There Was a Forest: Jewish Life in eastern Europe today
By Loli Kantor

Statement
Contemporary Judaism in Eastern Europe is a complex hybrid of lingering traditions and memories, a culture deeply influenced by the environment of post-war Soviet Ukraine and the relentless march of modernity. The title of the series, 'There Was a Forest', alludes to both the forest of the natural world, and the metaphorical human forest of Jewish life, both of which have been placed at risk of destruction by the forces of technology, industrialization and war.

For over five years I have traveled repeatedly to Poland and Ukraine to photograph Jewish life and culture in the small remaining enclaves and larger communities there. This project began while researching my own family's history. Both my parents were Holocaust survivors; both were from Poland and lost nearly their entire families. As my research progressed, the scope of my project broadened beyond my own personal history. I was motivated by a desire to learn about the continuing impact of the Holocaust, as well the legacy of the subsequent Soviet regime, on the Jews currently living in these places. I found that I was especially interested in the ways in which these communities were trying to preserve their Jewish identity during this time of transition and how non-Jews were playing an instrumental role in preserving Jewish culture, in both traditional and non-traditional ways.

While at times the images in this body of work carry somber undertones, the vivid highly saturated color prints convey the tangible reality of these places, in a full palette of the region’s hues. The work depicts scenes of everyday life and Jewish traditions, people old and young, caregivers and those they care for. During these years, I have witnessed cultural growth and the steady development of a Jewish presence.

Along with the color works, I printed part of the project using the palladium process, working from original black-and-white negatives. The resulting small palladium prints are reminiscent of snapshots taken in the 1940’s, and intended to invoke the past. Juxtaposed with the color works, they create a dialogue between past and present and a wider look at people and culture.

Although memory, grief, and loss are present, this body of work ultimately stresses strength and survival. Providing a unique perspective on what these communities look like today, it evidences how Jewish traditions and identity have endured in these communities, despite hardships and persecution.

Grant funds would be used to complete the editing and printing of photographs and text, mostly from 2009-2010, and to edit and produce authentic audio documentation collected throughout the entire project years which will significantly support the visual imagery.