

NEW HAVEN INDEPENDENT

IT'S YOUR TOWN. READ ALL ABOUT IT.

Sophie Fled. Abram Followed

BY **Debby Applegate** | JAN 21, 2015 12:05 PM

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Step into the [Slifka Center](#) and you'll find a building buzzing with people who have come to socialize, study, worship, debate, and eat. From now until Feb. 22, winding around the building, you'll also find *No One Remembers Alone: Memory, Migration and the Making of an American Family*, a sprawling, engrossing exhibit that follows the diverging paths of members of a Jewish family from Czarist Russia to new lives on three different continents.

The story begins with 18-year-old Abram Spiwak and 15-year-old Sophie Schochetman, who fell in



love in the city of Odessa just as the Russian Empire trembled on the brink of what would become known as the Revolution of 1905. When the attempt to overthrow the czar failed, Jews were blamed for the unrest, and [pogroms](#) erupted across Russia. Like thousands of other Russian Jews, Sophie Schochetman fled to the United States. Abram would not follow for another a year and a half.

The first half of the exhibit, on the ground floor of the Slifka Center (which is located at 80 Wall St.), focuses on Sophie's and Abram's lovelorn correspondence, in letters, photographs, and postcards, as their courtship blossoms and they build new lives in New York City's Lower East Side and the surrounding countryside. On the second floor, the story spreads out to trace Abram's seven siblings as they choose very different paths in America, Romania, Canada, and Argentina. The general outlines of this story are familiar to anyone who has visited Ellis Island. What makes this exhibit unusual is how personal and beautifully intimate it is. It creates an air of suspense as you make your way through the galleries, eager to see what news the next letter or document will bring.

The most striking and original aspect of the show is what curator Patricia Klindienst calls the two large "postcard circles" stationed in the middle of the two main galleries. When told that she could not use nails or screws to hang the show in a traditional manner, Klindienst had to devise an alternative way of displaying the visual materials she'd collected. So she, her husband Louis Mackall — an architect who owns [Breakfast Woodworks](#) in Guilford — and designer Margaret Kangley invented a free-standing circle made of clear Plexiglas, with a wooden box for each postcard that can swing back and forth to read both the front and the back of each card in sequence. For visitors, the effect is of eavesdropping in real time on Sophie's and Abram's epistolary affair as they are buffeted by family, work, and the shifting forces of history. The postcard circles are accompanied by maps, photographs, travel posters, and bureaucratic documents that have been blown up and transferred to Photo Tex, a fabric that can cling to nearly any surface without nails, and has the high-resolution and vibrant color quality to make even a passport photo look like a work of art.

It all fits in the back of a car when folded up.

Setting *No One Remembers Alone* in the bustling Slifka Center makes for a very different experience from seeing the material in the hushed, white-walled chambers of a traditional museum. Fanning out around the central postcard circles, the exhibit swerves around corners and up stairs, covering every available surface like colorful old-fashioned handbills, evoking in its own manner the immigrants' experience of making their way through the crowded, hectic streets of Odessa and New York. At any

point, it is easy to slip into the narrative and lose yourself in both the interweaving personal details and their deep historical context. You can spend hours tracing the particular paths of family members, or stroll through and dip in and out of the story.

Klindienst, a scholar, author, and teacher based in Guilford, is listed as curating the exhibit, but the title of curator doesn't do justice to the enormity of the project. To put together this multigenerational, multilingual, transcontinental love story, she had to draw on the combined skills of historian, detective, archeologist, anthropologist, bureaucrat, linguist, and cabinetmaker. Over the course of seven years, she unearthed oral histories, letters, postcards, photographs, travel documents, official records, and other ephemera — written in Yiddish, Russian, Romanian, Spanish, French, and German — in family attics as well as archives in the United States and the Soviet Union, coordinating the work of scores of translators and diving deep into a wide array of scholarship. It is a monumental achievement that turns a familiar tale into a fresh experience. Go see it while you can.

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