

The Mexican Suitcase

and other Stories
about Capa, Taro,
and Ted Allan



Fred Stein photo of Gerda Taro,
and Robert Capa on the terrace
of the Café du Dôme,
Montparnasse, Paris, early 1936.
©Estate of Fred Stein, International
Center of Photography.



Red box from the Mexican suitcase.
©International Center of Photography.

She was taking pictures as bombs exploded all around them; she photographed planes strafing the retreating soldiers, and kept taking pictures amid bullets and flying rocks, several men blown to pieces. Ted pleaded with her, but Gerda wouldn't listen. They finally jumped on the running board of a car, and moments later a tank veered into the side of their vehicle, throwing Gerda and Ted into a ditch ...

IN WHAT WAS AMONG the most important photographic finds of the twenty-first century, a Mexican filmmaker named Benjamin Tarver discovered a small, tattered suitcase containing some 126 rolls of film by legendary photographers Robert Capa, Gerda Taro, and David "Chim" Seymour. The negatives, considered lost in the aftermath of the Third Reich, include Capa's famous photographs of the fall of Barcelona, his harrowing images of the mass exodus from Tarragona, and Taro's Segovia and the destruction of Madrid, her terrifying take on the plight of the victims. Most but not all of the photos were taken during the Spanish Civil War, between early 1936 and 1939, at a time when war photography – and the risks attached to taking pictures in war zones – was new, and the photographers still believed these images could make a difference in the unfolding tragedy they witnessed – before the word "embedded" appeared as part of a photographer's equipment.

The long story of the suitcase began in 1939 when Robert Capa fled Paris in advance of the German occupation and entrusted these negatives to his friend Imre Weiss, a fellow Hungarian Jew who managed his darkroom. Weiss bicycled to Bordeaux, hoping to get the suitcase onto a ship to South America or Mexico. Instead, he handed it to a Chilean he knew, a man who promised to hide it in the cellar of a Latin American embassy.

Whether the Mexican ambassador to the Vichy government had any idea what was in the suitcase in his embassy's cellar is not known. What we do know is that it was in the large shipment of his belongings to Mexico City when his ambassadorial stint ended.

The suitcase was part of Benjamin Tarvel's inheritance from his aunt, a friend of General Aguilar, the former ambassador to France.



After Capa's death in 1954, during the last days of the French involvement in Indochina, his brother Cornell spent years trying to find these negatives. He had hoped to include some of the images in the 1979 Venice Biennale exhibition featuring Capa's work. "Anyone who has information regarding the suitcase should contact me and will be blessed in advance," Cornell Capa said.

His calls for help went unanswered until 2007, when Capa biographer Richard Whelan and International Center of Photography chief curator Brian Wallis contacted filmmaker Trisha Ziff in Mexico City. It was Ziff who succeeded in persuading Benjamin Tarver to send the suitcase to New York. Cornell Capa, now 85, was finally able to include the 4,500 negatives in the ICP's collection.

In the 2010 book *The Mexican Suitcase*, Richard Whelan defines what made the work of these photographers unique for their time and extraordinary even today:

For them, photo reportage meant three things: First, that the pictures themselves had to be wrenchingly dramatic and tell a human story; Second, that the photographs – and the photographer – had to be part of that story or action; and Third, that the photographer had to be engaged, had to have judged the political stakes in that story, and had to have taken sides. Lacking these qualities, photographs had no purpose, no meaning.

ROBERT CAPA was born Endre Friedmann in Hungary in 1913. He had an extra little finger on his left hand – a sign, his mother thought, that God had chosen him for great things. At school, he became involved with communism, an ideology he thought could save the world. He sympathized with outsiders perhaps because, as a Jew, he felt like an outsider in his own country. Already in the 1930s there were some anti-Semitic laws and a sense, as Hitler rose to power in Germany, that worse was to come.

He went to Berlin in 1931, a time when Berlin was a lively, permis-





ABOVE: Gerda Taro
OPPOSITE: Robert Capa

sive city where artists, poets, and novelists gathered, where Christopher Isherwood and W.H. Auden were enjoying the high life, where Henri Cartier-Bresson was experimenting with photography, even as the National Socialists gained ground. Given his sympathies, it was not surprising that Capa's first photographic assignment was Trotsky in front of a large audience of enthusiastic supporters.

Capa was short, swarthy, dark-haired, heavy-browed, with "spaniel eyes," a warm, husky voice, and a passion for photography. He had delicate, almost feminine hands.

He met Gerta Pohorylle in Paris a year after the Reichstag burnt.

Born in Germany, she too was escaping Nazi fanaticism. She was petite, stylish, vivacious, with red hair, grey-green eyes, and a quick smart wit. She wore high heels and plucked her eyebrows. Some of her friends said that she looked like a little deer with a perfect smile. Friedmann taught her how to handle his Leica, how to develop film, and she talked him into changing his name to Capa. It was not a big stretch: *capa* – "shark" in Hungarian – had been his nickname at school, and it was also pleasantly reminiscent of Frank Capra, who was already a famous film director.

She changed her own name to Gerda Taro. Her biographer has speculated that the "Taro" was borrowed from the Japanese artist Taro Okamoto, who was also in Paris, studying at the Sorbonne. They certainly knew each other.

Gerda and Capa moved into an apartment together near the Eiffel Tower.

IN 1936, Lucien Vogel of *Vu*, a French photographic magazine, sent both Capa and Taro to Spain to do photo stories about the Civil War. *Vu* featured the work of such luminaries as Henri Cartier-Bresson, André Kertész, and Man Ray, and ran photo essays similar to those that would soon become popular in *Life* magazine.



Chim (David Seymour):
Woman Listening to a Political
Speech near Badajoz, May 1936.
 ©Estate of David Seymour /
 Magnum Photos.

OPPOSITE:
Gerda Taro: *Citizens Attending the*
Funeral Procession of General
Lukacs, Valence, 16 June 1937.
 ©International Center of Photography.



David Seymour, who called himself Chim, was a freelance photo-journalist in Spain, covering the war for whichever magazine was willing to pay for his work. He had been friends with Capa and Taro since their time in Paris.

The Spanish Civil War was fought between those loyal to the Republic and the Nationalists under the leadership of General Francisco Franco, supported by both Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. The Republicans drew support from the Soviet Union, Mexico, and a motley assortment of International Brigades from a variety of countries, including Canada.

Roughly 1,200 Canadian volunteers from all classes and regions fought in the war – despite their government's lack of support and, after 1937, prohibition of Canadians enlisting in unsanctioned foreign wars. One Canadian who made his mark in Spain was Dr Norman Bethune, who developed a method of bringing mobile blood transfusion units close to battle lines.

Bethune's friend and admirer from Montreal, the young, skinny, dark-eyed 20-year-old Ted Allan, aspiring writer, idealistic communist, arrived in besieged Madrid at about the same time as Gerda and Capa.



**Robert Capa: General Enrique Lister and Ernest Hemingway [at right],
Móra d'Ebre, Aragon Front, 5 November 1938.**

Hemingway and Dos Passos and Martha Gellhorn were already there, as were other writers, artists, and idealists. Allan was excited to be among them. Later, he wrote of feeling nauseated by the stench of the dead, bewildered by the wanton destruction, the noise, the chaos. He had joined the International Brigade, but they assigned him to write about what he saw and send it to newspapers. He passionately believed that if fascism could be stopped in Spain, it could be stopped everywhere.

It was probably at the Hotel Gran Via's bar that Ted first saw Gerda Taro. She was intense but funny. She hosted parties with young poets reciting stirring poetry, and she sang "Los Cuatro Generales," which poked fun at the Nationalist generals and lauded the Republican cause. Everyone called her *la pequeña rubia*, "the little blonde." Though she still published most of her photographs under Capa's name, she was now a photojournalist in her own right, chasing stories, sending film to the magazines.

Ted Allan was still in love with her when I last saw him in 1994. He was almost 80 years old. He had written several wonderful books (including



©International Center of Photography/ Magnum Photos,
Collection of the International Center of Photography.

co-authoring the international bestseller *The Scalpel, The Sword*, about Bethune), plays, screenplays, radio plays, a children's book, won many coveted awards, had enjoyed the company of some extraordinary women, yet he was still enthralled with the "little blonde" of his memories. As so many times before, he told me the story of how Capa had left Gerda in his care when he returned to Paris, how she held his hand and denied that Capa was her lover, how she read and liked his short stories and touched his eyelids with the tips of her fingers.

On July 25, 1937, a bright, sunny day, Gerda and Ted went to the battle near Brunete, west of Madrid. General Walter ordered them to leave, but they didn't. She was taking pictures as bombs exploded all around them; she photographed planes strafing the retreating soldiers, and kept taking pictures amid bullets and flying rocks, several men blown to pieces. Ted pleaded with her, but Gerda wouldn't listen. They finally jumped on the running board of a car, and moments later a tank veered into the side of their vehicle, throwing Gerda and Ted into a ditch.



Robert Capa: General Enrique Lister and André Malraux [at right], Catalan Front, late December 1938 or early January 1939.

©International Center of Photography / Magnum Photos,
Collection of the International Center of Photography.

Soon they were both in a hospital, Ted begging the nurse to let him see Gerda. She refused. The tank had slashed Gerda's belly open, but she was still conscious when they brought her in. Ted was told later that before her surgery she had asked for her camera and for cables to be sent to *Ce Soir*, the magazine she was working for that day.

Gerda died at dawn the next day.

This was the one story Ted never perfected for publication. Some versions of it have survived, one of them in his unpublished autobiography, posted online by his son, Dr Norman Allan. Ted died in 1995.

ROBERT CAPA went on to cover the Japanese invasion of China, the European battles of the Second World War, the 1948 Israeli War of Independence. With a group that included his old friends Henri Cartier-Bresson and Chim he founded Magnum, the photo agency that is still the source for many award-winning photographs. Ironically, his most famous photo is one he took during the Spanish Civil War. It is known as *The Falling Soldier*, taken at the moment a man was shot and killed. Some

historians claim that it was taken by Gerda at a time when all her photos appeared over Capa's byline.

The negative of *The Falling Soldier* was in the Mexican Suitcase. It was featured in the International Centre of Photography's eponymous exhibition in 2011, the January 2013 exhibition of Capa and Taro's work at the Yokohama Museum of Art in Japan, and in the film directed by Trisha Ziff: *The Mexican Suitcase*. The exhibition *La Valise mexicaine: Capa, Taro, Chim* opened in Paris at the Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme in February 2013.

ANNA PORTER is an author, journalist, and former book publisher. Her most recent book is *The Ghosts of Europe: Journeys through Central Europe's Troubled Past and Uncertain Future* (Douglas & McIntyre). She has recently been writing about Central Europe for *Maclean's* and the *Globe and Mail*.



David "Chim" Seymour served in the United States Army during the Second World War and would become a US citizen before the war's end.

AN ISS



38

A



Robert Capa:
*Republican Exiles on
Their Way to an
Internment Camp,
Le Barcarès, 1939.*

©International Center of
Photography/Magnum
Photos.