

NEW BRUNSWICK: Tracing roots of Jewish culture

Long before Oprah Winfrey learned of her lineage to an African tribe, filmmakers Pearl Gluck and Marian Marzynski traced their Jewish roots from America to Hungary and Poland in the documentaries "Divan" and "Shtetl."

As societies become more multicultural — and as more people discover their cultural heritage - many may identify with the filmmakers' moving and enlightening experiences of producing the documentaries.

Gluck and Marzynski will screen clips from and discuss the development of their films on March 19 at 7:30 p.m. as part of a three-day international conference, "Beyond Eastern Europe: Jewish Cultures in Israel and the United States," held by the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life at Rutgers University and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

All sessions on Sunday, March 18, and Monday evening, March 19, are free and open to the public, and take place at the Douglass College Center, 100 George St., New Brunswick.

The film "Divan" is a Hasidic tale developed from a research project to collect oral histories of Yiddish speakers in Hungary. In the documentary, Gluck travels from her Hasidic community in Brooklyn to her roots in Hungary.

Along the way, a colorful cast of characters gets involved – the couch exporter, her ex-communist cousin, a pair of matchmakers, and a renegade group of formerly ultra-Orthodox Jews.

Marzynski, a Holocaust survivor and documentarian for more than 30 years, created "Shtetl," a Yiddish word to denote the "place where the journey to understand who we are begins and ends." The documentary, which debuted on PBS in 1996, explores Marzynski's Polish roots as he interacts with other Holocaust survivors in Poland, Israel and the United States. The film program is the Abram Matlofsky Memorial Program funded by the Karma Foundation.

The conference's keynote talk, "Russian Roots in Israeli Soil: From the Dnieper to the Jordan," the Ruth and Alvin Rockoff Annual Lecture, will take place at 8:00 p.m. March 18. The talk will be presented by renowned scholar Anita Shapira of Tel Aviv University.

Shapira, winner of the National Jewish Book Award for her book *The Zionist Resort to Force, 1882-1948*, is the Ruben Merinfeld Professor in the Study of Zionism and the chair of the Chaim Weizmann Institute for the Study of Zionism and Israel at Tel Aviv University.

The conference will compare the influence of Jewish Eastern European culture on language and literature, theatre and film, and food traditions and religious practice in Israeli and American Jewish cultures. It will bring together renowned scholars from Israel and the United States and will feature four Rutgers Jewish studies faculty members.

The event will open with the talk "The Chickpea and the Jewish Question: On the Tenacity of Ashkenazic Jewish Culture," setting the stage for the conference discussions about the influence of Eastern European culture on contemporary Jewish life. A series of sessions will examine the following topics:

Homelands and Symbolic Landscapes Panelists will discuss the common roots of three different groups of Jewish colonists: the Zionists who settled in Palestine, the immigrants to the U.S. who created farming communities such as in Vineland, and Jewish settlers in South Ukraine. They will also look at how Eastern European culture shaped the Zionist settlers' perceptions of the land; their perceptions of the desert and their vision of future settlements; and conflicting attitudes toward the Arabs, in particular the Bedouins.

Jewish Eastern Europe on Display Panelists will examine two contemporary approaches to memorializing prewar East European Jewish life – Yaffa Eliach's proposal to erect a Shtetl Museum, a large-scale living history museum, on a site outside Tel Aviv, and the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which broke ground in Warsaw. Both attempt to evoke the rich culture of the Jewish people that thrived in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust.

Modern Jewish Literary Imagination: Panelists will explore the world of Russian-born writer Sholem Aleichem, who made Jewish literature accessible to millions of Yiddish speaking Jews. *Fiddler on the Roof*, the famous adaptation of his story "Tevye the Dairyman," became symbolic of life in prewar Eastern Europe.

Support for the conference has been provided by the Posen Foundation and the Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences. Advance registration is requested.

For more information or to R.S.V.P., go to jewishstudies.rutgers.edu or contact csjlrvp@rci.rutgers.edu or (732) 932-2033.

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