THE STORY OF THE "MEXICAN SUITCASE"

In late December 2007, three small cardboard boxes arrived at the International Center of Photography from Mexico City after a long and mysterious journey. These tattered boxes—the so-called Mexican Suitcase—contained the legendary Spanish Civil War negatives of Robert Capa. Rumors had circulated for years of the survival of the negatives, which had disappeared from Capa's Paris studio at the beginning of World War II. Cornell Capa, Robert's brother and the founder of ICP, had diligently tracked down each tale and vigorously sought out the negatives, but to no avail. When, at last, the boxes were opened for the 89-year-old Cornell Capa, they revealed 126 rolls of film—not only by Robert Capa, but also by Gerda Taro and David Seymour (known as "Chim"), three of the major photographers of the Spanish Civil War. Together, these roles of film constitute an inestimable record of photographic innovation and war photography, but also of the great political struggle to determine the course of Spanish history and to turn back the expansion of global fascism.

We have determined that the film rolls in the Mexican Suitcase break down roughly into a third each by Chim, Capa, and Taro. Almost all of the film is from the Spanish Civil War, taken between May 1936 and spring 1939. There are two exceptions: two rolls of film by Fred Stein taken in Paris in late 1935, which include both the famous image of Gerda Taro at a typewriter and the picture of Taro and Capa at a café, and another two rolls from Capa's trip to Belgium in May 1939. It is not immediately apparent why these four rolls were packed with the work from Spain.

The Suitcase does not contain a complete collection of any of Capa's, Taro's, or Chim's Spanish Civil War coverage, but includes many of the important stories. From Capa, we see images of destroyed buildings in Madrid, the Battle of Teruel, the Battle of Rio Segre, and the mobilization for the defense of Barcelona in January 1939, as well as the mass exodus of people from Tarragona to Barcelona and the French border. There are several rolls of Capa's coverage of the French internment camps for Spanish refugees in Argelès-sur-Mer and Barcarès taken in March 1939. We have found Chim's famous image of the woman nursing a baby during a land reform meeting in Estremadura taken in May 1936, as well as his portraits of Dolores Ibárruri, known as La Pasionaria. There are many images of his coverage of the Basque country and the Battle in Oviedo. From Taro, we have dynamic images of the new People's Army training in Valencia, the Navacerrada Pass on the Segovia front, and her last photographs taken while covering the Battle of Brunete, where she was killed on July 25, 1937.

Jewish immigrants from Hungary, Germany, and Poland, the three photographers found a home in the culturally open Paris of the early 1930s. Friends and colleagues, they often traveled together in Spain. They published in the major European and American publications covering the war, regularly contributing to Regards, Ce Soir, and Vu, and then Life. Their combined work in Spain constitutes some of the
most important visual documentation of the war. These negatives had been considered all but lost until 1995.

Exactly how the negatives reached Mexico City is not yet definitively known. In October 1939, as German forces were approaching Paris, Robert Capa sailed to New York to avoid capture by the Germans and internment as an enemy alien or Communist sympathizer.¹ As far as we understand, Capa left all his negatives in his Paris studio at 37 rue Froidevaux, under the supervision of his darkroom manager and fellow photographer Imre "Csiki" Weiss (1911–2006). In a letter dated July 5, 1975, Weiss recalled, "In 1939, when the Germans approached Paris, I put all Bob's negatives in a rucksack and bicycled it to Bordeaux to try to get it on a ship to Mexico. I met a Chilean in the street and asked him to take my film packages to his consulate for safekeeping. He agreed."² Csiki, also a Jewish Hungarian émigré, never made it out of French-controlled territory and was interned in Morocco until 1941, when he was released with the help of both Capa brothers and arrived in Mexico late that year.

Csiki's 1975 letter may be the earliest known document of the story of the missing negatives. Neither John Morris, a picture editor who first met Capa in New York in 1939 and remained a close friend and colleague until Capa's death, nor Inge Bondi, who joined the New York Magnum office in 1950 and worked there for twenty years, recalls Capa ever mentioning the missing negatives or expressing any remorse that many of his most famous images of the Spanish Civil War had disappeared.³

In 1979, on the occasion of the inclusion of Capa's work in the Venice Biennale, Cornell published a call to the photographic community seeking any information on his brother's lost negatives following the appearance of a text about Capa's work by John Steinbeck in the French magazine Photo. "In 1940," Capa wrote, "before the advance of the German army, my brother gave to one of his friends a suitcase full of documents and negatives. En route to Marseilles, he entrusted the suitcase to a former Spanish Civil War soldier, who was to hide it in the cellar of a Latin-American consulate. The story ends here. The suitcase has never been found despite the searches undertaken. Of course a miracle is possible. Anyone who has information regarding the suitcase should contact me and will be blessed in advance."⁴ Unfortunately, no new information surfaced. There were discussions of a trip to Chile to seek out the "Latin-American consulate." There was even a dig in the French countryside following reports that the negatives had been buried there.⁵ Nothing was found.

As for the suitcase, we now know that at some point it was turned over to General Francisco Aguilar González, the Mexican ambassador to the Vichy government in 1941–42. We do not know when or under what circumstances this happened. It is highly plausible that in the anxious, underground environment of the thousands of Jewish and foreign refugees seeking exit visas out of France in the south, Csiki sensed the danger of his situation and passed the negatives to someone who could either bring them to safety or immediately put them in hiding. Whether Aguilar was the knowing receiver of the negatives or whether he ever had any idea of their significance (or even that he possessed them) is not yet clear. It is perhaps because the value of the negatives was understood that they survived, yet it is also possible that they survived because it was not known what they were and they quietly escaped attention. Aguilar later returned to Mexico City, the negatives presumably packed among his belongings. He died in 1971. The whereabouts of the negatives were never known during Capa's lifetime.

In the ensuing years, there have been three other stories of major troves of Capa/Taro/Chim work being found in unexpected locations. In 1970, Carlos Serrano, a Spanish researcher in the Archives nationales in Paris, uncovered eight notebooks of contact prints of negatives made in Spain by Capa, Taro, and Chim. The small notebooks, about 8 x 10 inches, contain some 2,500 tiny images from 1936–39
pasted onto the pages, which functioned basically as contact sheets. These notebooks were produced to show the full coverage of stories to potential editors and to keep track of which images were used by the publications. Some of the images are annotated with consecutive numbers, others with publication information and other markings; some are identified by photographer and some are not. In total, these notebooks are the most personal and comprehensive artifacts of the work by these three photographers. In Capa's possessions was a similar notebook with images from August 1936 by Capa and Taro. This is now in the collection of the International Center of Photography. The eight other notebooks remain in the Archives nationales in Paris.

The history of the notebooks is also interesting. The record numbers of the notebooks indicate that they are part of a collection from the French Ministry of the Interior and Security of the State, which were entered into the Archives in 1952 without any indication of when or why the material was collected. The record numbers of the notebooks fall between the personal papers of Gustav Rengler, arrested by the French police in September 1939, and a folder from the Agence Espagne, the Communist agency in France that distributed news and photographs about the Spanish Civil War, which may have been raided during the same period. Richard Whelan, Capa's biographer, has suggested that since the notebooks were used as a tool to sell pictures, it is possible they had been borrowed by the agency and never returned.

Additional Capa material was found in Paris in 1978. Bernard Matussiere, who lives in Capa's old studio at 37 rue Froidevaux, discovered 97 negatives, 27 vintage prints, and one contact notebook from China in the attic. Matussiere had inherited the apartment from photographer Émile Muller, for whom he had worked as an assistant for eighteen years. Muller not only knew Capa, but was also left in charge of the contents of Capa's apartment when both Capa and Weiss left Paris in 1939. The images found in the messy attic were of Capa's coverage of the Front Populaire in Paris, the Spanish Civil War, and the Sino-Japanese War. Matussiere made his find public in an article in Photo in June 1983. Following publication, Matussiere turned over the negatives to Cornell Capa. The negatives and notebooks are now in the collection at ICP.

In 1979, about 97 photographs of the Spanish Civil War were found in the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This collection of prints was part of a case of documents and letters belonging to Juan Negrín, prime minister of Spain's Second Republic, who lived in exile in France after the civil war until his death in 1956. According to Lennart Petri, the Swedish ambassador to Spain, a small suitcase containing the documents was delivered—we do not know by whom or in what circumstances—to the Legation of Sweden in Vichy. At the end of World War II, this case was sent to the Archives of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The documents and letters mostly date from the last months of the war, especially January 1939, and were organized into three sections: documents pertaining to the Ministry of National Defense, documents from other ministries, and general correspondence arranged alphabetically. It is not clear why Negrín had the prints, although there is speculation that Capa actually gave him the prints in 1938 or 1939, possibly for distribution or for an eventual publication or exhibition. The images are from August 1936 through January 1938 and are by Capa, Taro, Chim, and the unexpected fourth member of this group of photographers, Fred Stein. The images span the war: Capa's coverage of the bombing of Madrid in late 1936 and the Battle of Teruel in the winter of 1937, Taro's of Segovia and Madrid in 1937, and Chim's photographs of the Basque country. (Included in the group is one of two known vintage prints of The Falling Soldier.) The documents now reside in the Archives of the Spanish Civil War in Salamanca.

The negatives contained in the so called Mexican Suitcase were discovered among General Aguilar's effects by the Mexican filmmaker Benjamin Tarver, which he inherited after the death of his aunt who was a friend of the General. After seeing an exhibition of Spanish Civil War work by Dutch
photojournalist Carel Blazer in Mexico City, Tarver contacted Queens College professor Jerald R. Green in February 1995 seeking advice on how to catalogue the material and make it accessible to the public. "Naturally it would seem prudent to have this material...become an archive available to students and researchers of the Spanish Civil War," Tarver wrote.  

Green, a friend of Cornell Capa, contacted Cornell and told him of this letter.

Cornell Capa subsequently made numerous attempts to contact Tarver and obtain possession of the film, but, oddly enough, Tarver proved elusive and disinterested. In the fall of 2003, in preparation for the 2007 exhibitions at ICP on the work of Capa and Taro, the late Capa biographer Richard Whelan and chief curator Brian Wallis launched a new effort to return the negatives to Cornell Capa. In early 2007, Wallis enlisted the aid of independent curator and filmmaker Trisha Ziff, based in Mexico City. Ziff first met Tarver in May 2007, and over the next several months helped to persuade him that the negatives belonged at ICP with the rest of the Capa and Taro Archives and a large Chim collection. No money was exchanged. On December 19, Ziff arrived at ICP with the Mexican Suitcase. The missing negatives had finally come home.

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1. His application for accreditation as a photographer to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs had been denied, as his associations with Communist publications was suspect. By September 1939, 15,000 foreigners living in France had been deported to concentration camps in the south. Among the well-known artists in Mille interned in 1939 were Hans Bellmer, Max Ernst, and Wols.

2. Letter from Csiki Weiss to Cornell Capa, July 5, 1975, Cornell Capa Archives, International Center of Photography, New York. This letter was written in response to the controversy spurred by the publication of Phillip Knightley’s *The First Casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), where he suggests that Capa’s *Falling Soldier* was staged. In the letter, Weiss attests to the fact that Capa shot the negative and certifies its authenticity.


13. Letter from Tarver to Green, ICP Archives.

14. See Trisha Ziff's account of her involvement at [www.zonezero.com/magazine/fs_essays.html](http://www.zonezero.com/magazine/fs_essays.html).