David Seymour (CHIM) Photograph Collection

War and social documentary subjects, ca. 1935-1955

Jump to: Background and Scope | The Photographer | Image Sampler | Geographic/Chronolgical Summary | Permissions and Credits | Related Resources |

Background and Scope

The David Seymour (CHIM) Photograph Collection deepens our understanding of war and its human cost through images that became iconic as soon as they were published.[1] During CHIM's short life (1911-1956), he became famous for his coverage of the Spanish Civil War and was one of the founding photojournalists of the Magnum Photos cooperative. CHIM's nephew, Ben Shneiderman, donated this magnificent collection to the Library of Congress in 2013. [view the images]



CHIM with Leicas. Photographer unknown, ca. 1950. http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppbd.00599

100 black-and-white photographs focus on CHIM's early work. The first images were made in Paris in 1935, where CHIM developed innovative strategies to tell picture stories. The photos from 1937 to 1939 cover many aspects of the Spanish Civil War as it led into World War II. Images of Mexico show where some of the Republicans emigrated after the Nationalist's victory. The gift includes a portfolio of twelve of CHIM's best known photographs from the 1930s to 1955. They can be seen at http://davidseymour.com/photos/

CHIM and his fellow photojournalists Robert Capa (André Friedman) and Taro (Gerda Pohorylle) took news photography to new levels of importance during the Spanish Civil War. As photo historian and critic Susan Sontag wrote, "The Spanish Civil War was the first war to be witnessed ('covered') in the modern sense: by a corps of professional photographers at the lines of military engagement and in the towns under bombardment, whose work was immediately seen in newspapers and magazines in Spain and abroad."[2] This war continues to claim the public's attention because it was a precursor to the ideological warfare among fascism, communism, and democracy that affected so many countries in World War II and later.

The Library of Congress welcomes this special collection because we have long been the principal East-Coast repository for the study of the Spanish Civil War through newspapers, maps, movies, manuscripts, and books but the collections did not include a strong representation of the best known photographs. Shneiderman offered the Library's curators the opportunity to select vintage and modern prints from the family archive he and his sister Helen Sarid maintain, which, in turn, provides researchers with a group of photographs with impeccable provenance. For more information about the Library's Spanish Civil War materials in many formats, see Visual Materials Relating to the Spanish Civil War.

On Nov. 20, 2014, the 103rd anniversary of David Seymour's birth, the Library of Congress hosted a program celebrating the acquistion of CHIM's photographs. The program featured speakers discussing CHIM's life and contributions [view a Web cast of the program].

The Photographer

Best known as CHIM, David Seymour was born David Szymin on November 20, 1911, in Warsaw, Poland, into the family of a prominent publisher of Hebrew and Yiddish books. In his early years, CHIM prepared himself to work with his father. As a young adult at the Sorbonne in Paris, he planned to study chemistry and physics, which would be applied to printing work with his father. His interest in science informed his later use of many camera formats, developing techniques and advancements in the emergent color photography.

While at the Sorbonne, he also worked at the Polish photo agency Rap. In 1933 he began using the press name CHIM, an abbreviation for the French version of his surname. In 1934 he became a staff photographer for *Regards* magazine, a leftist news publication begun in 1932 and noted for its photojournalism. From 1935 to 1936, working for *Regards*, he covered the Front Populaire, a coalition of left-wing organizations in France. In 1936 he went to Spain, to document its Civil War, as did his friends Robert Capa and Taro. CHIM focused on covering the social and cultural aspects, while Capa and Taro concentrated on the fighting. When the war ended in 1939, CHIM traveled to Mexico on his way to settle in the United States. For the French magazine Paris Match, he covered the journey of 1,000 defeated Republican refugees, who would remain in Mexico. CHIM co-established Leco Photographic Services in New York City, which would become his home base.

CHIM joined the war effort by volunteering to serve in the U.S. Army, where he worked as a motion picture cameraman and later as an interpreter of aerial and combat photographs. In 1942, he became a naturalized American citizen and was discharged as a Second Lieutenant in 1945. His parents stayed in Poland during World War II and were killed by the Nazis.

In New York in 1947, CHIM and the prestigious photographers Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson and George Rodger co-founded Magnum Photos, one of the first international photography cooperatives in which photographers, not editors, made final decisions about use of pictures. CHIM served as president of Magnum in 1954.

CHIM returned to Europe in 1947 as a reporter for *This Week* magazine. In 1948, working for the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), CHIM documented the hardships of refugee children throughout Western Europe and parts of Eastern Europe. The following year UNICEF published those images as the book, *The Children of Europe*.

CHIM continued his work as a photojournalist, producing images of news events as well as internationally renowned actors and other celebrities. On November 10, 1956, while working for Newsweek to cover the Suez crisis, CHIM went to photograph an exchange of prisoners and was tragically killed by an Egyptian soldier near Suez, Egypt. The world lost one of its most influential photojournalists, who not only produced some of the most humane photographs of his time, but also advanced the technology and means of producing and distributing photographs.

https://www.loc.gov/rr/print/coll/david-seymour-photograph-collection.html