

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.