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CLOVER LEAF FARM

House Regulations

We desire to treat everybody well and fairly. If you have any complaints to make or fault to find, go see the man who employed you.

Bringing or using intoxicating liquor on the farm is POSITIVELY FORBIDDEN.

When men work they require rest. Therefore all lights must be out by 9 in the evening, except Saturday evening when they may burn until 10, but not later.

No fire arms to be used on the Farm without permission of superintendent or the owner.

Dancing and scuffling are all right in their places, but the place is out of the house.

It is the duty of everyone to be of proper speech and cleanly habits at all times.

MILTON ROGOVIN:
Seeing the Forgotten Ones

by
Holly Metz*

For nearly four decades photographer Milton Rogovin has been documenting the lives of peoples he calls "the forgotten ones"—men and women overlooked by society, or shunned, or considered expendable. Most of all, the Buffalo-based photographer has made visible the perseverance of working people—the ones who struggle with joblessness, as well as those who do the difficult, unseen, and necessary work in mines, mills, and factories.

Rogovin's choice of imagery and his attention to the dignity of ordinary men and women stem from his longstanding involvement in unions and civil rights organizing—a commitment predating his interest in photography and borne out of the hardships of the Great Depression. According to Rogovin, his education started when he graduated from Columbia University in 1931, with a B.S. in optometry. "I was dumped into a market where there were no jobs available," he recalled.[1] He saw proud laborers "making work" by polishing apples and "quickly realized there were severe problems in our society, and became politically active." He attended one-day organizing classes at a workers' school and began seeking out the analyses of journals from the radical movement, such as the *New Masses.*

Working-class, left-wing publications also provided his first encounters with art with a social conscience. Lewis Hine's photographs of miners, along with images of urban poverty by Jacob Riis, were repro-

*Holly Metz has been writing on social, legal, and cultural issues for over 15 years; her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Public Art Review*, *Preservation*, and *The Threepenny Review.* Parts of this article originally appeared in the January/February 1997 issue of *Solidarity*, published by the United Auto Workers. Rogovin's photos of miners will be appearing in a forthcoming issue of *Doubletake* magazine.

[1]Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Milton Rogovin are from interviews with the author, March 15 and 16, 1995.

duced there. Though he claims a deeper affinity with the work of Goya, Daumier, and the prints of Kaethe Kollwitz, which had also found their way into left-wing publications of the thirties, Rogovin would later add to the tradition established by photographers Hine and Riis.

But photography was far from Rogovin's mind during the Depression years. He didn't even own a camera until he served in World War II. He needed a job, and in 1938, he moved from New York City to Buffalo—"where the work was." Though an attempt at organizing the local optical union left him jobless again when the picketing ended, he soon established an office in downtown Buffalo, next door to the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union. He maintained his optometric practice for the next several decades, "catering to the union people," including steel workers and other unionists. "All my life," he said, "has been centered around working people."[2]

In addition to working six days a week and raising three children with his wife Anne, Rogovin remained politically active, including promoting voting rights in the city's African-American community. With little time to spare, he remained only a casual photographer until 1957, the year he was summoned before the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

Rogovin refused to speak and give credence to the proceedings, but accusatory newspaper headlines dogged him and his family. Within the year, Rogovin's optometric practice was reduced by half, as once-loyal customers, fearing ostracism themselves, stopped visiting his office. Anne Rogovin went to teach in the suburbs, where a loyalty oath was not required; although her husband's diminished practice struggled along, her salary became the family's primary means of support.

By 1958, Buffalo's progressive movement had been effectively silenced and Rogovin was blocked from organizing. Then 48 years old, he turned to photography as a way to continue to speak out against social injustice, and as a forum for his belief in the right of all people to be treated with respect.

Rogovin had never been schooled in photography, but taught himself, developing a straightforward photographic technique that enabled him to work quickly, without intimidating his subjects, or—when the subject was on the job—placing the worker in an untenable situation. "They're . . . depending for a livelihood on how much they produce," Rogovin noted.[3] He chose a twin-reflex camera that requires the photographer to look down, rather than *aiming* at sitters. And he would

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[2]Catherine A. Christen, "'We Miners Say We Have No Nationality': Photographs from Milton Rogovin's 'Family of Miners,'" *Labor's Heritage*, Summer 1995, 24.
[3]*Ibid.*, p. 26.

"This is all important to me. I try to show something besides the person, to help you *understand* that person."

In addition to creating steel worker portraits at the mills, Rogovin made sure to portray them hard at work, a surprisingly rare image, considering how much of workers' lives are spent on the job. He took special care, too, to depict women, who were beginning to gain positions in heavy industry. One of the women he photographed told him she was glad he'd given her a photograph showing her surrounded by flames, burning steel. "My kids think I'm horsing around here!" she said. Rogovin's images provide a deeper understanding about who labors, about self-presentation, and about the line between work and home life, crossed each day.

Soon after Rogovin completed the original project, however, America's steel industry collapsed. Along with Steel Belt-turned-Rust Belt cities like Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Gary, Indiana, Buffalo lost thousands of blue-collar jobs. Many of the people Rogovin had proudly photographed in their middle-class homes were struggling to keep them, as well-paying jobs disappeared. The photographer added new portraits to the series, which were published in 1993, under the title *Portraits in Steel*.

For Rogovin, the forced changes in these workers' housing, demeanor, and way of life, speak powerfully. "For instance, [in one series], the guy has a little bar in the basement, and you see everyone's happy. And then, he loses the job. They move to the countryside, next to a little spring. They live in a shack. [His wife] gets disturbed. You can see that, what's going on there."

The inability to find work, and its corrosive effect on individuals and communities, is a longtime Rogovin concern, perhaps represented most powerfully in his series "Lower West Side Revisited." Photographed over a 20-year period in a poor, ethnically-mixed neighborhood with the highest rate of unemployment in Buffalo, the series shows all the problems associated with destitution and social neglect: people devastated by drugs and alcoholism, dilapidated housing, gambling and prostitution. Subjects disappear between photo shoots: imprisoned, or dead from AIDS or murder. And yet the series also shows the tenacity of embattled families: couples age together over the years; single mothers stand with their children, then with their children's children.

By photographing on the Lower West Side in the early 1970's, and returning to photograph the same people in 1984 and 1992, Rogovin has produced a series of remarkable triple portraits, reminiscent of time-lapse photographs of buds unfurling to flowers, then fading to spent blooms. A selection, *Triptychs: Buffalo's Lower West Side Revisited*, was published in 1994. The assembled images form a kind of longi-

tudinal study of individual mortality, poor families, and the long-suffering Lower West Side. "All of these people have tremendous possibilities," says Rogovin. "And it's going to hell. *That's* why I want people to look at this darn stuff."

Now 87, Rogovin is still at work. Earlier this year, he finished making new prints in his basement darkroom for an exhibition at the New York State Museum. With the day-to-day perseverance he has portrayed so well in others, he has sustained a depth of commitment unusual in a medium devoted to the "quick take." When asked about it, he related a story attributed to Jacob Riis, who would visit a stone-cutter friend whenever he thought reaction to his Lower East Side slum exposes was insufficient. "He said: I would go to the stone-cutter and watch him hit that stone. Once, fifty times, a hundred times, and nothing would happen. But maybe at the hundred-and-first blow, the stone would split apart. I knew it wasn't the last blow that did it, but all of them, together."

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Photography Books by Milton Rogovin

In print

Portraits in Steel, with oral histories by history and American studies professor Michael Frisch, Cornell University Press, 1993.

Triptychs: Buffalo's Lower West Side Revisited, with essays by Robert Coles, Stephen Jay Gould and JoAnn Wypijewski, W.W. Norton, 1994.

Out of print but worth tracking down

The Forgotten Ones, published to accompany a comprehensive exhibition of Rogovin's work in 1985, with an interview by Albright-Knox Art Gallery curator Cheryl A. Brutvan and essays by Robert J. Doherty and Fred Licht, University of Washington Press, 1985.