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Slate

How One Photographer Captured a Changing New York City Over 50 Years

By [David Rosenberg](#)



When [Jerome Liebling](#) passed away in 2011, the prolific photographer left behind boxes of never-before-seen work. Some of those images are included in “Jerome Liebling: Brooklyn and Other Boroughs, 1946–1996,” on view at [Steven Kasher Gallery](#) in New York City through June 6.

“He was one of the most well-informed people, a real intellectual,” his daughter Rachel, who helped edit the show, said. “History really informed him, where you are in the flow of things, so the things you’re saying or photographing had something before it; it’s all coming out of a context. My whole life was like that; there was never a direct

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conversation. It always ended up being these deep, complicated stories and never with a yes or no answer. He was interested in how everything related to everything else and I think that's what made him a really special teacher and photographer."

Liebling was born in Harlem but raised in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. After studying for a semester at Brooklyn College, he left in 1942 to serve in World War II in the glider infantry, eventually returning to school under the G.I. Bill in 1946 where he continued his studies in photography.

Rachel said that her father's initial intent had been to travel to Mexico in order to be a political muralist, but he ended up staying in New York because his father passed away and he didn't want to leave his mother alone.



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“That’s when he first got a camera into his hands,” Rachel said.

In 1947, Liebling joined the Photo League and then, in 1949, he accepted a position teaching photography at the University of Minnesota. He eventually returned to New York 20 years later to a city that had radically deteriorated. It didn’t stop him from hitting the streets to photograph what was happening, sometimes with Rachel and one of her four siblings tagging along.

“He had a really charismatic and unique way about him,” Rachel said. “The Rolleiflex became part of his body and it was almost like choreography the way he would approach

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his subjects. I know this not only because I remember being out with him, but you can also see it in the images. He would walk right up to people, and they were intrigued by him. There's an exchange going on between him and them. He really connected with people; they look at him and they're both equally checking one another out."



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Rachel said the current show at Steven Kasher came about because of the popularity of a show at the gallery in 2014.

“I feel optimistic about the recognition among younger people of looking at a picture and saying, ‘Wow I feel something, there’s something there,’ and also knowing when they see it and then recognizing it. People are getting to be more interested in context, about the images having a context.”



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