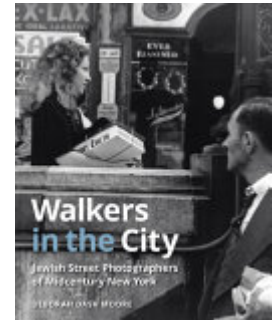


**Deborah Dash Moore.** *Walkers in the City: Jewish Street Photographers of Midcentury New York.* Ithaca: Three Hills, an imprint of Cornell University Press, 2023. xi + 290 pp. \$36.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-6847-7.



**Reviewed by** Michael Berkowitz (University College London)

**Published on** H-Judaic (July, 2024)

**Commissioned by** Jessica Carr (Lafayette College)

## Before the Digital Age

For many undergraduates in the mid-2020s, the subject of this book—New York's Jewish street photographers from the 1930s to early 1960s—may seem closer to antiquity than their own era. Taking photos, now, means pointing an ever-present device and lightly touching a button. Click click click. Take as many as you like and pick the good ones, if you bother at all. These can instantly be cropped, modified, and sent to hundreds of "friends" and "followers." Most will only be viewed on screen. Before the digital age, however, it took thought, time, effort, and money, not to mention several distinct skillsets and tools, to operate a camera, to develop a negative, and to print a photograph. Photography, at bottom, was dependent on one having a camera, and using it (usually) with film—both of which had to be suited, roughly, for the conditions of the photograph. Among the brilliant, terse chapter titles in *Walkers in the City: Jewish Street Photographers of Midcentury New York*, by Deborah Dash Moore,

is "Waiting" (chapter 5). Its main subject is people being photographed who happen to be waiting for something. "Waiting" also is critical to the photography that comprises this study. Patience and thoughtfulness factor into every image. As vibrant and frenetic as New York was, to these photographers, one needed to situate oneself—and wait—in order for a street scene to be worthwhile. This is the story of those who were willing to make such an investment of their time and resources—with little or no reward—because New York was such an immense part of how they imagined themselves.

*Walkers in the City* is a gorgeous book. It is well designed and delightful to the touch. It fulfills every requirement of a monograph issued by a first-rate university press and then some. For anyone who loves New York it also may serve as an exquisite gift. Reasonably priced at \$36.95, the lion's share of university presses would be wise to take notice. *Walkers in the City* might proudly be

displayed on an urbane, educated person's coffee table. Yet it also should be closely read for its fresh perspectives and interventions in the history of photography, as well as the historiography of New York and American Jewry. Its focus is the streets of the city, a means of "reframing New York" (p. 1), as captured by a band belonging largely to a particular time and place. The writing is sparkling. This book has so many superb photographs that it is impossible to specify one, or a dozen, which are exceptional. One of the great strengths of this book is that it sets each of the photos in its appropriate contexts—with reference to the photographers as women, men, and the sorts of Jews they were—as well as their relationship(s) to the city streets and people they photographed. More often than not, the photos they executed extended beyond Jewishness. In other words, this book is much more than reflections on the "Jewish" sections of New York. Moore shows how these (mainly) working-class Jews, (mainly) associated with the New York Photo League, sought to embrace and genuinely portray the humankind, overall, and materiality that comprised New York.

In the historiography on photography, this book is one of the few to seriously engage a reality that often is ignored, distorted, or blithely dismissed: that Jews were, dramatically, disproportionately large in number—in terms of quantity and quality—as photographers, and in many realms of the field, such as agents, photo (art) editors, laboratory personnel, and retailers of cameras, films, and photo equipment. Typical in the vast sea of offenders, in this regard, is the two-volume *History of European Photography* (2010), published in Bratislava and Vienna, as noted by Adam Mazur.[1] In contrast, *Walkers in the City* is in the same elite class as *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust* (2010) by the late David Shneer,[2] as one of the few scholarly books to seriously engage the question of the super-abundance and influence of Jews in photography, and the recent dissertation of Steven Samols, "Photobooks as Jewish History: German-speak-

ing Jews, Images, and the Transatlantic Construction of a Common Past" (University of Southern California, 2023). The essays of Lisa Silverman and Manuela Fugenzi, accompanying stellar exhibitions, also are outstanding.[3]

Although Dash Moore does not express this explicitly, we are reminded that it was only in the 1940s and afterward that ultra-Orthodox Jews arrived in significant numbers in the city with the intention of living—as much as they could—among themselves. In contrast, the vast majority of Jews coming to New York and the Americas since the sixteenth century had the intention of integrating to some degree into the greater, non-Jewish, established communities. It is not surprising, therefore, that a chief impulse that Dash Moore identifies among these photographers is their ardent desire to actualize the connection they feel as part of New York City writ large. Moreover, she writes, "Jewishness did not need to be chosen or even necessarily acknowledged. It just existed" (p. 42). And "Jewishness," to the photographers "a normative condition," was highly "*malleable*" (p. 39, emphasis added). One category of identity based on politics did not preclude another based on ethnicity. Hardly any of them were religiously observant or deeply committed to a particular stream of Jewish politics, per se. Naomi Rosenblum (1925-2021), who would be considered Jewish photography royalty, if there were such a thing, "articulated a pervasive political self-consciousness among Jewish photographers.... However, her statement only opened discussion because 'leftism'—whether of the socialist or communist or antifascist or even New Deal democratic variety—did not, in fact, translate directly into ways of seeing" (p. 43). The single constant was that "these photographers believed in the inherent dignity of the individuals they photographed." One of the early photos shown is *Chick's Candy Store, 1938*, by Naomi's husband, Walter. A younger man being addressed by the gesticulating older gent seems nonplussed. But there is nothing condescending about the portrayals, which rings true for

the hundred-plus photos in this book (p. 14). Near the conclusion we are treated to N. Jay Jaffee's *Kishke King, Pitkin Avenue, Brownsville, Brooklyn, 1953*. Dash Moore writes: "Exuberant and excessive advertising covers almost every inch of this building, trying to attract customers to a food stand purveying hot dogs, hamburgers, and *kishkes* (stuffed intestines). Jaffee couldn't resist the building's humorous presence" (p. 217). One might note that the customers for the Kosher fare, at that moment, are all African American. Relationships between Jewish photographers and African Americans are not relegated to a chapter, but intelligently interwoven in the entire volume.

A chapter on encounters with Coney Island, "Letting Go," could serve as a model for how historians of photography can examine a vacation or touristic spot frequented by a particular group. The book's "appendix" consists of short entries on the photographers discussed, which is a gem in itself. It might be exploited, in the best sense, for those pursuing research on visual culture in one of its most fruitful periods. Those included "fall into cohorts, in part based on their age. Many, but not all, started to take photographs as teenagers and came to know others around the same age as peers; they often met an older generation as teachers" (p. 243). The "brief biographies," therefore, "are presented in birth order to highlight the webs of relationships that developed among peers and between generations." These include, as well, at least one bibliographic reference for each, if it is known to the author. The clear majority are described as born "to immigrant Jewish parents" (pp. 244-45).

The weighty factors of gender and class are well integrated throughout. A strictly imposed border of American Jewish history, however, limits discussion of the international byways through which many of these photographers evolved as people and cultivated their craft. The impact of technological advances in photography, especially the newly designed Leica in 1925 for 35mm film,

as related by Eric Weitz in *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (2007), applies to New York and much of the world.[4] Regarding the transfer of photographs to print media, Elliot Elisofon was deeply impressed by the reproductions of Max Jaffe in Vienna, such as those in the French journal *Formes*.<sup>[5]</sup> Helen Levitt recalled the impact of the Soviet film *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929)—a great deal of which concerns not only cinematography, but the editing process. Maria Morris Hambourg writes that in contrast to Levitt's reaction to "Sergei Eisenstein's great epics, she was more excited by Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*.... While most prize the film for its dizzying technical feats, *Levitt was most struck by Vertov's close shots of real people moving about the city unaware of him* [emphasis added]."<sup>[6]</sup> *Man with a Movie Camera* could barely have been more different from the film by Ralph Steiner and Willard van Dyke, "with music by Aaron Copland," shown at the New York World's Fair of 1939, *The City*. It "relentlessly skewered urban culture" and "concluded with a glorification of suburbanization and the 'new city' movement" (p. 18). During the Second World War, however, a number of films appeared, including the *Why We Fight Series*, which featured the emergence and bustle of New York to the tune of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. Frank Capra was the overarching director, but the "building of America" segment was the handiwork of Anatole Litvak (1902-74).<sup>[7]</sup>

By no means should Dash Moore be expected to have located and examined all of the noteworthy Jewish street photographers of New York. Certainly the Photo League, as a connecting thread, makes perfect sense. Among many whose pictures might be interwoven, however, is Neil Libbert—although he would be among the youngest of her subjects. (One other, Joel Meyerowitz, was born in 1938.) Libbert fits well with the *Walkers in the City*. His New York work has recently been presented with Wolf Suschitzky (1912-2016) in London and Dorothy Bohm (1924-2023) in Paris. <sup>[8]</sup> The exquisite photos of Willy Ronis (1910-2009)

of Paris are comparable,[9] as are those of Fred Stein (1909-67), of Paris and New York—despite the fact that Stein was "The Lawyer with the Camera." [10] Scholars might also wish to consult, for contrast and comparison, the Yiddish- and German-language photo book of Moshe Verobeichic (1904-95), *The Ghetto Lane in Vilna* (1931). [11] Another route that, understandably, is not blazed here but could be explored is color photography. Helen Levitt, Saul Leiter, Joel Meyerowitz, [12] and others turned to color as the advent of Kodachrome, a fantastic match with the Leica, changed the game. [13]

That this book has the potential to open up so many paths of investigation is evidence of its originality, depth, and richness. Deborah Dash Moore's *Walkers in a City*, simultaneously earthy and elegant, is a stupendous achievement.

#### Notes

- [1]. Adam Mazur, "A brief history of Polish-Jewish photography," in *Menachem Kipnis: City and Eyes*, ed. Teresa Smiechowska (Warsaw: Institute of Jewish History, 2014) [Polish and English], 31-35; Václav Macek, ed., *The History of European Photography, 1900-1938* (Bratislava: Central European House of Photography, 2010).
- [2]. David Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010).
- [3]. Lisa Silverman, "Ein eigenes Zimmer: Der Salon der Fotografin/A Room of Her Own: The Photographer's Salon," in *Vienna's Shooting Girls—Jüdischer Fotografinnen aus Wien* (Wien: Jüdisches Museum Wien, 2012), 30-35; Manuela Fugenzi, "Introduction," in *They Fight With Cameras: Walter Rosenblum in World War II from D-Day to Dachau*, curated by Manuela Fugenzi with an essay by Daniel Allentuck (Rome: Postcart, 2014), 5-9.
- [4]. Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 209-12.
- [5]. Elliot Elisofon, undated fragment, 60.12, Series VII, correspondence, 1930s-40s, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.
- [6]. Maria Morris Hamburg, "Helen Levitt: A Life in Part," in Sandra S. Phillips and Maria Morris Hamburg, *Helen Levitt* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 49.
- [7]. "Army film detailing the history of the United States," digitized film segment from *Why We Fight: War Comes to America*, dir. Anatole Livak, prod. Frank Capra (1942), orientation film no. 7, reel 1, 8:28, accession number: 1994.119.1 | RG number: RG-60.1111 | film ID: 931, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collections, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1001258>.
- [8]. Katy Barron, ed., *Unseen: London-Paris-New York: Photographs by Wolf Suschitzky, Dorothy Bohm, Neil Libbert* (London: Ben Uri Gallery & Museum, 2016).
- [9]. Agnes C. Poirer, "The Photographer Who Saw Paris with His Heart in His Eyes," *New York Times*, April 27, 2018.
- [10]. Cilly Kugelman, "Foreword—The Lawyer with the Camera," in *Fred Stein. Paris—New York*, ed. Dawn Freer (Heidelberg: Kehrer Verlag, 2013), 7.
- [11]. Steven Samols, "'Moi Ver': 12 avril-28 août 2023. Paris, Centre Pompidou," trans. Jean-François Cornu, *Photographica*, 8 (2024): 212-14, <https://doi.org/10.4000/11pbd>.
- [12]. Joel Meyerowitz, *Joel Meyerowitz: A Question of Color* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2023), 14.
- [13]. Hans A. Kluge, "Eine Viertelstunde Theorie: Etwas über Farbenlehre und Farbenphotographie," in *Das Farbige Leicabuch*, ed. Kurt Peter Karfeld (München: Knorr & Hirth, 1938), 8. Despite knowing that the inventors of Kodachrome, Leopold Mannes and Leopold Godowsky Jr., were Jews, the Leica company awarded them their highly esteemed prize of specially numbered

cameras in 1935; see Frank Dabba Smith, "Ernst Leitz of Wetzlar: Helping the Persecuted" (PhD diss., University College London, 2017), 197-98.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

**Citation:** Michael Berkowitz. Review of Moore, Deborah Dash, *Walkers in the City: Jewish Street Photographers of Midcentury New York*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. July, 2024.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=60994>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.