

JEWISH LATIN PRINCESS

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER, AUTHOR OF TWENTY-SIX SECONDS: A
PERSONAL HISTORY OF THE ZAPRUDER FILM.

EPISODE 38

You're listening to Jewish Latin Princess Podcast by Yael. Every week get your dose of inspiration from the world's most uniquely talented Jewish women and from Yael herself. Seeking profound and practical ways to live a joyful, richer Jewish life? Welcome to Jewish Latin Princess Podcast.

And now, Jewish lifestyle expert and bilingual blogger at www.jewishlatinprincess.com, your host, Yael.

Yael Trusch: Imagine you are the only one who had recorded on video a monumental event that changed the course of your country's history by "accident." My guest today is Alexandra Zapruder, the grand-daughter of Abraham Zapruder, the Russian Jewish immigrant living in Dallas recorded the Zapruder film. Raw, unedited footage of President John F. Kennedy's assassination. Divine providence? I think so. What does Alexandra think? How did Mr. Zapruder handled the moral dilemmas that ensued as a result of him owning this film? When he received money for the film, what did he do with the money? And what happened later on in history which resulted in Alexandra's father receiving 16 million dollars from the Federal Government for the film? All this and more today on Jewish Latin Princess as I interview the author of Twenty-Six Seconds: A Personal History of the Zapruder Film. Yes, only 26 seconds and how they impacted not just the American public but one Jewish man and his family. Here's Alexandra Zapruder.

[THEME MUSIC]

Yael Trusch: Alexandra Zapruder, welcome to the Jewish Latin Princess!

Alexandra Zapruder: Thank you so much for having me!

Yael Trusch: Thank you for joining us. Catching you back in Washington after traveling... I mean how many cities have you been in the last few weeks?

Alexandra Zapruder: I don't know! I think it was a good—at least 15 in the last few months but I'm not, you know honestly, I kind of lost track.

Yael Trusch: Lost track! Amazing. And I got the chance to hear you speak when you were in Houston about your new book, Twenty-Six Seconds: A Personal History of the Zapruder Film. And so, Alexandra, before we get to the Zapruder film, to your family, to your experience writing the book, I want you to set the stage for our listeners a bit because my guess is that a lot of my audience did not experience President Kennedy's assassination. I didn't. So tell us, take us back in time, tell us about that memorable day, and what was your grandfather doing that day which then lead to what we know today as the Zapruder film?

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: Well, I should begin by saying that I also was not alive at that time of President Kennedy's assassination. I was born in 1969 so six years later. And my grandfather died 11 months after my twin brother and I were born so I didn't know him. Most of what I have learned about this history comes from research, but my grandparents were living in Dallas at that time. My grandfather was a Russian immigrant, who came in 1920 at the age of 15 from Russia, and from a very poor Jewish family, from very humble beginnings, but by the time 1963 rolled around, he and my grandmother had been living in Dallas for more than 20 years and he was a dressmaker like so many other Jewish immigrants and he had worked his way up from nothing to have obtained the middle class by that time.

Yael Trusch: Mm-hm.

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: He happened to—his office was just adjacent to Dealey Plaza, so he was working in a building at 501 Elm Street and he knew of course that the motorcade was going to pass directly by where his office was located. And he was also by then a very avid home moviemaker, so, and of course the person who loved President Kennedy. So he decided to go down to the plaza with his brand new movie camera to see if he could catch a glimpse of the President, which of course he did and got certainly much more than he intended.

Yael Trusch: Mm-hm. And I heard you say that originally he had forgotten the camera and it was his assistant who reminded him or your grandmother maybe. What was it?

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: It was his assistant. He actually hadn't forgotten it but rather had decided not to bring it. He was someone who had a somewhat hesitant personality, who was a little bit... he tended to kind of hang back and he liked to be sort of encouraged or pushed to do whatever it was that he wanted to do in the first place and so was it's confusing because both my grandmother and his assistant were both named Lillian.

Yael Trusch: Mm-hm.

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: But it is his long time assistant, Lillian Rogers who encouraged him to go home and get the camera and then come back to Dealey Plaza to film. So that's how it happened, and it was a lot of things were like that in his life. That he kind of hung back and then was encouraged to go home and do whatever, last I've said to do whatever it was that he wanted to do to begin with.

Yael Trusch: So I think this is an interesting detail of his character because it's almost like left to his own devices, he would have not been the person to capture this monumental event in US history but rather it's almost like I feel like it was divinely ordained. Like he had to be the one for reasons that are beyond our comprehension obviously, but there was something bigger and greater happening here. Do you feel like that a little bit?

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: Well, I can see why one would think that and it certainly is something that people have said to me before. I think... I don't tend to think about things quite in that way but I think it is very good for history that he did end up being in that particular place at that particular time and I think so often monumental moments in history do happen in just that

way. It's just a confluence of events that if one thing had gone differently the entire history would have been different. So that is certainly true in this case.

Yael Trusch: Right. So talk to me a little bit about your grandfather's character, because so much of the story here I feel like it was a Kiddush Hashem, a sanctification of God's name through your grandfather and the admirable way that he managed the situation. There we're so many moral decisions that he had to make. Talk to us about those decisions and how he handled them.

Alexandra Zapruder: Well, you know, it certainly was a situation that required enormous strength of character. He was traumatized and shocked of course, by witnessing the President's assassination and then he was immediately in a position where he had to figure out what to do with this film which was not yet of course as significant that would become but he knew that it was something that the Federal Authorities would want to see, and I think he set about, I think he had a very strong moral character and he of course was deep in Jewish ethical tradition, having brought up as he was, so his primary obligation was a civic one, I think. He felt very strongly that he needed to be in touch with the Secret Service and make sure that they had copies of the film which he did and then there was a problem for him because the media wanted access to the film and they wanted to purchase it from him. And he felt concerned that sharing the film with the wrong party could end up with results on it's being sensationalized or exploited in ways that would be harmful to the Kennedy family. On the other hand, he couldn't really keep the film, because there we're people from the media already beginning to pound on his door. And on top of all of that, selling it meant profiting from this tragedy which felt morally complex at the very least to him. So he had to juggle all of those things and his decision at the end of the day was to sell it to Life Magazine, because he felt that they could be trusted to handle it responsibly. And then he took part of the money that he earned for that and gave it to the widow of J.D. Tippit, who was the police officer who was killed in the Texas Theater by Oswald. This was a Mitzvah, that he felt that it was an opportunity for him to make a donation that he would not have been able to do otherwise.

Yael Trusch: Amazing! So, so many layers of decisions that your grandfather had to make. I mean first of all, he knew that the President was dead before the entire nation did, right? Before it was publicly announced.

Alexandra Zapruder: For sure.

Yael Trusch: Right. And then, it's not like nowadays where immediately... like he's holding on to this film. He hasn't been asked for the film directly, yet, he himself knew to go to the Federal Government. It wasn't like he was hunted.

Alexandra Zapruder: Right. That's right. He was approached on Dealey Plaza by a reporter.

Yael Trusch: Mm-hm.

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: And as the reporter's request about the film, I think that kind of snapped him out of his initial shock and he said to this reporter, I need to be in touch with the Federal Authorities and this gentleman, Harry McCormick knew the Head of the Secret Service in Dallas. It is how my grandfather was put in touch with Forrest Sorrels, who then it took the whole rest of the day and the other day in which this is not like today is that of course was an actual reel of 8mm film which was laborious to develop and it took them the rest of the day to get the original developed and to get duplicates made and processed so that by the very end of the day, by 9 or 10 o'clock that night, he was able to bring two copies of the film to the Secret Service in Dallas. And then he went home with the original film and one of the copies.

Yael Trusch: And then at what point does he start talking to Life Magazine, and then why Life Magazine not other media companies?

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: Well, over the course of the day, he begun to be approached through various mechanisms by members of the media who called or who tried to find him and express their interest in the film but when he got home that night, he was reached by phone by a gentleman called, Richard Stolley, Dick Stolley, who was the LA Bureau of Chief of Life Magazine and he wanted to see the film and my grandfather agreed to meet him the next morning at his office and I think my grandfather felt as many people did that Life Magazine was a very beloved pictorial magazine that was trusted and have a special relationship to the Kennedy Family having published many, many, hundreds of images and for stories about them over the years, and so I think he felt that it was... that this was a media outlet that could be trusted to handle the film responsibly which they did for the most part.

Yael Trusch: Okay. So then he ends up agreeing to selling them the film and then he gives a portion to Tzedakah.

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: Mm-hm.

Yael Trusch: And I remember thinking when I first heard you speak and being struck by the way things were during that time and I don't mean by the speed of which these things have transpired but just the cultural sensitivity to things that frankly we wouldn't be sensitive to. Like now a days we would see these images that could be really shocking and we might not even be shocked by them, but back then, it was a different story and that also played into this whole thing, right?

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: Yes, absolutely. I mean of course the film is incredibly graphic and violent, and this was something that there had never really been anything like this before that was in mainstream circulation and my grandfather, person, Life Magazine, second; you know we're very concerned and felt very strongly that this is not something that the American people should see.

Yael Trusch: Hm.

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: Both too violent and too graphic for public consumption but also that it was very disrespectful to the memory of the President.

Yael Trusch: Wow.

Alexandra Zapruder: And so that is something that played into, not only my grandfather's hesitations but ultimately Life Magazine's decision about which images to publish in the pages of Life Magazine and to keep the film as living footage for being seen by the public. Now, of course over time, culture changed, norms changed, society changed, and it became more and more difficult to withhold those images from the American people especially as more rumors and concerns about a conspiracy began to swirl so within several years there was a lot of pressure to make the film available to Life Magazine, rather for Life Magazine to make it available. But that concern really evolved over time.

Yael Trusch: And then—but Life Magazine, did not yield to the pressure. My understanding is they sold it back to your grandfather, is that how it worked?

Alexandra Zapruder: They did not yield to the pressure, although, and they we're an enormous amount of pressure from other networks, from the public, from people who wanted to examine the film to try to understand better what had happened to the President. By 1975, my grandfather was gone. He died in 1970. But by 1975, there we're many bootlegs of the copy. Many bootleg copies of the film that was circulating. And it became too much for Life Magazine to be policing those copies and also withstanding the pressure that came with the change in time so ultimately, they returned the film to our family. They sold it back to our family for a dollar.

Yael Trusch: Oh, my gosh!

Alexandra Zapruder: Now it's my father's responsibility to manage public demand for the film and decide how and when people should be allowed to use it either for nonprofit study and teaching purposes or for profit, you know, on commercial television and then movies and the like.

Yael Trusch: So, first year your grandpa... how much did he get from Life Magazine by the way? I didn't ask you.

Alexandra Zapruder: It was a 150k dollars and he donated 25 thousand of it to—

Yael Trusch: J.D. Tippit's—

Alexandra Zapruder: J.D. Tippit's widow, yeah.

Yael Trusch: Mm-hm. And so then your father is now the guardian of the film and many years later he took the reins and there was another profitable transaction for your family. What went on there?

Alexandra Zapruder: So my father was responsible for the film from 1975 until through the 1990s, and he, during that time, made the film available for free to anyone who wanted to use it; for study or for nonprofit purposes and as I said, when it came to commercial television or movies, he charged a fee. In 1992, there was a law passed JFK act that made all of the

material related to the Kennedy assassination available. Anything that's in the holdings of the Federal Government immediately became available to the American people.

Yael Trusch: And then?

Alexandra Zapruder: We released the original reel film in the National Archives for safe keeping in 1978, and when that happened, it raised the question of whether or not Federal Government had presumptively taken the film from our family because it was in the holdings of the National Archives and made it available to the American people. So this triggered a five year conflict really with the Government and our family about the ownership of the film. Who owned it? Did we own it or did the Government own it by virtue of having taken it by the JFK Act? And ultimately the government decided that they did want to take the film. And by picking it, that meant that some decision had to be reached on what's called just compensation, so this is basically, if the Government decides that they want to take the property, they have the right to do that but they have to pay for it.

Yael Trusch: Right.

Alexandra Zapruder: And it was very difficult, it was a very difficult thing to establish because no one knew how much the original film was worth. It had never been valued. No one in our community never thought of selling the original film. It was entrusted to the National Archives. So ultimately in year 2000, an arbitration panel, mutually agreed upon by our family and the government, assessed the value of the film at 16 million dollars. And that was how much he's paid for just compensation for the taking of the film. And I think it's really important to say that for our family, although this was a very difficult time because there was a lot of media attention and it was very uncomfortable, and our family would not have sold the original film. We would never put it up at auction or anything like that. But when the Government took it, of course, we were not in the position to walk away from establishing its value, so it was difficult all the way around and we followed suit in terms of my grandfather's actions by then donating the copyright to the film to the Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas, which was a very significant charitable contribution again trying to balance individual profit with a sense of responsibility to the public good.

Yael Trusch: Right. And honoring your grandfather's value for Tzedakah that was evident from the first transaction that took place, right?

Alexandra Zapruder: Yes, and those values we're extremely important to my father. The primary objective for managing the film was never about making money. There was money and we did make money. One of the things that I really grappled with in my book is how you make sense of that and how you come to terms with that? Is there a moral compromise involved and what are the considerations because these things are not easy and not straightforward and you know as a family, doing the right thing was always very important to us, but, for my father certainly, providing for his own family was important, too?

Yael Trusch: Right, so it seems like, really, like you said, your grandfather passed away when you were a child, so the Zapruder film becomes kind of “relevant” in your life at this kind of conflicting time when you’re young adults and this negotiation with the government is happening, how did that affect you?

Alexandra Zapruder: It was sort of going on in the back ground. In my family, we talked very rarely about the film and even when it was in the news, it was not something that we really discussed much like among ourselves.

Yael Trusch: Okay.

Alexandra Zapruder: So, there were certainly times when I felt self-conscious because you know there was an article in the newspaper, where there was something on the radio about it, but, I didn't know very much about it until I wrote this book. Part of the reason for writing this book was to really come to terms with both the private and the public legacy of the film. What did the film mean in American life? What was its impact on American culture and society? The question of ownership and rights and public access to important historical information, all of these we're questions that I wanted to trace, alongside my own inquiry into the relationship between our family and the film. For my father, you know my father was an extremely generous and moral person. And so, I have a lot of faith that in telling this story I was not going to be surprised by his actions but it was certainly interesting to dig in to it and see just how complex and how interesting it really was.

Yael Trusch: Right, so you had to embark on some detective work here I gather. At what point did you decide that because it was a little bit of a departure from what you were doing. You’ve been writing and you've been an education projects pertaining to the holocaust and then this was a little bit of a departure from what you were doing, and as you said, it was a story that was there with you constantly, but at what point did you say, I am the one to write this. I am taking this on, doing all the detective work and I'm honoring my grandfather and I'm painting the picture of what it meant to the American public as well as the film itself. At what point did you decide to do this?

Alexandra Zapruder: This really came in the aftermath of my father’s death. Like his father before him, my father died rather young at the age of 67, and he—when he died, he left a lot of unanswered questions because I didn't interview him. He had never really written or spoken at any great length about the history of the film, and I felt after he died that it was very important for our family to call together our records and make sure that everything that had to do with the film that our family was responsible for, that it be preserved. And so it was that impulse that first led me to think about getting an education about the film and the more I look in to it, the more questions I had and the more I realized that it was in fact a fascinating story and one that I wanted to tell, not only for us but for a larger public audience.

Yael Trusch: And this is how far after your father had already sealed the deal with US Government and your family had gotten the money and this chapter was, “closed”.

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: That happened in the year 2000. My father died in 2006.

Yael Trusch: Mm-hm. Okay.

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: Until 2011 that I really decided that I was going to write a book about it. So it was a long time.

Yael Trusch: Wow! How beautiful, Alexandra. How beautiful. Let's switch gears to some Jewish topics. Is there anything that you do in your home perhaps that maybe that you learned it from your parent's household or maybe you adopted it as an adult? Any Jewish traditions that you hold on too dearly today?

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: Well, there are great many of them, but of course at this time of the year I'm thinking hanukkah

Yael Trusch: Hanukkah

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: We have quite a number of memoirs that we've collected over the years and we always like many of them. As many as we can.

Yael Trusch: I love it.

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: Which is something that my parents always did, and you know I think for me, a lot of the traditions for our family as for so many Jewish families, really center on food. Like grandmother, Lil was—both of my grandmothers, but I'm thinking particularly of my grandmother on the Zapruder side, was a wonderful cook.

Yael Trusch: Uh-huh.

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: And I have a family cookbook of hers and so I made—

Yael Trusch: Oh, wow!

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: Some of her latkes and her brisket and that sort of thing which is a really special way to connect to our families, pass in our tradition, to keep those memories alive.

Yael Trusch: That's so amazing! Are you, Rus—both families were Russian? For both sides?

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: My grandmother and my grandfather on my father side were a Russian decent, and on my mother side, her mother's family was Romanian and her father's family was Polish.

Yael Trusch: Wow! Beautiful! Alright! Let's do some JLP fill in the blanks and this is the part of the show where I give you an open an ended sentence and you fill it with the first thing that comes to mind. Okay?

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: Okay!

Yael Trusch: Alright. I'm Alexandra Zapruder and I feel most spiritual when?

Alexandra: I feel most spiritual when... I think I feel most spiritual when I'm at Friday night services of my children at Temple Monica.

Yael Trusch: Oh, beautiful! How many kids do you have?

Alexandra Zapruder: I have two. I have a daughter and a son.

Yael Trusch: There is something magical about Friday night, I have to say. It is magical.

Alexandra Zapruder: I so love our congregation. It's a beautiful reformed congregation here and it's a very *haymish* place and so I really do love to be there with my family. It's very peaceful and I feel, I remember my father and my own growing up family, that's the congregation that I grew up in.

Yael Trusch: Nice.

Alexandra Zapruder: And were connected to many, many people who I love to work here and many who are gone, so it's very special.

Yael Trusch: Wow! I'm sure they're so very proud of your work.

Alexandra Zapruder: I think so.

Yael Trusch: My favorite mitzvah or one I feel most connected with is?

Alexandra Zapruder: I really love in terms of mitzvah's to, again, with my children ideally, to do things, to go and volunteer in needy communities or to collect gifts for the holidays; clothing... I think those are the things that mean the most to me. We have been very blessed and privileged in our lives and we have benefited from a family that came from nothing and most able to take advantage of opportunities in America to prosper and so for me, as a family giving back in very hands on way—

Yael Trusch: Yeah.

Alexandra Zapruder: It's not just by giving money to by purchasing gifts or purchasing items or going and feeding the hungry is... those are the mitzvahs that mean the most to me.

Yael Trusch: How beautiful. Yeah, really getting involved, beautiful. My fondest, sweetest Jewish memory is?

Alexandra Zapruder: I think I would have to say that that would be my B'nai mitzvah with my twin brother because everyone was there. I mean I love the Passover with my father side of the family and I loved thanksgiving even though it's not a Jewish holiday, its Jewish dish.

Yael Trusch: American, right.

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: I mean it has a very Jewish flavor to it.

Yael Trusch: Yes.

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: You know all of the Jewish holidays certainly have a strong memories but the thing about our B'nai mitzvah was that everyone was there. All my grandparents except for my Papa Eidden who's gone by then, but... and my parents and all of my cousins and lots of people who I loved, two are no longer with us and so that was a time of tremendous joy and meaning and I was very happy and proud to have accomplished this major milestone in my life.

Yael Trusch: That's so nice that you still remember it like that. That's so very beautiful.

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: Yeah.

Yael Trusch: Something I wish I had learned about Judaism growing up is?

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: I think I would say, I don't know if I would have wished to learn it when I was growing up, but I think I wished to know more about like collected Jewish wisdom, you know? Writings of Jewish theologians and thinkers, those are the things that I miss that I'm interested in now.

Yael Trusch: Right.

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: And I think that it would have been great to know more about that growing up, but I've become more, I have to say, that I have become more interested in Jewish history and Jewish culture and Jewish theology as I've gotten older which I think is not uncommon.

Yael Trusch: Good for you.

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: I embrace more and more as I get older.

Yael Trusch: Yeah, it's not uncommon and luckily nowadays, we have so much accessible and available, I mean translations of anything and everything that we'd want to learn so, that's our grandparents certainly didn't necessarily have access to all that Jewish learning.

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: Right. And also I think my family did a pretty good job of giving us education and we went through religious school. We had Bar mitzvahs. We—I taught in the religious synagogue. We celebrated all the holidays at home. I mean, we're not a strictly conservative Orthodox family but we did... those things were embedded and imprinted upon us and so I do feel that and I'm doing what I can to do that for our children as well.

Yael Trusch: Very nice. You sort of addressed this one, but maybe there's something else. When I give to Tzedakah a charity, I like to give to?

ALEXANDRA ZAPRUDER: I like to give it to needy communities in Washington, DC.

Yael Trusch: Oh, in your own hometown, beautiful.

Alexandra Zapruder: Right.

Yael Trusch: And finally, I'm Alexandra Zapruder and today I'm most grateful for?

Alexandra Zapruder: I'm most grateful for my family. It's not a very original thing to say but I'm most grateful for my family and my friends we have just been very fortunate. There has been, you know, I've always been surrounded by an incredibly loving and supportive family and we've stuck together through a lot and this is true for my friends as well and I just think that that is something that shapes every decision that you make. You know, if you grow up in the family that loves you and values you for who you are, you know anything is possible.

Yael Trusch: Yes, absolutely! So, beautiful. Thank you, Alexandra, so much. What's next? I mean this was a huge endeavor, a huge project. I mean what do you see coming?

Alexandra Zapruder: Yeah. There are a lot of things coming, I mean right now I'm doing a lot of work. I'm actually curating an exhibition for Holocaust Museum Houston.

Yael Trusch: Oh, cool!

Alexandra Zapruder: Yeah. About diaries of teenagers who worked during the holocaust and through genocide and another international conflicts through the present day, so that is a very small but powerful, I think exhibition that I'm working on right now, that will open in a few years when the Holocaust Museum Houston reopens in 2019.

Yael Trusch: Very cool.

Alexandra Zapruder: I am doing other consulting, working in education, and I'm thinking about new books. I haven't quite settled down what it will be but I hope that there will be something new for me to sink my teeth into very soon.

Yael Trusch: Amazing! Well, yeah! I forgot that you actually lived in Houston, right?

Alexandra Zapruder: No, I've spent a lot of time there. I never lived there but I have done a lot of work with Holocaust Museum Houston, very special organization and—

Yael Trusch: Yes.

Alexandra Zapruder: I've taught there a number of times and I have great, wonderful relationships with the museum's Education Department and so I continue to develop projects with them which is very exciting. I love that.

Yael Trusch: Very exciting. Beautiful! The book again, everybody is *Twenty-Six Seconds: A Personal History of the Zapruder Film*. And everybody can find it on Amazon or anywhere books are being sold. Alexandra, thank you so much. This was wonderful.

Alexandra Zapruder: Thank you so much for having me.

Yael Trusch: Thank you.

Thanks to Alexandra for stopping by. This is a fascinating book. Grab it on Amazon or anywhere books are being sold. *Twenty-six Seconds: A Personal History of the Zapruder Film*. Alexandra can be reached at www.alexandrazapruder.com and she's on twitter @azapruder. You can find the copy of the audio and the free transcript of this interview on much more back at www.jewishlatinprincess.com. I hope everyone had a wonderful Hanukkah

I need some rest, that's for sure. Next week it's music! Not one of my talents but definitely my guests. I have Jewish singer, Francisca on the show. Stay tuned for that, have a great week.

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