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# AMERICAN SUBURB X

photography & culture

## Milton Rogovin: An Activist Photographer

by: Robert Hirsch, Afterimage, September 1, 2004



*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.

*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.

*What followed?*

I began to photograph for the Miners Series in Appalachia during 1962, and returned to the mining area over nine summers. In 1983, this work continued with funding from the W. Eugene Smith Memorial Award for Humanistic Photography. With this grant I decided to expand the project to include miners of China, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Mexico, Scotland, Spain, the United States and Zimbabwe. Whenever it was possible I photographed the men and women workers, both on the job, and at home with their families.

*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 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 Kathe Kollwitz prints hanging on the walls in your house?*

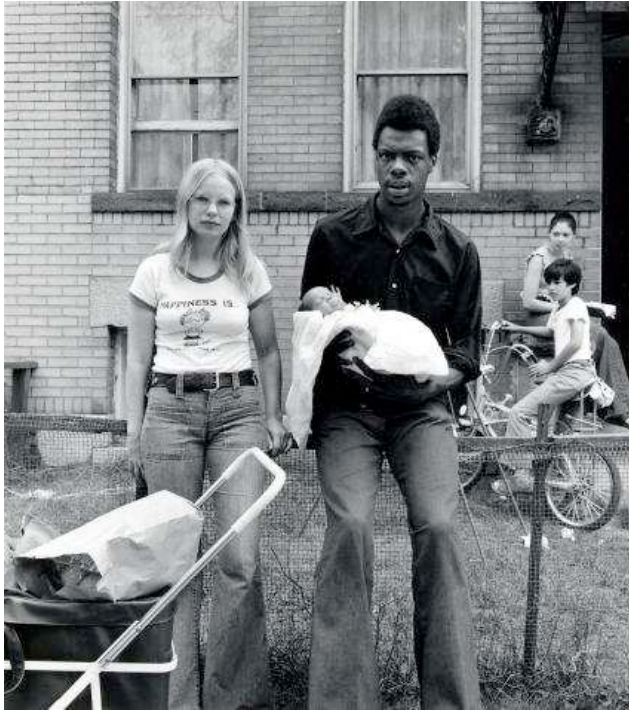
I admire Goya and German printmaker Kathe Kollwitz for denouncing the atrocities of war, paying attention to ordinary people, and showing the problems of the poor people.

*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.

*What appealed to you about Luis Bunuel's film, Los Olvidados (1950) that inspired your title The Forgotten Ones?*

Bunuel made this low budget film in Mexico that explored the extraordinary by using ordinary people and locations. The name just stuck with me, and since we were dealing with people in similar situations, I kept using the phrase "the forgotten ones".

*What were people's initial reactions to you?*

At first I was regarded with great suspicion. People thought the authorities, the FBI or the Welfare Department, sent me to spy on them.

*How did you gain their confidence?*

In those days, people in such areas were not used to being photographed, or indeed to being given any attention at all. It would be more difficult now, perhaps requiring more patience and care. I showed an interest, was polite, and tried to put people at ease. My wife Anne accompanied me and would talk with people. I would come back and give anyone I photographed a copy of their picture a few weeks later. Gradually I became known and trusted, and eventually people began to ask if I would take their picture. I remained in the area for the next three years.

*Were you worried about being robbed?*

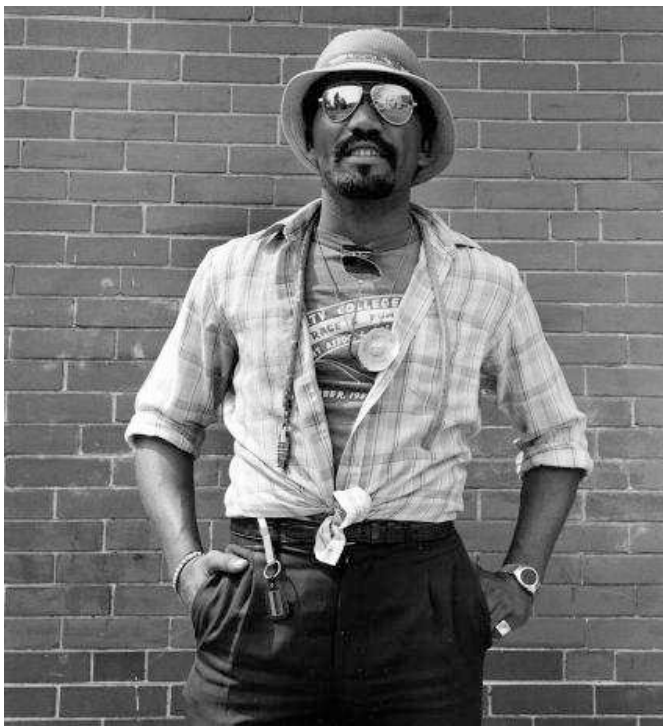
When I first went and set up my Hasselblad on a tripod, people would ask how much the camera was worth. After this had happened a few times. I got the message, and instead came back with my old twin-lens Rolleiflex to take pictures.

*What was the people's general reaction to your project?*

After I was accepted, most of the people felt good that someone wanted to photograph them, pay attention to them.

*How did this work first gain public notice?*

The Albright-Knox Gallery of Art showed these photographs, and this gave me credibility.



*Did you consider yourself a champion of the underdog?*

No, just like Kathe Kollwitz said, if it were not for the ordinary people I would have given up my artwork. It was the poor people who interested me, and I wanted to photograph. I was never interested in photographing the rich. For me, photography was not a way of making a living, but a way to express my thoughts about people. It made me feel good that I could bring the forgotten ones to public attention. I felt I was doing something important. It wasn't part of the radical approach that I should do photography; it was something I felt I had to do as an individual to make a difference.

*Do you think your photographs affect others?*

A few weeks ago the fellow who reads the gas meter told me: "I love your work" (laughs). I was very deeply moved that he had the courage to say he loved my work. When people look at my photographs and books, it encourages them to see that there are problems.

*Why did you decide on using a square format camera?*

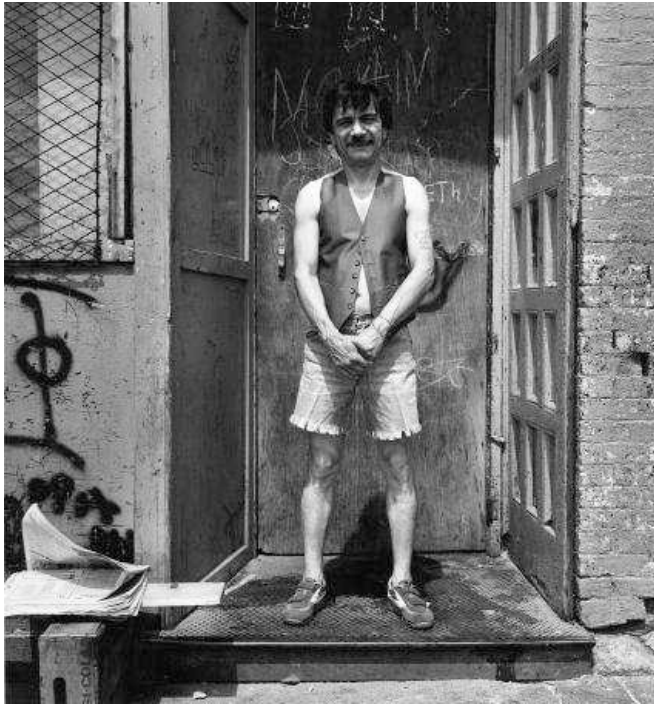
I liked the twin-lens Rolleiflex format with its waist-level viewfinder because it allowed me to look down into the camera. This was a much better way of making photographs of people as I was sort of bowing in front of my subjects, and this creates a different kind of interaction than aiming a camera directly at them. Also, the larger negative [medium format instead of 35 mm] allowed me to crop the image in the darkroom.

*Why black-and-white?*

If I photographed a woman in a pink dress, all people saw was a pink dress. Color got in the way of what I thought was important, so I got rid of it.

*Your subjects are centered within the frame and look directly into the camera. Is this the result of your training as an optometrist?*

My photographs are straightforward. I always asked permission before taking pictures. I wanted to get close and make the people be the most important thing in the frame. I never directed them or told them where to stand, how to hold their hands, or what to wear. The only thing I asked them was to look at the camera. I liked it when I saw their eyes and that's when I knew I was ready to make their picture. Typically I would make 2 or 3 exposures. When you look at these pictures, you know there was no monkey business, and that I was not sneaking around trying to steal pictures of people.



*What type of lighting did you use for your interior work?*

I used a Graflex bare bulb flash because it produces a soft even light in all directions. I used a long sync cord that allowed me to control the position of the shadows.

*Did you do your own darkroom work?*

Yes, I was self-taught, and for me, it was essential to make my own prints, which I processed using Beers two-solution developer to adjust contrast. I would develop the 12-exposure 120 Tri-X roll film in Edwal FG-7, make contact prints, and then select the ones to print, in a very simple basement darkroom in our house. I printed on Kodak Medalist 3 paper, and when that was discontinued, I switched to Kodak Elite 3. Who else could know what I saw and how I wanted to show it?

*What led you to photograph the same people 3 or 4 times over 30 years, which resulted in *Triptychs: Buffalo's Lower West Side Revisited*, and enabled viewers to see how people had aged, changed, and endured over time?*

My wife Anne convinced me that it would be a valuable thing to do. When I returned to the Lower West Side, in the 1980s, and again in the early 1990s, my biggest problem was to find the people and families I had originally photographed. Since I learned not to ask too many questions, I did not have their names and addresses. I would take a box of photos to the corner where people would gather, and show them the pictures. They would tell me who had broken up, who was in jail, who had O.D. ed, who had died, or moved away, and where I could find those who still lived there. For these reasons, a person might be missing in the second or third photograph of the triptychs.

*What role did your late wife Anne play in this project?*

When I started making these pictures in 1972, Anne would go out with me, and as an activist for peace and justice, she got involved with people. She encouraged me to give up optometry and devote myself to photography, which I did in 1975. Her job teaching Special Education supported us. This change to a full-time photographer enabled me to start the series Working

People where I went into the Buffalo steel factories during the working day to make pictures. I photographed in both the factory and in the workers' homes with their families. Some of this work was published in *Portraits in Steel* with interviews by Michael Frisch (1993.) It was her idea that I should go back and photograph the people again. Also, Anne did not allow television in the house, as she thought it was not a good thing to be hooked on TV, and it was more important to do our work.

*How and why did you go to Cuba?*

I was able to get access by "baiting the hook" and telling the Cuban officials about my work with DuBois and Neruda. I made a number of visits to photograph people working in factories. The last time I photographed nickel miners near Guantanamo, one of the miners invited me to his home to photograph, which resulted in a wonderful series of photographs. I also met the leading Cuban poet Nancy Morejon, and this led to a collaboration in which Nancy wrote 38 poems in response to my Cuban photographs. The result will be the publication of *With Eyes and Soul: Images of Cuba* late this September by Dennis Maloney's White Pine Press here in Buffalo. [see: [www.whitepine.org](http://www.whitepine.org)].



*What have you done with all your negatives and your prints?*

The Library of Congress accepted my entire archive of negatives in 1999, and they will be available for future use, including online. 225 of my photographs were purchased by Robert and Mary Ann Budin, and donated to the Burchfield-Penney Art Center here in Buffalo, which is now organizing it as a touring exhibition. In addition, the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles has acquired 133 of my photographs.

*How did you get on NPR (National Public Radio)?*

In 1999, Dave Isay (a MacArthur Fellow) and David Miller came to Buffalo and recorded some of the people I took pictures of, and myself as part of their NPR series [see: [www.soundportraits.org](http://www.soundportraits.org)]. This also resulted in the book *Milton Rogovin: The Forgotten Ones* (2003), for which I photographed some of the Lower West Side people for the fourth time! The



book contains a selection of my earlier Buffalo work as well as the new "quartets" and these people's oral history.

*I understand this led to a short 12-minutes' film about your work.*

Yes, Harvey Wang who accompanied Dave made *The Forgotten Ones*, which won the prize for best documentary short at the TriBeCa Film Festival last year [see: [www.harveywang.com](http://www.harveywang.com)].

*I recently saw one of your books prominently offered for sale at Wegmans' grocery store on Amherst Street in Buffalo.*

Yes, I had a book signing at Wegmans'. I like having everyday people see my pictures in everyday situations. I had mural size photographs of steel workers displayed inside Buffalo subway stations. I also have photographs on display at the downtown Buffalo Library and at the Columbus Community Health Center on Niagara Street. People come in and see their friends and relatives on the wall. There is even a photograph, I made years ago in the neighborhood, of a fellow who is now the clinic director.



*What issue rings your bell today?*

I recently attended an anti-war demonstration on Elmwood Avenue and Bidwell Parkway in Buffalo because I thought it was important to have one more person speaking out.

*Might the photographs of US military personnel tormenting Iraqi prisoners do to President Bush what the tape recorder did to Richard Nixon?*

I can only hope so (chuckle). Bush is leading us into a horrible mess in Iraq and I have very little regard for him and his direction.

*What is the best thing about living to be 94 years old?*

Since I was 47, before I seriously took up photography, it has allowed me time to continue to do my work. I also started writing poetry when I was 90.

*You became a poet at 90?*

Yes, I had never written a poem in my life. I was sitting in this [sloped] chair in my living room on my ninetieth birthday, and I started crying as I recalled my father going swimming at Coney Island, and a poem came out. Then I wrote a poem about my mother. I was remembering the time she took me to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City to see a well-known painting called "The Horse Fair" (1852) by Rosa Bonheur. I wrote about 70 poems over the next few years, all of them sitting in that chair. My family joked about it. (Laughing) My son Mark sat in the chair, but no poems came out.

*That is a fascinating link between your mother and one of the most famous woman artists of the first three quarters of the nineteenth century.*

Yes, although many women at that time were amateur artists it was very unusual for a woman to pursue a career in painting. Bonheur believed in direct observation of nature. To be accurate in her details she dissected animal parts, sketched from life, and attended horse fairs. At that time women did not do such things.

*Right, and to avoid the name calling that a woman would probably receive at a horse fair, Bonheur got permission from the prefecture of police to dress in men's clothing (1852). How else might your mother have influenced your seeing?*

My mother hung a print of Vincent Van Gogh's "Sun Flowers" in our living room next to pictures of my grandparents. I was fascinated by the print and later made a study of Van Gogh's genre working style.

*Did pictures like the "Potato Eaters" (1885) that dealt with everyday people and their personal toil influence your forthright style?*

I recall a letter Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo saying: "I have tried to emphasize that those people, eating their potatoes in the lamp-light, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labor, and how they have honestly earned their food." This fits just right with certain of my photographs.

*Why were you motivated to write poetry about your photographs?*

[At this point, Milton's son, Mark Rogovin, who is visiting from Chicago walks into the room and offers his observation.]

Mark Rogovin: I think my father's motivation to write poetry stems from his being silenced during the McCarthy period, a time when our family was spurned by many in our community. Milton returned to certain images because he had more to say about social/economic/environmental problems that many of the people he photographed were confronting. It is his plea not only that the photographs should speak, but that his poems could articulate a little more meaning. The photographs Milton chose to write about are indicative of the ones he would pin up on our kitchen bulletin board when I was a kid for family discussion. The ones that lasted more than a couple of days were the ones that Milton then would make as final prints. One of my favorites is "My Theme Boy" (2002).

### My Theme Boy (2002)

His land is dying  
You can see it  
In his eyes  
The mines are closing  
This too is in his eyes  
Look into his eyes  
They will tell you lots--lots more  
Of mountain tops--stripped and gouged  
Of streams polluted  
Of fish destroyed  
Remember, America  
This should be  
This must be  
The land of opportunity and equality  
For all  
Including this little boy

*What is the downside of living such a long life?*

I had to overcome heart surgery, prostate cancer, and cataracts. The worst was losing my wife of 63 years, Anne. We worked together very closely; she made many contributions to my work, and was a tremendous help in alleviating suspicion of me as a photographer. Here were two old characters, and people didn't worry about us (laughs).

*How would you describe your spiritual outlook?*

I consider myself an atheist. If there are problems, we will have to solve them here and not have someone up above solve them for us. We have to do it ourselves.

*What advice do you have for someone starting out in photography?*

You must believe in what you are doing. When you run into problems, you must keep plugging away and keep doing it. It is never easy. My slogan is "Never give up!"