

The Garden of Life

Bruce Davidson photographs the Lower East Side

BY JOSCELYN JURICH



Emily Haas Davidson, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Bruce Davidson, 1972

Bruce Davidson once said that his entire body of work could share the title of his collection of photographs of the Civil Rights movement: *Time of Change*. Throughout his 50-year career—during which he’s documented Brooklyn street gangs, the Freedom Riders, Harlem (in the seminal *East 100th Street*), the New York City subway, and Central Park—Davidson has been concerned with conveying a deep and distinct sense of place and of transition.

In the late 1950s, he began photographing Manhattan’s Lower East Side. For the next four decades he intermittently documented the neighborhood’s evolution, focusing in the 1970s on the legendary (and now defunct) Garden Cafeteria, which in the 1920s and 30s served as a meeting place for Yiddish writers and intellectuals, and was then frequented by Davidson’s friend and neighbor Isaac Bashevis Singer. Those photographs—which offer variations on Davidson’s perpetual theme of temporality—are now on display at the Jewish Museum, along with Davidson’s 1972 film about Singer, *Isaac Singer’s Nightmare and Mrs. Pupko’s Beard*.

In the catalogue accompanying your new exhibition at the Jewish Museum you say, “Isaac Singer allowed me to touch something I had never been able to reach for.” What was it that he allowed you to touch?

I was born and raised in the Midwest, in Oak Park, Illinois. And we were practically, at that time, the only Jews in this “village.” There was a small temple; it was really just a motel.

A motel?

Just one floor and looked like a house. And that's where my bar mitzvah was held, and that's when I got my first camera, my first good camera. It was during the war. And I saw it in the rabbi's study which was off the pulpit from where I was going to get my Haftorah. I could see the box with the camera in there. I knew that it was a camera and I got very excited and forgot the last four lines of the recitation. I made it up—made up whatever came to mind.

Did anyone notice?

Ninety-nine percent of the 50 people sitting in there didn't know that I wasn't speaking Hebrew anymore.

Is that telling about life in Oak Park?

My grandfather, who lived with us, was born in Poland, but came here as a teenager. But he could speak a little Yiddish, so Yiddish words floated around a bit. Everybody else was sort of hiding their identity, wanted to assimilate, wanted to be one of the boys. I could understand that. Oak Park was a racist, bigoted community. Ernest Hemingway, who went to the same high school as I did and was a classmate of my stepfather, said that Oak Park was a place of wide lawns and narrow minds.

I was the first son to study for his bar mitzvah. I always wondered about what it is to be a Jew, and when I met Singer years later and I was a grown man, I realized that he was my grandfather. He touched that which was vacant and void in my life, and turned it to continuity, cultural continuity. I latched onto my Jewish roots. Not that I'm a practicing Jew—I'm not. I don't like to fast. However there is always that feeling, that certain connection, that certain, as Singer calls it, continuity.

Singer was your neighbor. How did the two of you meet?

Right—he was a neighbor. The very first time I saw him, it was around 1967. I was assigned to photograph him for a magazine. I wasn't married at the time. There was a beautiful young lady across from me on the subway and I just sort of fell in love with her right then and there. And she started looking at me. But I couldn't break that barrier to make an encroachment with her. I just couldn't do it. And I got off the train and there I was and I had to photograph Singer. And I said, "I'm sorry. I feel a little disturbed. There was a young lady that I was infatuated with on the subway." And he said, "Oh those things happen, you know. Don't worry about it." It was like one of his stories.

How did you come to take these photos of Singer and the Lower East Side? It wasn't your neighborhood. You live on the Upper West Side, as did Singer.

Well, it was after *East 100th Street*, a project to photograph and portray a block in Spanish Harlem considered one of the worst so-called "ghetto" blocks in the city. I

worked on the block for about two years. And then people began talking to me about making films. I made a short little film called *Living Off the Land*, and then I was asked if I'd be interested in making a feature film. And I said yes, that I would like to do *Enemies, A Love Story* because it was the only novel at that time that Isaac had written that took place in America in the 1950s. Then I tried to raise the money for this film and went to Hollywood. I didn't have enough experience, and I didn't have the rights in perpetuity, so I couldn't sell the television rights to raise money for the feature film. So I was sort of downcast, depressed.

You returned to New York?

I started to go to my old haunts: the Lower East Side, the Bronx Zoo. I was riding the subway, and the subway was more depressed than I was, and that made me feel good. It was a good antidote to deep depression—going underground. So, in a way, the crossing of the Lower East Side at that time and the subway brought me into a new ground of understanding and awareness—and a voice that I see in my work as a voice of consciousness. I had to go through that stage of understanding my roots.

But you did eventually work on a film with Singer, *Isaac Singer's Nightmare and Mrs. Pupko's Beard*. What was that like?

I wanted to make this film like a feature but I only had one camera so I had to repeat lines, and move the camera and repeat it to get a different angle. And Singer said, "Oh, I can't do that line, I can't say that line again." "Well what do you mean?" I asked. He said, "Bruce, what would it be like if God said 'Let there be light' four times?" So then I took the camera off the tripod and shot it all handheld, all by myself. And Singer's bird is also in the film. I don't know if we mentioned that in the book, but Singer left to Florida for a little vacation and we took care of his bird. And I kept the bird out of the cage during the day in a pantry room. And I brought the movie camera which was a little noisy in, and I let the bird listen to the camera every day. And then I would put the bird in the cage. In the film, that's why the bird wouldn't leave Jack's hat. He felt very good with the camera next to him, that noise and everything.

Isaac was a wonderful actor, really a wonderful actor. He gave us carte blanche, you know. It was just wonderful.

When was the last time you saw him?

Just after he won the Nobel Prize. For some reason or other, I went down to Florida to see him in his high-rise apartment. He had told me he was being plagued by phone calls from all over the world. The phone kept ringing and ringing and ringing all day long. So I brought him an electronic gadget called the No-Bell, which if you attach correctly won't allow the phone to ring. The person calling will hear a ring but you won't so that you can have silence the whole day. I wasn't very good at following the instructions. They were a little complicated and we had to test it. So I'd say, "Isaac, call upstairs to your friend, your neighbor, and ask him to call." And he would call and nothing. It was ringing but no

one picked up anything on Isaac's end. So then his friend would run downstairs, knock on the door and say, "You okay, Isaac?" It became very Singer-esque.

When you were working on *East 100th Street*, the Reverend Norman Eddy aided your entry into the community. Did Singer serve a similar role when you were photographing the Lower East Side?

Singer brought me to the Garden Cafeteria. I needed all that: the remnants of lives. Survivors of both the concentration camps and survivors of New York itself were in the cafeteria. And very often, I thought that these were the fathers and grandfathers of sons and daughters who were probably successful—doctors and lawyers. And these people were kind of left behind. It's really the cafeteria of life.

If you reach a goal—and I can't do this consciously—you reach, if your work is successful, a universal. And the Garden Cafeteria on the Lower East Side could be a place in other places. It's diners and luncheonettes, and, you know, it's everywhere. It's that loneliness of sitting and thinking of Edward Hopper. His painting of that woman sitting in a diner alone, the isolation that we experience and feel facing the void; all that was implicit in those cafeteria pictures. That's why I did day-for-night, because those globes on the ceiling reminded me of stars and other galaxies and I deliberately did that so that it would be a kind of surreal place that could be on Mars or the Moon. It wasn't done to make my photographs grotesque. But in "Two Women Seated," those women that are sitting with their stockings rolled down—they are those mothers who nurtured those children who are now successful. They're left behind in a kind of lonely world. Those women were sacrificed and they are torn, and they're like a tree that has been weathered for many years. So I did that not as a grotesque, no. I felt something about those women who were left behind, lonely, bedraggled, and yet dignified at the same time.

I definitely see that in the photograph of Bessie Gakaubowicz—she's holding an image of herself and her husband. What's her story?

Somehow or other I sat across from her at the Garden Cafeteria. I would enter the cafeteria, look around to see who might be interesting for me to sit across from in the empty tables. And I sat down with that woman. We had a brief conversation and she told me she was a survivor. I said, "Did any of the pictures of you or your husband or your family survive?" She said, "A few, because we sent them to America before we were taken by the Nazis." So the next day, she brought in some pictures to show. I sat down again with her and so that became the picture. She has obviously survived. It was in France; the train was stopped, the partisans got her out and she ran away. You know, she was a young girl at the time and her husband didn't survive the camp. So that picture was cut out of a larger picture. It meant a lot to her and it meant a lot to me to be able to photograph her coming to grips with that.

It's a very moving photograph.

Yeah, it's meant to be moving. And there again, it's day-for-night, set in a really romantic natural light. I used a direct strobe. It was almost the light of the concentration camp that's focused on the barbed wire fence, a clear light, the kind of spotlight that brought her out of the blackness, out of the darkness, out of the infinity of it all, and made it very real and strong. These things were all working unconsciously within me.

Was it difficult or depressing, photographing the Garden Cafeteria?

I just thank God there was rice pudding...it got me through the day. I couldn't eat very much; the food was just a ploy to get in there. "Hello, how's your rice pudding today?" I would say. The baked apples I could eat quickly, and the rice pudding. I think the gefilte fish was pretty good there too.

Do you still go down to the Lower East Side?

Well, once in a while. I'll go down to Joe's Fabric Shop with my wife. I haven't been to Katz's in a long time. I love to go there but the food is not good for me any longer so I don't. But recently *Esquire* asked me to do something on America right after 9/11.

And you chose Katz's as your subject?

Katz's. Because I didn't feel comfortable doing anything Americana-like, going to the Grand Canyon or something like that. So I went to Katz's. It's a little bit vulgar. It's not kosher and its reputation is based on pastrami. My theory was, and it was kind of ironic, that pastrami makes you feel peaceful. And if the world ate more pastrami, there'd be more peace. I wrote a little thing about that. And I photographed people gorging themselves with pastrami. I didn't photograph anyone eating corned beef or anything else. Only pastrami because that's the fattiest meat you can buy. It was sort of a humorous piece. But that, too, was partly about being Jewish, being free. The underpinning of that project was freedom, the freedom of America that you don't have to be a certain way. 📍

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