

Nextbook.org (re-printed in *The Jewish Week*)

Wartime Lens

The woman behind Robert Capa comes into her own

BY JOSCELYN JURICH



Gerda Taro and Robert Capa, Paris, 1935

She was nicknamed *La Pequeña Rubia* (“the little blond”) by Spanish soldiers and described by *Life* magazine as “pretty little Gerda Taro.” Yet Taro, a photographer whose life was cut short at the age of 26 during the Spanish Civil War, was far from dainty. “Some of her pictures are pretty brutal and defied the characterization of what a female photographer ought to be interested in,” says Kristen Lubben, co-curator of the photographer’s first retrospective, “**Gerda Taro**,” on view at the International Center of Photography through January 8.

Though she worked as a professional photographer for only two years, Taro left behind a diverse body of work documenting the front lines of the war that split Spain. Like her partner and lover **Robert Capa**, Taro was an Eastern European refugee from fascism, and felt a strong personal commitment to the Spanish cause. In July 1937, she was killed, struck down by a tank as she fled the battle of Brunete on the running board of a car transporting wounded soldiers, the first female photojournalist to become a casualty of war.

Though her story and work have historically been overshadowed by Capa’s, Taro’s life was equally dramatic. She was born Gerta Pohorylle in 1910 in Stuttgart, Germany, to Yiddish-speaking parents from Eastern Galicia. As Taro’s biographer Irme Schaber explains in an e-mail, Stuttgart was rife with anti-Semitism, especially after World War I when many Jewish refugees from the East flooded the city. Taro kept her Jewishness a secret: “A female friend of Gerta’s in Stuttgart said that she responded to the anti-Semitism there by trying to be perfect at everything,”

writes Schaber. “She wanted to be the perfect student and the most fashionable one so that her German classmates would forget that she was Jewish.”

When her family moved north to Leipzig in 1929, things changed. Leipzig had more than double the Jewish population than Stuttgart, and Taro fell in with a circle of Jewish friends who were involved with local leftist politics. She became active in the Socialist Workers’ Party, and in 1933, she was arrested and detained for her involvement in anti-Nazi activities. After her release, she decided it was too dangerous to remain, and in autumn of that year Taro fled to Paris. She never saw her family again.

Seemingly far from the troubles of her homeland, Taro joined a vibrant group of intellectuals and artists: She boarded with the photographer **Fred Stein** and his wife Lilo, and in 1934 she met the Hungarian photographer André Friedmann. Taro assisted Friedmann as his business manager and he taught her photography. Soon the two became romantically involved and began collaborating on projects. In a city full of émigré artists and photographers, the two came up with an idea that Schaber says was both an attempt to avoid anti-Semitism and a calculated marketing concept. The young couple cooked up an imaginary American photographer called Robert Capa, figuring that such a character would gain higher prices for his work than yet another immigrant named Friedmann; in 1936 André took on the name and Gerta became Gerda Taro. For that first year, they collaborated, identifying their photographs with the stamp “Reportage Capa & Taro.” (In 1937, Taro began publishing under her own name, using the stamp “Photo Taro.”)

“Before or after, we never saw Capa work with someone other than Taro in that way. Clearly, that relationship was a very special relationship,” says ICP director Willis Hartshorn, who speculates that this cooperative spirit may have led Capa to create the collaborative photographic agency Magnum.

When war broke out in Spain in July of 1936, Taro and Capa quickly made plans to go. “Her status as a refugee from fascism made her incredibly committed to one side in this war,” says Lubben. “I think she felt like going to Spain and photographing for the Loyalist side was her way of fighting Hitler that she couldn’t do in her own country.”

During her year in Spain, Taro photographed a wide range of subjects: militiamen and women in Barcelona and at the Cordoba front; refugees in Almeria; the Battle of Guadalajara and air raid victims in Valencia. She sent the photographs back to France where they were printed in leftist papers and magazines such as *Regards*, *Vu*, and *Ce Soir*. Some of the most powerful images among the exhibition’s approximately 80 photographs add resonance to Capa’s maxim, “If your pictures aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough.” Taro’s photographs from the front lines at Segovia, such as the one of a wounded Republican, his head swaddled with bandages, show a remarkable intimacy. Because she spoke German, French and English fluently, as well as some Spanish, she could communicate with the soldiers and other people she photographed. Taro's horrific series taken after multiple air raids on the city of Valencia reveal a graphic, uncommon brutality; in one, blood streams onto the marble slab below a man’s battered head. “There’s a kind of intimacy and reality with death that is very rare for us to see these days,” Hartshorn says. “Today images are much more cleaned up.”

The exhibition also traces the evolution of Taro's aesthetic and working methods, along with her wartime experiences. The dramatic angles of Taro's early images of Republican militiamen and women training in Barcelona share the avant-garde aesthetic of **Rodchenko** and **Eisenstein**. Her shift from the Rolleiflex, which produces more static images, to the lighter, more flexible Leica allowed for greater intimacy and spontaneity. The exhibition's final image, of a burning truck in Brunete, has an eerie, ominous strength.

Her politically committed journalism runs counter to contemporary ideas about objectivity, Hartshorn says. "Today there is a very strong sense that the photography of war needs to present a kind of neutral face on what's going on," he says. "[Taro and Capa] were people who believed that the work they were doing could actually have an impact on defeating fascism."

In July, 1937, Capa returned to France while Taro remained in Spain, covering the Battle of Brunete. Capa was still in Paris when he read of his lover's death in a newspaper. (Taro's funeral, organized by the French Communist Party and held in Paris on what would have been her 27th birthday, was attended by tens of thousands, including the writer Louis Aragon and the poet Pablo Neruda. Alberto Giacometti designed her memorial tomb.) While they never married, Capa did propose, according to Schaber. But Taro refused him; she may have turned him down because she was hoping for a man who could help get her parents and two brothers to the United States. Her family managed to flee Germany and took refuge with relatives in Serbia as they tried to make their way to Palestine. But they never got out of Belgrade, and in 1942 they were killed in the aftermath of the Nazi invasion.

Capa took possession of Taro's archive, and after he passed away in 1954, it was transferred to his brother, Cornell, the founder of the ICP. But 70 years after her death, Taro, despite her pioneering photographs, is still considered a footnote to Capa. Schaber and others at the ICP are hoping that this exhibition will give her her due. "The possibility to have a look at her work is really a quantum leap," writes Schaber. "We are discovering the independent *oeuvre* of a woman of the 1930s who was committed to fighting for her own future."



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