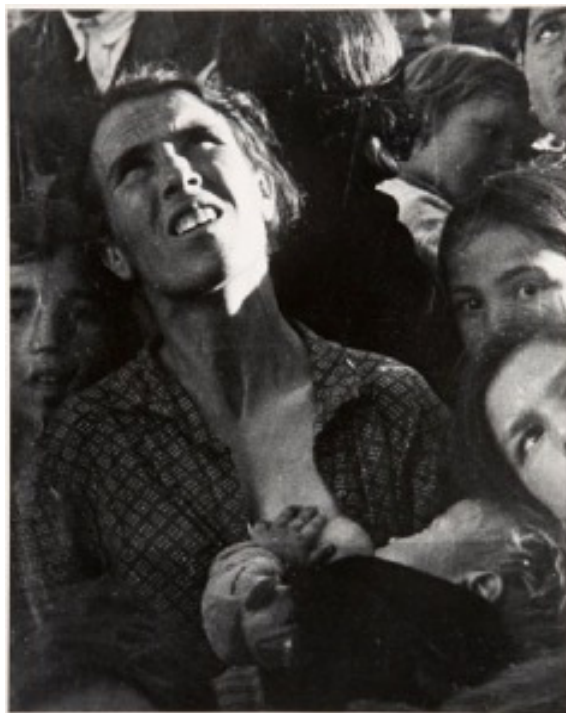


## **‘Chim’ and the Mexican Suitcase**

by John Migden 25<sup>th</sup> March 2010

In May 1936 one of the world’s great humanist photographers took one of the most iconic and important images of the Spanish Civil War. The photograph itself shows a woman nursing her baby whilst listening to speakers at a land reform<sup>i</sup> meeting in Extremadura, only months before the Barcelona uprising. It is a thoughtful and symbolic representation which provides its viewers the opportunity to identify with both the motivations and fears of those involved. Although seemingly simple and documental in both composition and purpose, the photograph’s complexities and affect are far beyond that which the viewer might see upon first glance. It is an example of the most delicate and elusive of processes, when subject (unknowingly) and photographer converge in partnership to produce an image that is both luminous and poignant. In contrast with its seeming simplicity, upon examination, layers of detail peel back to reveal a deep potency: a truth that spears the viewers’ conscience and forces them to ponder both the fragility of hope and the vulnerability of the individual. The photograph also tells of the photographer’s concern of the people whom this war would catapult into hardship and sacrifice, a plight eventually, and brutally, ended in defeat. A striking comment on war, the quality that this photograph possesses for relaying the photographer’s thoughts and ambitions is no less significant than its strength of meaning. As a historical artefact, it not only informs modern audiences of the essence of this war, but narrates the development of photojournalism and the motivations of those who contributed to its evolution.



*Woman at Land Reform Meeting, Extremadura, Spain, 1936.  
Photo: David Seymour Estate/Magnum*

The significance and power of this photograph has cemented its place as one of the most important of the twentieth century<sup>ii</sup>, but it is only one of many that characterise the work and qualities of its creator, David Seymour ‘Chim’.

In recent years further interest in this photograph has been reignited when, on the 19<sup>th</sup> December 2007, three small leather bound boxes arrived at New York's International Centre for Photography. It had taken sixty-eight years and a journey that spanned over 6000 miles for the parcels to reach this destination, and among the 126 rolls of film contained within them, was, the previously assumed lost, original negative of this most masterly of photographs.

The roles of film, however, did not all belong to Chim, but were split almost exactly in thirds between Seymour, Robert Capa and Gerda Taro. The photographs depicted the Spanish Civil War and dated from between 1936 and 1939. The collection of negatives drew immediate and widespread attention, not least because of the mystery that surrounds their story.

Having been sent from Spain to Capa's darkroom in Paris (where they would have been developed) Imre 'Csiki' Weiss, a fellow photographer and darkroom assistant, took the decision to rescue the images from the invading Nazi regime<sup>iii</sup>. In a 1975 letter to Cornell Capa (the late director and founding member of the ICP and brother to Robert), Weiss states briefly that he packed the negatives into a rucksack with the intention of cycling them to Bordeaux where he would attempt to secure their safe passage to the United States. It is unclear how far Weiss got, but before being arrested and eventually interned in Morocco, he managed to pass the rucksack on to a Chilean<sup>iv</sup> man with instructions to hide them in his consulate building. Whilst it is here in the story that the threads of evidence break, researchers believe that the negatives were somehow delivered to Marseilles and resided in the Mexican Embassy under the charge of the Mexican Ambassador to the Vichy Government, General Francisco Aguilar Gonzalez. In 1942 the General was recalled to Mexico and all research points to the negatives accompanying him to Mexico City. It is unclear whether he was aware of the significance of the luggage he hauled or even if he knew that they were stowed among his things, but they surfaced almost fifty years later among other items from his willed estate.

The ICP acquired them after long and delicate negotiations with the Mexican filmmaker, Ben Tarver, who had discovered the negatives among various artefacts that he had inherited, via his Aunt, from General Aguilar Gonzalez. He contacted Queen's College professor Jerald R. Green<sup>v</sup> in 1995, to discuss how best to curate the negatives whilst ensuring access for researchers and students. The ICP and Cornell Capa were informed and what ensued was a protracted series of visits and meetings to secure their acquisition. It was not until film-maker Trisha Ziff became involved that Mr Tarver finally agreed that the right place for them to be kept was at the ICP. Far from implying that Mr Tarver had simply been obtuse about the importance of the negatives, he had raised valid concerns that the removal of these films from Mexico might be seen as the removal of a legitimate part of Mexico's legacy to the Spanish Civil War<sup>vi</sup>.

The significance of the discovery of these images cannot be underestimated. The scenes of war they depict are poignant, interpretive, and technically profound. Their influence upon our historical understanding of the Spanish Civil War is, in many instances (although the conflict was covered by a plethora of journalists and photographers) unique and their role in supporting personal testimonies and official documents is noteworthy, to say the least. They remind us that the Spanish Civil War

was, in many ways, if not the birthplace of photojournalism (certainly with regards to photographers producing reportages whilst *on assignment*) certainly where it received significant shaping and that without their record (albeit sympathetic to the Republican cause), history may well have sided with the victors, as it often does, and the Republicans' fight against fascism in Spain may well have been in danger of being deleted.

As a collective the cache reveals much about how and where the three photographers developed skills and working techniques that, at least for two of them, would go on to inform their later work.

Capa's name is synonymous with war photography and there is no disputing the importance of his work (both during this conflict and afterwards). Along with Gerda Taro, Capa, quickly embedded himself with fighting soldiers and militiamen, and between them they produced some of the most dynamic and graphic images of the Spanish Civil War. Taro (who died after being accidentally struck by a Loyalist Tank in Brunete, 1937) produced in her own right a thorough and accomplished body of work, whilst Capa, through his ability to get close to and capture frontline fighting, set a precedent for what, it could be argued, was to become the future of war photography. It would be an oversight to discuss the 'Mexican Suitcase' without at least mentioning all three photographers, but whilst most articles written at the time of the discovery focussed on the rumours surrounding the surfacing of Capa's *Falling Soldier*<sup>vii</sup> negative (which was not found), what actually emerged as perhaps the most important find of the cache are the many, previously unseen, negatives belonging to Seymour.

Chim travelled extensively through Spain during the Civil War and although on assignment, the distance between him and his editors in Paris was sufficient to allow him the freedom to take a key role in choosing the stories for his reportages. Although a talented war photographer, he was, by his own admission, far less comfortable photographing the front as he was taking pictures of those struggling to structure a semblance of *normal* life in the shadow of war. To his name are many of the war's most iconic images, that through their humanity have gone on to take their place in the world's collective memory and have undoubtedly aided our understanding of this particularly cruel civil conflict. After the end of the Spanish Civil War, Chim surfaced as a significant driving force in the relatively new profession of photojournalism.

When looking through Seymour's photographs of Spain, it is exactly *Spain* that the viewer is being urged to consider. The friction of political ideals may have been what gave the war its meaning and reason, and although this is well represented in much of Chim's work, it is the photographs produced through his pursuance of the men, women and children of Spain that leave the deepest impression. His ability to focus on the civilian population and relate their experiences to an audience, is certainly one of the things that most adeptly characterises Seymour's work. In many of his most famous and iconic images the viewer is compelled to find the human story. Chim is urging his audience to search beyond rhetoric and gunpowder to consider what is, at times, the most unpleasant truths of war. He seeks out facial expressions with the same commitment that many war photographers pursue explosions and gunfire. The eyes, for instance, of the young *boy miners* in one of his 1936 photographs,

communicate to the audience that whilst these boys are doing all they can to appear strong and stoic, their vulnerability and glee reminds the viewer that, although they are performing a man's role, they are no more than children. The duality of this image is a common thread that binds much of Chim's work. It is war, and of course there is destruction and death, but there is also hope and humanity to be found.

Although the themes of much of Seymour's photographs have been well established through his published works, the images found in this recently discovered cache go further in showing us the depth to which Chim wished to represent this country, its people and the war within which they were embroiled.

Among them, is a masterfully composed image, that symbolises the often unseen effects of war. Unusually for Chim, this image does not present a person as its main subject but rather symbolises *man's* presence and purpose through the use of something that perfectly represents an important characteristic of modern humanism. The photograph shows a destroyed typewriter, its keys melted and mangled, the hammers on which letters had once been etched now crushed and mutilated. He places the typewriter in the middle of what the viewer can only assume was once a room, now razed to the ground.

The power of this photograph is created, in no small part, by the striking impact of the monolith, which is formed by the typewriter and the small rectangular stone block on which it sits. The form stands alone, above the rubble as if to symbolise, that even within this chaos, the written word cannot be bound by the same destructive powers as the manufactured world. That words, like thoughts or ideals can withstand bombardment, regardless of how long or severe the attack. Perhaps Chim is presenting this as an icon of the civilised world pitted against the wilderness of war. However, regardless of its connotative meanings or implied binary oppositions, it certainly reminds those who view it, that soldiers on the front line were not the only ones who succumbed to the violence of war.

In historical terms it is a significant representation and reminder of the mass media coverage of the Spanish Civil War, and perhaps on some level Seymour was not only representing the presence of the many journalists and photographers reporting from Spain, but highlighting the dangers in which they worked. The meaning of such an image is open to interpretation but it certainly provokes the viewer to ponder the photographer's intentions.



*Destroyed typewriter, January 1937, Gijon, Asturia, Spain. Photo: David Seymour Estate/Magnum*

What is clear is that without the imagery of bullets, rifles, bombs or bodies, Chim mediates the effects of conflict with precision and empathy. This image is one of many that tells us as much about his own perceptions of events as it does his eagerness to photograph them.

Besides Chim's ability to encourage the viewer's response through the use of metaphor and symbolism, his skill in representing the struggle and defiance of an entire people through the portraits of individuals is one of his greatest skills. Depicted in his photographs of *Asturian Soldiers, Spain, 1937*, is, above all, the strength and assuredness of youth. Yet although these photographs show young, healthy, handsome men facing the camera (and therefore the world) with bold, confident expressions, upon closer examination these pictures communicate the underlying impact of their predicament. Although the portraits communicate their passion and belief for the cause, they also indicate sacrifice, albeit one that they seem content to suffer.

Upon further inspection of the soldiers' expressions the viewer becomes aware that although the war had only been in full swing for approximately a year when these photographs were taken, the burden of their experiences are telling. Perhaps when photographing the people of Spain, Chim was working to produce more than a propagandistic, pro-republican portrayal of the Civil War. Instead it seems that he may have been exploring the difficult truths that often lie behind such commitments to support a cause.

These 'new' photographs also tell of a photographer thinking about how his photographs were going to connect with an audience.



*Asturian Soldiers, Spain, 1937. Photo: David Seymour Estate/Magnum*

With this in mind, we can see that Chim is carefully constructing strong audience identification. Among other means, this is constructed by using (a potentially unhinging technique for documentary photographers) direct eye contact which draws the viewer closer to the subject.

Perhaps one of the most interesting portraits found is that of a young man (perhaps a soldier - whether nationalist or rebel is unknown) in the Basque region of Spain, taken in January 1937. He is wearing a beret on which is pinned a large Swastika. The image, very much like those of the Asturian soldiers, shows a young man looking directly, and rather defiantly, into the lens of the camera. The frame is slightly tilted which gives the photograph a mischievous or uneasy feel, something that is reflected in the man's animated facial expression. It is difficult to know whether the young man is reacting to Chim taking his photograph or to something unrelated, but what results is, again, an image that communicates on many different levels. Chim is presenting us with an image of mixed meaning, left to be perceived as we see most appropriate.

Chim, again, appears to be more interested in representing the *person* than the politics. In addition to this, the image serves as important evidence of the Nazi presence or involvement in the war and would have, at the time of its taking, proved significant for those observing the worrying alliances of Fascist Europe.



*Man in beret with swastika, Basque region, January 1937  
Photo: David Seymour/ Estate /Magnum*

Also discovered, were negatives taken by Chim of larger social events or gatherings, including images of Basque soldiers attending an outdoor mass near the Monastery of Amorebieta. In addition to these there are photographs of Dolores Ibarruri speaking before a crowd of Republican soldiers and civilians in July 1936. Ibarruri's contribution to the second Spanish Republic and indeed her significant role in the fight against Fascism cannot be underestimated, and it is fair to say that Chim knew the impact that images of her delivering speeches would have had on the wider audience. What is particularly interesting about these series of images is that he does not present a portrait of an individual monk, or even that of Ibarruri, but rather composes these photographs to include the crowds. His picture of Ibarruri giving a speech, for instance, shows that instead of focussing on her, Chim is thinking about how best to compose the meaning of the event. It is significant that he includes the mass of people listening to her speech which represents a strong theme within the Republican resistance, that of community. They are being led, but their cohesion is what gives them their strength. Seymour's photographs represent this perfectly.



*Dolores Ibarruri speaking before a crowd of Republican soldiers and civilians, Spain, July 1936*  
*Photo: David Seymour Estate/Magnum*

These images also highlight an important characteristic of Chim's approach to photography and one that grew with potency and precision as his career developed after the Spanish Civil War. Unlike many notable photographers of the time who strived to remain unnoticed and detached from their subjects, Chim seemed to want to co-inhabit their environment and laboured (if only for the duration of the photograph) to forge a relationship with those he recorded. Clearly, in his later images of Greece, Italy and Israel, he was able to use a sense of belonging to enable him to capture some of the most delicate and private of moments, images that tell us as much about the lives of his subjects as his affinity for them. Perhaps, above all else what Chim discovered in Spain was the significance of the partnership between subject and photographer and learnt that if harnessed with accuracy it could produce a far greater depth to the photographs he took.

There were many thousands of photographs taken during the Spanish Civil War, and although these negatives represent but a tiny portion, their discovery will further motivate the research currently unearthing and naming the many Spanish photographers who produced noteworthy contributions to the historical and social record of the War.

Arguably, the true significance of this find, lies in how much the photographs tell us about the mindset and ambitions of the photographers themselves. Capa, Taro and Chim shared a profound ability to record the fighting, damage and hardships of war but whereas Capa, for instance, pushed himself to get as close to the fighting as possible, Chim pushed himself to get as close as possible to the suffering of those reacting to the war around him. Certainly when putting these photographs in the

context of his entire life's collection, the viewer can easily see how these formative years influenced the work he later went on to complete in Europe and Israel. What he learnt, or deduced, about both subject and audience certainly informed and developed his unique approach to photography. Regardless of differences in style and content, their combined efforts significantly contributed to the writing of history.

The story of the 'Mexican Suitcase' and its journey is, in many ways, as important and certainly intriguing as the images found within. It is a surviving symbol of antifascism and a reminder of the courage and conviction of those who aided its safekeeping. The fight, so passionately undertaken in the hundreds if not thousands of battles in Spain between 1936 and 1939, did not, it seems, concede defeat upon Franco's victory. The struggle against the fascists of Europe endured, and through the efforts of the people (most of whom remain anonymous) who recognised the significance of preserving the voice of freedom, Capa's, Taro's and Chim's photographs have become once again, the material icon of this struggle. The sheer amount of detail that persists in evading us regarding this parcel's journey and safekeeping is a testament to those whose efforts engineered its survival. To uncover the truth of its journey, is, in the very least, to highlight the sacrifices and purpose of those involved. The cache will remain an important historical and photographic archive, but we must not forget what it symbolises or fail to acknowledge those who made its later discovery possible. Research regarding its journey continues, and with each piece of new evidence the story of the 'Mexican Suitcase' grows.

The discovery of these negatives is a rare treat for all enthusiasts, but what is important is that they are preserved and displayed as an ocular to our past and fulfil their role in reminding their twenty-first century audience, of the loss and sacrifice of war. In this respect they could not have been uncovered at a more relevant time.

### *Author Bio*

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<sup>i</sup> Land Reform had been a divisive and significant issue in Spain during this time. It defined the line between the rich land owners (including the Church) and the poorer workers who cultivated it. Land Reform meetings were an opportunity when workers could organise and focus their needs and demands. The context of Chim's image is significant as it lends even more power to its meaning.

<sup>ii</sup> Time-Life, in its year 2000 list, voted this photograph in its most important 100 images of the Twentieth Century

<sup>iii</sup> The Nazi government would certainly have either destroyed or confiscated the largely pro-loyalist stock of images. In the months that followed Franco's victory in Spain many images that had been left by fleeing photographers, such as in the case of Spanish photographer Agusti Centelles (often described as the Valencian Robert Capa), were confiscated and stored in the vaults at the Archives in

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Salamanca, where they remained out of publication until Franco's death in 1975.

<sup>iv</sup> Historians and researchers believe that Weiss knew this man from the Spanish Civil War and although there is no evidence proving such, it is very possible that he had been in Spain fighting with the International Brigades until they withdrew in 1939

<sup>v</sup> Professor Green was both coordinator of Spanish and Latin American Art and Professor Emeritus of Hispanic Languages and Literatures at Queens College, City University New York. In addition to his teaching Professor Green has acted as curator for exhibitions of Spanish and Latin American art, including a 2002 exhibition of photographs that were selected from his own collection which he had compiled over 40 years.

<sup>vi</sup> Mexico had been strong allies and sympathisers with Republican Spain throughout the War and had secured safe passage of many Spanish refugees to Mexico. The negatives may well have been seen by Mexican's as artefacts that depict far more about their own history than that of the United States, and therefore *giving* them away could have been seen as an inappropriate gift.

<sup>vii</sup> One of Robert Capa's most famous and disputed images was *Death of a Loyalist Militiaman (Cerro Muriano, Cordoba front, September 5, 1936)* and it was hoped that with the discovery of its negative, questions surrounding its validity could finally be answered.