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‘Capturing History: The Photography of Chim’ Review: The Past Made Personal

One of the co-founders of Magnum Photo, Chim populated his photos with memorable faces.

Capturing History: The Photography of Chim

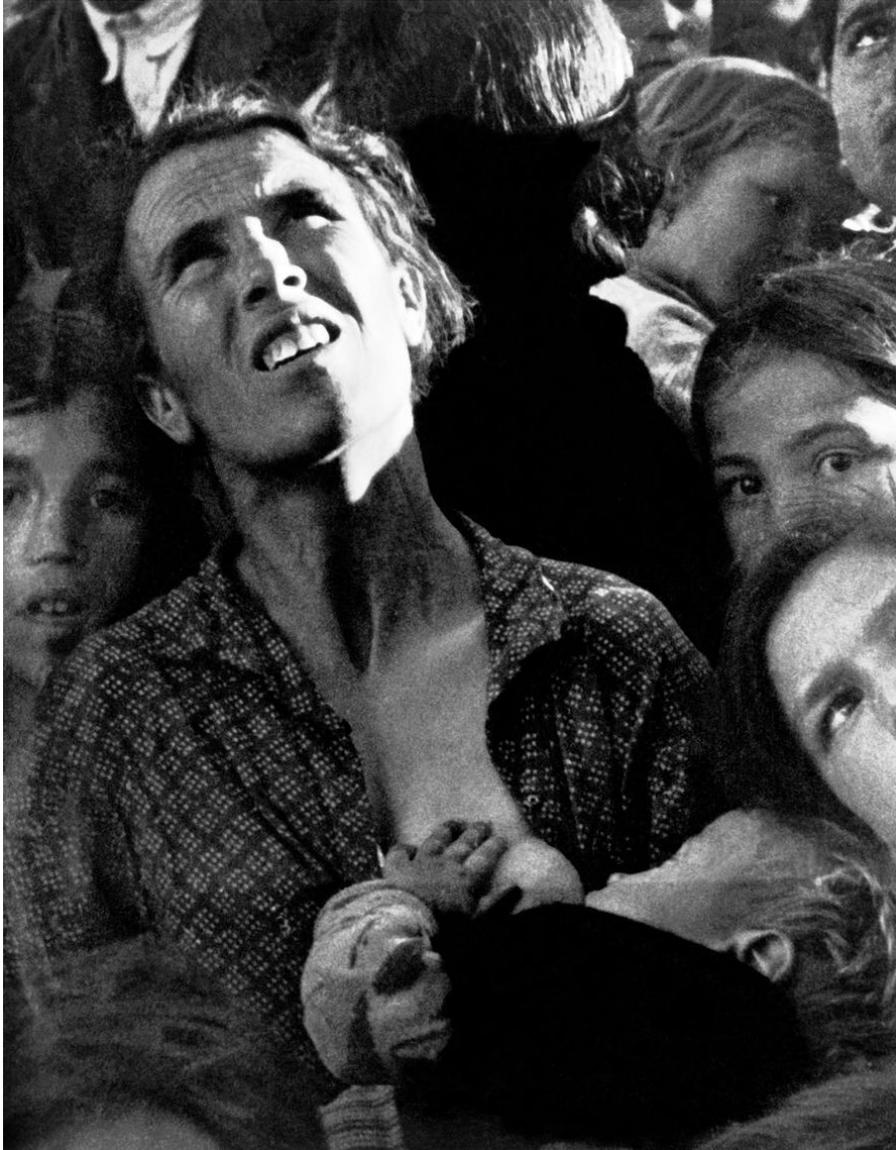
Museum of the Jewish People

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By William Meyers

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David 'Chim' Seymour's 'Woman Nursing a Baby at a Land Reform Meeting in Spain' (1936) PHOTO: DAVID SEYMOUR (CHIM) ESTATE/MAGNUM

'Capturing History: The Photography of Chim' is part of Magnum Photo's 70th-anniversary celebration. In 1947, David "Chim" Seymour, Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson and George Rodger founded the cooperative agency; great photojournalists, they wanted independence to pursue only the projects that truly interested them. In an era when most people depended on newspaper and magazine illustrations for a sense of what personalities and events looked like, Magnum produced many of the most memorable images.

Like Capa, Seymour (1911-1956) came to international prominence with his pictures from the Spanish Civil War. Capa's "The Falling Soldier" (1936) established his reputation as a combat photographer. Similarly, Chim's "Woman Nursing a Baby at a Land Reform Meeting Near Badajoz" (1936) was widely circulated; the woman, seen from above, is straining to understand what is being said and its relevance to the baby at her breast. Chim's sympathy for her and her struggling apprehension informs the image; as always in his work, it is the face you remember.

Chim was born and grew up in Warsaw, the son of secular Jews. His father's publishing company printed books in Yiddish and Hebrew; his mother edited a Jewish paper.

After *gymnasium*, he earned a degree in graphic arts in Leipzig, Germany, and in 1932 left for further studies at the Sorbonne. In Paris, a job in a photo shop got him involved with photography, and he was soon selling pictures of political events such as "Funeral Procession in Paris for Pacifist and Anti-Fascist Henri Barbusse" (1935) to the press. His Polish name, Dawid Szymin, was difficult for non-Poles to pronounce, so he became "Chim." He photographed workers ("Les Halles," 1936) and personalities ("French Intellectual Andre Malraux," 1935), and established friendships with Capa and Cartier-Bresson.



Chim's 'Children Playing Among the Wreckage of the D-Day Invasion' (1947) PHOTO:DAVID SEYMOUR (CHIM) ESTATE/MAGNUM

In Spain he documented civilians contending with the war. "Children Take Refuge in Underground Shelters on the Island of Minorca, Spain to Escape the Bombings" (1938) shows them standing in an orderly formation in a small illuminated area surrounded by pitch darkness. Back in Paris he took "Pablo Picasso in Front of His Painting 'Guernica'" on July 12, 1937, the first day the artist displayed his furious work. Chim was in Mexico photographing the arrival of refugees from the Spanish conflict when World War II began. He went to the U.S., anglicized his name to David Seymour, and joined the American Army; his work analyzing reconnaissance photographs earned him a Bronze Star. Chim's sister survived the war; his parents were murdered by the Nazis in Poland.

Returning to Europe after the war, he photographed life in the ruins of the once great cities. The massive “Crowd Listening to a Speech by Socialist Leader Pietro Nenni ” (1948) stands in the shell of the Basilica di Massenzio in Rome, while a single “Woman in Her Garden Amid Ruins” (1947) labors alone in Frankfurt. But the work that drew most on Chim’s humanistic instincts was his photographs of children that were published as a book by Unesco in 1949. There were “Children Playing Among the Wreckage of the D-Day Invasion” (1947) on the beach of Normandy; a girl in a body brace in the “Bellevue Hospital for Children” (1948) in Vienna; children with missing limbs engage in a ball game in Rome; and, most famously, “Tereska, Who Was Raised in a Concentration Camp, Draws a Picture of ‘Home’” (1948). On the blackboard behind her is a spaghetti-like squiggle, all she could draw, and on her face a look of incapacitating terror.



Chim's 'Tereska, Who Was Raised in a Concentration Camp, Draws a Picture of "Home"' (1948) PHOTO: DAVID SEYMOUR (CHIM) ESTATE/MAGNUM

The room that houses "Capturing History" is divided diagonally by an S-shaped line of large-format color prints of Israel suspended in glass frames. Chim had studied the use of color in Leipzig, and was quick to take advantage of Kodachrome when it became available. His bearded "Welder" (1954) is a heroic figure, clad in brown leather protective gear and standing in a huge

pipe. The muscular “Workers at King Solomon’s Mines” (1952) in the Timna Valley are bronzed from exposure to the sun. Chim must have enjoyed the “Independence Day Parade in Tel Aviv” (1952) that features a bright red tractor.

Chim’s last assignment was to cover the Sinai conflict in 1956 for Newsweek. As usual, “Inhabitants of Port Said After Anglo-French Air Attack” shows his concern for civilians; a woman leads one child and carries another through the debris. On Nov. 10, four days after an armistice had been declared, he and French photographer Jean Roy headed in a jeep for El Quantara to photograph a prisoner exchange. An Egyptian machine-gunner opened fire on them, sending the jeep into a canal and killing both. Chim was 44.

Henri Cartier-Bresson eulogized his longtime friend and Magnum business partner: “Chim picked up his camera the way a doctor takes his stethoscope out of his bag, applying his diagnosis to the condition of the heart.”

—*Mr. Meyers writes on photography for the Journal. See his photographs at www.williammeyersphotography.com.*