Jewish life before the Holocaust in thousands of never-seen photos

by Lauren Markoe

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(RNS) In 1920, a young Jewish man with a keen eye fled anti-Semitism in his native Russia, arrived in Berlin and began snapping pictures. Roman Vishniac would go on to become one of the 20th century's great photographers.

But Vishniac has always been appreciated for more than his art; the emigre created a visual record of European Jewish life before the Holocaust, documenting the world of shtetl rabbis, Jewish farmers, and Hebrew school students in his 1983 book *A Vanished World*.

"His photographs of pre-war Jewish life became the iconic face of a world that was destroyed," said Judith Cohen, director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's photographic reference collection.

Now Vishniac's lifework—far more than any one book could contain—is open to the world, online. The museum hopes that more eyes on his legacy can help identify the people—many of them murdered by the Nazis—who live on in Vishniac's images.

On August 26 a partnership between the museum and New York's International Center of Photography, which owns Vishniac's negatives and photographs, launched a new website.

The ICP gave the responsibility for digitizing Vishniac's negatives—most of which had never been published or printed—to Ardon Bar-Hama, who had digitized the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The archive's more than 9,000 photographs include portraits of the larger culture—nuns, window washers, the Berlin Zoo, train stations, and a dog that doesn't want to be walked—in addition to Vishniac's studies of European Jewish life.

In 1935, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the world’s largest Jewish relief group, asked him to take photographs to help raise money for beleaguered Jews in Eastern Europe, who suffered anti-Semitism and poverty.

When Hitler’s intentions for the Jews became clearer, the relief agency in 1939 sent Vishniac to document Nazism in Western Europe, where Vishniac also worked as a freelancer. So as not to raise suspicion, Cohen said, the photographer would sometimes pose his young daughter in front of Nazi propaganda so it would look as if he was taking a picture of her, as opposed to examples of Nazi depravity.

The ICP and the museum hope the online archive will only increase the likelihood that viewers might identify people they know in Vishniac photographs, and share their stories.

This has happened several times before with Vishniac’s work. Several years ago, for example, a woman walked up to a photograph of a farmer’s smiling, deeply lined face at an exhibition at the Holocaust museum, and saw Chaim Simcha Mechlowitz, her grandfather, who had died in Auschwitz.

Vishniac himself survived the Nazis, though he was arrested and interned in France after the German invasion. After immigrating to the U.S. in 1940, he resumed his career, and became a pioneer of photomicroscopy—photography that uses a microscope to show what the naked eye cannot see.