddish, RAF documents, and collected oral histories. Themes of friendship, play, place, air flight, and artistic experimentation emerged from the box.

Early Life and Interests

Nick Yudell was born in 1916 in Canada, to new Canadians originally from Russia. His father, Alexander Yudlavit, like other Russian Jewish boys, was conscripted at the age of 13 into the Czar’s army. A high-ranking officer, after the disastrous Russo-Japanese war in 1904 he made his way from Vladivostok to Kiev, to his sweetheart, Sophie (Kluner). A postcard taken by an art photographer in Vinnytsia, in west central Ukraine, shows a tall, uniformed officer with a sword, a holster, and a cornet. Alex wrote a tender message to Sophie, “*You are in my mind all the time, your image stays with me.*”

Leaving Russia during the pogroms, they landed in Cuba in 1904. Alex found contacts in sugar for his future business. They went to New York, where Sophie’s sister Sonia had worked in the garment industry. In 1909, they arrived at Winnipeg’s Union Station, embracing life in Canada.

When he was two, Nick’s mother Sophie died. Running the Star Trading Company, 277 Dufferin Ave., in Winnipeg’s north end, Alex could not provide for his older children, Mary and Milton, and care for a toddler. Nick came to live with his mother’s sister Sonia and her husband “Doc” Rabinovitch in the town of Morden, 80 miles southwest of Winnipeg. Nick joined nine adventurous cousins as the baby of the family. His cousins captivated him. Travelling between Morden and Winnipeg, with family or by rail, he observed life on the prairies with a curiosity instilling a desire for adventure. At the age of 12 he received a camera, and began taking photographs, capturing introspective self-portraits, shooting the attitudes and pastimes of those around him.



Zenon Yonker, 397 Burrows 1933 photo taken by Nick Yudell



One of Nick’s earliest photographs, taken just prior to 1928 with a camera he had just been given. The picture is of Nick’s cousin, Wolf Rabinovitch, in Morden, Manitoba.

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A Passion for Photography

Attending St. John’s Technical Collegiate in Winnipeg’s North End from 1930-1933, he photographed his friends in reflective or dramatic poses. His images include Joe Adelman, Etta Granovsky, Rose Rothstein, Silvia Rosenberg, Fritz Greene, Doris “Thor” Torchinsky, Shirley Walsh, Zenon Yonker, Mary Ginsburg and Milton Yudell. Returning to Morden to work in the Rabinovitch Bros. Store on Stephen Street, he captured Bert Deans, Harold Kendal, Evelyn Cram, Cliff Milne, Edith Dickie, Marian Vrooman, Joe Gladstone, Vic Burgess, and his cousins Beryl, Ruby, Milton, Leon, and Wolf Rabinovitch. Many boys that he photographed served in WW II.

Depression and the Dust Bowl

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.

After the stock market crash of 1929, there was no work. By 1931, Manitoba suffered from the withering effects of the Dust Bowl that dried the land and blew the disappearing soil across the plains. In Morden, locust invasions occurred, followed by town campaigns to “keep your soil at home” through planting bushes. These were idealistic times. Volunteers at the Dominion Experimental Farm in Morden developed fruit and grain for a short growing season, allowing prairie farmers to feed the world.

Photography and Air Flight: the RAF pilot

His passions for photography and air flight merged during the mid-30s. He documented flight with model airplanes, Steven’s Field, and biplanes landing in the Red River. Relentless news of rising fascism on the European continent prompted him to enlist in the Manitoba Mounted Rifles and the RAF in 1940. In early 1942 he went to England, joining RAF Squadron 104 in North Africa. He arrived in Kabrit during the second Battle for El Alamein under Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery.

Nick became a pilot and a warrants officer with an international group of Commonwealth airmen: British Squadron Leader, Ivan Cornelius Strutt, Tommy Lonsdale, and Australian gunner Geoffrey O’Keefe. The squadron



Fritz Greene, Shirley Walsh, N Panama Apt, Winnipeg - 1934



Cliff Milne, Edith Dickie in Large Pair of Pants, Morden

moved to numbered locations in the Western Desert from Egypt to Tunisia, enduring desert heat during day, cold at night, with little to eat. 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.*”¹

After WWII, piercing personal losses rendered families silent. No one talked about Nick. Celia Rabinovitch researched his life with the contributions of many others, especially Paul Strutt of England, Squadron Leader Ivan Strutt’s nephew. Nick Yudell was awarded the 1939-45 Star, Africa Star & bar, Defence Medal, Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, War Medal 1939-45, and posthumously awarded RCAF Operational Wings in recognition of gallant service in action against the enemy, in 1946. His name is on the Malta Memorial and the Morden Cenotaph, and listed in Canada’s Book of Remembrance. In northern Manitoba, Yudell Lake bears his name.

The daring eye of Nick Yudell uncovers a playful and romantic world in a perilous time, in rare images of the glamour and grit of an era.

The Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada is pleased to host the exhibition by Celia Rabinovitch, who presents The Lost Expressionist: Nick Yudell’s Journey in Images, on Tuesday, September 26, 7:30 pm, Berney Theatre, Asper Campus 123 Doncaster Street, Winnipeg. Admission to lecture: \$10 at door. The exhibition runs September 9-October 11, 2017.

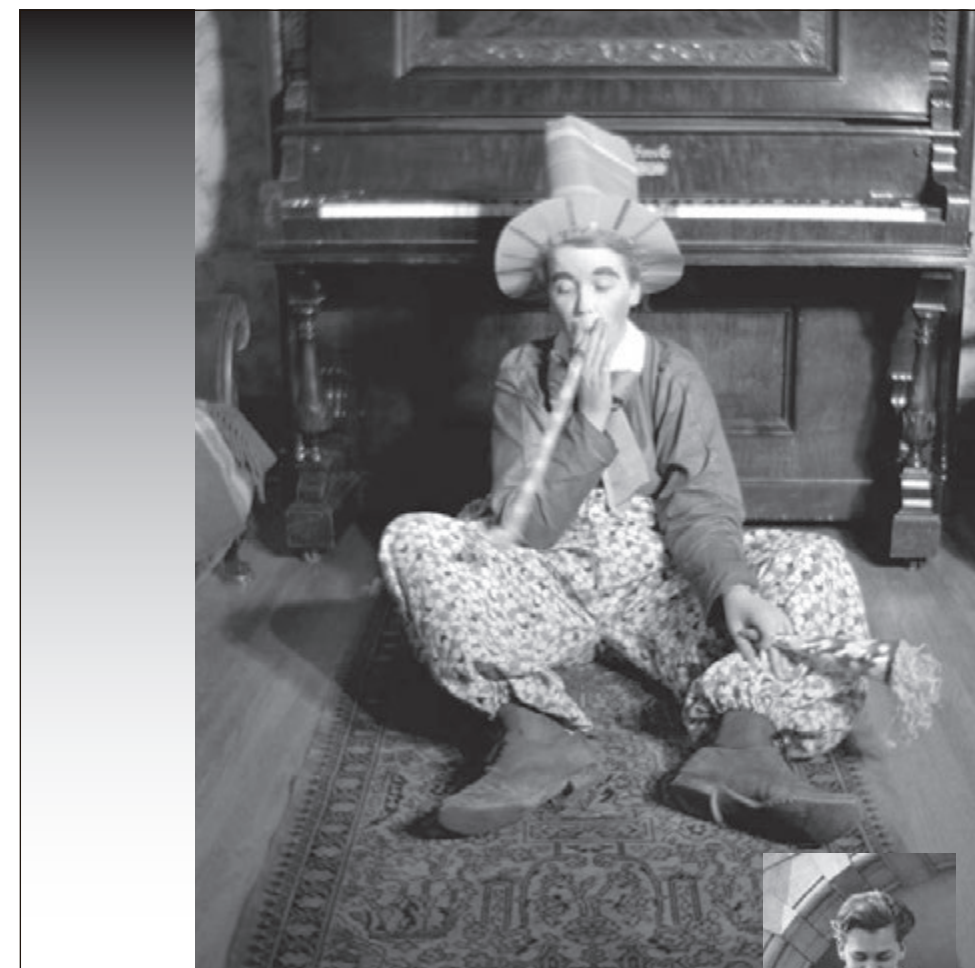
¹ RCMP Intelligence Bulletin, December 23, 1940, 311. <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/RCMP/article/download/9647/9702> Accessed July, 2017.



Etta Granovsky, Nick Yudell, 105 Bannerman Ave, 1937



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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. RAF pilot who fell in the Western Desert, WWII, left a visual legacy.

A multimedia program and exhibition by Celia Rabinovitch, Ph.D.

Exhibition, September 8 to October 11, 2017

Lecture, Tuesday, September 26, 2017, 7:30 PM, Admission \$10, reception to follow Berney Theatre, Asper Campus 123 Doncaster St, Winnipeg, MB, CANADA

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