

'Everything Is Illuminated'

Turning over her family's past, Joan Goldstein discovered a greater heritage

By Adam Grybowski

JOAN Goldstein wanted someone to remember. She even expected it, perhaps foolishly.

Her family used to tell her, as a young girl, a Romanian nursery rhyme. When the Montgomery resident visited Romania, the country her grandparents left in the late 1800s to settle in New York, she asked people she met if they knew the nursery rhyme, and if they could translate it.

"Too long ago," she was told repeatedly.

"I expected someone to say, 'I remember that,'" she says. "Nobody remembered. There's this business of forgetting. Somehow the past gets sealed off. It's gone, the past is gone. And you don't know if they've never heard of it or they don't want to talk about it."

Three of Ms. Goldstein's grandparents are from Iasi, Romania's second largest city and birthplace of the first-ever Yiddish-language newspaper. She traveled there with her cousin in 2004.

"We wanted to see where they lived, where they came from," Ms. Goldstein says. "We didn't know a lot because there was so much information missing."

Watching the 2005 film *Everything Is Illuminated*, based on the novel by Princeton University graduate Jonathon Safran Foer, Ms. Goldstein saw her ancestral pilgrimage reflected in the journey of the film's hero. Elijah Wood plays a young American writer who travels to Ukraine to discover the village where his grandfather lived before escaping from the Nazis.

When the West Windsor Arts Council screens *Everything Is Illuminated* Jan. 10, Ms. Goldstein will introduce the film and generate post-film discussion.

Once asked to speak, Ms. Goldstein, a professor of sociology and literature at Mercer County Community College for 15 years, read the book, watched the movie and then watched it a second time.

"I do my homework," she says. "The film really intrigued me. The second time I took notes, I was listening for my cues. There's a lot symbolism. The first time you hear it but don't process it."

Reading reviews for the film, Ms. Goldstein found many of them arrogant, stating how little interest critics had in "another Holocaust film." For Ms. Goldstein, this is not a film about the Holocaust, just as her family history is not about the Holocaust. "It's a story of my past," she says, "and the Holocaust is there in my history."

Photographs prompted the trip. Ms. Goldstein's cousin sent her photos she had never before seen, where she is pictured as a little girl with her grandparents, aunts, uncles. "I started to think about

what I knew about my grandmothers," she says. "I can't ask them any more questions."

Before the trip, family legends had become a topic in her poetry (Ms. Goldstein also is an artist). "My mother was the anthropologist of the family," she says. "She had all these stories. I'd been thinking about (a trip) for years. I had bits and pieces of stories. Most of it turned up in my poetry."

On the trip Ms. Goldstein and her cousin visited cemeteries, homes and community centers. Turns out 25 Goldstein families lived in Iasi, and each was unrelated.

The name was so common it became impossible to narrow down which names belonged to her family.

"Murkiness I found everywhere," she says. "Nothing was crystal clear." For instance, she had repeatedly heard about a red bridge in her grandparents' village. Her guide took her to a district called the Red Bridge. What did she find?

"A tiny little stream over which there is this simple footbridge, and the railing is red," she says, speculating that long ago it was made of wood. "The district was right there." Things had changed. The railing was now metal. And "ugly, concrete post-Stalinist" buildings stood where small cottages with red tiled roofs probably existed.

While her family heritage lacked clarity, she was able to learn about the community from which they emerged. "Instead of finding about my family, I found about the Jewish community," she says. "This is like in the film. (The main character) is looking for his grandfather's past. But the whole community turns up. His family and the world that they came from is illuminated."

She discovered Nazis tore up tombstones and used them to pave roads — tombstones from the cemetery she conjectures her great grandfather would have been buried. A new cemetery was created in a different location, but "most of the graves had no bones underneath," she says.

Shaken by this turn of events, Ms. Goldstein and her cousin went to recover at a local restaurant. Musicians were performing in the outdoor garden. "All of sudden they started playing Hebrew songs," Ms. Goldstein says. Jewish music persisted in a city that massacred 14,000 Jews during World War II, half its Jewish population. "I guess they liked our music — they just hated us!" Ms. Goldstein says.



“You just don’t know what you’re going to find,” she continues. “We know (our ancestors) lived because we live. We had to accept this is all we’ll ever know.” ●

Everything Is Illuminated, with an introduction and post-film discussion by Joan Goldstein, will be screened at the West Windsor Library, 333 N. Post Road, West Windsor, Jan. 10, 7:30 p.m., free; (609) 919-1982; www.westwindsorarts.org



Elijah Wood and Eugene Hutz in a scene from *Everything Is Illuminated*, which will be screened at the West Windsor library.