An interview with photographer Milton Rogovin

MTV • Thompson Twins • Jack Gilbert/John Logan • A Buffalo Super-8 film festival
photographed coal miners and their homes and at work—if there was work: it was a very bad period in the '30s for coal miners. Most of them were unemployed. The situation: coal was going down and gas and oil were coming up, so most of them were unemployed.

After that I spent a month in Chile. I did a series in collaboration with Pablo Norden, the Chilean poet. I wanted to a little village in the south of Chile. It was very difficult series because you had to go everywhere by bus, the roads were very few and far between. But it was rather nice. Now, Pablo Norden wrote a nice introduction.

I did not know Milton Rogovin.

His letter asked me an unnecessary question. He wanted to photograph the truth.

He had a very good background—photographs that shows the South of the Americas.

He carried much more than his equipment. Patient eyes and listening. 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 profanity.

Because the earth is extremely unstable, it offers itself to the foreign eye and decays our eyes, our indifference, our ways.

Rogovin had to come, photographer of the great social and political and humblest communities of the North, so that he may understand for us of the South, and in that he can take with him the truth of the South, with those dark eyes which looked at me and then swept me up, those ever pathetic and poetic poverty of the inhuman which we love and suffer.

Pablo Norden

It was never published but everybody seems to be interested in it. I just got a letter from the Tate Gallery in London; they want to see it.

How were you funded during these travels?

Yes, it was very interesting how. (laughs) Always on my own.

What do you need when you work, and I have worked and so I always paid my own way, always worked, and I have been with one person I have been with — (grants) I tried for them but I never got one. I don't think that documentary photographer of the type that I do is the kind that they give grants to, it's not sophisticated enough, or odd, or what.

But anyway, the important thing is that I was always with people, always with the people, always with the people.

It has a long tradition, and an important tradition—Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, Dorothy Lange, I mean that there is a whole tradition of this type of photography. In the 1930s it was a very important thing. Farm Security Information hired a group of photographers—Evans, Lange, Arthur Rothstein and they did probably the most important documentary series done every day in the history of photography, over seven or eight years. But anyway that's the type of photography I'm interested in — people, and their problems — so that's the type of photography I do. I think Lewis Hine recognized it as well as I could or better, he said "I want to show the things that should be corrected, and I want to show the things that should be admired." So you will all work my life, I show the people, how they live. Some of the problems you can see on the walls. Also, I think this is something that people and that's what I'm trying to show, those are human beings—and very fine human beings, too.

After I got through with that Chilean one, I decided to do a photo series which was one of my most important ones until that period. My office was on Court Street in downtown Buffalo. I lived in a little neighborhood which I call the Lower West Side. I lived in an Italian neighborhood. I selected six blocks, and I stayed there for the first six or eight months. Then I got over that and I've stayed in the other six blocks. The first six or eight months was very full, because it's a tough neighborhood—problems, photographer, but I'd like to get to know me and trust me it was pretty tough photographing there. The first couple days I walked with somebody, but then I got bumpy on the Fourth of July. I walked with a photographer who lived in the neighborhood. He worked in the health clinic there. And they introduced me to their grandparents, and their cousins, and so forth and so forth. And then the next week I came back with some photographs for them. So they saw what I did and they appreciated what I gave them. And then they'd say "Hey, go to my cousin, you live on the next block", so I got to know another four. And after a few weeks I met a lot of people and they all said to each other "Hey, you ought to come to my house, let me give you a photograph because he's gonna give you a print." So I said "Okay." And I've helped

I just walk around casually, and find my photo opportunities. And I have in my mind I've got to get this person, I've got to get that person, I've got to get the other. I've got a lot of people there, and that's why I'm there to take pictures for them. There are photographers who make photographs, get up early, get up before your leg this way, your hand this way, your hat this way? But I find a person and I say "Okay, let's go together," and we take a walk, and it's this way I photograph them. I don't make photographs of a person "sit down, stand" whatever the hell it was that was that word that went to them. I usually have them look at me because I want them to know I'm around. If you look at them, they seem relaxed; I don't make a big thing of my photography, with setting them up and measuring. I do it very quickly and very simply so that they don't get overwhelmed and "Hey, this guy's gonna make a big deal about pictures." So burgers go up into a plant and I say "could I photograph you?" If somebody talks you can't make a good photo—by the way, I've been through that. I've got some people who've had criminal records that didn't want them photographed taken. Maybe they've been divorced or they haven't been divorced and took off with their wives or something. Photographs like this are good records, sometimes they could hurt people. So I never take anybody who doesn't want to be photographed. If they say no then I'm fine with that. I don't have any question about it. I might try a mouth later tomorrow, it does happen every once in a while where they say no, then they said yes because they saw we took the pictures relating to them and wasn't trying to hurt them.

Incidentally, often I would go to this area and I got to know some of these people; even I went there a few times feeling. There was a poem written by Thomas Gray. The poem was "Elegy in a Country Church Yard." He goes into this churchyard and he reads the names and he looks at them, and he says "Well, you know they never get anywhere," and he writes this poem; one of

The lines says "Fall many a flower is born to blush unseen and waste its sweetness on the desert air." When I would go to the West Side I would see these people with great potential and it was just being wasted on the desert air. Potential being destroyed. After finishing the Lower West Side series, a curator from the Albright Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, told me if I could use a camera "can have to exhibit them there." And so for two months I worked with the photographer Thomas Gray, from a six block area of the city by a local artist drew record crowds to the Albright Shoveling in New York City, Sweden, Finland and England.

"So when I completed that particular series I thought there would be never another one like it. It was such a... it was very moving for both my wife and for me. But his most antive and, arguably, his most powerful social-humanist statement was yet to come.

I came across a poem by Bertolt Brecht and it was called "A Worker Reads History" and it starts like this:

"Who built the seven gates of Thebes? The books are filled with names of kings. Was it kings who hauled the cruddy blocks of stone? And Bakunin so many times destroyed. And then I got the idea — that was simultaneous with giving up my practice four years ago — that I ought to go into the factory and show the workers who do the tough work, just the real tough work. Because of my exhibit at the Albright I was known among some of the factory owners, managers. I had a reputation as a photographer and when I called them, in droves they came to see me. And I photographed — again, for three years — Bethlehem Steel, Republic Steel, Ford Motor Company, Chevy, and a number of foundaries. And then, because there are no coal mines in this area, I also went down to..."
It occurred to me that I ought to show the people at work and at home.

Rogovin  •  continued from page 3

West Virginia, ten years after my last visit, and photographed women coal miners, there are about three thousand in the United States. So, as I was doing this work, it occurred to me that I ought to show the people at work and at home. Now this is an important concept that's never been down in the history of photography, to my knowledge. There was an article written about my work by a famous art historian, Boston University's Fred Licht. He pointed out that the German photographer August Sander—who did a series of photographs—it was his ambition to show all the different trades, professions, etc., of German people. And so he took one photograph of each of a judge, a lawyer, a dender, an artist, a bricklayer, and so forth, and with that one photograph he was going to show all these different professions. Each trade, one photograph. This art historian who wrote about my work pointed out that if you can't tell by looking at a person what kind of work he or she does, that the young lady who's selling you coffee in that place could be a graduate student at U.C.L.A. So he says, "Now Rogovin came and tries to show with one photograph what the person is like."

So then I adopted the procedure of photographing at work and at home. You see that they have responsibilities, problems, etc., etc., and this exhibit was very well received. It's called "Working People."

It's a hundred photographs. It can be seen at the Charles Burchfield Center, Buffalo State College, December 3 through January 30—see box, page 3. It's going around the country now, it started off in New Hampshire. Part was shown in Norway, Amsterdam, Barcelona and Paris. It's been very successful in Europe. They apparently like documentary photography there, or at least they like my approach to American people, because what they see of America is not what is reality in most cases. (Laughter)

When I went into places like Bethlehem or Republic, I always photographed the women there, not the men. Why? Other places there were no women, just men. But Atlas Steel; no women; Amherst Foundry; no women. So I photographed men in those places but when I got to a place where women were working to photograph them. Again, always those who did the toughest work, not the typists—not that it's not important work, but it's what I was choosing to do. Toughest work, in the foundries, if I found women I would photograph them. The home scene shows them with children and in most cases there were no husbands in the photographs, because there were no husbands.

And so, this type of photography is saying something to whoever's interested in looking. 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. There's absolutely no reason for this. It means there's a reason for it because it's been developed historically that women got the short end of the stick, and do anybody that's interested in improving our society will have to do something about this situation.

Now, when I finished that series, Working People, I thought I'd been spending a lot of time in the United States. I thought I'd once again try to visit some other country. I got an invitation from the Scottish Mine Workers Union to come to Scotland. They would help me to do a series in the mining area. Last summer my wife and I went there and the help they gave us was simply beyond anything we expected. They took us anywhere we wanted to go, they showed us all the coal mines, to their families. We walked in their backsyards, went into their homes and bars, anywhere we could go we went. Again, all the series that I'm doing have the same thread running through them: the lower, poorer section of our society.

Did you notice any fundamental differences between the coal miners in Scotland and those in West Virginia?

Well, you see, when I first photographed in West Virginia, it was in the '60s when there was a pretty desperate situation there. And so, the faces of the people when you look at them are pretty sad; there were problems of no work and Black Lung disease and they found the company's sure that there was an industrial disease that some of the miners had, compensation. But when I was in Scotland, through all these years of 60 to 70 years that this was nationalized, the important thing was the wages were very important, they bought them, they bought their homes and their car. Thatcher's idea of home ownership, I think seems a little bit like, always if you were laughing at something, could seem to be a part of it incidentally, the coal mine...

Why's that?

Because of the coal mines gone through...
an icon concept that's never been done in the history of photography.

by Milton Rogovin

Photography is not (long pause) you know, doesn't sell well in this country, in other countries, yes, but not in this country. I say it straight, I say its simple and this kind of book sells in limited quantities. The problem is compounded by "a serious depression in the publishing houses."

Nevertheless, this local man, who taught a course in documentary photography at U.S. ten years ago, has been published in some 40 international magazines in Asia, Japan, Australia, Europe and the U.S. His work lives the walls of museums in Paris, London, New York City, and Washington, D.C. And he has won the respect of his peers, including Arthur Rothstein. "Rogovin is a avant-garde photographer, a great documentary photographer. But he's virtually unknown," though touring exhibits like Working People and a retrospective planned for 1985-86 will introduce his extraordinary art to many more people, and the accolades for this compassionate, barrier-breaking work are sure to be numerous and resounding.

Incidentally, I don't use captions in my work. A famous German anti-Nazi writer, Kurt Tucholsky, wrote a book — it was full of pictures. In it he said:

"Once you've studied the pictures for a while, you begin to speak. The people in the pictures hold still — so patiently, that you can study them at your leisure. And when you're wholly inside the picture, the people speak. They tell you their life-stories."

Their political opinions. They confess. They accuse. They laugh. They cry because they're tired. They open their hearts to you. This is how we live, they say, and this is how we hate, and this is why we didn't get anywhere, and this is our youth, and these are our dreams of glory, and this is what our parents looked like, and here is my weak point, and here is my strength. I'll have to ask you to write your own caption. Look at them closely. Look into the people's eyes and let them speak. They tell you about their lives.

That's my feeling about captions. I think if you look at my work there's something there I'm trying to say to you. It ties into my experience when I first went to Colombia in 1937. It was a period of mounting prosperity and one of the election slogans was "A chicken in every pot, two cans in every garage," and when I graduated in '39 we were in the midst of a terrible depression, where you couldn't get a job and thousands — tons of millions — people were unemployed. And I don't mean just "lowly" workers. Professors, doctors and lawyers and everybody was bearing their brunt as trying to make a living. Shining coffee on the streets of New York City, where I was born. And so that, of all the faces I've seen over the years, especially the poor. So that's why I stuck to this kind of photography that interested me of people. You can see it all through my photographs.