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Jerome Liebling obituary

Socially conscious US photographer who focused on 'the everyday, the ordinary'

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Jerome Liebling in 2006. More than once, magazines found his photographs too unflinchingly graphic to publish. Photograph: NYT/Nancy Palmieri

The American photographer Jerome Liebling, who has died aged 87, once said that his motivation was "to figure out where the pain was, and to show things that people wouldn't see unless I showed them". Liebling worked as a photographer for more than 50 years and his early work, especially his New York street scenes and his quietly powerful portraits of ordinary people, influenced several generations of socially conscious photographers.

Liebling was also an inspiring teacher of photography and film-making. One of his former pupils, the acclaimed documentary director Ken Burns, later told the New York Times: "He was so authentic ... You wanted to be like him. You wanted to tell the truth."

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Liebling, the youngest of three boys, was born in New York to Morris and Sarah Liebling. As a teenager, he joined the US Air Force, flying missions over Europe and north Africa during the second world war, a formative experience that underpinned his progressive anti-war politics in later life. As a returning soldier, he was given free higher education and, in 1945, opted to study art and design at Brooklyn College. His tutors included the painter Ad Reinhardt and Walter Rosenblum, who ran the photography course that provided Liebling with his first camera. "I was so precocious and so good so quickly," he said later, "and every aspect of photography just seemed to fuse." He then studied film-making at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan.

In 1947 Liebling joined the Photo League, a co-operative of amateur and professional photographers committed to social documentary photography that also included Paul Strand, Berenice Abbott, Helen Levitt and W Eugene Smith. Like the others, Liebling attended regular meetings devoted to photography and leftwing politics, and, influenced by Strand's often formally complex compositions, took to the streets of New York to, as he later put it, "bring back pieces of the world as honestly as possible".

The Photo League was declared a subversive organisation by the US government in the very year that Liebling joined, and many of its members were blacklisted for supposedly being communist sympathisers. "It was extremely threatening that you'd have to submit to a loyalty test, as I did at the many schools where I taught," he told the photography writer Amelia Hennighausen shortly before his death. "They'd come up and say, 'Are you a radical and will you sign the list?' If you were in the Photo League, you had to say, 'Yes, I was a subversive.' So everybody quit the Photo League."

In 1949, unable to make a living from his photography, Liebling accepted a post at the University of Minnesota, where he set up the college's first photography and film course. Alongside his friend Allen Downs, he started making documentaries and travelled throughout America, filming and photographing whatever caught his eye: coalminers, carnivals, state fairs, street scenes, children and migrant workers. He once said of his work: "The thing which is closest to us – which is the everyday, the ordinary – I think is very important." He also shot dramatic, reportage-style portraits of campaigning politicians, including John F Kennedy, Harry Truman and the southern segregationist George Wallace, as well as more viscerally powerful images of the inmates of asylums and blood-drenched slaughterhouse workers. More than once, magazines found his photographs too unflinchingly graphic to publish.

In 1969 Liebling founded the film, photography and video programme at Hampshire College, in Amherst, Massachusetts. He later said that his classes were based on rigorous self-questioning as well as technique. "I wanted them to see that there were no

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shortcuts," he told the New York Times in a recent interview. "It's too easy if everything is soft, and you can just buy your way and live well. I kept asking, 'Where is your work coming from? Why are you doing it? What is it you see?' And, after a while, they started to really look."

Liebling published several acclaimed books, including *Jerome Liebling Photographs* (1982), *The People, Yes* (1995) and *The Minnesota Photographs* (1997). In the late 1990s, in a surprising late departure from his more socially engaged work, he photographed the house that the poet Emily Dickinson lived and worked in. His book *The Dickinsons of Amherst* was published in 2001.

Liebling continued to take photographs until relatively recently, but the advent of digital technology left him cold. Throughout his working life, he used a Rolleiflex film camera, describing it as "an engrained part of me".

His photographs are in the permanent collections of the [Museum of Modern Art in New York](#), the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#) and the [Museum of Fine Arts, Boston](#). He received several awards and grants, including two Guggenheim fellowships and, at the time of his death, was professor emeritus of Hampshire College, where, in 2009, the Jerome Liebling Centre of Film, Photography and Video was set up in his honour.

He is survived by his second wife, Rebecca Nordstrom, a professor of dance at Hampshire College; four daughters, Madeline, Tina, Daniella and Rachel Jane; a son, Adam; and five grandchildren.

- Jerome Liebling, photographer, film-maker and teacher, born 16 April 1924; died 27 July 2011