

LEO HURWITZ
A Pioneer In The Beginnings Of America's Documentary Film Part 2
LEO'S HISTORY: CHILDHOOD MEMORIES AND FANTASIES

By Sandra E. Cohen

Memories and fantasies originating in childhood influence the course of a life as it unfolds. So do childhood experiences. If someone has a strong creative drive, as Leo Hurwitz did, these impressionable early occurrences find powerful forms of expression in their creative work. This is certainly true for Leo. Leo's films speak for those abandoned by the societies they live in and for those who have no voice. We already know Leo's family of origin had a strong social conscience. Yet, what are some of the personal, early, even unconscious sources leading to Leo's passion?

Thanks to direct quotes from family interview material made available to me by my cousin, Ellen Hawley (Pete's daughter), to Leo's candor, and to confirmation by both Leo's son, Tom and his widow, Nelly Burlingham, I've been given a view into Leo's childhood. Putting some of these pieces together, as both psychoanalysts and writers are inclined to do, we see revealed in Leo's musings, some of the origins for his sensitivity to abandonment, for his creativity, and for the focus of his films.

Words And Images For Abandonment

The words and images in Leo's early films bring to life the feelings of despair, fear, and anger that exist in silenced and marginalized populations. Some of his films speak for those attacked and murdered for labor organizing during the Great Depression (*Native Land*); for racial bias and mistreatment of blacks in post World War II America (*Strange Victory*); for the persecution and freeing of Jews at Auschwitz-Birkenau (*The Museum and The Fury*).

Leo's awareness of marginalized people came first from childhood dinner table discussions with his father Solomon. But, a deeper unconscious source was Leo's own early experience of abandonment, which he began to find words for only later in his psychoanalyses: "I realized how much I could not talk about, had nowhere to go with; the inability to communicate things that were explosive within one. Anger one didn't necessarily know was anger." The earliest origin of his anger was an experience of being left:

“I had double pneumonia at age one and a half and was taken to a hospital. I saw no one in the family. When I was brought home by Mother and Channah (Mother’s sister) on a trolley or horse-drawn Mother asked questions. I wouldn’t talk to her. She then asked why I wouldn’t talk; I wouldn’t answer. Then I began to talk to her through Channah, telling Channah the answers. I knew the story as a child, it was considered cute (I talked well at that age). Mother understood that I was angry at being left.”

Tom, Leo’s son, believes that Mother (Eva) was tired by the time Leo, the youngest of eight, was born and perhaps not as emotionally available. Plus, she tended to be practical and reserved anyway. These realities would complicate any baby’s feelings. His older sisters doted on him, though, and Leo’s understanding of the real impact of being left at the hospital surfaced when Rose, one of two sisters who became child psychoanalysts, died in 1981:

“After Rose’s death, we took some of her furniture, which we thought was emptied. In a bottom drawer, it turned out there were toys and I saw all these toys two months after her death. It was a shock to have Rose present in the form of her toys, which she had there for little children to be able to open the drawer and dig out the toys and play as part of their therapy.”

“A bit later, I had an episode where I didn’t know where I was where ordinary things had to be made conscious; a sense of disconnection and isolation. I was at home and lay on the bed to let material surface ... it had to do, obviously, with Rose, with death. In 20 minutes, it passed. My connections: Rose, Rose’s death, children, disappearance; being left in the hospital, all familiar things gone; new faces, white walls, no sense of how I got there. This was a reproduction of an infant’s confusion in which the immediate environment makes no sense.”

Leo may have talked well at age one and a half, but there were feelings and emotional connections he didn’t yet have language to understand or express.

Leo’s films give us an emotional language for such unspeakable traumas as discrimination, persecution, murder, and abuse of power. They speak of losses; of people abandoned by society, isolated and alone - people who can’t make sense of the situations they are in. These are people, too, who didn’t have the words to speak and have every reason to be angry. Leo’s films reveal important concerns that many of us turn a blind eye to and would rather not know. Leo always focused on seeing, on never hiding from the truth. Turning a blind eye was not something Leo Hurwitz could do.

Never Turning A Blind Eye

Leo learned not to turn away at the young age of three or four years old. An early memory shows us where and why he began to keep his eyes open. He'd just run a summertime potato race and won his first heat, putting him into the semifinals. But Leo was standing on the iron fence, watching what was outside. He was distracted and missed the semifinal run. This upset him:

“The threat of missing something by virtue of not being alert haunted me for many years.”

Then, Leo's eyes were focused. At age three or four, he missed what was most important. That never happened again. Early in his life, Leo became vigilant to what he might not see if he wasn't paying close enough attention.

Finding His Voice

Being alert was also necessary for Leo to find his voice. That wasn't an easy task in a large family of powerful voices - especially his father Solomon's:

“When the family was together, it was a struggle who got the floor. I was the youngest. I began to save up a reply, wait for an opening and I'd have to smash in the reply in a second and a half ... no expectation that anyone's going to listen. And who needed them? The expectation was that everyone was independent.”

With his father's powerful presence, independent ideas weren't always easily accepted. Especially if they differed from Solomon's certain, even absolute, beliefs about Socialism and how to achieve change. When Leo turned from Socialism to an interest in Communism (and later a more active involvement), there was conflict between them:

“Mother didn't take an extreme position. She was a Socialist, but had not as much vehemence against Communists. She saw something there worth watching. She read some papers ... she didn't have Father's political passion but a cool understanding that something was wrong with capitalism. She'd experienced it. I never had to fight with her. I had to fight with him.”

“Underneath the discussions, the arguments, there was some satisfaction in being able to discover weaknesses in Father's position and being able to prove it... one has a father who's big with a big voice and a big laugh who can roar

with violence, and it's fun. But you're the little one who can get eaten up with the violence."

Then, Father lost his voice.

Leo was in college at Harvard in 1926 when a growth on Solomon's vocal cords was discovered: "he had an operation ... [and] after the operation, he had trouble speaking. He had a ring in his throat and could have learned to speak but didn't want to. It gave him a breathy voice and I think he thought it was ugly and didn't want to subject people to it. Communication was by little notes. I took a portrait of him when I was twenty-one or so - it reveals great sadness, and it had to do with his voice. His voice was the drama of his life. He talked dramatically and passionately. He had been robust, energetic, laughing ..."

This tragedy, in one unwished for way, made room for Leo to have the stronger voice, a voice he couldn't have as a small child with his father's very large presence. Yet such tragedies, if children have wishes to find weaknesses or to overpower (although a normal part of development), come with conflicting feelings. The voice in Leo's films is as dramatic and passionate as Father's. I found myself wondering whether, as much as Leo speaks for himself and the people his camera captures, he also restoratively spoke for Father.

A Voice For Those Who Couldn't Speak

Leo could take a stand about his ideas with Solomon and, despite Solomon's opposition; they would eventually work it out. But, the battle for more equitable conditions for workers, something all the Hurwitz's were committed to, was not so easy to win. Any form of protest for labor rights, organizing, or striking, was met with suspicion and quickly quashed by corporations, government, and police; sometimes with violence. This was the climate of Leo's childhood and something that angered Father.

Father did not tolerate injustice in society and he certainly didn't abide it against his children:

"My 4th grade teacher was called Fats Davis - Mrs. Davis. Threatening, tough teacher ... She left the class alone for a while. Erasers were thrown. She came in and asked, "Who did this?" Silence. She pointed to several students to stand in front of the room, including me. Had us hold out our hands - eight or ten kids, random. I hadn't enjoyed the earlier chaos. I felt it was an atrocious thing to do and told Father: 'You must talk to Mrs. Davis because that was a monstrous thing to do - none of those people were any more guilty or innocent

than the others.’ He did talk to her. He had flowing white hair and spoke imperfect English. But she used no physical punishment the rest of that year. Injustice you could go to him about.”

Leo and Solomon agreed about injustice. Leo’s films expose many injustices, speaking about them with poetic words and images. Leo grew up with an authoritative father and two parents who leaned more towards intellect than feeling. Perhaps it’s no surprise that he and Paul Strand developed a style of documentary called: “the structure of need.” Leo infused his films with a kind of emotional accessibility to the needs of others that wasn’t readily available from either Solomon or Eva:

“I remember childhood as being full of mystery and the withholding by grownups. In terms of school, grownups were the enemies of children with some few exceptions. At home grownups weren’t the enemy, but a different set of beings [with] barriers to the feelings, needs, attitudes of the child. Except in unstated ways. Mother was very loving when you needed to be loved, separate at other times. Father was both loving and remote as the gods were to the Greeks. The virtue in the family was independence not dependence. I inherited a sense of obligation, order, without it being connected with the satisfaction of my needs ...”

Leo made sure this wasn’t true in his films. His films show deep empathy for those who’ve been hurt and abandoned by society. To tell their stories well, he brought the power of something emotional into the world of the documentary. I don’t think it’s an accident that Leo’s films speak for those who couldn’t speak for themselves - about human things, with feeling.

FOOTNOTE: The bulk of the information I’ve put together in this piece is from my cousin Ellen Hawley’s interviews with Leo, from communications with my cousin Tom Hurwitz about his father, and from talking to family.