

Milton Rogovin

# THE PEOPLE V. THE OPTOMETRIST

By Arthur H. Bleich

**“Pleasant.” That was the morning weather report for Buffalo, NY, on Friday, October 4, 1957. But inside the Dillon Federal Courthouse, a distinct chill prevailed as Milton Rogovin, 48, an optometrist and local activist exercised his rights and refused to answer questions posed by visiting members of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).**

Rogovin, whose principle “crime” was distributing copies of *The Daily Worker* (a legally published newspaper), was named by the Committee as the “Top Red in Buffalo.” He feared his business might suffer for a while but figured it would probably recover after the hearings ended and the Subcommittee moved on.

However, at 3:12 p.m. that same afternoon, the Russians launched Sputnik, the world’s first artificial satellite. It threw America into a state of anti-Soviet paranoia and acted as a catalyst to badly damage Rogovin’s practice, turn his wife and children into neighborhood pariahs, and destroy family relationships with many longtime friends.

There was, though, an unexpected upside. Rogovin began to use a camera to express his political views and would become one of the greatest social documentary photographers in the world.

Moving to Buffalo, NY from his New York City birthplace in 1938, he set up a practice that catered to union workers and soon thereafter met his wife-to-be, Anne. Four years later, just prior to his enlistment in the service, they were married. Rogovin subsequently purchased a used Zeiss Super Ikonta A and won a prize in a photography contest before shipping out for England where he served in a hospital as an Army optometrist until he was honorably discharged in 1945.

Back in Buffalo, he and Anne became politically active in voter registration and unionization, which eventually led to their coming under FBI surveillance (not uncommon during the Cold War when the hunt was on for “subversive” individuals) and in Rogovin’s appearance before HUAC. His wife was also expelled from her job as a public school teacher for refusing to sign a Loyalty Oath (she was subsequently employed by a school outside city limits).

Shortly after the hearings, business began to fall off and the family became more and more dependent on

Anne’s income. Rogovin had a lot of time on his hands, so when a music professor friend who was making sound recordings for Folkways Records at an African-American storefront church asked him to come along to take some pictures for the album cover, he readily agreed.

“My practice kind of fell pretty low and my voice was essentially silenced,” Rogovin recalls in a 2003 interview on National Public Radio. “So I thought that [by] photographing people in the storefront church, I would be able to speak out about the problems of people, this time through my photography.”

Armed with a Rolleiflex and a strobe, Rogovin began the church project only to find he wasn’t technically capable enough to capture the images he saw in his mind. For one thing, he was having problems with properly exposing black skin tones; for another, his flash was creating heavy shadows.

A chance meeting with Minor White, renowned photographer and teacher, became a turning point in Rogovin’s photographic education. “He suggested I slow down my shutter speed in order to capture the exciting movement of the preacher and individuals who were moving rapidly while in a trance.” White also advised Rogovin to use a bare-tube strobe to soften the lighting and eliminate harsh shadows. The results were stunning; White published a series of the images in *Aperture*, the prestigious photo magazine he edited. The “Storefront Churches” series committed Rogovin to a life as a social documentary photographer.

“Before starting any new series, I would have to be convinced that it had the possibilities of dealing with the problems of people; especially the poor, the disadvantaged, the ‘forgotten ones,’” Rogovin says. He is fond of saying that the rich have their own photographers but the poor have none. He became their photographer and

ALL PHOTOS COPYRIGHT © MILTON ROGOVIN



# Speaking of Milton Rogovin...

“ Why was he taking these photographs? What was his purpose? He doesn't take them and put them away in a book. He doesn't take them to make money. If his goal had been personal fame [or] notoriety, he could have taken a lot of these people and shot them differently. The tenacity of this man! To have literally worked for decades without much recognition. And now it's quite wonderful [that] at the end of his life he's really being seen as one of the major photographers in this genre in the last 100 years. ”

**James Wood, Director and President,  
Art Institute of Chicago 1980–2004**

always made prints for his subjects, usually hand-delivering them. Sometimes he'd see one of his images hanging on a wall when he returned years later for a follow-up photo session.

Many series followed. In 1962, he and Anne traveled to Western Virginia and Eastern Kentucky for nine consecutive summers to photograph miners in the area. Later, beginning in 1981 when Rogovin was 72 and ending in 1990 when he was 81, they documented miners all over the world, aided by an \$18,000 W. Eugene Smith Grant in Humanistic Photography and the support of the J. Paul Getty Museum, which eventually purchased many of the images and produced a book of them.

Rogovin was never one to pick up his camera to go looking for pictures. He rarely took his Rollei with him unless it was for a purpose. Series of images were his meat and potatoes. He would send

letter after letter to others proposing collaboration on this topic or that. Most replies were negative—some because he was relatively unknown, others because his respondents lacked the time. But in 1967 he hit the jackpot when preeminent Chilean poet Pablo Neruda (who would win the Nobel Prize for literature four years later) invited him to take images that would eventually illustrate a book of Neruda's poetry.

Neruda recalled Rogovin's arrival with humor: "He came loaded down with lenses and cameras. He was too much for our simplicity." But when Rogovin had finished, Neruda was impressed: "He carried much more than his equipment; patient eyes and searching; a heart sensitive to light, to rain, to the shadows. The great photographer immersed himself in the poetry of simplicity and came to the surface with the net full of clear fish and flowers of profundity."

---



One of those flowers is Rogovin's signature image of a young Chilean mother and child that he and Anne called "The Madonna." The background—as in all his pictures—speaks forcefully: The tattered wall behind the two reveals the impoverished conditions in which they live. Rogovin only brought 30 rolls of film with him to Chile, a total of 360 potential exposures. As he would throughout his career, he'd set up his tripod and then shoot an average of three shots per subject—rarely more.

Most of his pictures were taken with Tri-X Professional film,

visits to document the same people and families. He roamed an area of six square blocks, capturing images of its poor, but proud, inhabitants who represented a racial, religious and economic mélange typical of many similar ghetto areas throughout the United States.

"As a social documentary photographer I was interested in this small neighborhood because of the many problems that existed there—high unemployment, prostitution, drugs, alcoholism and others." At first regarded with suspicion, people began to warm to Rogovin and Anne (who often accompanied him) especially after

“One of the reasons Milton is not as well known [as other great photographers] is that working in the field of social documentary photography is not the type of work that gets seen in a lot of galleries and museums. It's not the type of work people are going to buy to hang on their wall because it shows, in a lot of cases, difficult material to look at. It's not the beautiful nature shot or celebrity photograph. These are people we tend to pass by on the street and not look at.”

**Carol Johnson, Curator of Photography, Library of Congress**

developed in FG-7 and printed on 8x10 Kodak Medalist #3 paper and, when that was discontinued, Kodak Elite #3. Color was out. "I don't find that color adds anything to what I'm trying to say about our society. If anything, it's always a disturbing factor. [People will] mention what a lovely pink blouse this woman has on or what nice green plants that guy has. I tried it several times and just dropped it," Rogovin says.

Rogovin is known best for his Lower West Side series, which he began in 1972 at age 63 and continued into his 90s with periodic

they began handing out prints. After all, what harm could these two seniors do? Soon, they became neighborhood fixtures: Rogovin with his twin-lens Rollei, Linhof tripod and, for indoor work, a powerpack with a long cord connected to a bare tube strobe; and Anne, with her perpetual smile and light-hearted banter. They simply approached people, told them they were doing a photo series on the neighborhood and asked if they'd mind being photographed.

"I never told them how to stand or what to do. All I suggested to them was that they look at the camera; that was all I ever did. And



most of them felt so good that somebody wanted to photograph them and pay attention to them, you know." Rogovin felt the Rollei was the perfect camera for his work because in looking down at the ground glass, "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."

Rogovin would return to the Lower West Side for more than 30 years to re-photo-

graph the same people and their families. When cataracts caused his eyesight to fail at 88, he thought he was finished as a photographer and sold his equipment. But surgery restored his career at 91 and he bought back his beloved Rollei; two years later he completed his fourth and final round of Lower West Side photographs.

When Rogovin was 67, he was motivated by Bertolt Brecht's poem, "A Worker Reads History," to begin a "Working People" series

on laborers at steel mills, foundries and auto factories in western New York. He then took the idea one step further; he would also photograph the same people at home, away from the grit and grime of their daily work. But how would he gain access to their private world?

"I would come back [to the factories] a couple of weeks later and give [prints] to them, and I would talk to them about going to their home. They would be dressed the way they wanted to be photographed and sit where they wanted. So you would see a different aspect of this person." Always the social commentator, Rogovin notes that husbands were absent in the at-home images of many women workers because there were no husbands.

"Women go to work, and they are doing it in some cases because they must go to work. They should be treated the same as men and given the opportunity. Women get the short end of the stick, and so anybody that's interested in improving our society will have to do something about this situation," he says.

Rogovin, who celebrated his 100th birthday in December 2009, has become a 20th century icon of American social documentary photography, along with Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, W. Eugene Smith and others. He and Anne (who passed away in 2003) donated his works to the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, AZ, and to the Library of Congress, where his collection resides alongside those of other greats.

Throughout his lifetime, Milton Rogovin has worked for social justice. And though the government may have silenced his voice at one time, his images have spoken out far more powerfully than words. He has won the game.

Milton Rogovin's awards, honors and portfolios are at [www.miltonrogovin.com](http://www.miltonrogovin.com), a website set up by his children, Mark, Ellen and Paula. Books in print about Rogovin may be found at [www.miltonrogovin.com/publications](http://www.miltonrogovin.com/publications). A DVD of an award-winning film on Rogovin, produced by Ezra Bookstein, is available at [tellingimagefilms.com](http://tellingimagefilms.com).

*Arthur H. Bleich (arthur@dpcorner.com) is a photographer, writer and educator who lives in Miami. He does assignments for major publications both in the United States and abroad, and conducts digital photography workshop cruises. Visit his Digital-PhotoCorner at [www.dpcorner.com](http://www.dpcorner.com) and his workshop cruise site at [www.dpcorner.com/cruise](http://www.dpcorner.com/cruise).*

