



# A photographer of a vanished world and his family

BY MARA VISHNIAC KOHN

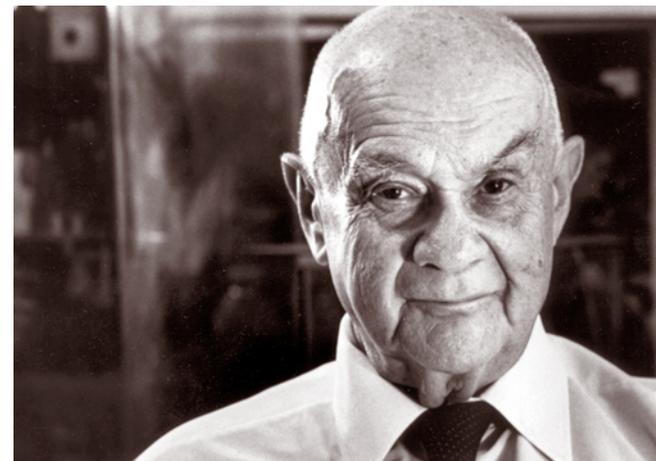
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t the time of my family's arrival in New York on New Year's Eve 1940, I was 14, and entirely too self-involved and amazed to be much aware of HIAS' efforts on our behalf.

Our beginnings in New York were, naturally, difficult, and consisted of four different sets of life and experience. We all had to learn English, though as far as I was concerned I considered this to be an impossible task. My older brother Wolf was our resident expert, though, as it turned out, not as expert as we had expected. My father Roman Vishniac (see endnote) knew that his years-long avocation of photography would now become his and our livelihood. The question was, how to start? My mother had not

been independently employed. She had always managed various family businesses and was the person who, after much work and many disappointments, had managed to get my father released from a French detention camp, get affidavits, visas and passage to Lisbon where we were reunited for the stormy winter crossing to the U.S. My brother had been a budding scientist from childhood and at 18 expected to attend some college, though we didn't know how, since we had no written transcripts of any kind. I was enrolled in high school by an aunt, my mother's sister Claire Holt who was then living in New York. Not knowing English and never having had to change classrooms during the school day I was at a loss where to go and what to do.

We'd better skip ahead: My father became well known and recognized for the documentary work he



The author's father, Roman Vishniac, in the 1970s.

had done in the 1930s in Eastern Europe where he had photographed life in traditional Jewish communities, both *shtetls* and cities. His livelihood became his outstanding micro-photography which was published in national magazines and used for both scientific work and advertising. My mother founded

and ran a Raffia shoe company during the war and later became a travel agent. My brother became a well-known biochemist much involved in the space program and, to our enormous sadness, was killed while on an Antarctic research trip in 1973. He had two sons, Ethan, an astrophysicist, and Ephraim, a computer scientist. I became a therapist working in special education, taught, and since my father's death I work with his legacy, oversee



Four generations of Vishniacs – from right: Roman, with his father, Salomon, his son, Wolf, and grandson Obediah (Obie).

his archives and distribution rights and have recently – in 1999 – published a book of his Polish children's pictures, called *Children of a Vanished World*. Other books of my father's are *Polish Jews*, *Vanished World* and *To Give Them Light*.

I have two children, Naomi and Ben Schiff. Naomi is a graphic designer with a busy studio in Oakland, Calif. My son Ben is a professor of political science at Oberlin College in Ohio. I have three wonderful granddaughters, and am married for the second time to Walter Kohn, a well-known physicist (Nobel Prize, 1998), and child of the *Kindertransport*.

*Roman Vishniac was an artist and an amazingly versatile scholar – an expert biologist, photographer, art historian and philosopher. Born in Pavlosk (near St. Petersburg) in 1897, he fled to Berlin in 1920. For several years, beginning in 1933, he traveled Central and Eastern Europe photographing Jewish communities. In 1940, he emigrated to the U.S., where he taught in several fields at universities including Yeshiva University, the City University of New York, Pratt Institute and Case Western Reserve University.*



Roman at his wedding to Luta (Leah) Bagg in Berlin, 1920.



The author's father, Roman Vishniac in his Moscow School uniform, circa 1904.