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Beyond the Forest: Jewish Presence in Eastern Europe, 2004-2012 (Exploring Jewish Arts and Culture)

Loli Kantor

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Like a forest recovering from a cataclysmic fire, the Jews of Eastern Europe are drawing on deep roots to regrow their communities in the long aftermath of the Holocaust and decades of Soviet domination. The children and grandchildren of victims and survivors are reconstructing the histories of their families and reviving the forgotten Jewish customs, bringing them forward into the twenty-first century and creating a contemporary culture that would be both familiar and strange to the generation that perished in the conflagration of the Holocaust.

Loli Kantor is the daughter of Holocaust survivors who lost nearly their entire families, and her desire to reconnect with her family's history first took her to Poland in 2004. As she photographed her parents' hometowns and grappled with the destruction and grief of the past, her vision gradually widened beyond the personal to focus on the signs of the rebirth of Jewish culture in Eastern Europe. Over eight years, she traveled in the Ukraine, as well as Poland, Romania, and the Czech Republic, photographing Jews in their everyday lives and listening to their stories in their homes, synagogues, and communities. Her luminous black-and-white and color images eloquently reveal how Eastern European Jews are honoring the past and building the future through such things as revived observances of the holidays, including Passover, Sukkoth, and Hanukkah. They also explore the role that artists are playing in the preservation of Jewish culture, which might otherwise have been completely lost. Polish art historian and critic Anda Rottenberg offers an appreciation of Kantor's photography and its place in reclaiming Eastern European Jewish identity. Novelist Joseph Skibell celebrates Kantor's "brave vision, unblinking and unafraid."

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