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Bringing the 'Daughter' Home

Professor Ruth Wisse to Narrate Documentary

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By **Matthew S. Robinson**
Advocate Staff

BOSTON — On Nov. 5, Harvard University Professor of Yiddish Literature Ruth Wisse

will narrate the documentary "Daughter of Vilna: The Life in Song of Masha Roskies" at the Vilna Center for Jewish Heritage.

Produced by her brother David Roskies (himself a professor of Yiddish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York) and directed by filmmaker Josh Waletzky ("Partisans of Vilna"), "Daughter" is the story of Masha Roskies, mother of Professors Wisse and Roskies.

"Our mother was a popular folk singer in Vilna," Wisse explains. "She had a repertoire of over 200 songs in several languages. She taught my brother and I many of the songs."

Some years ago, Wisse was approached by Professor Michael Stanislawski who was then acting as a research assistant on a study of Yiddish folk singers.

"He came to visit me asked me if I knew of any folk singers I could recommend," Wisse recalls. "I told him about my mother."

When the hours of interviews and performances were through, Stanislawski gave Wisse a copy of the project.

"We had the tapes in which my mother not only sang but also told of the circumstances in which these songs had been learned and sung," Wisse explains.

When Harvard Hillel invited Wisse to present a program about the songs that her mother sang, she and her brother put together a presentation based on Stanislawski's tapes.

"We enjoyed it very much and

decided we would do it again," Wisse recalls.

That second opportunity came at the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, where the presentation was filmed.

That film was then given to Waletzky and made into the 45-minute documentary which Wisse will present at the Center.

Campaign Coordinator Deborah Bogin Cohen first read about Wisse in an 1997 issue of Harvard Magazine.

"I was totally enchanted by what I read because her students absolutely love her," Cohen recalls. "It was a great coup for Harvard to get her from McGill University and it has been an even greater coup for us."

Once the idea of inviting Wisse to the Center had been raised, it was suggested that, as her ties to Vilna were so strong, she be presented as the introductory guest to a new series of Center presentations.

"I was so impressed just by reading about here, I knew this had to be a wonderful program," Cohen says. "When I met her, she was so approachable," Cohen recalls. "I could see right away why her students love her so much."

As Wisse had already visited the Center and was both familiar and, Cohen adds, quite supportive of what they were trying to accomplish there, when Cohen approached her to invite her to speak at the Center, she enthusiastically accepted.

"What could be more appropriate for the Vilna Center than a film about a woman who had lived in Vilna," Wisse reasons.



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File photo

Prof. Ruth Wisse with her brother, Prof. David Roskies.