

# MILTON ROGOVIN, SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY AND JEWISH IDENTITY

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Milton Rogovin, who is now ninety-nine years old, has dedicated his life's work – as an optometrist, a political activist, and a photographer – to enabling people to see more clearly. Celebrated for his photographs of "the forgotten ones" of Buffalo, New York, where he has lived for most of his life, and of the people he has photographed throughout the world, Rogovin is acclaimed as well for his photographs of workers at work and at home, and people out of work. Rogovin's nearly half-century of photographic practice, rendering visible the work and lives of those whose lives most often remain unseen, was undoubtedly shaped by his politics – unswervingly progressive, and informed notably, though certainly not exclusively, by Jewishness.

Though Rogovin is religiously non-observant, as was his wife Anne, his life partner and comrade for sixty-one years, at the core of his politics and his photographic practice are profound compassion, righteous outrage, passionate identification with the oppressed, and ardent commitment to justice – all, to some degree, Jewishly inflected. I met Anne in 2003, several months before her death, when I became involved in the project that resulted in the 2006 publication of *Milton Rogovin: The Making of a Social Documentary Photographer*.<sup>1</sup> Each morning she awakened me with the celebrated anti-fascist song *Peat Bog Soldiers*. Three and one-half years later, on my most recent visit, when Milton and I celebrated the publication of the book, Milton sang me another well-known song *Bei Mir Bist Du Schein*. It was the juxtaposition of these songs that compelled me to think about his Jewishness, informing and informed by his steadfast commitment, throughout his life, to working for social and economic justice, and that served as the impetus for this paper.



Milton and Anne Rogovin, photograph by Harvey Wang, 2000

Milton Rogovin was born in New York City in 1909, the third son of Jacob and Dora (Shainhouse) Rogovin, recent immigrants from what is now Lithuania. Jacob had emigrated in 1904, followed by Dora and their first son; their second child was born in 1907. Milton grew up in New York, first on the upper east side of Manhattan, where his parents ran a dry goods store, and then in Brooklyn. He went to Hebrew School; he remembers his mother reading Yiddish newspapers and stories to the three boys; his mother also took them to the Yiddish theater. From his neighborhood in Brooklyn, where there were fewer Jews, he took the train to Manhattan to study for his Bar Mitzvah. Then, following his older brother Sam, he went to Columbia University to study to become an optometrist.<sup>2</sup>

Rogovin's immersion in the cultural life of New York's Jewish immigrant community clearly shaped his values and his subsequent commitments to speaking through his photography on behalf of "the forgotten ones." He was not unique in this regard, of course; many Jewish immigrants and children of immigrants have shared this identification with "outsiders" and other oppressed peoples.<sup>3</sup> Rogovin says he was radicalized by the widespread deprivations he witnessed in New York during the Depression, and began to study socialism as a means of understanding the inequities he observed. He moved to Buffalo, where he met and married Anne, and commenced practice as an optometrist, serving union members and other working people. He says,

The radical movement shaped me into a new person, concerned about others. We fought for health insurance for all, for social security and old-age pensions. We fought for unions and jobs for everyone. And we not only fought for "Bread" but also for "Roses." Everyone should be entitled to an education and everyone should have access to the arts, the "Roses" that help to create a truly human being.<sup>4</sup>

After service in the U.S. Armed Forces during World War II, Rogovin returned to Buffalo, where he and his brother became partners in a shared optometric practice. Milton and Anne had three children and continued their political work, engaging in union organizing and voter registration in Buffalo's African-American community. Though he was not actively engaged in photography during these years, his avowed enthusiasm for "Bread and Roses" was manifest in a love of music and the work of socially engaged artists that was familiar to him through publications such as *New Masses* and *The Daily Worker* – Francisco Goya, Honoré Daumier, Käthe Kollwitz, and the Depression-era photographers – whose work he cites as inspirational. Indeed, while he notes as well the importance to him of the tradition of social documentary photography that began when nineteenth and early twentieth century sociologists such as Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine took up the camera or, as did Riis, enlisted the services of contemporary photographers to add credibility to their studies, he names as vital influences the photographers of the New Deal programs established by the Roosevelt Administration in the 1930s – among them photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White and social documentary photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, whose best known photographs were made under the auspices of various federal agencies, particularly the Resettlement and Farm Security Administrations. 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.

Then came the Cold War, the House Committee on Un-American Activities' investigations of the Hollywood Ten, the Attorney General's List that included the Photo League among the hundreds of groups named as subversive organizations, and the arrest of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg during the summer of 1950. The Rosenbergs were charged with espionage, tried and found guilty in federal court, and sentenced to death; protests were held throughout the United States and the world. Milton and Anne Rogovin were actively involved in these protests, and Anne worked tirelessly to raise money for the Rosenbergs' defense. When Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed in the electric chair in the summer of 1953 the Rogovin family was away from home on a camping trip, and, as all three of the children still remember, Anne sobbed when she heard this devastating news. To many people, this execution was a chilling manifestation of what could befall those whom the U.S. government determined to be traitors to this country.

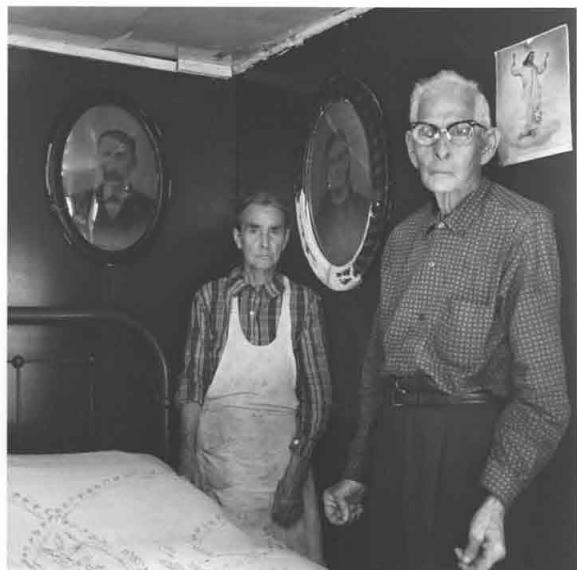
With the onset of the Cold War, Milton and Anne Rogovin found themselves under surveillance for their political activities, deemed dangerous by the U.S. government. Milton Rogovin was summoned and appeared before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in Buffalo on October 4, 1957. Refusing to 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.<sup>5</sup> He still recalls his excruciating appearance before HUAC and its devastating repercussions on his family, his friends, and his optometry practice. 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 Milton and Anne 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.



Milton Rogovin, *Storefront Churches*, 1958-61

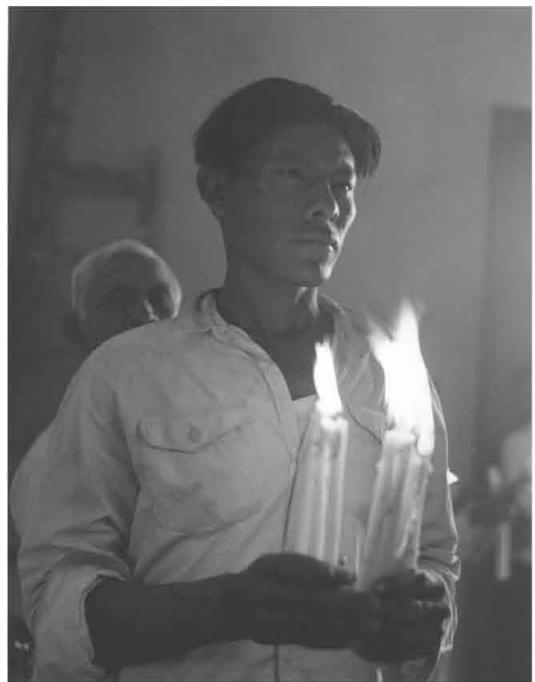
"But as it turned out," he says, "there was also a positive result to all these attacks." With his increased free time he turned to photography as a way to speak

about social inequities, producing his first photographic series over the course of three years in Buffalo's African-American storefront churches.<sup>6</sup> In the summer of 1962, when the Storefront Church series was completed, and each summer through 1971, Milton and Anne Rogovin traveled to West Virginia and eastern Kentucky to photograph miners, their families, and the devastating consequences of strip-mining. 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 Milton 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."<sup>7</sup>



Milton Rogovin, *Appalachia*, 1962–71

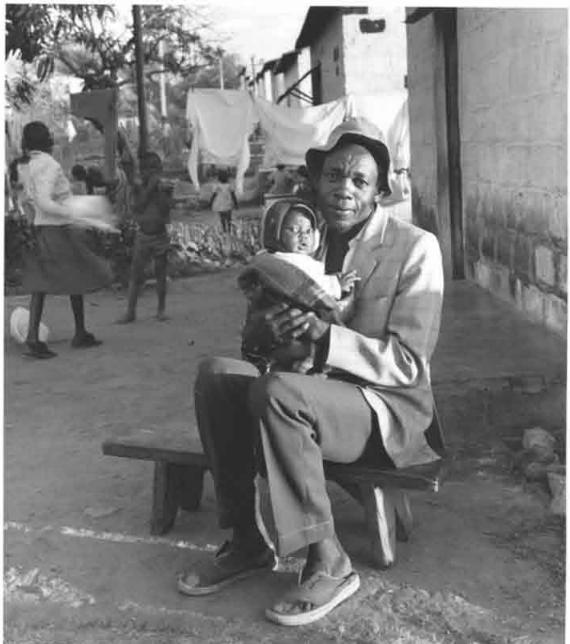
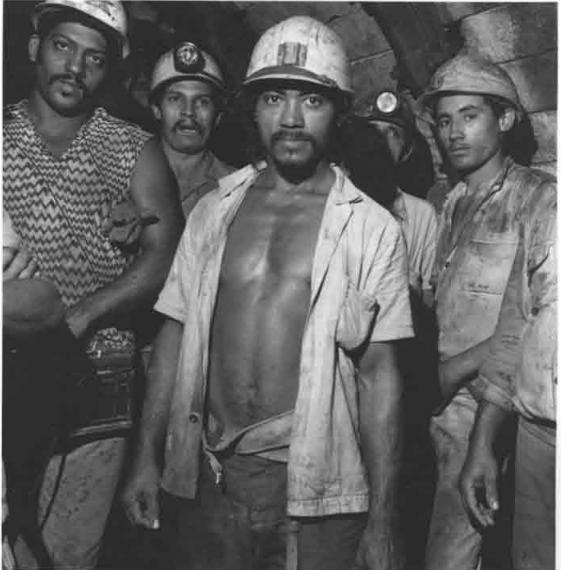
They traveled to Mexico beginning in the 1950s, where they met other socially engaged artists and Rogovin made a few photographs. At the invitation of the poet Pablo Neruda, he spent several exhilarating weeks photographing in Chile in 1967. Often accompanied by Anne, he went on to photograph residents of Buffalo's East Side, the neighborhood surrounding the Storefront Churches; Native Americans in Buffalo and on the nearby reserves; Yemeni immigrants in communities near Buffalo; working and poor people of Buffalo's Lower West Side – in a series that spans more than thirty years; Buffalo steelworkers at work, at home, and out of work (the *Working People* series); and miners in Scotland, Cuba, Mexico, France, Czechoslovakia, Spain, Germany, Zimbabwe, and China, and, again, in Appalachia (the *Family of Miners* of series).<sup>8</sup> His emphasis is people, all of whom are aware of the presence of the photographer; recorded with precise clarity, details of their surroundings disclose the social and economic conditions of their lives.



Milton Rogovin, *Mexico*, 1953–61

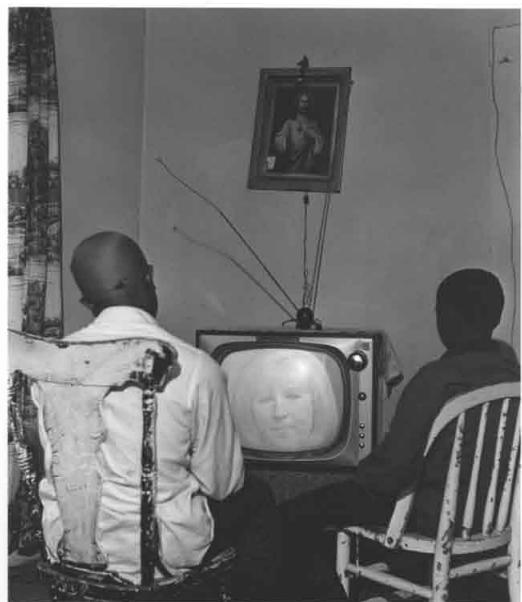


Milton Rogovin, *Chile*, 1967



Milton Rogovin, *Family of Miners*, 1981–90

What is crucially 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 heroicize 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.



**Milton Rogovin, East Side, Buffalo, 1961–63**

Documentary photography is contested territory, rife with issues of power and privilege that must be taken into consideration when looking at the work of any social documentary photographer. Thus, it is critical that in his photographic practice Rogovin established with his photographic subjects a relationship that privileges the agency of these subjects. His images are not “captured” or posed; the people Rogovin photographed chose how they wished to be seen, and he describes his process as one of “finding” a photograph. Aware of his presence – Rogovin unfailingly asked 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. In addition, his choice of camera – the twin-lens Rolleiflex – demands that the photographer look down into the viewfinder, the camera held at waist height. The photographer, then, bows slightly before his or her subject, and the person being photographed is seen from, or slightly above, the level at which the camera is held. Visually, the effect is that the viewer regards the person photographed eye-to-eye – we are not allowed to “look down” at Rogovin’s subjects. “That’s exactly the point,” he says. “I never look down at these people. Photographically speaking, neither do I look up at them because it would distort them... I’m on their level.”<sup>9</sup>



Milton Rogovin,  
Photograph by Frederic Marshall, 1960

In what ways might this methodological, literal, and metaphorical vantage point be construed as Jewish? It would be ludicrous to claim that the twin-lens Rolleiflex is essentially “Jewish” – that this vantage point is unique to the Jewish photographer, or that all Jewish photographers share this photographic perspective. I do, however, regard this vantage point as part of a broader constellation of identification, of empathy, of respect for the dignity of these outsider subjects to which Rogovin has devoted his photographic practice – immigrants, working people, the displaced and dispossessed – that is multiply inflected by Rogovin’s politics and his Jewishness. Further, Rogovin’s Jewishly grounded social consciousness and the politics it informs, can be understood as twin lenses through which his photographic practice as a political stance must be construed. Like the optometrist’s lenses that determine the clearest possible focus for our eyesight, they work together to sharpen most precisely Milton’s – and our – vision of the world, rendering most visible the injustices we are called to address.

In “The Claim of a Jewish Eye,” cultural historian Alan Trachtenberg poses the question of whether there might be “something that can be called Jewish sensibility or ‘Jewish eye’ in the broad field of photography.”<sup>10</sup> (One must wonder what Rogovin, an optometrist, would think of such a question.) Acknowledging the “discomforting essentialism” bound into this query, Trachtenberg nonetheless regards it as “a compelling invitation to think at a deeper level about the meaning of ‘Jewishness’ as a quality of being – something existential, indelible, definitive, a historical rather than genetic term.”<sup>11</sup> “Is Jewishness a palpable photographic quality?” he writes. “Does it take an initiate to unlock the secrets of Jewishness as they radiate in such Sephirot as camera point of view, focal length of lenses, contrast of light and dark? Is there a code

that can decipher Jewish perceptions, Jewish desires to picture certain subjects in certain ways?"<sup>12</sup>

Trachtenberg offers no easy answers, but rather invites us to consider "the complex relation of Jews to America" and the many ways of being a Jew. Finally, he invokes the shared culture of Yiddishkeit as it informs Jewish secular humanism, and suggests as well that Jewishness might be manifested in narratives of "making it" in the "promised land," in group self-consciousness that "anxiously seeks evidence of acceptance, of tolerance and recognition," of success.<sup>13</sup> Yet, as his politics would suggest, Rogovin shows not these successes, but rather the betrayal of capitalism – and the resilience of people under capitalism's duress. If he brings a "Jewish eye" to his photography, it is one that invariably sees the world through the focusing, perhaps magnifying, lens of his politics. To the extent that this particular modulation of Jewishness and progressive politics go together – twin lenses focused on the same conditions of oppression and injustice – perhaps there's something that can be said about Milton's way of observing the world, his empathy with the forgotten ones, the invisible whom he seeks to render visible, as Jewish.



Milton Rogovin, *Lower West Side*, 1972–77

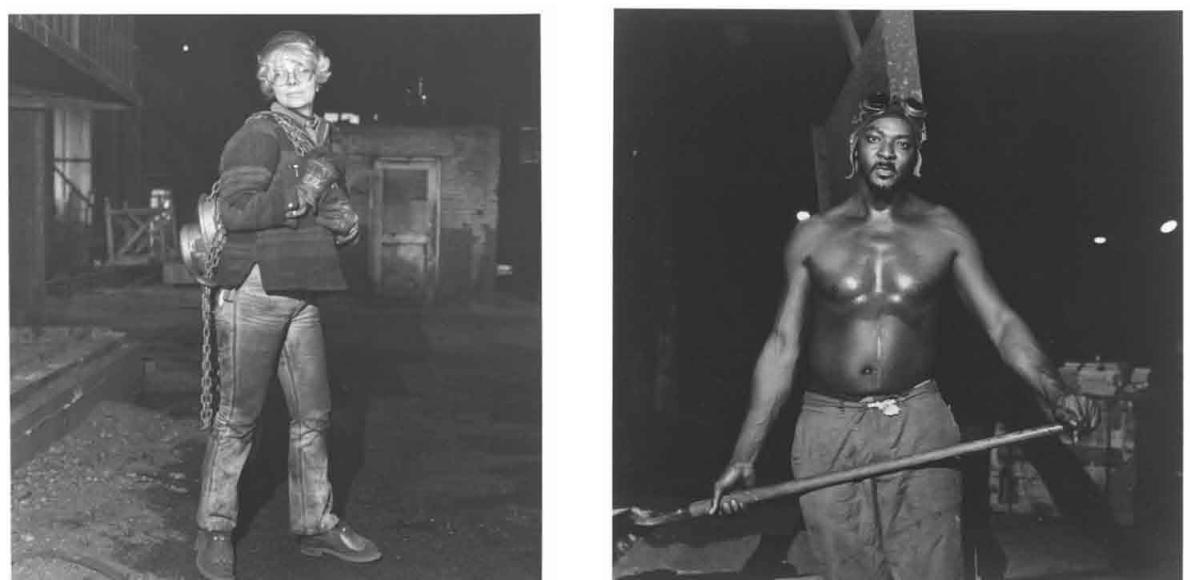
When, in 1970, his brother announced his retirement from their shared optometry practice, Rogovin moved to a smaller office near Buffalo's Lower West Side. This six-blocks-square neighborhood had been predominantly Irish and German, and then Italian, and was now newly populated by Puerto Ricans, African Americans, Native Americans, and unemployed and underemployed whites. For three years he photographed the people of Buffalo's Lower West Side on the streets, in their homes, and in the neighborhood's churches, bars, and other places where people regularly gathered. While he did not pose his subjects, Rogovin unfailingly noticed the details of their surroundings that, to him, "made" the photograph – the broken door, peeling paint, children's drawings taped to a wall – that explain what is happening to the

people in the photographs, and his photographs record these details with sharp precision. Scarred by the ravages of capitalism, racism, and other injustices, these are survivors nonetheless – dignified and astoundingly resilient.



Milton Rogovin, "Triptych," *Lower West Side*, 1972–1994

Rogovin does not photograph Jews. But there is an empathic identification with the people he photographs, particularly with the people of this neighborhood of immigrants and outsiders – the displaced, the dispossessed, the “forgotten ones” – to which he returned in 1984, 1992, and again in 2002. The resulting series – paired images, then “triptychs” and finally “quartets” – document the passage of time in people’s lives, often in astonishing and deeply moving ways. Lovingly cradled babies grow to adulthood and become the protectors of their aging parents and grandparents. Couples age together, or go their separate ways and sometimes find new partners. Friends and family members die.<sup>14</sup>



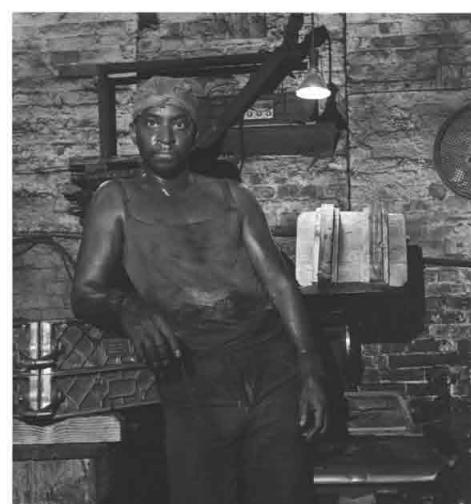
Milton Rogovin, *Working People*, 1976–1987

In 1976 Rogovin began his *Working People* series. Two years later he sold his optometric practice and went into Buffalo's steel mills as, at last, a full-time photographer to document working people – not the people who work in the offices, he says, but those who do the heavy work in the steel mills and foundries, a major industry in Buffalo in the 1970s, now gone. *Working People*, he says, was inspired by the poem "A Worker Reads History," by one of his favorite poets and playwrights, Bertolt Brecht. Brecht's poem reads in part:

Who built the Seven Gates of Thebes?  
The books are filled with names of kings.  
Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?  
And Babylon, so many times destroyed,  
Who built the city up each time? . . .<sup>15</sup>

The physical environment of these dark, vast spaces demanded that Rogovin re-learn, essentially, how to work with light and an extended focal range – difficult in this dimness – to document with precise clarity the details of background as well as subject. A man who had dedicated forty-seven years as an optometrist to helping others be able to see most clearly and precisely was now, through his work in the steel mills, learning to "see" in new ways as well.

Rogovin initially photographed men working in Buffalo's steel mills and foundries, and then he went in search of women steelworkers as well. The women Rogovin photographed in the 1970s as part of his *Working People* series were among the workers doing the toughest jobs in the steel mills and foundries, hired in response to the 1973 Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's requirement that documented employment discrimination be addressed through affirmative action. These workers pause for a moment from their work, turning to face the camera, their confident poses and direct gazes asserting their agency as participants in this documentary process. Rogovin photographed women and men in the steel mills at rest, and actively working. Then he asked their permission to photograph them at home. Paired with their workplace photographs, which reveal the physically demanding, sometimes dangerous, labor of steel and foundry work, the images of workers at home offer a more nuanced view of their lives.



Milton Rogovin, *Working People*, 1976–87



Milton Rogovin, *Working People*, 1976–1987

The photographs of women at work in these non-traditional jobs and at home suggest the complexity of their negotiation of gender and of the contingency of their status as newcomers to the mills. Photographs Rogovin made when he and Anne returned in 1981 to Appalachia to photograph women coal miners at work and at home similarly confound assumptions about gender and work, and the expectation that workers fit into coherent social categories. Particularly compelling about these photographs is that they implicitly acknowledge that women perform these jobs without leaving outside the mine their sense of who they are, that their work and home selves are inextricably intertwined.



Milton Rogovin, *Family of Miners* (Appalachia), 1981–1990

Trachtenberg ultimately concludes that, “To the question of whether there is a Jewish eye in photography we can reply – Jews always answer questions with questions, no? – What does it look like, and what does it see?”<sup>16</sup> It is what Rogovin sees, and what his photographs compel us to see as well, that suggests this possibility of Jewishness – perhaps not a “Jewish eye,” but rather a Jewishly inflected (or twin-lensed) political perspective that provides the sharpest possible focus to this act of documentary witness. Rogovin’s photographs do not invite pity, or horror, or even sympathy, but rather a seeing for the first time, or a seeing anew, with empathy and respect for the tenacity and profound dignity of people living in extremely difficult circumstances. Art historian and critic David Levi Strauss writes, “When one, anyone, tries to represent someone else, to ‘take their picture’ or ‘tell their story,’ they run headlong into a minefield of real political problems. The first question is, what right have I to represent you? Every photograph of this kind must be a negotiation, a complex act of communication. As with all such acts, the likelihood of success is extremely remote, but does that mean it shouldn’t be attempted?”<sup>17</sup>

Milton Rogovin has continued to make this attempt, in compassion, solidarity, and sometimes anger, grounded in empathy and identification. His photographs are acts of witness that render visible, with precision, clarity, and acknowledgement of the complexity of people’s circumstances and lives, that which is forgotten or – at times deliberately – unseen. Writer, policy analyst, and editor Kerry Tremain writes,

Documentary photographers often see things that do not officially exist. Indignities. Cruelties. People pinned to a wall with fire hoses because they want to vote. . . . A transformation occurs when you see something important that is denied by those who have not or will not see it. “Look, I’ve got a picture,” you say. “I was there.” Excuses are made: Pictures can lie. “But I don’t.”<sup>18</sup>

Rogovin 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!’”<sup>19</sup> 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 of – even, at times, astonishment at – the resilience of human beings surviving in this world.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Melanie Anne Herzog, *Milton Rogovin: The Making of a Social Documentary Photographer*, foreword by Douglas R. Nickel, afterword by Catherine Linder Spencer (Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, in association with University of Washington Press, 2006). This book is largely based on Milton’s own autobiographical narrative, which he wrote in response to Anne’s urging that he tell his life story. Catherine Linder Spencer, a Buffalo, NY artist who became a devoted friend of the Rogovin family, over the course of three years spent countless hours working with Milton and Anne to develop Milton’s text into a manuscript. I offer my deepest thanks and appreciation to Catherine Linder Spencer for her boundless generosity in sharing the product of her extensive efforts and I am humbled by her trust that I would see this book through to publication. Milton and Anne’s son Mark Rogovin generously devoted much time and energy to assuring that this book would become a reality, and to assisting me with the present

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project. His assistance with information, resources, correspondence, and photographic images has been crucial, and I am profoundly grateful.

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of Milton Rogovin's life, including his early years in New York's immigrant Jewish community, see Herzog, *Milton Rogovin: The Making of a Social Documentary Photographer*. Parts of the present essay are excerpted from this text. Biographical information is drawn from Rogovin's handwritten autobiography, not dated (1990s), in Milton Rogovin's archives, Buffalo, NY, which in the book is framed by a broader historical consideration of this narrative. Most of this autobiography was transcribed by Catherine Linder Spencer; transcription in Milton Rogovin's archives and in the collection of Melanie Herzog.

<sup>3</sup> On Jewish political artists and their commitment to social justice, see Paul Von Blum, "Justice, Justice, You Shall Pursue: Jewish Political Artists," in *Jews and American Popular Culture*, volume two (Music, Theater, Popular Art, and Literature), edited by Paul Buhle (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007). I thank Paul Von Blum for sharing this text with me in advance of its publication.

<sup>4</sup> Milton Rogovin, from his handwritten autobiography, quoted in Herzog, *Milton Rogovin*, 12. Unless noted otherwise, all statements by Milton Rogovin quoted in the present essay are contained in his autobiography.

<sup>5</sup> "Rogovin, Named as Top Red in Buffalo, Balks at Nearly All Queries," *Buffalo Evening News*, October 4, 1957, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Soon after his appearance before HUAC, Rogovin was invited by his friend William H. Tallmadge, a professor of music at Buffalo State University College, to make photographs while Tallmadge made sound recordings at Holiness Church in Buffalo's African-American community. Tallmadge completed his recordings in three months; Rogovin continued to photograph in Buffalo's storefront churches for three years. Several of Rogovin's photographs appeared on the Folkways record jacket and liner notes for Tallmadge's recordings; see *Urban Holiness Service: Elder Charles D. Beck*, Folkways Records FR8901, 1957. Forty-eight of Rogovin's *Storefront Churches* photographs were published in *Aperture* magazine in 1962; see "Store Front Churches, Buffalo, New York," with text by W.E.B. DuBois, *Aperture* 10, no. 2 (1962): 62–85.

<sup>7</sup> Milton Rogovin, interview with Melanie Herzog, June 18, 2004, Buffalo, NY.

<sup>8</sup> See *Milton Rogovin: Lower West Side Buffalo, New York* (exhibition catalogue), introduction by James Wood, appreciation by Paul Strand (Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1975); also *Milton Rogovin: The Forgotten Ones* (exhibition catalogue), interview by Cheryl A. Brutvan, essays by Robert J. Doherty and Fred Licht (Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, and Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985). On Rogovin's *Working People* photographs see *Portraits in Steel*, interviews by Michael Frisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993). On his *Family of Miners* series see Judith Keller, *Milton Rogovin: The Mining Photographs* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Milton Rogovin, interview with Melanie Herzog, June 1, 2003, Buffalo, NY.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, "The Claim of a Jewish Eye," *Pakn Treger: The Magazine of the National Yiddish Book Center* 41 (Spring 2003/5763): 20.

<sup>11</sup> Trachtenberg, "The Claim of a Jewish Eye," 22.

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<sup>12</sup> Trachtenberg, "The Claim of a Jewish Eye," 23.

<sup>13</sup> Trachtenberg, "The Claim of a Jewish Eye," 24.

<sup>14</sup> On Rogovin's Lower West Side "triptychs" and "quartets" see *Triptychs: Buffalo's Lower West Side Revisited*, foreword by Robert Coles, introduction by Stephen Jay Gould, text by JoAnn Wypijewski (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994); and Dave Isay, David Miller, and Harvey Wang, *Milton Rogovin: The Forgotten Ones* (New York: Quantuck Lane Press, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Bertolt Brecht, "A Worker Reads History," in Bertolt Brecht, *Selected Poems*, translated by H. R. Hays (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1947), 109. This is Rogovin's preferred translation among several.

<sup>16</sup> Trachtenberg, "The Claim of a Jewish Eye," 25.

<sup>17</sup> David Levi Strauss, "The Documentary Debate: Aesthetic of Anaesthetic? Or, What's So Funny About Peace, Love, Understanding, and Social Documentary Photography?" in David Levi Strauss, *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2003), 8.

<sup>18</sup> Kerry Tremain, "Seeing and Believing," introduction, in Ken Light, *Witness in Our Time: Working Lives of Documentary Photographers* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 4.

<sup>19</sup> Milton Rogovin, quoted in Robert Hirsch, "Milton Rogovin: An Activist Photographer," *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism* 32, no. 2 (September–October 2004): 6.