Russian American Foundation
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The Harriman Institute, Columbia University
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The Memory of Time & Space: Russian and American Jewish Women Photographers in Diaspora
May 12 – August 17

Photo by Svetlana Didorenko,
"Katia Shraga: Grandmother’s Scissors and Ring"
Soviet Jews, as historian David Schneer has pointed out, were among some of the most important builders of the profession of Soviet photography. Beginning in the 1920s, Jewish men and women, as members of the Soviet avant-garde of state photographers and photojournalists, transformed how people in the Soviet Union visualized, conceptualized and thought about their country, the war and the world around them. Indeed, in this exhibit one can see not only the special relationship between Jews and photography, but also the critical role played by women in developing this field and profession. These women of the Russian-Jewish diaspora are building on a long American tradition, as Jewish women played an integral role in photography in America during the first half of the twentieth century. Jewish women, as Deborah Dash Moore highlights, developed the area of "street photography" that presented a radically new vision of the city. Far from the poverty-ridden streets of early-twentieth century photography, they re-envisioned the city as "accessible, varied, interconnected and worthy of contemplation."

These three female photographers carry on these traditions as they seek to capture such diverse topics as the elder generation of Russian-Jewish immigrant families, family heirlooms of Russian-Jewish migrants, or contemporary Jewish life in Ukraine. In short, the portraits of Svetlana Didorenko, Yulia Levitt, and Joan Roth remind us of the unique perspective women can offer on the constantly shifting world of Russian-Jewish immigrant life. Coming to photography from different paths, these women, as Gloria Steinem argues, approach "the Jewish world as if women mattered" and show how "across all the boundaries of geography and language, there is not only a common world of belief, but a common world of women." Their work highlights not only the centrality of gender to contemporary Russian, Jewish and immigrant life, but also how the history of the Jews in Russia cannot be told if one only looks at a map of Russia or Ukraine. Migration has made this community transnational; the experience of Russian Jewry can no longer be told by looking only at one geographical region. These evocative photographs, which have been published and exhibited worldwide and are included in some of the most important art collections in the United States, are presented together here for the first time through the support of the Russian American Foundation, COJECO, and the Harriman Institute of Columbia University to mark the 12th Annual Russian Heritage Month®.

Professor Rebecca Kobrin, Harriman Institute, Columbia University
Yulia Levit was born and raised in Moscow and moved to New York when at the age of 21 along with her mother, father, both grandmothers, her grandfather, family dog, cat, my father's bike and my violin. Yulia currently resides in New York City and works as a professional photographer. Yulia is a documentary and lifestyle photographer. Back in the day, when she was helping her father develop film under the red light and watched photographs come to life, she knew she was "in" and that there is no way out. Eventually Yulia would become a photographer. She took some pretty sizeable detours through mathematics and computer science, but ultimately ended right where she wanted to be and couldn't be happier.

Speak Memory Project - For the last two years she has been working on the Speak Memory Project, which was originally conceived as a COJECO BluePrint Fellowship project, trying to hear and preserve memories and stories of her grandparents' generation.
Renowned photographer Joan Roth has focused her lens on women for over 40 years. Her photographs are published and exhibited worldwide, as well as featured in some of the world’s most important art collections and institutions in the United States and around the world. Her books of photographs include Shopping Bag Ladies of New York and Jewish Women: A World of Tradition and Change. She has been the photographer of record since 1994 for Project Kesher, a women’s network throughout the Commonwealth of Independent States of the former Soviet Union (CIS). She is staff photographer for Lilith Magazine and independent publisher and president of Jolen Press.

Most of the photographs featured in this exhibit were taken in the Ukraine, where Roth feels great sense of identification and which was exceptionally moving for her because her father fled the Ukraine in advance of the Germans.

For many years Joan Roth continues the collaboration with the Russian American Foundation on various projects.
Svetlana Didorenko was born in Odessa, Ukraine in 1977 to a family of Soviet engineers and doctors, and emigrated to the US soon after the breakup of the USSR. She followed her family's technical leanings and worked in neurology research and robotics engineering. In 2011 however, following her interest in documentary film and photojournalism she obtained a Master's degree from Columbia University Journalism School and since then focused on documentary storytelling. She's a freelance media producer in New York City and most recently worked on a documentary film series for the Russian Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow, Russia. My Russian Jewish Family Relic is a multimedia project realized in 2013 as part of the BluePrint Fellowship project of COJECO.

The project: My Russian Jewish Family Relic portrait series
This portrait series presents the stories of family heirlooms of the Jewish immigrants from the former USSR living in the US. From household objects to photographs and preserved documents, these objects passed on from generation to generation each has a story, which reflects personal joys and tragedies of the Jews of the former Soviet Union against the backdrop of the Russian Jewish history from 19th century to today. The series explores personal relationships with memory and our common history through family lore.
This project is made possible through a grant by the BluePrint Fellowship project of COJECO, funded by the UJA-Federation of New York and Genesis Philanthropy Group.
The Russian American Foundation was founded in 1997 to encourage interest in and understanding of Russian heritage among all communities in the U.S., as well as to promote reciprocal interest in American heritage among global communities of the former Soviet Union. Over the years RAF’s programming and activities have expanded to incorporate:

- Promoting cultural, economic and social development, progress and well-being within the Russian speaking community in the New York area and the greater United States.
- Promoting a better understanding and acceptance of the Russian speaking community among the various other communities of the New York area and the greater United States.
- Engaging in activities which assist the Russian speaking community of the New York area, and the greater United States in preserving their heritage, culture and language.

COJECO (Council of Jewish Émigré Community Organizations) is the central coordinating body of the Russian Jewish community of NY that was formed in 2001 to facilitate the successful integration of Russian-speaking Jews into the greater American Jewish community, while preserving our unique cultural heritage. Today COJECO continues to support its member organizations, represents the Russian-speaking Jewish community and advocates for its needs. COJECO serves as a bridge between the Russian-speaking Jewish community and the American Jewish community by providing informal Jewish education, leadership training, as well as funding and support to American Jewish organizations in developing culturally sensitive and appropriate programs for Russian-speaking Jews.

The COJECO Blueprint Fellowship is a highly selective year-long leadership program that provides Russian-speaking Jewish young adults with the opportunity to creatively explore the relationship between personal identity and the Jewish community through the creation of a community project.

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Curator - Marina Kovalyov
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