

MILTON ROGOVIN: AN ACTIVIST PHOTOGRAPHER

AN INTERVIEW BY ROBERT HIRSCH



(c) Molly Jarboe

Robert Hirsch: What was your family background?

Milton Rogovin: My parents, Jacob and Dora, came to America as immigrants and set up a store that sold household goods in New York City, where I was born in December 1909. In 1931 the Great Depression forced the store into bankruptcy.

Why did you move to Buffalo, New York?

I graduated from Columbia University as an optometrist in 1931 just four months after my father died. Work was very scarce and sporadic. I came to Buffalo for a job in 1938 and established my own practice the following year.

How were you politicized by the 1930s Depression and the rise of fascism?

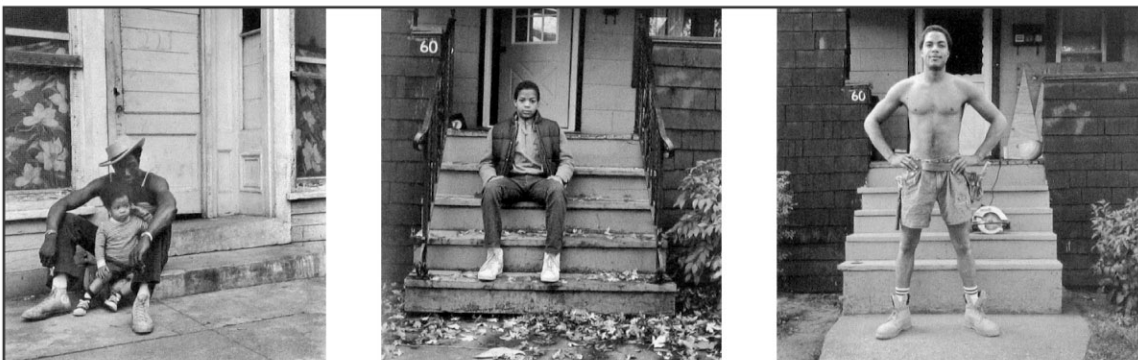
The loss of my father's business, his following death, and the concrete events I witnessed of people suffering everyday during the Depression completely changed my thinking, and as a result I became politically active. I felt that it was not enough just to feel these things, and that I had to do something to help change the situation. I could no longer be indifferent and like many others at the time I worked for a better future through socialism. I read books by political activists, such as Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money* (1930) and *Change the World* (1937), and numerous essays by Emma Goldman, which confirmed my feeling that changes were necessary and we had to do it ourselves.

How did you get involved with workers' rights?

I became involved in left-wing politics, and was active in organizing the Optical Workers Union in New York City. I continued this work in Buffalo and helped to reorganize the disintegrated local optical union here. Most optometrists did not look favorably on my activities (laughs). I picketed two of my boss's offices (laughs) and that was the end of my job. I had union following and I decided to open my own optical office on Chippewa Street, at the edge of Buffalo's Lower West Side.

How did you meet your wife and get interested in photography?

In Buffalo I met Anne [Setters] at a wedding reception while discussing the Spanish Civil War. Anne was not very political at that time (laughs). We were married in 1942, the same year as I bought my first camera, and was drafted into the U.S. Army and went overseas. Anne became active in the radical movement at this time, but it was not until about 15 years later that I really started to make photographs.



Triptychs. *Buffalo's Lower West Side Revisited*, "1973/1985/1992, pp.112-113.

What was your first project?

It was the *Store Front Church* series that I began as a way of speaking out through photography about the problems in our society. W.E.B. DuBois (a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) encouraged me to do this series, and he later wrote an introduction for this work. I was interested in his philosophy, and had read quite a few of his books including *Souls of Black Folk*, and *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*.

How did a white guy with a Jewish background get interested in Store Front Churches?

(laughing) Bill Talmage, a friend of mine who taught music at Buffalo State College, asked me if I would take photographs while he was recording the music at these churches. We worked together for three months, and he completed his series, and I stayed on to

do an in-depth study. Every Sunday, for three years, I went to these little storefront churches. They got to know and welcome me, and I always gave everyone pictures.

How did Minor White influence your early work?

Before I knew photographer Minor White [who had been an assistant curator at the George Eastman House, was teaching photography at the Rochester Institute of Technology, and was a co-founder and the first editor of *Aperture*]. I didn't know how to capture motion. I had a fixed 1/125th of a second notion about photography. When I showed Minor White my work he suggested that I slow down my shutter speed to 1/25th of a second so I would capture the sense of movement. I continued sending him my photographs, and he kept advising me. I was fortunate to have a master photographer giving me advice. I stayed at his home for a two-weeks' workshop during which he showed me how to do better darkroom work, which was very important since I never had any lessons. White published 48 of these photographs in *Aperture* (1962), which for a rank amateur, was very unusual. Robert Dougherty, a former director of the George Eastman House, also helped me a great deal.

with Strand, sending him photographs on a regular basis and visiting him when he would return to New York.

I notice you have Goya and Käthe Kollwitz prints hanging on the walls in your house?

I admire Goya and German printmaker Käthe Kollwitz for



in *Aperture* Vol.10:2, 1962, p80-81.

denouncing the atrocities of war, paying attention to ordinary people, and showing the problems of the poor people.

What happened when you were called before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1957?

My union activities and being the librarian of Buffalo's Communist Party brought me to the attention of the Committee and the FBI. I had a very difficult time getting a lawyer to represent me. When I appeared before the Committee I invoked my constitutional right not to testify against myself since I was a target.

What happened to your life after that?

When the McCarthy Committee got after me, the newspapers labeled me "Buffalo's Top Red." My optometry business immediately dropped in half. We were

shunned. Neighbors refused to allow their children to play with our children. It was terrible.

What motivated you to start making the photographs that eventually became the Buffalo Lower West Side project?

My voice was essentially silenced so, I decided to speak out about problems through my photography. Ordinary people interested me, and I wanted someone to pay attention to them. I began to phase out my optometric practice and concentrate on photographing the residents of Buffalo's Lower West Side. My practice was located close to this former working-class Italian neighborhood, which had become home to African-American, Puerto Rican, Native-American, and poor white families.

What were some of the problems facing this neighborhood?

The area has high rates of unemployment, alcoholism, drug use, and prostitution.

What was your photographic motivation?

I wanted to make sympathetic portraits of the poorest of the poor that showed them as decent humans struggling to get by. Most are considered as *los olvidados*, the forgotten ones, who are without a voice or power. Most people don't even know these people exist. By photographing them I thought I did bring them to the attention of the general public, [showing] that they were people just like us and should not be looked down upon, or abused, in any way.

Who else influenced your artistic vision?

Photographer Margaret Bourke-White and the Farm Security Administration group, especially Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, influenced me as well as the social documentary work of Lewis Hine. In addition, I was friends with photographer Paul Strand. Strand and I shared many similar concerns. He moved to France in the early 1950s because of his political beliefs. I stayed in touch



Triptychs. *Buffalo's Lower West Side Revisited*, "1973/1985/1992, pp.110-111.