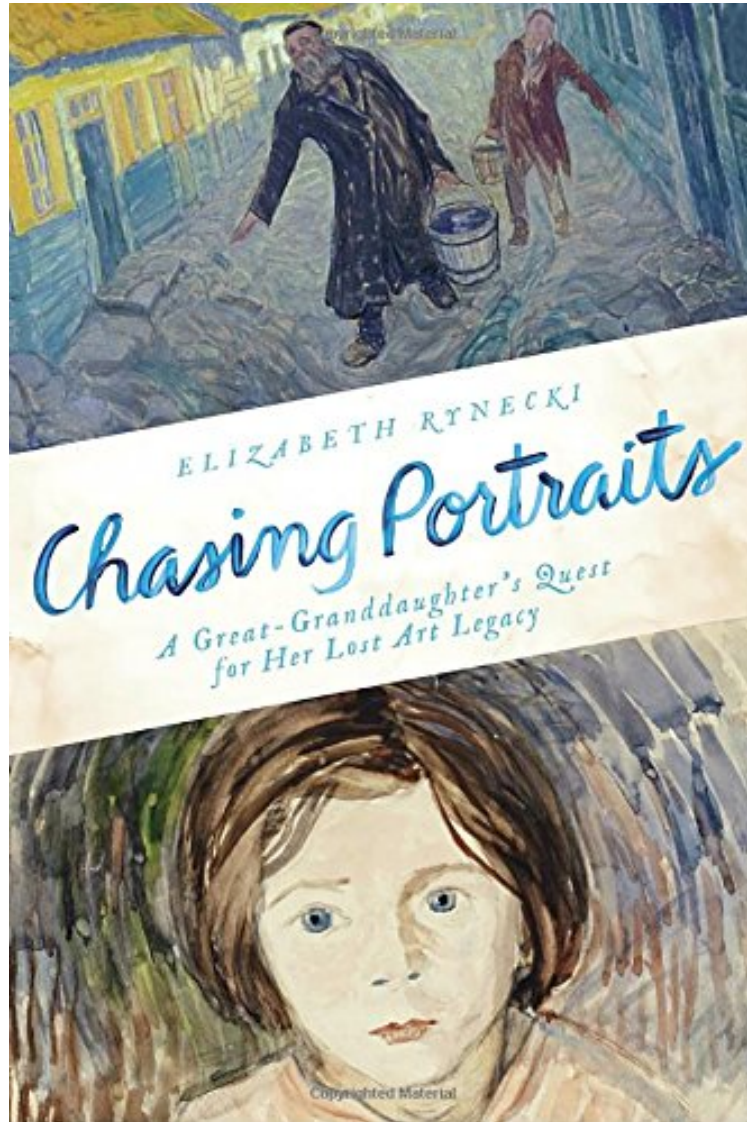


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Chasing Portraits: A Great-Granddaughter's Quest for Her Lost Art Legacy

Elizabeth Rynecki

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Elizabeth Rynecki : Chasing Portraits: A Great-Granddaughter's Quest for Her Lost Art Legacy before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Chasing Portraits: A Great-Granddaughter's Quest for Her Lost Art Legacy:

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difficult to explain any circumstances to the why and wherefore. Her love for her heritage and the drive for her to recapture it makes Elizabeth a worthy researcher and Rebbet to the past. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By Gretchen Anthony An inspiring story of dedication to family, history and life. Compelling. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Worth your time! By Mary G. An excellent read. Through the author's quest to discover her great grandfather's lost art depicting Jewish life and culture during the run up to WWII in Poland, she discovered not only his world, but also her place in it. The author showed determination, perseverance, but ultimately the magnanimity to share her grandfather's artistic legacy with the world.

The memoir of one woman's emotional quest to find the art of her Polish-Jewish great-grandfather, lost during World War II. Moshe Rynecki's body of work reached close to eight hundred paintings and sculptures before his life came to a tragic end. It was his great-granddaughter Elizabeth who sought to rediscover his legacy, setting upon a journey to seek out what had been lost but never forgotten. The everyday lives of the Polish-Jewish community depicted in Moshe Rynecki's paintings simply blended into the background of Elizabeth Rynecki's life when she was growing up. But the art transformed from familiar to extraordinary in her eyes after her grandfather, Moshe's son George, left behind journals detailing the loss her ancestors had endured during World War II, including Moshe's art. Knowing that her family had only found a small portion of Moshe's art, and that many more pieces remained to be found, Elizabeth set out to find them. Before Moshe was deported to the ghetto, he entrusted his work to friends who would keep it safe. After he was killed in the Majdanek concentration camp, the art was dispersed all over the world. With the help of historians, curators, and admirers of Moshe's work, Elizabeth began the incredible and difficult task of rebuilding his collection. Spanning three decades of Elizabeth's life and three generations of her family, this touching memoir is a compelling narrative of the richness of one man's art, the devastation of war, and one woman's unexpected path to healing.

Praise for *Chasing Portraits* A page-turning personal history of [Elizabeth] Rynecki's search for her great-grandfather's legacy. A wonderful story beautifully told. Rynecki's years-long search, successes, frustrations, and failures are a study in perseverance. Kirkus (starred review) *Chasing Portraits* is a miraculous story of heartbreaking loss and spine-tingling discovery. In her search for her great-grandfather's paintings, Elizabeth Rynecki becomes a genealogist, an art historian, a detective, a crusader for justice, and a time traveler, peering through windows and into paintings to unearth her family's past. Her memoir will break your heart, but it will have you cheering wildly too because every new discovery is a triumph of art and love over hatred and loss. Amy Stewart, New York Times Bestselling Author of *The Drunken Botanist* A heartfelt, vivid account of a hunt for lost masterpieces painted by a great-grandfather that prove to be unforgettable relics of a rich world swept away by war, taking readers on a lushly detailed international journey that reminds us that the search for missing paintings is, at heart, a search for missing history. Anne-Marie O'Connor, National Bestselling Author of *The Lady in Gold* Elizabeth Rynecki's *Chasing Portraits* is part of a gathering wave of stories by the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of Holocaust survivors and Holocaust victims' stories that accept the burden of carrying this legacy forward, with all the anguish, the unanswered questions, and the unexpected joy of recognition this entails. With devotion and determination, Rynecki movingly demonstrates that, even after such unimaginable loss, even seventy years later, fragments of individual lives and so the untold stories of individuals can still be recovered . . . if only you keep searching. Glenn Kurtz, Author of *Three Minutes in Poland* In recent years, there has been an increase in the awareness of the problem of looted and stolen art, and *Chasing Portraits* makes an important contribution to the field. But it's much more than just a tale of detective work. Elizabeth Rynecki's story is transcendent, presenting the reader with an elevated level of passion and duty. For this reason, it sets itself apart from the rest of the field. Anthony M. Amore, Author of *Stealing Rembrandt's* and *The Art of the Con* About the Author Elizabeth Rynecki is the great-granddaughter of the Polish-Jewish artist, Moshe Rynecki (1881-1943). She grew up with his paintings prominently displayed on the walls of her family home and understood from an early age that the art connected her to a legacy from the old country: Poland. In 1999, Elizabeth designed the original Moshe Rynecki: Portrait of a Life in Art website. Today, she continually updates it to keep it current regarding academic research, educational resources, and tracking lost Rynecki paintings. Elizabeth has a BA in Rhetoric from Bates College and a masters degree in Rhetoric and Speech Communications from UC Davis. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. One Jewish Girl Should Know "Echh, what is friendship? There are never good friends. They all want something," Grandpa George said to me from where he sat on the couch in my grandparents' living room. "But, Grandpa, I have friends at school." "You just think they're friends. There are no such things as friends. Never trust anyone," he said, wagging his finger at me. Grandma, who sat next to me, put her arm around my shoulders and came to my defense. "Why do you say this to her? She's just a girl," she told Grandpa. "A girl?" Grandpa half stated and half asked. He pursed his lips, shrugged his shoulders, and lifted his hands to question. "Alex," he said, and pointed at Dad, "was younger than she is now when the Nazis marched into Poland. Alex watched me dig ditches to slow down the advancing German forces, and he wasn't even three yet! She should know these things. A Jewish girl. She should know," he said to Grandma. "Never trust anyone? But, Grandpa, that's mean. You shouldn't say bad

things about my friends." I tried to say it with conviction, but I felt uncertain. The girls at school were not always so nice. Sometimes they made fun of me. They called me "Elizabeth ding-dong" because my middle name is Bel. And that was Grandpa's fault. He had asked my parents to give me a middle name after his sister. My great-aunt's actual name was Bronisawa, so Bel was a nickname. She had died a long time ago, in Warsaw, a place I had never been and wasn't certain I could locate on a map. After all, I was only in third grade and we had spent much of the school year studying California Native Americans like the Miwok tribe, not world geography. I thought being named after her was supposed to be an honor. I wasn't sure. I wondered if people had called her "ding-dong." Grandpa looked at me, looked at Grandma, and then switched from English into Polish. I recognized the sounds and rhythm even though I didn't understand a word. I knew *tak* meant "yes," and *na zdrowie* (*Nahzdrovya*), which is said in a toast or after someone sneezes, meant something like "to your health." But those were not the words they used. I might not have understood the details, but I got the gist. Grandpa said something. Grandma fidgeted with her rings and gave a short response. Grandpa raised his voice and spoke emphatically. Grandma stood up from the ten-foot-long blue couch where we had been sitting side by side, looked across the room at Grandpa, and made some sort of plea. Grandpa raised his voice and slammed his glass of cognac on the redwood coffee table, which made the amber liquid slosh about. His words came out powerfully, forcefully. Grandma started to cry. "Please, no war stories," she said. She ran from the room. Dad said something in Polish to Grandpa, and I looked to Mom for an explanation, as much for comfort as for understanding. Frightened, I pulled a pillow close to my body, hoping to find reassurance in its soft contours. The cookie and glass of juice I had been enjoying were forgotten. I stood to go after Grandma. I wanted to console her, tell her that everything was okay. Mom grabbed my hand. "Let her be alone for a bit. She needs some private time," Mom told me. She looked unsure what to do, but before I could ask any questions, Grandpa began. "I'm going to tell you a story," he said, pulling his glasses off his mostly bald head and onto his nose so he could see me clearly. Though I was still confused, I perked up somewhat. I liked stories. Fifteen years later, looking back, I couldn't remember the details. I remembered it had something to do with the Second World War, an arrest, and how the Nazis almost sent Dad and Grandma to a concentration camp. As a child, I hadn't thought the details were important, but now, too late, I realized how important, and yet how ephemeral, they were. Dad had called me at work to tell me Grandpa had died, and I was keenly aware I would never hear the story again. I was stuck in a recurring loop of regret and sadness, punctuated by mostly futile attempts to piece together more of my grandfathers story. I was bubbling over with questions I could no longer ask. I was still stuck in that line of thinking that evening as I flew from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco. I had left work early to catch the flight. I was headed to Humboldt County, the farthest coastal reaches of Northern California, an outpost of redwood forests and former logging towns where Grandpa George had died and would be buried. Humboldt is only 250 miles from San Francisco, but it's a hard place to get to by car or airplane. It hugs Highway 101, which for much of its length north of the San Francisco Bay is a narrow two-lane road. As it approaches Humboldt County, it twists and turns its way through the Eel River canyon, and ultimately breaks through the "Redwood Curtain," as locals call it. The forests of enormous trees are both a physical barrier to travel and a symbol representing the cultural distance from the rest of California. I had mixed feelings about the trip. On one hand, Dad had said I didn't need to be there. "It's more important to be around for someone when they're living," he told me. While I agreed with his sentiment, I thought he had missed the point, at least for me. I wasn't going for Grandpa; I was going to support Dad. Our family was small and getting smaller. I'm an only child, and Dad is an only child too. I also felt a need to support Grandma. I knew Grandma had her own mixed feelings about attending the funeral, in large part because my grandparents had divorced about a decade earlier. I arrived early in the morning and ate a breakfast of toast and hot tea at the Eureka Inn. After breakfast, Mom and Dad chatted with me while I checked in, asking about the flight and giving me a rundown of the day's events. They then headed off to meet with the rabbi about the funeral, confirm the plot selection at the cemetery, invite a few more people to the graveside funeral service, and sort out the details for the reception we would host. My role was much simpler; I would spend the morning with Grandma. Grandma met me in the lobby at ten, wearing a suit and heels. I felt sloppy in my jeans and T-shirt. She wanted to walk to the florist a few blocks away. "Elbieta," she said and gave me a large hug. She took my hand, and we were off. I loved Grandma, but I didn't know her very well. Or, rather, I did know her, but not the same way I imagined other kids knew their grandparents. Grandma spoke English with a strong Polish accent. She spoke very quietly because she feared making mistakes. She was so different than Grandpa, who figured if he kept talking everything would all come together and work itself out. Grandma was soft-spoken, seemingly doubting her skills, herself, and her place in the world. I wondered if she was more assertive when she spoke Polish. "You help me pick out some flowers," Grandma said. "Of course," and then we headed off to look at the local offerings. The floral shop was small and didn't have a great deal of inventory. Grandma scoffed at the bouquets. Some were too big and said the wrong thing about Grandma's relationship to Grandpa. "Red roses are too much?" Grandma both told and asked me at the same time. She meant they expressed love when what she really wanted to say was "We had a life together. We survived hell together." I picked up irises, but Grandma dismissed the bouquet. She pointed to yellow and white roses. "Together," she announced to the florist. "The white is somber, the yellow is friendship," she said. With flowers in hand, we began our walk back to the hotel. "You flew a long way for the funeral," she said. "You came a long way too, Grandma." "It was a mistake." She

shook her head and her eyes welled up. "What was a mistake?" I asked. But I knew. I didn't really need to ask. The divorce. After the trauma of the war, they had built a new life together in America, and then they divorced. It was too much. "Nothing, oh . . . Just nothing." She shook her head, embarrassed her inner thoughts had escaped her lips. "Oh, Elbieta . . ." She bit her lower lip and grabbed on to my arm. I looked at Grandma, waiting for her to finish the sentence, but she didn't and we walked back to the hotel in silence. Around three o'clock the telephone in my hotel room rang. "Are you ready?" Dad asked. "Meet in the lobby in fifteen minutes." I stood and straightened my suit. It wasn't great, but it was what I owned. Blue pencil skirt and matching jacket with shoulder pads. Post-college interview outfit. I put on my flats and walked down to the lobby. Dad didn't want to drive to the service, so we piled into a limousine. We rode south along Highway 101 through Eureka. The freeway went through the center of town. It was a vaguely depressing series of strip malls, offices, and light industrial workspaces supporting a slowly fading timber-based economy. We arrived at Sunset Memorial Park just off Broadway, the main street. The cemetery was up on the hill. The limo went all the way to the top to reach the Jewish part of it, where the driver let us out. "There's a nice view from up here," Dad said to no one in particular, and gestured toward the bay, which was visible on the horizon. "Dad will have a view from his final resting place." I nodded my head, not sure what to say. He won't ever see the view, I thought, but I was careful to keep the words to myself. The rabbi was there. So were many longtime friends and acquaintances. I didn't know many of them because I had never lived here. Eureka was where Grandpa lived, worked, and put down roots in the Jewish community when he settled here in the mid-1950s. People had come to remember him, to pay their respects. The rabbi approached. In a hushed tone, he welcomed us to the cemetery and asked Dad if he was ready for the service to begin. "Yes," Dad said softly. "May I perform keriah?" the rabbi asked. Dad nodded. The keriah, or the tearing of the mourner's clothes, is an ancient Jewish ritual that is meant to give a physical way of expressing grief. We didn't actually tear our clothes. Instead, the rabbi pinned a black, torn ribbon to each of us. The ribbon was a symbol, a powerful one, indicating separation and finality. Prior to this moment, my family had taken the responsibility for the funeral details. With the keriah the responsibility shifted to the community. They must take care of us. The keriah was a way for us to express our anger and grief. It was a way to express loss and to begin the healing process. "Baruch atah Adonai, Dayan Ha-Emet-Blessed are You, Adonai, Truthful Judge," the rabbi recited. We were to wear the torn ribbon for the first seven days of mourning-the period of shiva. I touched the ribbon, hoping it would impart wisdom, hoping for some sort of sign about how to mourn Grandpa, help my father, and aid my grandmother. The rabbi began the service with a prayer, and then offered kind words of remembrance of Grandpa George as an individual and as a member of the community. Grandpa's casket was lowered to the bottom of the grave. The rabbi invited us to recite the mourner's kaddish. "Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei raba. B'alma di v'ra chirutei, v'yamlich malchutei, b'chayeichon uv'yomeichon, uv'chayei d'chol beit Yisrael, baagala uviz'man kariv. V'im'ru: Amen." [Exalted and hallowed be God's great name in the world which God created, according to plan. May God's majesty be revealed in the days of our lifetime and the life of all Israel-speedily, imminently, to which we say: Amen.] As the prayer continued-there were several more stanzas-I stared toward the edge of the grave. I saw where the coffin had gone down. It was so final. After a time, I couldn't watch it anymore, and focused on the distance, toward the view Dad had pointed out when we arrived. I didn't want to be here. I didn't want to think about death. The mourner's kaddish came to a close. The rabbi paused and then spoke to the mourners in English. "It is tradition," he said, "for mourners to place earth in the grave. Using the back side of this shovel," he said, holding it up, "we scoop the earth onto the casket to show that this is not an easy task to perform. The Rynecki family invites you to be part of this important tradition." Grandma went first. She shoveled a small piece of dirt onto the casket. Mom and Dad walked to the edge of the grave and each took a turn. I came next. The sound of the clods of dirt hitting the casket unnerved me. It was somehow both strangely comforting and deeply disturbing. I passed the shovel to someone else and walked away from the pile of dirt that would eventually completely cover the casket. I lost track of how many people helped us bury Grandpa. When the last one had taken a turn at the shovel, the rabbi faced us and recited another Hebrew prayer. Then he issued an announcement from my family. "You are all," he told the gathered crowd, "invited to join the Rynecki family at the Eureka Inn for a reception." The graveside service over, Dad, Mom, Grandma, and I climbed into the limousine for the return trip to the hotel. No one spoke. I stared out the window, uncomfortable at the silence. Everything I would normally think to talk about-my new job, my housemates, life in D.C.-seemed inappropriate given the circumstances. The Eureka Inn had a room off the main lobby where we gathered. I played hostess and offered people glasses of wine, bottles of water, cheese and crackers. People I had met once, long ago, asked me questions about where I lived, what I did, how I got to Eureka in time for the funeral. I heard a lot of "your grandpa was quite a man" comments. They told me stories about his scrap metal business, about building construction, and cattle ranching. I smiled and listened politely, although it got harder and harder to do so. The toll of the late night flight and the emotional exhaustion of the funeral started to wear me down.