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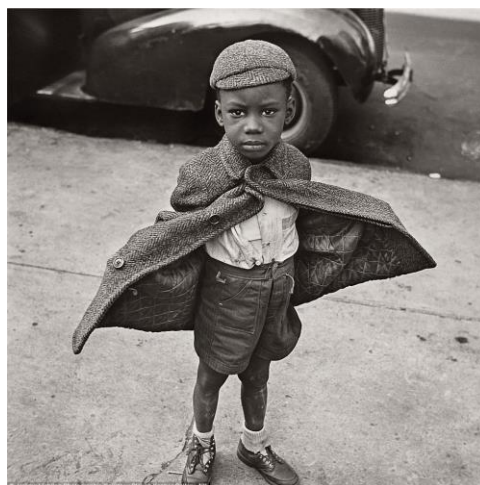
## Turning back the clock on the Big Apple: Fifty years of everyday working-class New Yorkers and life in the city

A photographer has brought the last 50 years of his native New York to life with intimate portraits of the everyday people he would find while walking through the city's working-class streets.

Jerome Liebling, who passed away in 2011, was inspired by his experiences as the son of immigrant parents and a soldier in World War II to seek out a different perspective - one of perseverance.

It's a theme that radiates in both Liebling's individual photos and his work as a whole, showing his audience how the Big Apple's streets went from the community-filled blocks of the 1940s, to the desolate corners of the 1970s and back to the bustling vitality he rediscovered again a decade later.

Liebling's desire to 'figure out where the pain was', as he once said, came from his horrifying experience serving in the glider infantry in Europe and North Africa during the Second World War.



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'They called them "Flying Coffins"', Liebling's daughter Rachel told [TIME](#) of her dad's experience in infantry, which sent soldiers behind enemy lines in gliders for a 'surprise element'.

'They're just being riddled by bullets and half the people are shot,' she said. 'I know for certain that some of his close friends were killed.'

Liebling returned to his photography studies at the Brooklyn College on the GI Bill in 1946 and then joined the Photo League, a collective of photographers who wanted to showcase the struggles of everyday working-class Americans.

It was just a few years later Liebling would take one of his most iconic photographs, of a young boy dressed for Easter morning in Harlem.

The boy's shoelaces are broken and his trousers are worn but it is his pose, hands in the pockets of his coat as he spreads his arms wide, that gives the photograph its symbol of hope.



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Known as Butterfly Boy, the picture appeared in posters and billboards throughout New York, Paris, Amsterdam and Japan, according to the photographer's [website](#).

Liebling would soon leave to teach at the University of Minnesota. When he returned to New York 20 years later he didn't recognize the city of his childhood, calling it a 'disaster'. Steven Kasher, whose New York [gallery](#) Liebling's work will be on display all month, said a distinct loss of community can be seen when comparing his photos from the two decades.

Kasher said Liebling's pictures from the 1940s are filled with 'people living together, banding together going to church, going to rallies'.

But in the 1970s images he captured of the South Bronx, there are 'isolated people and devastated cityscapes'.



© Jerome Liebling Photography, Courtesy Steven Kasher Gallery, NY

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Liebling's hope came back with his own return to Brooklyn, specifically the Brighton Beach neighborhood where, his daughter said, he re-discovered 'this feeling he had about New York'.

'He had wondered where it had gone,' she told TIME. 'It felt familiar and right to him.' Liebling was so enthralled he would go on to photograph the neighborhood for three decades, his subjects ranging from an old women in a fur coat and blue eyeshadow to a young Russian immigrant with piercing green eyes.

Rachel said her father had a special connection with people, something she saw first-hand as she wandered the streets of Brooklyn with him.

'The Rolleiflex became part of his body and it was almost like choreography the way he would approach his subjects,' she told [Slate](#).



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'He would walk right up to people, and they were intrigued by him. He really connected with people, they look at him and they're both equally checking one another out.'

Perhaps, Rachel said, that was because Liebling understood the people whose 'perseverance and ingenuity' was 'heroic in his eyes'.

'He found mystery and intrigue around every corner,' she said.

'The people on the streets...became larger-than-life through his lens.'

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