

# ***Sonia Handelman Meyer, Socially Conscious Photographer, Dies at 102***

As a member of the Photo League in the 1940s and '50s, she roved New York City, capturing the humanity of ordinary people. She was 87 when her work was rediscovered.



Sonia Handelman Meyer, circa 1948, when she was a photographer with the New York-based Photo League.Credit...Sy Kattelson



By [Richard Sandomir](#)

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[Sonia Handelman Meyer](#), whose memorable black and white street photography around New York City in the 1940s and 1950s reflected her training at the [Photo League](#), a left-leaning collective of photographers who believed their work could change poor social conditions, died on Sept. 11 at her home in Charlotte, N.C. She was 102, having enjoyed a late-life rediscovery of her work in the last 15 years.

Her son, Joe Meyer, confirmed the death.

Ms. Handelman Meyer joined the progressive New York-based Photo League in 1943, learning about socially engaged photography in workshops from one of its founders, [Sid Grossman](#), and other teachers. She soon began making her way around the city with her Rolleicord camera, unobtrusively capturing the humanity of ordinary people doing ordinary things.

[In Spanish Harlem](#), she found a forlorn little girl shyly standing atop a stoop; a group of teenagers, one of whom stared her down; and three boys who affected tough guy poses after chasing her down the street demanding that she photograph them.

In Manhattan, she photographed three Black men, including a police officer, grimly watching an anti-lynching protest in 1946 after two Black couples were killed in Georgia.

At the newly integrated Sydenham Hospital in Harlem, she photographed a girl dancing with Santa Claus and a little boy in a gown (Ms. Handelman Meyer referred to him as “my beautiful boy”) looking out from behind the bars of a crib.

On the Lower East Side of Manhattan, she came upon new arrivals to the United States — weary adults and mothers with children on their laps — waiting for help outside the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, a nonprofit organization that continues to help resettle refugees.

“When you go out on the street and you see things, they don’t seem to have an impact,” Ms. Handelman Meyer [told The New York Times in 2011](#). “But after you begin to work

with a camera and have the discussions we had in class, you see details. Faces, buildings and streets seem to have much more significance.”

Image



“Love,” Harlem, circa 1946-50. Ms. Handelman Meyer captured the humanity of everyday life. Credit...Sonia Handelman Meyer



“Teenage Boys,” Spanish Harlem, 1946-50. Credit...Sonia Handelman Meyer

[The Photo League shut down in 1951](#) amid accusations that it was a Communist front. Four years earlier, Attorney General Tom C. Clark had placed it on a list of subversive groups. A paid informer had accused Mr. Grossman of being a Communist.

As the league’s secretary at the time, Ms. Handelman Meyer answered the office phone when requests for comment about the accusations poured in from the media.

“It got to be too much,” she told The Times. “They were blacklisting people. There were photographers who could not get their passports for overseas jobs. Little by little, it dissolved.”

When the league closed, Ms. Handelman Meyer put her photos and negatives in boxes and moved on with her life. They wouldn't be opened for many years.

"She was scared until the day she died that the F.B.I. would catch up with her," Mr. Meyer said in a phone interview, adding that she and his father, Jerome Meyer, a biomedical engineer, whom she married in 1950, lived under assumed names for three years in Philadelphia.

Image



"Girl on Stoop," Spanish Harlem, 1946-1950. Credit...Sonia Handelman Meyer



“Children in Vacant Lot,” Harlem, 1946-50. Credit...Sonia Handelman Meyer

Sonia Handelman was born on Feb. 12, 1920, in Lakewood, N.J., and grew up in New York City. Her parents were Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Her father, Harry, who worked in the fur business, was from Bessarabia, a region in Eastern Europe that now straddles Moldova and Ukraine. Her mother, Francesca (Kupsucker) Handelman, who was from Lodz, Poland, was a seamstress and milliner.

Sonia graduated with a bachelor’s degree in English literature from Queens College in 1941. Shortly before the United States entered World War II, she took a job in Puerto Rico working in a warehouse for the Army Signal Corps, where she began taking pictures.

She became fascinated by the images of poverty taken there by [Lou Stoumen](#), a photographer for the National Youth Administration. He praised her work and recommended that she study at the Photo League.

When she returned to New York in 1943, she began her education at the Photo League while holding down a paid job working for the United States Office of War Information,



which promoted American policies in World War II through films, radio shows, photographs and posters.

Through the Photo League, she hoped to change the world.

“Without the intellectual motivation, I probably wouldn’t have taken these pictures,” she told *The Charlotte Observer* in 2015. “I was a radical in the ’40s — and not only in the ’40s.”

Image



“The Weavers.” When Ms. Handelman Meyer spotted her photo of the folk music group on a postcard without crediting her, it set off a chain of events that led to renewed interest in her work. Credit...Sonia Handelman Meyer

After the Photo League closed, Ms. Handelman Meyer found work as a morgue librarian at Dell Publishing, a clinical photographer at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital (now



NewYork-Presbyterian), a photographer for the public relations firm Ruder and Finn, a substitute teacher, and a college textbook editor at the Prentice Hall publishing house.

She continued to take photographs, but they were mainly of nature subjects and her children, Joe and Francesca. In 2007, several years after she moved to Charlotte, she and her son were in a bookstore when they spotted a postcard with a picture of the Weavers, the folk group whose members included [Pete Seeger](#) and [Ronnie Gilbert](#).

“The postcard said, ‘Photographer unknown,’ and that pissed her off,” Mr. Meyer said. Ms. Handelman Meyer had taken the photo and others as publicity for the group and for an early album cover.

“I said, ‘Do you want me to do something about this?’” Mr. Meyer recalled asking his mother.

“She said, ‘Whatever.’”

Mr. Meyer wrote to the card company, which responded with a letter of apology and a box of the cards, still without a credit for her picture. More important, her son took some of her prints to the [Hodges Taylor gallery](#) in Charlotte.

It was the start of her artistic renaissance, at age 87.

When she was told that her work would be the subject of an exhibition, Mr. Meyer said, “she clutched her heart.”

Image



Ms. Handelman Meyer with one of her prints in May. Credit...Joseph T. Meyer.

[Carolyn DeMeritt](#), a photographer who curated the gallery's 2007 exhibition, "Into the Light," said that as she sifted through the negatives that Ms. Handelman Meyer had preserved in boxes, she was surprised to see that she had not taken more than one or two pictures of any subject.

"She was just an unobtrusive presence, this small, young, nonthreatening woman, wandering all over the city, taking her shots and moving on," Ms. DeMeritt said in a phone interview. "I was amazed at how many wonderful photographs there were."

She added, “When we priced her pictures at \$500 each, she thought not a soul would purchase them for that exorbitant amount of money, but we sold so many of them.”

Her photos have since been [exhibited](#) in the United States, Germany and Poland and are in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Jewish Museum in New York, the Columbus Museum of Art in Ohio and the Mint Museum in Charlotte, which showed her work in a 2013 exhibition, [“Bearing Witness: The New York Photo League and Sonia Handelman Meyer.”](#)

In addition to her son, Joe, she is survived by her daughter, Francesca Fortson, four grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren. Her husband died in 1997.

Ms. Handelman Meyer had a particular affinity for children. In one of her photographs, five children played in a vacant lot in Spanish Harlem with nothing but rubble around them. Two boys are standing up — looking at something or someone unseen — on either side of three other children kneeling on the ground.

She took more pictures of children than other Photo League members, she told The Observer, because they are “the most vulnerable, most beautiful.”