

LEO HURWITZ
A Pioneer In The Beginnings Of America's Documentary Film Part 1
LEO'S HISTORY: FAMILY INFLUENCES

By Sandra E. Cohen

Leo Hurwitz (1909–1991), pioneer documentary filmmaker, was part of a small group who founded America's documentary film and invented the social documentary form. According to his son, Tom Hurwitz, Leo's films "exemplified a new way of making films about the real world, and about ideas that help us to understand it. He and his group saw these films as an antidote to the films of Hollywood that gave the audience dreams of escape." Leo's films spoke to various human rights concerns; problems he became aware of, early in his life, growing up in his socially conscious family. Leo was my great-uncle.

Leo's parents and my great-grandparents, Solomon and Chava (Eva) Hurwitz, were, themselves, passionately engaged in the social-political climate of the real world of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Their beliefs grew out of the intellectual backgrounds of their Lithuanian and Ukrainian childhoods, and came with them through Ellis Island when they emigrated at the turn of the century. This humanitarian thinking had a deep effect on all eight of their children.

Eva's father, Abraham Benjamin Ben Chaim Behr Katcher, was one of the few intellectuals in Rassava, a tiny shtetl, south of Kiev, and west of the Dneiper River. He owned a small grocery and was custodian of the town library of secular books. Abraham, a free thinker and an avid reader, had long rejected the rigid and insular religious beliefs of most Jews in the town. In fact, he hosted Saturday evening gatherings and conversations about revolutionary ideas in the home he shared with his wife Sarah and their children.

Solomon, a 28-year-old teacher from Vilnius, Lithuania came to Rassava to tutor for the more prosperous families there. He was also an intellectual and had long discussions with Abraham, soon becoming his friend. When he was introduced to Abraham's family, Solomon was a fitting match for the smart, serious, practical, and studious Eva, ten years younger. They fell in love.

Solomon and Eva married in Rassava and soon moved to the large river town of Kremenchug. There, the first four of their eight children, William (1890), Elizabeth (1893), Rosetta (1895), and Marie (1897) were born. The difficulties of adequate education in Russia made America a desirable goal. Solomon bought his ticket and left Russia for America in 1898, soon after Marie's birth.

America In The Early 1900's

A teacher and an intellectual, Solomon worked for two years at menial jobs before he could send for Eva and the children. According to my cousin Tom, Leo's son: "he saved his wages (an intellectual unprepared for factory work) earned as a pushcart peddler and factory worker in the garment industry in Philadelphia and then New York City, toward bringing his family to New York." Eva, with William, Elizabeth, Rosetta and Marie, joined him in 1900.

The family settled in the lower east side and later moved to Brooklyn. Peter (1901), Sophia (1903), Eleanor (1906), and Leo (1909) were born in Williamsburg. My grandfather was William (Bill) the oldest of the eight and Leo was his youngest brother. Solomon struggled to support his growing family. According to Tom: "Blacklisted from the garment industry for organizing strikes, [he] began a life as a tiny business owner (cigarette stands and the like) and as a dining table intellectual." In the United States, Solomon and Eva found much to deepen their belief that capitalism is not good for the working class.

At the dining table, the difficulties of the working class were in the forefront of Solomon's mind. The Hurwitz family came to New York City at a time when so-called robber barons such as John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie were controlling business, most of the wealth, and creating monopolies in commodities such as oil and steel. The Hurwitz's were immigrants, poor, and Socialist, entering America in a time of class struggle that was brewing under the surface of apparent opportunity.

The labor of miners, farm workers, meat packers, textile workers, and blacks was exploited and the human cost was great. But the government and its ties to business had political motivation to do little to support worker's rights, fair pay, or decent working conditions. Child labor laws weren't yet in effect. The division between wealthy and poor was extreme.

The unfairness towards workers had motivated Solomon's organized strikes. This same unfairness created socialist rebel forces and labor unions such as The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) or the "Wobblies." Solomon and Eva were active in the worker's movement. Both attended lectures at Cooper Union and Solomon made his passionate beliefs clear each night at dinner.

Father

Leo remembered those dinners well: "At meals, most every supper dinner the family ate together and it was a discussion and debating hall. Socialism.

Religion. What he [Father] talked about could have been ideas, feelings. Why there were wars. Why there shouldn't be, the relationship between society (capitalism) and wars. His ideas were always invested with feeling." (Leo in an interview with Pete's daughter, Ellen Hawley) From his armchair at the head of the table, Leo's father led lively discussions about many subjects including politics, literature, philosophy, and later even psychoanalysis when Freud's thinking came to America. Solomon had strong and steadfast ideas, but everyone was encouraged to state his or her own. Eva came in and out, expressed her thoughts, and went back into the kitchen for cooking and serving the meal.

Before becoming a devoted Socialist, Solomon was a philosophical anarchist. As Tom tells the story: "the first heroes of the Hurwitz family were the anarchists, like Prince Peter Kropotkin, in Russia, Emma Goldman and Johann Most. Most was editor of the *Freie Arbeiter Stimme* (Free Workers' Voice). Solomon was on its editorial board [when he first arrived in New York] and also wrote for the newspaper."

Who Leo became was certainly shaped by Solomon's ideas. But Solomon's views weren't easy to challenge. As a young man, Leo disputed some of his father's beliefs, as any son must do, turning from Socialism to Communism when Socialism didn't seem revolutionary enough. Yet, despite his dogmatic authoritarian stance, Solomon did have a playful and affectionate streak, which he passed down to all of his sons:

"He had an armchair at the head of the dining room table. Even if there was no meal, he sat there. At 5 or 7, I would come along and somehow would sense an invitation to come closer. I'd stand between his legs. One of the forms of play was that I'd feel the hills and valleys and texture of his face, his heavy stubble, mustache, and smooth forehead. Strange landscape. Then my hand would come close to his lips and he would let out a roar as if he would bite off my hand and I would withdraw my hand. Lots of close, move away, roar. Scared me to death but I couldn't resist the enjoyment of being scared to death. It was the power and fright of Father. But clear that the threat was a mockery. There was a twinkle in his eye." (Leo to Ellen Hawley)

Other (societal) threats were not mockeries. There were important and real issues to consider—inequality, organizing, unions, and the problems of capitalism. Solomon read revolutionary literature to the children including Kropotkin and Sofia Pirofskaya. As Leo said: "Books that influenced Father were Spenser (late 19th century English Darwinian sociologist, philosopher, and Victorian), Turgenyev, Chehov, Gorky (early), Sholom Aleichem, Marx, Jack

London, Upton Sinclair, Drieser, and Frank Norris.” (To Ellen Hawley) These ideas and concerns were part of everyday life, discussed each night at dinner.

In Tom’s words: “The family dinner table seems to have been, at least in the eyes of the kids, a kind of neighborhood cross between park bench, barber shop, synagogue, and Socrates’ table in *The Symposium*. People came every night to discuss and debate; with Solomon presiding and asking pointed questions to direct the discussion. The older daughters, especially Liza [Elizabeth], were sent out into the new land to find culture and education and brilliant friends, whom they brought back to dinner.”

Evening gatherings welcomed other revolutionary Socialist intellectuals, including such figures in the literary and art world as the Russian philosopher Chaim Zhitlowsky, a friend of Solomon’s, artist Ben Shahn, Gorham Munson, and Faubion Bowers. Their concern was to create socialism reform through nonviolence. The smaller Hurwitz children, including Leo, hid under the table and giggled, but they all soaked in the political and thinking atmosphere.

Mother

In Leo’s memory: “Mother was loving in a not-overbearing way. Touched one’s hair. A feeling of love flowed through that... no great display of emotion; but a sense of support, of the importance of my being. How these things get communicated, I don’t know.” (To Ellen Hawley) Feeling and emotion weren’t openly shared in the family. I’m sure this had to do with the focus on ideas in both Solomon and Eva’s childhoods. Leo fought Solomon’s intellectual dogma, but Eva’s sensible nature and emotional remoteness had its own affect.

Born in 1857, Eva was the oldest and bookish one of the six (of thirteen) Katcher children who survived a high rate of infant mortality at the time. According to Eva’s youngest brother, Moishe (Morris Katcher in his book *Reminiscences*), she was something of a legend, smart and spoken about with great respect. He describes her as having: “wisdom, understanding of people and their situations, helpfulness, and practicality.”

Eva was always busy, taking care of her eight children and working as a mid-wife — much more grounded than Solomon, who was immersed in the world of ideas. She was also a talented seamstress, making all of her daughters’ clothes. She could easily recreate any outfit the girls saw on display in a store window; often occupied with cutting and sewing. Some of the children gathered around as she worked.

Life was a practical thing for Eva and there wasn't time to hug or kiss. She took care of the children's physical needs and made sure each had a chance for education. Yet, they all felt her quiet warmth. Most importantly, she supported their individuality, never interfering. She let her children live their own lives, free to come and go as they wished and to think their own thoughts.

Family Values

Solomon was fervently against anything that undermined individual thinking and freedom. Eva agreed. This included not only what they believed to be the chains of a capitalist system, but also the hold religion had on people's minds.

Leo recalled: "When I had to fill out forms or was asked in school what was my religion well my religion was always 'None.' There was a kind of daring in this, in which we knew we were doing something quite different from everyone else. You were Jewish, but your religion wasn't Jewish. This was some little barrier you had to cross but once it was said you were in the clear." (To Ellen)

The children grew up with two of Karl Marx's fundamental ideas: "Worker's of the world, unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains and a world to gain" and "Religion is the opium of the people."

Not being defined by religion or religious belief was one thing. The Hurwitz's were Jews in a Jewish neighborhood. Even though Eva's fairly religious parents lived close by or with them, religious traditions were not followed. In addition to writing 'None' when the question of religion was asked, the children went to school on Jewish holidays in spite of the askance looks of some of their neighbors. Mostly, they thought nothing of it. At Christmas, on the children's whim, stockings were hung for a joke. Satisfied with very little, they were happy with candy, small toys, an apple, and 'funny things.'

War and the military was another: "the songs I remember in the family (during WWI) were: "I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier.' And, a little poem the others learned at Socialist Sunday School, which I was too young for: 'The soldier says, I do not think, I obey/If that is your soldier's creed, I say/I'm more of a man than you/ because whether I swim or sink/I can say with pride/I do not obey/ I do not obey, I think.'" (Leo to Ellen)

Raising The Eight Siblings

Independence and freethinking was a primary value in the upbringing of all eight Hurwitz children. From Mother and Father, Leo said: "There was very

little talking about what I did do, either approval or disapproval. There was an extraordinary amount of separateness. I'd come home with a report card. There'd be no comments on the report card. My mother would look at it; my father would sign it. No comments, no praise. Unspoken sense that yes, that's what we expect of you. Non interference." (To Ellen)

In the Hurwitz family, bringing up children was *laissez faire* except for the unspoken expectations of doing well in school, integrity, and morality. For most of the Hurwitz eight, this worked well to support their individuality.

All went their own directions: Leo into the documentary film world; Marie and Rose to Vienna in the mid-1920s to study child analysis with Anna Freud. Elizabeth and Sophia followed different paths as dancers. Elizabeth taught Alexander Technique to the Metropolitan Opera. Sophia traveled to China with her husband, Cook, bringing Tai Chi Chuan back to the United States. She wrote several seminal books on Tai Chi Chuan technique under her professional name, Sophia Delza.

As for the rest: Pete explored various aspects of the theater for quite some time before settling down with his wife Jane and their two children Jim and Ellen, union organizing for housing, and working in various business jobs with a gift for detail. Eleanor was an executive secretary and a talented sculptress. My grandfather, Bill, left the fold and moved to Illinois with my grandmother, Sophie, and his two children. He owned a small automotive parts manufacturing business.

Leo and his siblings were free to do what each was each moved to do. None of us, though, leave childhood without some particularly impactful childhood experiences and fantasies. Some of these, as far as I can see, likely had influence on the emotional resonances of Leo's style and work.

FOOTNOTE: The bulk of the information I've put together in this piece is from my cousin Ellen Hawley's interviews of family (Leo's in particular), from conversations with my cousin, Tom Hurwitz, Leo's son, talking to family, and from my great-great uncle, Morris (Moishe) Katcher's book titled *Reminiscences*. Moishe was my great-grandmother, Eva's, youngest brother.