

The New York Times

Showcase: Milton Rogovin

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By RANDY KENNEDY

Milton Rogovin, who will turn 100 in December and has lived in Buffalo most of his adult life, was an optometrist whose practice was decimated and children were shunned after he was called in 1958 before the House Un-American Activities Committee and refused to testify. An article in The New York Times reported that friendly witnesses described him as “the chief Communist in the area.” (He has laughed off that description, saying that he was only the librarian of the local Communist Party at the time.)

Mr. Rogovin turned to photography because his “voice was essentially silenced,” as he once said, and what followed was more than 40 years of powerfully straightforward pictures of others without voices – the poor and working class of Buffalo’s East Side and Lower West Side, Appalachia, Mexico, Chile and many other countries.

Visiting him in the city that was the catalyst for much of his best work and in the home where he developed all of his prints has long been a rite for photographers, curators, historians, activists and writers. These days, in tenuous health, Mr. Rogovin no longer actively photographs. His wife of 61 years, Anne, an educator and writer who was an active partner in his projects, died in 2003. And with his negatives and prints having moved to institutions like the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Library of Congress, his basement darkroom is now mostly empty, with only a few scissors and spoons hanging on hooks above a set of scales and an old transistor radio.



Mr. Rogovin has been nominated to receive this year’s National Medal of Arts, the kind of establishment recognition whose irony is not lost on him. In a statement accompanying the nomination, James Wood, the president of the Getty Trust and before that the longtime director of the Art Institute of Chicago, wrote that Mr. Rogovin has “created images that allowed us to see our fellow man with an intensity equal to that of Walker Evans or August Sander.”

Over a lunch of chicken salad and summer cherries recently with his daughter, Ellen Rogovin Hart, Mr. Rogovin opened his picture notebooks, as if they were family albums, to take another visitor through an exceptional half-century record of struggle, suffering, determination and hope.

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His memory often fails him now. But as his daughter prompted him, he recounted his years of traversing some of Buffalo's most impoverished and dangerous neighborhoods with his wife, who was the more gregarious of the two and often the one who approached potential subjects to arrange a photography session. (Mr. Rogovin always gave prints to those he photographed and many can still be seen hanging in living rooms and businesses around the city.)

"Here was this little old couple, the only white people you would see in some of these neighborhoods, and everybody knew them," said Ms. Rogovin Hart, a retired elementary-school teacher who lives in Philadelphia and drives up frequently to see her father. "They were invited to christenings and weddings and funerals." When she told a story about her father once being locked briefly in a room with a nervous prostitute at a brothel as her mother stood outside waiting for him, his eyes lit up and he grinned mischievously. "Oh, boy," he said. "That was a time, wasn't it?"

At exhibitions of her father's work, she said, there were always strangers whom she recognized instantly - the subjects of his photographs, who had come by to say hello. "I had never met them," she said, "but I knew them so well, because I had grown up looking at their faces."