
“Glimpses of a Puzzling Phenomenon”: Robert Capa and Jewish History

Éndre Friedmann was born in 1913 to a Jewish family in Budapest, Hungary. It was not until 1936 that Éndre Friedmann would be reborn as the photojournalist Robert Capa in the pages of the French illustrated magazine, Vu. It makes sense to connect Friedmann/Capa’s Jewish background with his experience in the photography and war field. After all, in his description of Friedmann/Capa’s experiences in Paris, Capa’s biographer Alex Kershaw writes, “André [Capa] and Chim [David Seymour] were the true copains—intimates, bonded by their Eastern European sensibilities and experiences of anti-Semitism.” Later, when describing Capa’s work in Israel between 1948 and 1950, Kershaw writes “Israel had become home to hundreds of thousands of young socialists who were busy building a new country from scratch. They reminded Capa of the idealists he had met in Barcelona in summer 1936, before fascism had killed their dreams of a new, democratic nation.” While such descriptions capture the complexity of 1930s European, Jewish communities and the continuities among Friedmann/Capa’s experiences, the literature on his photographic work rarely touches upon Friedmann/Capa’s roots—the fact that he was a Jew from Budapest originally named Éndre Friedmann. It pays to ask how Friedmann/Capa’s connection with the Jewish community in Budapest, Berlin, and Paris affected his travel itineraries, stylistic movements, connections with the Left, and ability to establish a position within a relatively new professional field.

Three recent publications, This is War! Robert Capa at Work, Robert Capa: The Definitive Collection, and The Mexican Suitcase represent some of the excellent work catalyzed by the recent surge in interest in Capa. They also highlight the pitfalls of taking a complex piece of visual culture, and, as catalogs often do, turning it into a universal object of art.

In 1950, Robert Capa and writer Irwin Shaw published Report on Israel. The aim of the report was to highlight a “series of glimpses of a puzzling phenomenon.” That is, it was not meant as a definitive account of Israel “today,” but as a particular moment in which “nothing [was] safe.” The report included 93 of Capa’s photos, which focused on

1 When referring to Robert Capa before the adoption of the name/character “Robert Capa,” I will use “Friedmann/Capa” so it is clear about whom, what historical period, and identity construct I am speaking. When I refer to “Capa” it indicates a period after 1936. In addition, although Gerda Taro and Friedmann came up with the idea for “Robert Capa” in 1935, I use 1936 as the “birth date” because it was in an 8 July 1936 issue of Vu that “Robert Capa” first appeared in print.


3 Ibid., 211.

4 Over the past few years, scholars and curators have written exhaustively on Robert Capa, which has greatly expanded our understanding of his contributions to and impact within the world of photojournalism. Richard Whelan, Robert Capa: The Definitive Collection (New York: Phaidon Press, 2001); Richard Whelan, This is War! Robert Capa at Work (New York: International Center of Photography, 2007); Richard Whelan, Robert Capa: A Biography (New York: Knopf, 1985); Kershaw, Blood and Champagne; and Esperanza Aguirre Gil De Biedma, et al., Heart of Spain: Robert Capa’s Photographs of the Spanish Civil War (New York: Aperture Books, 1999).


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themes such as reconstruction, daily life, immigration and arrival, culture, agricultural development, and Torah study. The polarized use of “Jew” and “Arab” occurred regularly within the Report. The published photographs were culled from three trips Capa made to Israel. Kershaw claims that the reason Capa photographed Jews to the exclusion of Arabs during his trips to Israel was that he and Shaw were “prevented from covering the Arab side because it would have been too dangerous, particularly for Capa as a now famous Jew.” This claim could be reasonably scrutinized as scholar Richard Whelan has suggested, “As a Jew, many of whose relatives had been victims of the Nazi Holocaust, he [Capa] took a strong personal interest in the new nation of Israel and even considered settling there himself. He identified with the thousands of European Jews who were at last arriving in a nation they could call their home.” This identification with the subject was, it seems, common for Friedmann/Capa, and it is clear that the ways in which he identified as a Jew and was identified as a Jew by others affected how he approached certain assignments and his subjects.

In This is War!: Robert Capa at Work, Richard Whelan does an excellent job of highlighting Friedmann/Capa’s methodology and illustrating how he revolutionized photojournalism, journalism, and media production. The discussion of Friedmann/Capa’s Jewish background, however, is oversimplified and only addressed in the introduction. This is unfortunate because in Whelan’s biography of Capa, he acknowledges the ways that Jewish communal structures and organizations affected Friedmann/Capa’s professional and personal development. When describing some confusion about his last name (there was another Vu photographer with the last name Friedmann) in Robert Capa: A Biography, Whelan says, “In an attempt to avoid such confusion (and to hide his Jewishness from the editors of the Berliner Illustrierte), the younger Friedmann had signed his work ‘André’ during 1935, but he decided that using only his first name made him sound like a hairdresser; at which point he and Gerda [Taro] came up with ‘Robert Capa.’” In this version of Capa’s biography, Whelan highlights how the rise of Nazi culture forced the young Friedmann to cover his identity. Removal of the German and Jewish contexts of the story in the exhibition catalog makes the name change less about substantive identity formations and the politics of identity in 1930s Europe and more about superficial conceptions about professionalism.

Another peculiar description of Friedmann/Capa’s Jewishness occurs in the first chapter of This is War!, “Robert Capa and the Rise of the Picture Press.” The piece operates as both a biography of Friedmann/Capa and an introduction to the ways in which Capa revolutionized photojournalism. In the description of Friedmann’s youth, Whelan says, “his parents were thoroughly assimilated, nonpracticing Jews” and that, later in life, Simon Guttmann, head of a photo agency in Berlin, was interested in meeting with Friedmann because of Guttmann’s “interest in esoteric Judaism.” In addition, the exhibit catalogs and photographic retrospectives examined here do not make clear how it was that Friedmann was able to travel from Budapest to Berlin and then to Paris given his financial situation at the time. Quoting a childhood friend, Kershaw writes that Friedmann/Capa “had discovered that the Jewish community in Budapest sent gifted students abroad to study. So he had applied to them for a grant, and they had accepted his application,” which is how he eventually made his way to Berlin. His connections with the Jewish community enabled his mobility from eastern to western Europe. Yet, this interesting facet of Capa’s make-up is glossed over by the over simplification of Jewishness in a participatory, religious sense, which does a disservice to the reader and exhibit viewer. Clearly, Friedmann/Capa paid close attention to his connection with the Jewish community, and more importantly, knew he was perceived as Jewish. In Slightly Out of Focus, Capa relates a formative anecdote: “A German machine gun opened up at the dangling men… I began a long, loud Hungarian swear… [a] boy lying near me looked up… [and said]… ‘Stop those Jewish prayers… they won’t help you now.’” By elevating

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7 Kershaw, Blood and Champagne, 211.
8 Whelan, Robert Capa: The Definitive Collection, 467.
9 Whelan, Robert Capa: A Biography, 81.
10 Whelan, This is War!, 24, 26. Capa described his mother as having a “big and loving Jewish heart.” See Robert Capa, Slightly Out of Focus (New York: Random House, 1999 [Orig. 1947]), 7.
11 Kershaw, Blood and Champagne, 15.
12 I have yet to find a quote where Capa openly self-identifies as Jewish, but there are several quotations, specifically in Slightly Out of Focus, such as this one, that make it clear that he was keenly aware of how he represented Jewishness to people. Capa, Slightly Out of Focus, 219.