

## **ROMAN VISHNIAC REDISCOVERED** **26 OCTOBER 2018 - 24 FEBRUARY 2019**

23 July 2018

*An exhibition collaboration between The Photographers' Gallery and the Jewish Museum London.*

Presented simultaneously at The Photographers' Gallery and Jewish Museum London, **Roman Vishniac Rediscovered** is the first UK retrospective of Russian born American photographer, Roman Vishniac (1897–1990).

An extraordinarily versatile and innovative photographer, Vishniac is best known for having created one of the most widely recognised and reproduced photographic records of Jewish life in Eastern Europe between the two World Wars. Featuring many of his most iconic works, this comprehensive exhibition further introduces recently discovered and lesser-known chapters of his photographic career from the early 1920s to the late 1970s. The cross-venue exhibition presents radically diverse bodies of work and positions Vishniac as one of the most important social documentary photographers of the 20th century whose work also sits within a broader tradition of 1930s modernist photography.

Born in Pavlovsk, Russia in 1897 to a Jewish family Roman Vishniac was raised in Moscow. On his seventh birthday, he was given a camera and a microscope which began a lifelong fascination with photography and science. He began to conduct early scientific experiments attaching the camera to the microscope and as a teenager became an avid amateur photographer and student of biology, chemistry and zoology. In 1920, following the Bolshevik Revolution, he immigrated to Berlin where he joined some of the city's many flourishing camera clubs. Inspired by the cosmopolitanism and rich cultural experimentation in Berlin at this time, Vishniac used his camera to document his surroundings. This early body of work reflects the influence of European modernism with his framing and compositions favouring sharp angles and dramatic use of light and shade to inform his subject matter.

Vishniac's development as a photographer coincided with the enormous political changes occurring in Germany, which he steadfastly captured in his images. They represent an unsettling visual foreboding of the growing signs of oppression, the loss of rights for Jews, the rise of Nazism in Germany, the insidious propaganda - swastika flags and military parades, which were taking over both the streets and

The Photographers' Gallery  
16–18 Ramillies Street  
London W1F 7LW

+44 (0)20 7087 9300  
info@tpg.org.uk  
thephotographersgallery.org.uk

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daily life. German Jews routinely had their businesses boycotted, were banned from many public places and expelled from Aryanised schools. They were also prevented from pursuing professions in law, medicine, teaching, and photography, among many other indignities and curtailments of civil liberties. Vishniac recorded this painful new reality through uncompromising images showing Jewish soup kitchens, schools and hospitals, immigration offices and Zionist agrarian training camps, his photos tracking the speed with which the city changed from an open, intellectual society to one where militarism and fascism were closing in.

Social and political documentation quickly became a focal point of his work and drew the attention of organisations wanting to raise awareness and gain support for the Jewish population. In 1935, Vishniac was commissioned by the world's largest Jewish relief organisation, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), to photograph impoverished Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. These images were intended to support relief efforts and were used in fundraising campaigns for an American donor audience. When the war broke out only a few years later, his photos served increasingly urgent refugee efforts, before finally, at the end of the war and the genocide enacted by Nazi Germany, Vishniac's images became the most comprehensive photographic record by a single photographer of a vanished world.

Vishniac left Europe in 1940 and arrived in New York with his family on New Year's Day, 1941. He continued to record the impact of World War II throughout the 1940s and 50s in particular focusing on the arrival of Jewish refugees and Holocaust survivors in the US, but also looking at other immigrant communities including Chinese Americans. In 1947, he returned to Europe to document refugees and relief efforts in Jewish Displaced Persons camps and also to witness the ruins of his former hometown, Berlin. He also continued his biological studies and supplemented his income by teaching and writing.

In New York, Vishniac established himself as a freelance photographer and built a successful portrait studio on Manhattan's Upper West Side. At the same time he dedicated himself to scientific research, resuming his interest in Photomicroscopy. This particular application of photography became the primary focus of his work during the last 45 years of his life. By the mid-1950s, he was regarded as a pioneer in the field, developing increasingly sophisticated techniques for photographing and filming microscopic life forms. Vishniac was appointed Professor of Biology and Art at several universities and his groundbreaking images and scientific research were published in hundreds of magazines and books.

Although he was mainly embedded in the scientific community, Vishniac was a keen observer and scholar of art, culture, and history and would have been aware of developments in photography going on around him and the work of his contemporaries. In 1955, famed photographer and museum curator Edward Steichen featured several of Vishniac's photographs in the influential book and travelling exhibition *The Family of Man* shown at the Museum of Modern Art. Steichen later describes the importance of Vishniac's work. "[He]...gives a last-minute look at the human beings he photographed just before the fury of Nazi brutality exterminated them. The resulting photographs are among photography's finest documents of a time and place."

***Roman Vishniac Rediscovered*** offers a timely reappraisal of Vishniac's vast photographic output and legacy and brings together – for the first time – his complete works including recently discovered vintage prints, rare and 'lost' film footage from his pre-war period, contact sheets, personal correspondence, original magazine publications, newly created exhibition prints as well as his acclaimed photomicroscopy.

Drawn from the Roman Vishniac Archive at the International Center of Photography, New York and curated by Maya Benton in collaboration with The Photographers' Gallery curator, Anna Dannemann and Jewish Museum London curator, Morgan Wadsworth-Boyle, each venue will provide additional contextual material to illuminate the works on display and bring the artist, his works and significance to the attention of UK audiences.

Roman Vishniac Rediscovered is organised by the International Center of Photography. It is made possible with support from Mara Vishniac Kohn, whose generosity founded the Roman Vishniac Archive at ICP, and from the Andrew and Marina Lewin Family Foundation, Estanne and Martin Fawer, The David Berg Foundation, Righteous Persons Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, Olitsky Family Foundation, the ICP Exhibitions Committee. James and Merryl Tisch, Koret Foundation, and additional anonymous donors.

The Photographers' Gallery gratefully acknowledge the support of Cockayne – Grants for the Arts and The London Community Foundation, The Death Penalty Project/Simon Muirhead & Burton as well as the Roman Vishniac Exhibition Supporters Circle.

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**Press Contacts:**

**For further press information and image requests from The Photographers' Gallery please contact:**

Grace O'Connor or Roz Arratoon at Margaret on +44 (0) 20 7739 8203 or email [grace@margaretlondon.com](mailto:grace@margaretlondon.com) or [roz@margaretlondon.com](mailto:roz@margaretlondon.com)

**For further information or images please from Jewish Museum please contact:**

Andrew Thompson on +44 (0) 207 7284 7356 or email [andrew.thompson@jewishmuseum.org.uk](mailto:andrew.thompson@jewishmuseum.org.uk)

**For General information and enquires about The Photographers' Gallery, including their Archive, Print Sales Gallery or Bookshop contact:**

Natasha Plowright on + 44 (0) 207 087 9364 or email [press@tpg.org.uk](mailto:press@tpg.org.uk)

**Notes for Editors:**

**The Photographers' Gallery**

The Photographers' Gallery opened in 1971 in Great Newport Street, London, as the UK's first independent gallery devoted to photography. It was the first public gallery in the UK to exhibit many key names in international photography, including Juergen Teller, Robert Capa, Sebastiano Salgado and Andreas Gursky. The Gallery has also been instrumental in establishing contemporary British photographers, including Martin Parr and Corinne Day. In 2009, the Gallery moved to 16 – 18 Ramillies Street in Soho, the first stage in its plan to create a 21st century home for photography. Following an eighteen months long redevelopment project, the Gallery reopened to the public in 2012. The success of The Photographers' Gallery over the past four decades has helped to establish photography as a recognised art form, introducing new audiences to photography and championing its place at the heart of visual culture. [www.thephotographersgallery.org.uk](http://www.thephotographersgallery.org.uk)

**Jewish Museum London**

The Jewish Museum London tells the story of the history and heritage of Jews in Britain through universal themes of migration, family, faith and culture. Our mission is to surprise, delight and engage all people, irrespective of background and faith, in the history, identity and culture of Jews in Britain. Our exhibitions, events and learning programmes encourage a sense of discovery and aim to provoke questions, challenge prejudice, and encourage understanding. [www.jewishmuseum.org.uk](http://www.jewishmuseum.org.uk)

### International Centre of Photography, New York

The International Center of Photography (ICP) is the world's leading institution dedicated to photography and visual culture. Cornell Capa founded ICP in 1974 to preserve the legacy of "concerned photography"—the creation of socially and politically-minded images that have the potential to educate and change the world— and the center's mission endures today, even as the photographic medium and imagemaking practices have evolved. Through its exhibitions, school, public programs, and community outreach, ICP offers an open forum for dialogue about the role that photographs, videos, and new media play in our society. To date, it has presented more than 700 exhibitions and offered thousands of classes at every level. ICP brings together photographers, artists, students, and scholars to create and interpret the realm of the image. Here, members of this unique community are encouraged to explore photography and visual culture as mediums of empowerment and as catalysts for wide-reaching social change. Visit [icp.org](http://icp.org) to learn more.

### Visitor Information

#### The Photographers' Gallery

Opening times: Mon – Sat, 10:00 - 18:00; Thu, 10:00 - 20:00; Sun, 11:00 - 18:00

Admission: free until noon (Mon - Sun) and then £4 / £2.5 concessions

Address: 16-18 Ramillies Street, London W1F 7LW

Nearest London Underground Station: Oxford Circus

T: + 44 (0)20 7087 9300

E: [info@tpg.org.uk](mailto:info@tpg.org.uk)

W: [thephotographersgallery.org.uk](http://thephotographersgallery.org.uk)

#### Jewish Museum London

Opening times: Daily 10am – 5pm (Friday: 10am – 2pm)

Address: Raymond Burton House, 129 – 131 Albert Street, London NW1 7NB

Nearest London Underground Station: Camden Town

W: [jewishmuseum.org.uk](http://jewishmuseum.org.uk)

Twitter: [@jewishmuseumLDN](https://twitter.com/jewishmuseumLDN)

Instagram: [@jewishmuseumLDN](https://www.instagram.com/jewishmuseumLDN)

Facebook: [facebook.com/jewishmuseumLDN](https://facebook.com/jewishmuseumLDN)

Museum admission (includes entry to exhibition and all permanent displays)

Adults - £8.50

Concessions - £6.50

Children (5-16) - £4.00

Under 5s – free

Family ticket (two adults and up to four children) - £20

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