

## **“Eye Witness: Milton Rogovin, Social Documentary Photographer by Melanie Herzog**

NOTE: This essay is excerpted from Melanie Herzog’s book, *Milton Rogovin: The Making of a Social Documentary Photographer*, published by the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, Arizona and the University of Washington Press (2006).

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Milton Rogovin, now ninety-seven years old, has dedicated his life’s work - as an optometrist, a political activist, and a photographer - to enabling people to see more clearly. Born in New York in 1909, Rogovin was radicalized by the widespread deprivations he witnessed during the Depression and dedicated himself to working for social and economic justice. After military service during the Second World War he began practice as an optometrist in Buffalo, New York. He and his wife Anne were politically active, engaging in union organizing and voter registration in Buffalo’s African-American community. In 1957 he was called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, or HUAC, and after refusing to testify was dubbed “Buffalo’s Number One Communist.” Much of his optometry clientele vanished, and with his increased free time he turned to photography as a way to speak about social inequities. Still, he maintained his optometry practice until he was nearly seventy years old.

Milton Rogovin’s story is not the story of a lone artist. Rather, it encompasses the dynamics of a relationship and a family. It was Anne - teacher, author, and ardent activist - who held the family together when, following her husband’s summoned appearance before HUAC, his optometric practice was devastated and their children were shunned. And, though she herself had a demanding job as a teacher, when he continued to work at his office during the day and in his basement darkroom in the evening, she was their children’s primary caregiver. She opened doors into people’s lives and made it possible for Milton to walk through these doors with his camera. She did not simply accompany her husband on his photographic forays; she was the instigator of many of his projects, his constant organizer, and his persistent publicist, bringing his photographs to the attention of writers, museum curators, and publishers.

Throughout their sixty-one years of marriage they shared ideas and political commitments as loving comrades – Anne died in 2003.

Rogovin's story is also about community – various communities in Buffalo, where he has lived and worked for most of his life, and where he photographed working and poor people, people at work and at home, and people out of work, for nearly fifty years – and communities in other parts of the world, where he photographed workers and their families. His story is entwined with that of many other people, particularly those of the U.S. political left, people advocating for fundamental change in the distribution and enactment of power in this country.

And his story is also part of the larger story of the history of social documentary photography. Milton Rogovin is heir to a tradition of social documentary photography that came of age in the climate of liberal social reform that characterized the Progressive Era. This was when nineteenth and early twentieth century sociologists such as Jacob Riis (1849-1914) and Lewis Hine (1874-1940) took up the camera or enlisted the services of contemporary photographers to add credibility to their studies. While a number of cultural critics and activist artists are critical of the reformist perspective that has shaped the historical trajectory and discourse of documentary photography, Rogovin himself would argue that while social documentary photographers share the aim of inciting their viewers to awareness, their perspectives in fact vary – from visions of social reform that ameliorates the conditions of social ills to a more radical critique of the social structures that produce these conditions.

In his autobiographical writing and in presentations on his development as a social documentary photographer, Milton Rogovin emphasizes his own awakening to this country's gross social inequities and his formation of an understanding of their causes during the Great Depression of the 1930s. This was an era in which photographers, like other artists, regarded themselves as cultural workers, utilizing a variety of expressive media in the service of social consciousness. Accordingly Rogovin names as vital influences

photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White (1904-1971) and social documentary photographers such as Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) and Walker Evans (1903-1975), whose best known photographs were made under the auspices of various federal agencies, particularly the Resettlement and Farm Security Administrations, established by the Roosevelt Administration's New Deal during the 1930s. For many people, these Farm Security Administration photographs represent the pinnacle of social documentary photography; the culmination of the early twentieth century vision of photography's potential to serve the cause of progressive reform.

When Rogovin returned to Buffalo following three years of service in the U.S. Armed Forces during the Second World War, he and his brother established an optometric practice together. Milton and Anne Rogovin had three children, and continued their political work. But with the onset of the Cold War they found themselves under increasing surveillance for political activities which, along with Rogovin's volunteer service as literature director for the local branch of the Communist Party, were deemed dangerous by the U.S. government.

Milton Rogovin was summoned and appeared before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in Buffalo on October 4, 1957. Refusing to answer the questions put to him other than his name and occupation, he was proclaimed the "Top Red in Buffalo" by that day's *Buffalo Evening News*. His appearance before HUAC was an excruciating experience, and it had devastating repercussions - on his optometry practice, his family, and his friends. Neighbors kept track of who visited the Rogovin house. Neighborhood children were warned against playing with "the Rogovin children." Friends and other associates were afraid to greet them openly on the street. Though Milton and his brother kept their optometry office open, many of their patients, fearing accusations of guilt by association, went elsewhere. Anne Rogovin refused to sign the Loyalty Oath required for teachers in the Buffalo public schools and

went to work in Buffalo's suburbs for the Board of Cooperative Education as a Special Education teacher; she later became a recognized leader in this field as an educator and a writer.

"But as it turned out," Rogovin has said, "There was also a positive result to all these attacks." In 1957 he was invited by his friend William H. Tallmadge, a professor of music at State University College in Buffalo, to accompany Tallmadge while he made sound recordings at a Holiness Church in Buffalo's African American community and to make photographs of the church services. "I readily accepted my friend's offer," he said, "since I felt that once again I could speak out about the problems of the poor, but this time through my photography." After three months Tallmadge had completed his recordings; Rogovin continued to photograph in Buffalo's various storefront churches for three years.

In the summer of 1962, when the *Storefront Church* series was completed, Milton and Anne Rogovin traveled to West Virginia and eastern Kentucky to photograph miners and mining communities. They returned to Appalachia each summer through 1971; Milton photographed miners and their families, and the landscape devastated by strip-mining. They also recorded interviews with some of the miners. Anne's role on these trips was crucial, for she initiated conversations with the women of these mining communities and, as a couple, she and her husband would be invited into their homes. "I often wonder why they let me go into their houses," Rogovin recalls. "I guess there was something about Anne and me, we didn't look threatening to them."

Rogovin went on to photograph residents of Buffalo's East Side, the neighborhood surrounding the Storefront Churches; Native Americans in Buffalo and on the nearby reserves; working and poor people of Buffalo's Lower West Side – in a series that spans more than thirty years; steelworkers in Buffalo; and miners in Scotland, Cuba, Mexico, France, Czechoslovakia, Spain, Germany, Zimbabwe, and China, and, again, in Appalachia. His "Working People" and "Family of Miners" images pair photographs of workers

at work and at home, visual manifestations of the fullness of people's lives and of the specificities and complexities of gender, ethnicity, and class in particular locations and at particular historical moments.

What is critically important is that while Rogovin recognizes the impact of social conditions and is unfailingly critical of the social and economic structures that impose and maintain these conditions, his photographs are not portrayals of abject victimization. Nor does he romanticize or heroize his subjects. Rather, he seeks to convey the effects of material reality on his subjects and how people live their lives in relation to social conditions. He is not satisfied with a one-dimensional portrayal of a subject, and his photographs defy simplistic interpretation, instead suggesting questions - about individual lives, communal circumstances, and the social and economic structures that shape these circumstances. Aware of his presence - Rogovin unfailingly asks his subjects' permission before making a photograph - his subjects engage the camera and the photographer. Accordingly, there is a sense of connection, whether momentary or extending through years or even decades, in these photographs.

Milton Rogovin has dedicated his life's work to enabling people to see more clearly - as an optometrist, a political activist, and a photographer. He offers the following advice to those just beginning their life's work: "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!'" His work demonstrates an abiding respect for the humanity of his subjects, awareness of how people's circumstances and surroundings have an impact on their lives, and consciousness - even, at times, astonishment - at the resilience of human beings as he makes visible that which might otherwise remain unseen.

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