LYN LIFSHIN

Where are My Chickens

She's searched all over town, past the woman carrying eggs, past the beach party on the river, but she still can't find them. "I must," Yaffa Eliach says, "find my chickens."

She's scanning photographs. 1500 pictures in Ejszszki, Lithuania, she's standing in the tower of faces at the Holocaust Museum, the crunch of snow in Lithuania still in her ears, the smell of the apple trees lingers.

Now a grandmother, she leans forward, pivots, looks for the shot of a grinning girl surrounded by chickens. "There," she says spotting the 4 year old in a gingham dress. It's her as a child, in 1941, snapped the morning the Nazis marched into her village. Three months later only 39 of the 3500 escaped the bullets of the Einsatzgruppen, the mobile killing squad.

In two days they were stripped, shot and shoved into bloody ditches. Yaffa Eliach has dug up their memory, obsessed by her goal to collect a picture of every Jew from the shtetl she travelled, bartered bought, smuggled faces. "There's my uncle, most eligible bachelor in town," she points brightly at a handsome man in a bathing suit. "There's Freddy's farewell party when he left for America. There's the swim team, the town rabbi. I must find him."

For years she says later, her family lived in a nearby cave under a pig sty, their only light, stories about weddings, graduations and holidays. When she went back to Lithuania in 1988 she realized the Jews had died a double death.

First physically, then their memories. The cemeteries were demolished, tombstones ground up and used to pave roads. But in the photographs their faces come back. Yaffa's family rescued 100 photos, some she smuggled out of Europe in her shoes as a girl, some her father found, hid, some his brother hid strapped to his body when he jumped ship and swam ashore to Palestine. "We have," she says, "prisoners in striped suits, cattle cars. It's easy to show evil. But how do you convey the beauty of the human soul? I didn't see them as bones and skulls. I wanted to show them going to school, skating, picking flowers."

Lyn Lifshin's poetry appears earlier in this volume.