

ONE PAINTING.  
A CENTURY OF JEWISH LIFE.



A FILM BY  
SLAWOMIR GRÜNBERG

# STILL LIFE IN LODZ

LOGTV FILMS POLSKA PRESENTS "STILL LIFE IN LODZ" STARRING LILKA ELBAUM PAUL CELLER & RONI BEN ARI PRODUCER BARBARA GRÜNBERG  
DIRECTOR OF ANIMATION MARCIN PODOLEC EDITOR CEZARY KOWALCZUK SCREENPLAY LILKA ELBAUM SLAWOMIR GRÜNBERG  
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# STILL LIFE IN LODZ

## About The Film

The lure of family mysteries lies at the heart of STILL LIFE IN LODZ, an emotionally riveting documentary that journeys to the historically tumultuous city of Lodz, Poland. Here, a surprise reunion with a painting that hung in the same apartment for 75 world-altering years becomes a probing investigation into the power of memory, art, time and resilience.

What follows is a deeply personal detective story rich with twists and turns. But, equally, the film is an ode to the lost generations of Jewish Lodz and a look at how fragile—but also how incredibly *necessary*—our relationship with the past is for creating the future.

### *One Painting, A Century of Jewish Life*

The stirring mystery begins inside an ordinary-seeming tenement apartment where a painting has witnessed the most extraordinary of times. The painting is a serene still life. But it has clung to the wall through incredible personal and global turmoil-- through both war and peace, through moments of joyous communion and shocking chaos, through everyday scenes of family love and the shattering terror of hate, displacement, the Holocaust and totalitarian rule.

Once, this painting was the constant companion to Lilka Elbaum, who grew up in Lodz and lived there until 1968, when at the age of 19, an antisemitic purge drove her and her entire family out of Poland. The portrait might have been a simple likeness of lush flowers and ripe fruit, but for Lilka, it had been an indelible connection to her childhood and to Lodz itself.

48 years later, by remarkable chance, Lilka has an emotional re-encounter with the painting in Lodz. This will spark a new journey full of startling new discoveries but also to a reckoning with the countless ghosts and complicated stories of the city. She brings two important companions on her trek, each with roots in Lodz from different eras, each searching for their own answers. New Yorker Paul Celler brings the perspective of a second-generation Holocaust survivor as he traces how his mother, against all odds, made it out of the Lodz Ghetto and Auschwitz. Exploring the pre-War life of Lodz is Israeli artist Roni Ben Ari who is drawn back to the spot of her family's textile workshop once located in Lilka's same building. Together, the trio maps their own labyrinthine stories onto Lodz's current landscape.

### *Memories Come Alive*

All of this comes to life through a mix of live moments, expressive original animation, authentic drawings and rare archival footage, which make the past as visceral and intimate as the present. The film is directed by Emmy Award winner Slawomir Grünberg (director and producer of more than 45 docs including the acclaimed KARSKI & THE LORDS OF HUMANITY). Himself a Jewish native of Lublin, Poland, Grünberg taps into a handmade style to get to the story's innermost emotions and to mirror the intangible nature of memories.

His unusual approach makes these unique accounts of Jewish perseverance fresh. Expansive as the story is, Grünberg zeroes in on the details: on the everyday mementos and artifacts that become the precious vessels where families store their most vital remembrances, and which so often are lasting clues to our life stories. As Lilka, Paul and Roni hunt for signs and symbols that can link

them to their forebears, the film ponders how it is that mere inanimate objects—artworks, furniture, keepsakes, street corners, the very buildings we dwell within—are enchanted with feeling, meaning and connections to one another.

### *The Time Capsule of Lodz*

STILL LIFE IN LODZ also takes audiences deep into the once thriving Jewish community of Lodz. Jewish culture has been at the core of this once great center of textile manufacturing—still filled with well-preserved factories, grand apartment buildings and industrial magnates' palaces—since it came to the fore in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

For a time, the city hosted Poland's second largest Jewish population. Then, in 1939, German troops rolled into Lodz, annexing it to the Third Reich. Soon after, Nazis undertook an unthinkable inhumane plan: driving nearly 200,000 Jews into an overcrowded, 1.5 square-mile area that would become known as the Lodz Ghetto, sealing the people inside with barbed wire, leaving them to fend for themselves amidst hunger, forced labor and deportations to concentration camps. In 1944, the entire surviving population of Lodz Ghetto was “liquidated” to Auschwitz.

Yet even mass catastrophe could not stop Lodz's Jewish life. With an astonishing fortitude, thousands returned after the War—including Lilka's parents, courageously saved by Polish Gentiles—determined to restart the community. Rising antisemitism would again shrink the population in the 50s and 60s, but there remains today a small but resolute Jewish community in the contemporary city, keeping the heritage going.

For Lilka, Paul and Roni, diving into the riddles and secrets of Lodz's past brings new personal revelations. But it also opens a way forward. For they each believe that a brighter future can be built by truly honoring the voices that still speak from Lodz's streets and walls...and from a painting that even in stillness was able to contain some of the vast beauty, wonders and sorrows of an entire century.

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# STILL LIFE IN LODZ

## About The Production

In STILL LIFE IN LODZ, an unexpected reunion with a long-lost painting sparks a probing journey that brings a vanished world—in all its raw humanity—back to life.

The film is partly about the drive so many of us share to dig deeper into our tangled family roots, to gather hints about where we come from and the ways we've been shaped by the arc of history, both personal and global.

But what sets STILL LIFE IN LODZ apart is that it's not only about the compelling mysteries of a painting that was an eyewitness to the 20<sup>th</sup> century's extreme tumult including the Holocaust. And it's not only about three Jewish families who represent the inextinguishable spirit of the nearly wiped-out Jewish culture of Lodz, Poland in three completely different eras. It is equally about a deeper enigma: how memory works, how it sustains our most vitally important stories, even when those stories are violently disrupted, and how the past—not just in its incomprehensible losses but also in its remarkable lived experiences—haunts the present and pushes us forward.

STILL LIFE IN LODZ looks to everyday objects--a portrait on the wall, a blurry photograph, a family heirloom—to unlock memory's secrets: its layers, emotions and reminders.

“We all as human beings struggle at times with our most personal and traumatic memories,” says Slawomir Grünberg, the film's director. “Some things we don't want to remember, some things we remember differently than the way they happened and some things we remember all too well. This is a story about memory, memories of a Jewish world in Europe that was destroyed, memories that need to be preserved now more than ever. But these memories also open the door I hope to new perspectives. I hope this film leads to discussion and perhaps even a change in thinking.”

### *The Still Life That Set A Journey In Motion*

The film, like the story behind it, begins with Lilka Elbaum, a spirited, perceptive and laser-focused Polish émigré. Here in the U.S., Lilka has devoted many years of work to preserving the history of Jewish culture in Poland.

Still, Lilka could not have foreseen that her own history would take a turn of cinematic proportions. It all started when Lilka accidentally rediscovered a painting that had been an everyday part of her childhood in Lodz, Poland. The painting itself was an ordinary work of decorative art. But what made it extraordinary is that it not only hung in the Lodz apartment where she spent the

first 19 years of her life—it also sat on the same wall long before that, during the boom years of Jewish Lodz, through the stark terror of the Holocaust and then amid the fragile renaissance of Jewish life after the War, when Lilka was born. It sat there until Lilka left her home city permanently, forced out during the Communist government’s antisemitic reprisals in 1968.

Then, one day, this canvas unexpectedly came back into her life, laden with resonant echoes of a vibrantly rich Jewish world now nearly obliterated. It happened on a visit to Lodz to attend the wedding of the great granddaughter of the Polish Gentile family who saved Lilka’s mother during World War II. During this fateful trip, Lilka met with an old childhood friend she had not seen in four decades.

“At one point my friend asked: do you want to see the painting? And I said what painting?” Lilka remembers. “I knew her parents had bought all the furniture from my family’s apartment when we were expelled from Poland, but that’s when I realized she also had this still life painting that had hung over my bed for 19 years.”

Naturally, Lilka was indeed curious to lay her eyes on it after so long. “I was very emotionally moved to see it again,” she recounts. “It is only an inanimate object, but it was a part of my life in Lodz when Poland was my home. It brought back a flood of memories, of my parents, my brother and of a way of life that once existed.”

Lilka’s hopes of buying back the painting were dashed. Yet, she continued to feel a draw to do something more with it, to use all of its stored meaning in some creative way, to pay tribute to its powerful links not just to her own familial past but that of Lodz, of Poland, of the Jewish people.

The painting became a kind of portal. “I began to view the painting as a metaphor,” Lilka explains. “It had seen everything. It had seen tragedy and triumph. The painting was untouched by time while the people who lived in the apartment changed. It was a very visual story, which is why I thought to myself, wouldn’t this be an interesting documentary?”

That’s when she began thinking in-depth about the theme of “objects of memory,” those material belongings that can act as time machines, transporting you back to emotions, places, people and cultures no longer extant in this world. She notes that for those with roots in Jewish Europe, such objects carry an even deeper valence. For while talk of the loss of millions can feel abstract, each one of those people was an individual with dreams, complexities and relationships, all of which come to the fore when you start to map the life cycles of the everyday objects they touched.

“Objects, whether they might be cufflinks or a sugar bowl, are proof that this extinguished world existed,” Lilka says. “When you think about it, generations of people were wiped out from this planet leaving almost no trace. Many times, objects survived where people did not.”

This idea led Lilka to reconnect with Emmy Award-winning Polish director Slawomir Grünberg. She’d gotten to know Grünberg when she appeared in his documentary *THE PERET’ZNIKS*, about the Jewish school that she and her brother had attended in Lodz. And she knew he had a love for innovative storytelling about history.

Soon the project began expanding. To traverse an entire century of Jewish life in Lodz, Lilka combined her story with two others from earlier times: that of the U.S.-born real estate developer and self-taught piano virtuoso Paul Celler, whose parents survived unthinkably harrowing experiences in ghettos and camps during the Holocaust; and that of Israeli artist Roni Ben Ari whose paternal family was part of Lodz’s textile boom and growing Jewish identity in the pre-War years.

### *Filming Begins*

The mix of Lilka’s background, the century-old painting and objects charged with potent memories intrigued Slawomir from the start, but he also had his own connections to Lodz. Born in Lublin, he attended the prestigious National Film School in Lodz, renowned for such globally acclaimed alumni as Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Kieslowski, Roman Polanski and Jerzy Skolimowski.

A filmmaker of wide-ranging interests and acute curiosity, Slawomir has directed, produced and shot a broad range of acclaimed docs on topics spanning from environmental disasters to LGBTQ activism. Given his own complicated Polish and Jewish background, he has also often carved out space to make films about European Jewish life and loss.

Still, despite his interest in Lilka’s story and returning to Lodz, Slawomir was so backlogged with other projects, he initially suggested another director to her. With her typical persistence, Lilka approached him a second time, and he could not resist.

“I was excited about the whole idea, thinking about how this film could be quite different from others that touch on these times,” he recalls. “The story of the still life portrait was so unique and real-life mysteries like this don’t come along very often. I knew it would be challenging and whenever you start filming a story like this, there are so many uncertainties, but once we started, I felt very committed to it.”

His personal links with Polish history came into play as he began preparing for the shoot and influenced his approach: aimed at making what is so often overwhelming and numbing more

intimate and human. “I’m very familiar with people who have experienced all the many different struggles of being Jewish in Poland, so that only drew me in deeper,” he says.

Lilka was thrilled that he came on board. “He appreciated that this was not exactly a Holocaust film nor a film that is just about Polish Jews. He understood the power of objects of memory and wanted to explore that with us,” she comments. Says Slawomir of Lilka’s fervor, which continued from start to finish of the production: “Without Lilka’s enormous and tireless efforts to get this film made, we would never have been able to bring it to people.”

### *Animating Memory*

Early on, Lilka and Slawomir began talking about how to work with a story that is not just about remarkable true events but about remembrance—in all its fuzzy, dreamlike refractions of reality. Slawomir knew he would have to find ways to break the verité mold if he was going to be able to bring the past to life in that visceral, energetically alive way it exists only inside our minds.

Slawomir suggested to Lilka the possibility of using animation in the film. He had done it previously to unexpectedly powerful effect in his award-winning film *KARSKI & THE LORDS OF HUMANITY*, which followed the inspirational story of Jan Karski, the man who documented Nazi crimes against humanity from inside the Warsaw Ghetto. It had been a risk on that film. In fact, he had been sternly warned to avoid animation in a Holocaust story by many who feared the medium lacked gravity. Yet, Slawomir was convinced it could be done in a way that would increase, rather than detract from, the intensity of the audiences’ experience and open up a new way of seeing.

Ultimately the animation in *KARSKI* drew widespread accolades from film critics for its heightened impact and fresh point-of-view on the era.

For *STILL LIFE IN LODZ*, Slawomir set out to use an entirely different style of animation, one that taps into the uncanniness of childhood memory. “We don’t have images from those times, so this was our way to get inside this world. I think it immerses you in a way that talking heads and archival material can’t alone,” he says. “The challenge was that we kept discovering things that changed the animation. For example, before we started filming, Lilka remembered her parents told her that a German dentist moved to the apartment in 1940, when the city was annexed to the Third Reich. So, I asked the animators to create a few scenes with a German dentist but then, during the filming, we learned that a Jewish woman was actually the dentist and the German who moved to the apartment was actually a carpenter. After this unexpected twist, the animators re-did all the drawings. The process was in constant flux with new discoveries.”



Few filmmaking pursuits are on such opposite extremes as animation and documentary filmmaking. One is painstaking, time-consuming and takes immense logistical planning, while the other thrives on the unpredictable, the open-ended, the search for that elusive “moment.” Once, combining both modes was considered not just messy but taboo. But they have increasingly proven to blend in ways that can be novel and revealing in films including Ari’s Folman’s *WALTZ WITH BASHIR*, Brett Morgen’s *CHICAGO 10* and Davis Guggenheim’s *HE NAMED ME MALALA*.

“Logically, the combination doesn’t make any sense, but then, when it is properly done it proves to be an effective means of breaking the rules of documentary film. It is that part of what interests me in it as a storyteller,” muses Slawomir “I like experimenting and we brought in a number of unusual tools on this film, including using drawings from the Lodz Ghetto as well as some amazing rephotographs of Lodz by Stefan Brajter. [Rephotography combines two photos taken at the same site but at different times, for example one old and one new.] I’m always looking for new ways to express emotions and to bring audiences deeper into a story than they expected.”

### *Into The Archives*

Counterpointing the animation, the film’s rare archival footage provides a stark window into the lived reality of the Holocaust. As soon as he began on the project, Slawomir dove into intensive research, scouring all the known archives that contain preserved film clips of Lodz over the last century, unearthing images that haven’t yet seen the light of day. It was all-consuming work, and he admits the process took a personal toll as he absorbed hours and hours of nearly inconceivable human cruelty as well as staggering human endurance.

“Much of the footage you see in the film I had seen for the first time,” he notes. “It is a very emotional thing to do this kind of research. It’s not like reading newspaper clippings because you see before you very real individuals and there are many feelings you have to confront.”

Three different organizations provided invaluable resources: the Polish Archives where he spent days watching 35mm footage shot by Russian, German and Hungarian military crews; the U.S. National Archives’ extensive Holocaust-era assets; and the Lodz Photographic Archives.

To lend an even greater human touch to the film, Slawomir utilized the evocative artwork of David Friedmann, who was deported from Prague to the Lodz Ghetto in 1941, where he survived in part by sketching portraits of the ghetto leaders in exchange for provisions. Friedmann’s illustrated diary and artwork were destroyed, his wife and child murdered. After liberation he recreated the scenes he witnessed. Paintings and drawings from his series, “Because They Were Jews!” are in the



collections of Yad Vashem, in Jerusalem, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C.

Then came the cornerstone of the film's immediacy: the in-the-moment discoveries and stirring reactions of Lilka, Paul and Roni as they traveled to Lodz. "What I like is that these three different people who have three different personalities and very different links to Lodz gives you a much richer picture of the history of Lodz," Slawomir says. "There were lots of challenges in balancing the stories, but each one has such important and moving moments in the film."

Slawomir found that each came to an emotional crossroads. "One of my favorite moments is when Lilka enters her childhood apartment for the first time again. We captured it exactly as it happened, it wasn't staged or re-created. I don't work like that, anyway, but it was an incredible organic moment. The emotions were indescribable, and it was something special," he says. "With Paul, there is the moment he walks into the deportation train car and unexpectedly in that very heavy moment he starts to hum a tune. It was so human, and it was amazing to see that happen. With Roni it is when she brings the family menorah back to the place where her grandfather had his textile workshop, and you see how much it means to her."

Getting to these moments took a lot of trust and space and invested time, but challenges come second nature for Slawomir, something he seeks out in his work. "This is a story about trying to gain new perspective from history and memory. It also reflects why I like to make films: to start important discussions and to touch the world in one way or another. That is my passion."

### *Lilka's Story*

Lilka's story in STILL LIFE IN LODZ follows her as she becomes a detective on the trail of her own family's past, searching for the full history of the still life painting she lived with all of her childhood. She knew some of the painting's history already. But, in the course of the filming, Lilka turned up completely unanticipated revelations.

Despite her excitement for learning more, Lilka understood that not all of the questions that haunted her could ever be answered and that clarity evaporates in the midst of genocide.

"The professor I work for at Boston University, Steven Katz [who is the Alvin J. and Shirley Slater Chair in Jewish Holocaust Studies], says the more you know about the Holocaust, the less you understand it. There are things that will always be incomprehensible," Lilka acknowledges.

As a second-generation Holocaust survivor, Lilka knows firsthand the transgenerational nature of trauma. She carries a sense of inherited loss that can never heal over, that will always be

part of her. “Being the child of Holocaust survivors, the most important event of my own life happened before I was even born,” she reflects. “And I saw how those who survived had major PTSD—because you cannot survive losing everybody and emerge as normal. My father had somewhere around 200 relatives before the Holocaust and he was the only one left, so you cannot go back to who you were before that. So, I always wished I could have known my parents before they were destroyed.”

What she does know is that her father, Benjamin Rozenbaum, previously had a wife and two children, who were all killed in the Treblinka death camp. Her mother, Maria, had lived in Warsaw, the cultural heart of Jewish Poland before the War, before being forced into the virtual hell on earth of the Warsaw Ghetto—the largest ghetto in Nazi-occupied Europe—where she lived for a year before mounting a bold escape plan.

“To me it is still a mystery where my mother got this idea to escape. Why would you think you would be successful in this?” Lilka wonders to this day.

“My mother was very elegant and cosmopolitan, and she was very courageous,” Lilka describes. “She didn’t come from money, but she had an engagement ring [from a young man who died during the War] that she used in order to bribe the Jews whose job it was to bring out the dead using enclosed carts. That is how she made her way out of the ghetto.”

Even after her daring escape, Maria could not find safety. She walked 100 kilometers to the small town where she was born, only to find herself trying to adapt to life in a smaller, but still perilous ghetto. Then in October 1942, Maria learned she was herself imminently about to be deported to Treblinka. With days to spare, her life was saved by a chance encounter with a local Polish farm family, the Chorazkiewicz, who, unprompted, offered to hide her on their farm. (The Chorazkiewicz family today is heralded as the “Righteous Among Nations,” those Gentiles who took great personal risks to save Jews during the Holocaust.)

“This couple had come to buy furniture and other items from the Jews who knew they were about to be deported. Suddenly this man who did not know my mother, who was a total stranger, said to her just one sentence: if you need a place to hide, you can come to my place,” recounts Lilka. “She ended up being hidden by them for two and a half years. Why did they do it? I still do not fully know. But they became like a second family to my mother and I maintain a relationship with the entire extended family to this day.”

Though Maria avoided deportation to the camps, the psychic toll of all she experienced was immense. “My mother was totally destroyed by the War emotionally, totally,” Lilka observes.

“Although she functioned and she had children, she never actually could recover from all this stuff. This was very common for people who went through this and as with many second-generation Holocaust survivors it was something my brother and I had to deal with.”

After they married, Lilka’s parents stayed put in their small town for a while, but when a Jew was killed there, they concluded it was too dangerous. That’s when they headed to Lodz, which was then refilling with Jews returning from exile, from hiding and from concentration and labor camps, evincing an extraordinary determination to start anew even in the face of immeasurable grief.

Again, fate had a hand in helping Lilka’s parents secure their new home—an unusually big and handsome apartment in a Lodz tenement built in 1893. Like many buildings in those times, it lacked hot water, but it was smack in the center of town and on one of Lodz’s main streets.

“In 1945 this apartment was incredible for Lodz,” Lilka notes. “It was fully furnished, and it had everything you could need. My parents got it through connections, and they knew they were very lucky to get this place. Many Jews had nowhere to stay in Lodz and they had this large apartment, but this is how it worked in a totalitarian regime: it was all about who you knew.”

Growing up in Lodz in the 50s and 60s, Lilka says she was largely unaware of the extent of antisemitism still percolating below the surface of Polish life under Communism. She and her brother attended the I. L. Peretz Jewish School, a rare institution schooling children of Holocaust survivors, which was ultimately forced to close in 1968. And for most of her childhood, Lilka felt relatively safe.

“Of course, when you are born into an environment you think it is just how things are,” Lilka points out. “We were in the Communist Bloc, and there were always shortages, and it was drab and grey, but we had a Jewish community, and we were openly Jewish. I was not ashamed to be a Jew even though we were a tiny minority by then. Jews were also well represented in professions like doctors and lawyers and we had a good life compared to many others.”

She continues, “We knew we were different and occasionally you would be exposed to antisemitic attitudes. But until we were kicked out in the last purge, I never really felt that being Jewish was a handicap, though I know that others did.”

Everything changed suddenly in the late 1960s, just as Lilka was reaching adulthood. In the aftermath of Israel’s 1967 Six Day War, the Communist government of Poland declared Jews “the enemy of the state,” forcing the majority of Polish Jews, about 20,000, out of the country. “Once again, the government used the Jewish minority as scapegoats, and we were accused of being traitors

who sympathized with Israel's victory over Egypt, Syria and Jordan, Arab countries supported by Poland and the Soviet Bloc. It really ended Jewish life in Poland," says Lilka.

As for her family, there was only one option: "We had to leave. You have no choice when you have become the enemy and you are told 'you don't belong.' It is a traumatic thing to be thrown out of your country. People sometimes ask me why I wasn't happy to be leaving Poland, but it doesn't work like that. Nobody wants to be forced from the only home they have ever known."

That was when Lilka parted ways with the still life painting, with her family's apartment, and with Lodz for what seemed at the time might be forever. But now as she began making a film with the rediscovered painting at its center, one mystery lingered: who had brought the painting to the apartment in the first place?

Lilka remembered being told that the apartment once belonged to a German dentist. That sparked an epic hunt for the elusive German—a hunt that would ultimately reveal something entirely different. To help find the proper records, Lilka worked with Monika Kucner, Director of the Department of German Studies at the University of Lodz. The conclusion to that quest, seen in the film, brings a surprising twist: the original owner was actually a Jewish woman dentist who had broken many barriers. (After the filming of *STILL LIFE IN LODZ* concluded, Kucner discovered that members of the Jewish dentist's family survived, with descendants living in Israel and the U.S. Lilka is now friends with them, sharing information about their grandmother.)

"Without Monika, the movie would not exist because I would not have known who lived there," Lilka says. "Her research capabilities and knowledge of German were instrumental in finding the Jewish woman dentist and discovering who else lived in the building."

To know the names of the people who lived there meant the world to Lilka. Names, she points out, and the individuality that goes with them, are often one of those things that go missing in mass catastrophes. "Each name matters," she says. "To hear the names read aloud is powerful. Like the objects we returned to the building, they are mysterious but also real and palpable."

### *Paul's Story*

Everyone's family memories are vital, complicated and full of mysteries. But that is all greatly magnified for second-generation Holocaust survivors. For as the first generation of survivors passes on, their children are becoming the sole keepers of their essential tales of bravery, horror, sorrow and transcendence. As Elie Wiesel once said, "a person who listens to a witness

becomes a witness,” and in that sense second-generation survivors will soon be the only witnesses left both to the genocide and the flourishing of Jewish life in Europe that preceded it.

Each second-generation survivor has his or her own experience of what that means. For New Jersey-born real estate developer Paul Celler, one responsibility he feels is just to convey his pure, unmitigated awe at what his parents David and Rosa went through.

“Both of my parents had survival stories that are beyond what I would even call amazing. I truly don’t believe any future generations could ever be as strong as they were,” he reflects. “They had such a will to survive and then to come out of that, and to have the tenacity to rebuild lives that had been completely broken...it’s astonishing. My father arrived in this country with five dollars in his pocket, with nearly all of his family killed, only to make an extraordinary life for us from that. They were very special people of great integrity.”

Paul never expected their stories to make it into a feature film, but when he was introduced to Lilka, he was so moved by her fervor to tell the story of Lodz’s Jewish community, he did something unexpected: he not only agreed to join the production and share his own Lodz story, he also came on board as an investor.

“Sometimes a door in life opens only once,” he says with a Talmudic sagacity. “As soon as I met Lilka, I was in, and I was excited to see what I might learn.”

Lilka was convinced Paul would bring more illuminating layers to the film. “He’s a wonderful person and we clicked immediately,” she remembers. “I saw Paul as being very representative of this second generation of survivors who want to know more. He had a lot of questions about his mother, so this was as important a journey to him as it was to me. And it added something new because his story is so different from mine.”

Growing up, Paul heard more from his father, a natural storyteller, than from his mother. His father on occasion would stun Paul with stories that seemed almost otherworldly – for example the story of how he convinced an officer in the brutal Kielce Ghetto to give his own deceased father (Paul’s unmet grandfather) an illegal burial. But for the most part there was silence.

“Neither of them talked a lot about the past,” he notes, “because it was just too painful, and the scars were too deep. But my father would sometimes tell stories that would just rivet you...they were so incredible. My mother really didn’t like to talk about those times, but she would say things randomly at times, so that I did get some picture of all she went through. For example, that’s how I heard the story I tell in the film of her sister.”

What he knew is that his mother Rosa had been living in Lask, Poland, near Lodz, before she was transferred to the Lodz Ghetto along with 700 others, where she stayed alive doing forced labor as a seamstress. When the Nazis liquidated the ghetto, his mother was sent to Auschwitz, before being forced into a “death march” to other camps in Germany where she was liberated in April 1945. (Though Paul’s father also ultimately was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau and then to other concentration camps, he did not meet Rosa until later in a displaced person’s camp near Munich.)

“One thing I’ve learned from my parents’ experiences is that in life you have to have luck. They had a tremendous will to survive, but they also had moments where they were favored by chance,” Paul says. “For example, when my mother was rounded up into the church in Lask, anyone who wasn’t a skilled worker went straight to the Chelmno Death Camp. She had the luck of already being a seamstress.”

Paul also absorbed from his mother that even amidst all the sheer evil and gross inhumanity she witnessed, the single most dispiriting experience of all was watching people she thought cared about her turn against her for no rational reason. “What always bothered her most was seeing her good friends stand there clapping while she was being intimidated by Nazis. It showed that you can never really be sure how people will react. You find out what people are really like during the most adverse times and many people don’t have the strength for integrity,” he says.

Prior to filming *STILL LIFE IN LODZ*, Paul had only been to Poland once, visiting with his son on a Jewish Heritage Tour, a trip he terms “life-changing.”

“When you go there [Auschwitz] for the first time, you come back and you’re a different person. You never complain again about anything. It puts everything in perspective.”

He recalls that his mother did not want him to visit Poland where so much innocent blood had been spilled, but he explained his motivation to her. “I told her I have to go; I have to see what happened and that’s the only way I can truly start to understand it. I do understand why it’s a hard trip for some people to make, but I think there is no substitute for seeing it yourself.”

Returning for a second time with Lilka, Roni and the film crew was every bit as packed with raw emotions as that first trek. “It was a powerful and very meaningful journey,” he says.

There were some mystery-filled moments for Paul, especially pondering if a blurry photograph of a woman on a Lodz Ghetto street might actually be his mother captured as a young woman. And there were instants beyond words, especially at Radegast Station, on the edge of the former Lodz Ghetto, which was both the port of entry for those deported to the Lodz Ghetto and the point of departure for those sent to the Death Camps at Chelmno and Auschwitz.

Three preserved cattle cars stand today at the station, their doors open, though eerily empty in sharp contrast to what Paul's mother would have experienced. Through accounts such as that of Holocaust survivor Sara Zyskind (writing in her memoir *Stolen Years*) we know some of what they experienced: "The cattle cars were filled in an orderly fashion. Exactly 32 people in each, irrespective of some child, mother or father left outside. Begging brought no results. The iron door was slid with a clatter and secured with thick bolts; two soldiers sat on the stairs with bayonets."

When Paul entered a car similar to the one that took his mother to Auschwitz it was among the most emotionally overwhelming events of a trip full of intensity. But there were also moments of joy, especially when Paul had the chance to play the piano inside Izrael Poznanski's Palace, formerly the extravagant neo-Baroque home of the eponymous Jewish textile magnate.

A self-taught musical prodigy once offered a scholarship to Juilliard, Paul loved being able to make music in a place rife with so many mixed feelings. "Paul is a bit of a musical genius, but this was a completely unexpected moment," says Lilka. "The palace, which is now part of a shopping mall, symbolizes the height of Jewish power in Lodz, so for him to play there felt like a miracle."

### *Roni's Story*

While Lilka's story shines a light on the post-War era in Lodz and Paul's story is a passage into the Holocaust, Lilka and Slawomir also wanted to explore the pre-War years when the Jewish community was central to Lodz's rise as a city. In many ways, it is the most invisible era of the three because so many of the families who created that society would later perish. It's a reality that makes every photograph, diary and memento that still exists from that time especially precious.

Through providence, Slawomir and Lilka met a woman closely connected to, and still fervent about, that past. This was Roni Ben Ari, a celebrated Israeli photographer and multi-disciplinary artist who probes social issues and the web of history in her evocative works. Roni was born in Israel. But her father, Abraham, was born in Lodz, and her family's history was quite literally woven into the city thanks to her grandfather Moishe Halpern's once bustling workshop where he produced the brocaded fabric for ladies' corsets. Abraham also took up the family loom, weaving bedspreads and tablecloths. In 1926, the family left Poland for Romania before emigrating to Israel, where they helped build that nation's prosperous textile industry.

In 2016, Roni created a poignant and thought-provoking exhibition at the Central Museum of Textiles in Lodz. Entitled "Loom/Father/Requiem," the exhibit featured richly textured multi-media pieces inspired by the jacquard looms that her grandfather and father used while living in



Lodz. (The exhibit was so well-received it is now a permanent installation.) Around the same time, Lilka's research led her to realize that Roni's grandfather lived and worked in the same building where Lilka grew up. Their meeting seemed inevitable.

"In fact, Roni's father was born in the building, so I felt this coincidence was incredible," Lilka says. "Having Roni join the film gave us the connection we were looking for to that period in the 1920s when this was a Jewish building. And because Roni is such a successful and insightful artist, she adds another perspective to the film."

Adds Roni: "Lilka and I share a feeling of obligation to preserve the history of Lodz. Though we had never met before, we felt a bond through the building on Kilinskiego Street."

The conceptual beauty of fabric, fiber and mechanical looms became entwined with Roni's soul early on in life as she watched her father work. She recalls "the sounds of the looms, the scents of oils lubricating the machines, the dust. I still remember how my father would bend over a loom that got stuck, fixing it stubbornly until it re-started."

Those memories led her to dig more deeply into her roots in Lodz and became the springboard for the "Loom/Father/Requiem" exhibit, in which the many parts of an industrial loom became a metaphor for interconnections. "I wanted to create an artwork containing the very DNA of the looms my grandfather and father knew so intimately. It became a requiem to the looms of yesteryear," she says.

Roni made her very first trip to Lodz with her father who took her to see the vestiges of the former Halpern textile workshop. There, she found herself flooded with both wonder and sorrow. "It was sad to see the gloomy colors of the old building and a neglected courtyard," she recalls. "At that time, the building was wrapped in nets that prevented the crumbling bricks from falling. People peeked through the windows and drew the curtains for fear we might have come to take our apartment back. And yet, it was also so exciting to see my father point with his finger towards the apartment on the third floor where he lived. And when he approached the rusty, iron carpet-beating stand that still stood as it had in his childhood, it was wonderful to see the gleam in his eyes."

She was moved by walking through the city but was also struck by a powerful feeling of absence. "There were new malls and new sidewalks, but we also saw abandoned buildings, graffiti-laden walls, and there was a sense of emptiness in the areas that Jews once inhabited," she describes.

Since then, Roni has traveled to Lodz many times and has a cautious optimism about its future. "The life of Jews in Lodz at this time is not very visible, but there are people interested in reconnecting with the Jewish heritage in the city. Unfortunately, in our visits, we have also seen

swastikas smeared on the walls and a painting of a man strangled with a rope. Yet, I have a dream mixed with hope that art has the power to mediate between hatred gaps.”

As part of her journey in *STILL LIFE IN LODZ*, Roni was exhilarated to have the opportunity to bring another object of memory back to Lodz: the menorah she inherited from her grandfather Moshe. She muses that it is her own “still life,” in the sense that it is an inanimate item that is nevertheless full of visceral life.

“Returning my grandfather's menorah to the windowsill where it once sat at Kilinskiego 41 in Lodz was a chance to honor the memory of my Jewish family in a meaningful way,” she explains. “I hope the audience watching the film will experience some of the emotions I felt.”

### *Music*

Another layer of intimate beauty in *STILL LIFE IN LODZ* comes from the original score that works hand-in-hand with the film's swirl of emotions. Keeping the connection to Lodz, Slawomir collaborated with composer Wojciech Lemanski, a graduate of the Lodz Music Academy who has been composing for film and television since the early 2000s and was nominated for Best Composer at the Polish Film Awards. Later the score was recorded by the renowned Lodz Primuz String Orchestra conducted by Lukasz Blaszczyk.

“Wojciech actually composed the music directly to the finished film, which I think further heightened the emotions,” says Slawomir.

The music rises in the film's emotive climactic moments as Lilka gets the chance to hang the still-life momentarily in the apartment once so full of her family's spirit. When she finds the very same nail hole from decades ago it is as if the wall was waiting for the painting's return all this time.

For Lilka, it was a momentous happening. “There was the feeling of a circle being closed,” she says. “The apartment is almost a ruin now, but in a certain way, it felt right for the painting to come back to this empty building. The emptiness reminds us all of the absence of Lodz's Jewish community.”

## A Brief History of Lodz

“The city of Lodz is a major character in our film,” says Lilka Elbaum. Indeed, the city is seen both through the panorama of history and the up-close intimacy of those who called it home.

Populated since the Middle Ages, Lodz (pronounced *Woodge* in Polish) absolutely exploded with growth in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Although under the administration of Imperial Russia, at lightning speed, Lodz became Poland’s second largest city and a teeming industrial hub, with a polyglot mix of Polish, Russian, German and Jewish cultures.

Dubbed “the Manchester of Poland,” the streets filled with redbrick textile factories and a vivid melting pot of working-class families. Meanwhile, newly wealthy textile tycoons erected Baroque palaces and lavish villas that became part of the city’s persona. Lodz soon emerged as a cultural mecca, attracting artists, architects, musicians and intellectuals. The world-renowned pianist Artur Rubinstein was born in Lodz, where he debuted as a seven-year-old child prodigy in 1894.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lodz had a strikingly Jewish identity—the second largest Jewish community in Poland after Warsaw. Despite the constraints of anti-Jewish policies across Poland, in 1914 a third of Lodz’s factories had Jewish owners, including some of the city’s famed “textile barons,” and there were Jewish leaders in every craft and trade, from the arts to the sciences.

“There was a brief period when Jews and Poles seemed to have learned how to get along together. There was a lot of Jewish life in Lodz and it was a booming time,” says Paul Celler.

### *War Time*

Then came World War I, which left Lodz physically damaged and under German occupation. Economic hard times descended on the city and as they did, life took a darker turn for the Jewish community. Attacks mounted, antisemitic political parties rose into power locally and strict, repressive anti-Jewish decrees made even the most basic routines of life and business increasingly impossible.

Still, at the outbreak of World War II, an estimated 233,000 Jews, about 34% of the populace, called Lodz home. As acts of shocking brutality spread fear, some Jewish families fled, but by the time the German Army occupied the city in September of 1939, it was too late for those who remained. Immediately annexed to the Third Reich, Lodz was renamed Litzmannstadt (after a German general who died in Lodz in World War I) and fell under Nazi rule. In short order, 39

synagogues were destroyed, Jewish bank accounts were blocked, Nazis took over Jewish-owned factories, Jews were required to wear yellow stars and arbitrary arrests and beatings began.

The Nazis then moved to entirely separate Jews from the life of the city.

### *The Lodz Ghetto*

On March 1, 1940, infamously known as “Bloody Thursday,” German troops began driving hundreds of thousands of Jewish citizens into an area that would be known as the Litzmannstadt (Lodz) Ghetto—executing on the spot anyone who resisted. As the savage strategy unfolded, the Jewish community found themselves packed into a space of just 1.5 square miles, completely sealed-off with barbed wire fencing, leaving those within little means of subsistence. All phones and radios were confiscated to intensify the total isolation and police were ordered to shoot anyone trying to leave.

The Nazis appointed an internal Jewish administration to oversee life inside the ghetto, but the inhumane conditions quickly deteriorated. Hunger, violence and epidemic disease escalated.

By early 1942, the Nazis had transformed the Lodz Ghetto into a vast de facto labor camp of nonstop workshops and factories. The schools, charities and hospitals the Jewish administration had built were closed, and 90% of the populace—anyone over the age of 10— was ordered to work for the German war machine and German consumer economy. That year, residents of the ghetto were forcibly deported to the nearby Chelmno Death Camp, where thousands of Jewish and Roma people were murdered by asphyxiation. From August to September of 1942, all children under 10 and all persons over 65 in the Lodz Ghetto were deported and murdered at Chelmno.

In late August of 1944, as the Germans were facing defeat on the battlefield, Heinrich Himmler ordered the final “liquidation” of the Lodz Ghetto. The city’s remaining 76,701 Jews were deported to Auschwitz, most murdered in the Birkenau gas chambers.

### *Post-War Return*

Soviet troops liberated Lodz on January 19, 1945. They found only 870 Jewish survivors in the city at that time, though estimates are that somewhere between 7,000 and 10,000 residents of the Lodz Ghetto survived the War.

This was a time of immeasurable mourning and reckoning. And yet, as the city resurfaced out of the dark depths of wartime, the Jewish population began to resurge. By 1946, Lodz was

home to 50,000 Jews. Some returned from places of hiding in Poland or exile in the Soviet Union. Others had survived the camps. Still others traveled to Lodz from the ruins of Warsaw or from different regions of Poland feeling that there might be safety in a larger community. Many were in transit, hoping to leave for Israel or elsewhere as soon as they could arrange for it.

In the early days after the War, the situation remained extremely precarious. Spasms of violence and systemic prejudice continued. Some former residents came back only to find their homes had been occupied by their neighbors and many Jews found themselves unable to return to their former businesses or professions. Even so, there was also an enlivening, if bittersweet, sense of community, of a spirit that nothing could crush. For a time, in the mid 1940s, Jewish culture in Lodz was visibly renewed as it once again became a center for Yiddish theater, literature and the arts.

At the same time, the increasing Sovietization of Poland in the 1940s put renewed pressure on Jews to leave. In 1949, as Stalinism advanced, all independent Jewish political parties, organizations, and institutions were barred, sparking a new wave of emigration through the 1950s.

In 1968 came a major blow to the remaining Jewish community. In response to Israel's Six Day War, the Polish government launched an aggressive antisemitic smear campaign, using it as an opportunity to purge its ranks from Jews who often occupied high-level positions in the government. When the government called for Jews to be removed from all public service jobs, and vicious attacks and intimidation against Jews in Lodz returned, the past seemed to be repeating itself. From 1968 to 1970, the majority of Jewish citizens departed Lodz for good, leaving only a tiny remnant in the city.

With the collapse of Communism in Poland came a small revival as Jewish freedoms were officially restored. At the end of the 1990s, in a sign signaling a new era, the Lodz Jewish Community Center reopened in its original spot on Pomorska Street, complete with a synagogue.

### *Contemporary Lodz*

Today, the city of Lodz has a modern, creative veneer layered over its well-preserved pre-War architecture and layout. Flashy new office buildings, restored brick factories and design-forward shops stand side-by-side with crumbling tenements and vacant warehouses. The area where so many struggled to stay alive in the Lodz Ghetto has been partially paved over and replaced with Communist-era buildings, but beneath the façade, if one knows the history, the ghosts are evident.

There remains a Jewish presence in the city, though small and watchful of flare-ups of antisemitism, especially with the recent alarming rise in nationalism and hate groups throughout Europe and the world. There are also signs that the Jewish peoples' spirit endures, with the community now planning to build the first new synagogue in Poland since World War Two.

Says director Slawomir Grünberg: "There is a resurgence of Jewish culture happening throughout Poland. More and more people in Poland are discovering they have Jewish roots and there are small but strong Jewish communities in several cities. There also still remains significant antisemitism. To me, that is another reason it is so important to keep making films like this, to tell these stories, so that people continue to remember the history."

## About the Filmmaker

**Slawomir Grünberg** is an Emmy Award-winning documentary producer, director and cameraman. Born in Poland, he graduated from the Polish Film School in Lodz before emigrating to the United States in 1981.

He has since directed and produced over 45 documentary films spanning a broad range of topic and issues. In addition to *Still Life In Lodz*, they include *Don't Cry When I'm Gone*, *Karski & The Lords Of Humanity*, *Shimon's Returns*, *Castaways*, *Santa Rosa*, *The Peretzniks*, *Portraits Of Emotion*, *Coming Out In Poland*, *The Legacy Of Jedwabne* and *Saved By Deportation*.

Grünberg's acclaimed documentary *School Prayer: A Community At War* aired on PBS stations and garnered an Emmy Award. The film also won The Jan Karski Award, a competition designed to recognize and to reward outstanding television documentaries produced on the theme of moral courage. Among his awards, Grünberg has received the Guggenheim Fellowship, the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship and the Soros Justice Media Fellowship. His credits as director of photography include: *Legacy*, an Academy Award nominee for Best Documentary feature in 2001, and *Sister Rose's Passion*, which won Best Short Doc at Tribeca Film Festival in 2004 and received an Academy Award nomination for Best Documentary Short in 2005.

An English edition of the book Slawomir Grünberg—*A Man with the Camera* by Barbara Grünberg, which includes a chapter about the making of *Still Life in Lodz*, will be published in April of 2021.

## About the Cast

Born in Lodz, **Lilka (Rozenbaum) Elbaum** graduated from the Jewish Peretz School. After completing her first year of studies at the University of Lodz, in 1968, she, together with thousands of Polish Jews, was forced to leave Poland and settled in Canada. She now lives in the United States. The daughter of Holocaust survivors Maria Koper and Benjamin Rozenbaum, she works at Boston University's Elie Wiesel Center for Jewish Studies. She has for many years researched the history of Polish Jewry, focusing on the Holocaust. Through her work, but also out of sentiment for the city and the country where she was born, she maintains close ties to Poland.

Together with Professor Monika Kucner, Lilka is currently writing a book with the working title *Still Life: Family Histories*, to be published by the University of Lodz Press in 2021/2022.

**Paul Celler** grew up in New Jersey, where he lived and worked for most of his life. The son of two Holocaust survivors – David Celler and Rosa Posalska – Paul finds meaning and grounding through kindness, his connection to his family and community, the study of history, and his spiritual practice. He places a high value on *Tikkun Olam*, a Jewish concept defined by acts of kindness and integrity performed to repair the world. The surest ways he knows how to do this are by playing music, and spending time with his wife, his three children, and his three grandchildren.

**Roni (Halpern) Ben Ari**, an internationally acclaimed photographer and multimedia artist, was born and lives in Israel. Her exhibition *Loom/Father/Requiem* was shown at the Central Museum of Textiles in Lodz, and at the Eretz Israel Museum in Tel Aviv. Her grandfather, Moshe Halpern, was a weaver of jacquard in pre-war Lodz and her father, Abraham Halpern, continued the family tradition in Israel. Roni sees herself as a weaver of memories from the looms' DNA.