

WILLY RONIS

BY

Willy Ronis

THE MASTER PHOTOGRAPHER'S
UNPUBLISHED ALBUMS

THE DEFINITIVE REFERENCE ON THE MASTER HUMANIST PHOTOGRAPHER WILLY RONIS



“A FINE IMAGE IS GEOMETRY, MODULATED BY THE HEART.”

—Willy Ronis, 1998

Willy Ronis (1910–2009) was one of the great photographers of the twentieth century. Selected by MoMA curator Edward Steichen for inclusion in two groundbreaking exhibitions, *The Family of Man* and *Five French Photographers*, his work depicts the poetic and poignant reality of life in postwar France. From carefree children to embracing lovers, and from sun-dappled Provence to the cobblestones of Paris, Ronis’s humanist eye found joy in the simplest moments of everyday life.

In his last decades, Ronis donated his complete works to the French State. To accompany this gift, he made a personal selection of what he considered to be his most noteworthy images—590 in total—mounting them in a series of albums and providing meticulous commentary on each photograph. Combining anecdotes with historical and technical context, they constitute an essential document on the photographer’s long career.

This exceptional volume reproduces, in full, the contents of Ronis’s albums for the first time. Together they form a touching, intimate portrait of the life, career, and worldview of a singular artist in the history of photography.

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15	Sveinbjorn Organ Dirjan					
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33	ou à l'Ecole des transports					
34	Trop. BERLIN "Berliner Ensemble" Jeanne de Meillon					
35	de Dresde					
36	Anna Seghers					
37	la semaine du Théâtre Bérthel					
38	Christa Sammler sculpture					
39	Berliner Ensemble "la terre" de Ernst-Günter					
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FEUILLE DE RÉFÉRENCE POUR CLASSEUR N° 303

LA RENAISSANCE - MADE IN FRANCE



P17-11



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— Contact sheet 141 and corresponding file, 24 × 36-mm film, nos. 45–50; East Germany, October 1967.

— Illustrated sheet no. 5/3, containing seven 2 1/4 × 2 1/4-in. (6 × 6-cm) photographs from 1947 on the theme of the Vendôme Column, plus one 2 1/4 × 2 1/4-in. (6 × 6-cm) image from 1949 and one 24 × 36-mm from 1959.





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THE ALBUMS OF WILLY RONIS

“The photojournalist is not well prepared for handling the pen. First, because it is not his everyday tool. Second, because the rhythms of expression of the man who wields a camera and the man who wields a pen are fundamentally different, even in the field of journalism, where these two men rub elbows. And yet, today it is a photographer who is writing. He does so, in any case, taking care not to say anything that is not verified by his own experience and that of his colleagues whose words he has recalled here and there.”¹

A LIFE IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Throughout these pages, the reader will watch an oeuvre of 590 photographs, along with comments by their author, unfold. By turns reporter, industrial photographer, and photographic illustrator, Willy Ronis is a prominent figure in French twentieth-century photography who between the 1930s and the 2000s focused on the French, treading the streets of Paris and the South of France with never fading pleasure. A photographer of “slices of ordinary life,”² Willy Ronis intimately linked his personal experience to his work.

A socially committed man and a member of the Communist party, Ronis captured the great struggles of his time, such as the strike at the Javel factories in 1938 (photos 17 and 18), the return of prisoners of war in 1945 (photos 27 and 475), and the funeral of the victims of the Charonne massacre in 1962 (photo 497). His images of the underprivileged, of picket lines, and of trade union activists do not revel in despair, but are the fruit of genuine solidarity with the workers' struggle and an active engagement with the disadvantaged. His photographs appeared in the press of the time, notably in the Communist magazine *Regards*. As a photographic illustrator, Willy Ronis also regularly published his images in books on Paris, alongside other photographers of the Groupe des XV, including Robert Doisneau and René-Jacques. His first personal book, *Belleville Ménilmontant*,³ published by Arthaud in 1954 with a preface by Pierre Mac Orlan, is devoted to a district of Paris that had been little photographed at the time. This professional already stood up for his work and his vision of his craft in the many articles he published in magazines aimed at amateur and professional photographers such as *Photo-Cinéma*, *Photorama*, and *FOCAgraphie*.

In Paris as in Gordes in the Vaucluse, where the Ronis family bought a house in 1948, his wife, Marie-Anne,⁴ his son, Vincent, and his friends became his first subjects. He observed them with candor and gentleness. Each day, the moments of daily life—games, a bath, a nap—gave the photographer images that have become iconic.

Multilingual and curious, Willy Ronis looked abroad very early, traveling through Italy in the 1930s and, after the war, in England and the United States, and in Moscow, Berlin, and Prague during the Cold War. Rarely driven by commissions, his travels often provided an opportunity for sharing his work through exhibitions or lectures, as with his invitations from John Heartfield to East Berlin in 1960⁵ or to Moscow in 1968.⁶ In 1951, Ronis's work was celebrated by Edward Steichen, who made him one of his *Five French Photographers* alongside Brassai, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Doisneau, and Izis at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The American curator, passing through Paris, chose

1. Manuscript of an article published under the title “Devoir de vacances d'un reporter-photographe” for the magazine *Camera* in 1954.
2. Willy Ronis quoted by Marta Gili in the press pack of the exhibition *Willy Ronis, Une poétique de l'engagement*, La Monnaie/ Jeu de Paume, Paris 2010 [http://www.jeudepaume.org/pdf/PetitJournal_WillyRonis.pdf, accessed February 20, 2018].
3. Willy Ronis, Pierre Mac Orlan, *Belleville Ménilmontant* (Paris: Arthaud, 1954).
4. Willy Ronis met the painter Marie-Anne Lansiaux while hiding in the Free Zone during the occupation.
5. Lecture, “La liberté de la presse en France,” 1960.
6. Lecture, “L'influence du reportage et de l'illustration dans la conception de la photographie publicitaire,” 1968.

Vincent and the model aircraft taken in Gordes in 1952 (photo 129), for the exhibition *The Family of Man*, presented in 1955 in New York.⁷ Two years later, Willy Ronis received the gold medal at the Mostra Internazionale Biennale di Fotografia in Venice.

This early recognition was undermined by the unfavorable situation photographers of his generation faced during the following decade. In the mid 1960s, he opened up to those close to him, such as Naf Avnon,⁸ about the difficulties he had in finding new clients. From 1968, he added a string to his bow by joining the IDHEC film school,⁹ then the École de Vaugirard, where he taught photography and its principles.

In 1972, as his photographic commitments shrunk more and more, he left Paris to settle first in Gordes, then L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue in the Vaucluse. Developing a method of teaching photography through images, he lectured on the subject at the University of Aix-en-Provence and the École des Beaux-Arts in Avignon until 1977.¹⁰ Those years in the South of France allowed him to take a fresh look at his archives and to present his work in a new light.

In France, Ronis had to wait until 1970 to be rediscovered by young critics including Bertrand Éveno, Jean-Claude Gautrand, and Guy Mandery. In 1979 he received the Grand Prix National des Arts et des Lettres, and participated in the exhibition *10 photographes pour le patrimoine* (10 Photographers for the Fatherland) at the Centre Georges Pompidou.¹¹ The Rencontres d'Arles photography festival chose him as guest of honor the following year. With the help of Pierre-Jean Amar, Claude Nori, and Guy Le Querrec, he published his second book, which became a milestone in his bibliography: *Sur le fil du hasard* (On Chance's Edge). Containing 113 photographs, this publication marked the return of Willy Ronis to the spotlight when it received the Nadar prize in 1981.

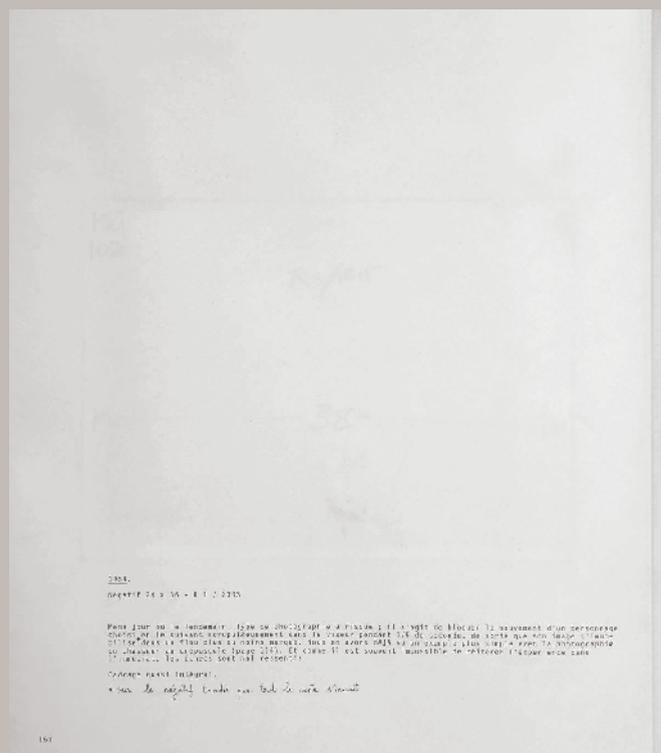
A PHOTOGRAPHIC DONATION

As early as 1979, at the Rencontres d'Arles festival,¹² Pierre Barbin, the head of the photographic heritage at the Ministry of Culture, spoke to Willy Ronis about the possibility of a donation to the State.

The photographer did not respond at first, but issues with his health and that of his wife, Marie-Anne, made him reconsider the matter in 1982. He opened up about his decision in a letter to Raymond and Barbara Grosset dated January 25, 1983: "But with advancing age, the prospect of staying here alone after one of our deaths seeming impossible, I agreed to make this donation in return for an apartment in Paris until the death of the surviving spouse."¹³ This home in the capital provided by the French State, as for André Kertész the following year, allowed Ronis to come back to live in Paris after years spent in the south, and to return to the neighborhoods of his youth.

On June 16, 1983, Jack Lang, the Minister for Culture, accepted Willy Ronis's donation to the French State of all his photographic work since 1927.¹⁴ This included all of his negatives on glass plate and on film, in both black and white and color, as well as all the prints in his possession. Inundated with projects, the photographer wanted to continue to explore his work; he therefore retained the usufruct of both his prints and his negatives. The donation took place in a formal setting that delighted the photographer: "The minister paid me the honor of receiving me alone for some time before signing the act, after which his prolonged presence concluded this ceremony in a relaxed and good humored atmosphere, which we will remember vividly for a long time."¹⁵

From the moment of signature, it was necessary to consider the transfer of the photographic collection, which was then kept in the south. At the same time, several exchanges took place between the photographic heritage team (Sylvie Cohen and Pierre Barbin) and the photographer to define the couple's housing needs. The apartment would need to be 860 square feet (80 square meters), provide both Willy and Marie-Anne with workspaces, and include a small room that could be transformed into a darkroom in which to develop films and make prints. The location of the apartment was also important: it had to be in a central neighborhood but "not in a beautiful neighborhood,"¹⁶ as Willy Ronis wanted to get back to the



7. *The Family of Man* exhibition traveled around the world over the course of a decade, attracting nine million visitors.
8. Letter from Willy Ronis to Naf Avnon, April 18, 1966: "However, for over one year, work has not been going well, and I wonder how it is going to turn out" (MAP, Willy Ronis archive).
9. Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques, Paris.
10. Letter from Willy Ronis to Inge Bondi, February 1, 1978.
11. Letter from Jean-Philippe Lecat, Minister of Culture, to Willy Ronis, August 24, 1979; letter from Christian Pattyn, Director of Heritage, to Willy Ronis, September 6, 1979.
12. Patrick Roegiers, *Façons de voir* (Pantin: Le Castor Astral, 1992), 111.
13. In the same letter, he ensured that his working relationship with the Rapho agency, which Raymond Grosset founded, would remain unchanged until his death (MAP, Willy Ronis donation file).
14. In 1983, Jacques Henri Lartigue completed the donation to the State he had made in 1979. In his speech to welcome the Willy Ronis donation of June 16, 1983, Jack Lang, Minister for Culture, defined a policy of safeguarding photographic heritage with these words: "The interest in heritage is indeed one of the elements of the coherent and diversified policy relating to photography that the Ministry of Culture is committed to implement. This interest has been reflected in a very real way in the past few months: two new donations, those of Jacques Henri Lartigue's recent works, and the one given to us by Mr. Ronis today, have been received" (MAP, Willy Ronis donation file).
15. Letter from Willy Ronis to Pierre Barbin, June 18, 1983 (MAP, Willy Ronis donation file). In this exchange, the photographer lamented, however, that "the press had been poorly represented" during the ceremony following the signature.
16. Letter from Willy Ronis to Sylvie Cohen, March 1, 1983.



—— Album 2, photo 160,
showing Ronis's annotations.
Photo Christophe Frontera, MAP.

lively working-class areas that did so much for his reputation. At the end of 1983, the Ronises settled on rue Beccaria, in the twelfth arrondissement.

It was in 1982, during the correspondence between Willy Ronis and Pierre Barbin, that the idea of the albums came about.¹⁷ Since the photographer kept his prints and negatives at home, “a specialized archivist will need to build up a catalog containing reference prints accompanied by technical comments for subsequent and historical prints of each of the photographs.”¹⁸ In the minds of each of the protagonists, it was clear that Ronis’s work would enter the public collections only after his death; it was therefore necessary to come up with a medium that would symbolically mark the entry of the work into public collections and open up opportunities for further study.

On the occasion of the exhibition marking the first donation—*Willy Ronis par Willy Ronis*, presented in 1985 at the Palais de Tokyo¹⁹—four reference albums containing 350 prints were made up. Each print, usually $7\frac{7}{8} \times 10$ in. (20×25 cm), was accompanied by very detailed comments by the photographer about the circumstances of each exposure, the equipment used, the method to be employed for printing, and any potential printing difficulties. The production of these albums required many exchanges between Ronis and the photographic heritage team over the course of some two years. This led to the creation of four beige canvas albums, each measuring $15\frac{3}{4} \times 16\frac{1}{2}$ in. (40×42 cm). The prints are mounted on the right-hand page, on double sheets in which windows are cut to show the framing of the images. The commentary is inscribed on the left-hand page opposite each image. The sheets are then mounted on a tab. The success of the Palais de Tokyo exhibition led Pierre Barbin to propose to Ronis that he publish a book including about eighty images, accompanied by the commentary from the albums. Due to a lack of funding, this project never saw the light of day.

In 1989, when the owner of the rue Beccaria apartment gave notice to Ronis, Marie-Anne’s health was deteriorating. The need to change apartments revived the correspondence between the Ministry and the photographer, and the idea of a complementary donation then came about. For six years, the photographer had continued to survey all the neighborhoods he had visited in his early career. He therefore felt, as did the representatives of the photographic heritage department, that these images should join the first corpus. A new donation was signed on June 22, 1989: it included all the negatives Willy Ronis had produced since 1983—some six thousand images. A new album was made on this occasion, which included 120 new photographs.

In 2004, the collection of photographers’ work assembled by the photographic heritage department was assigned to the Médiathèque de l’Architecture et du Patrimoine (MAP), which had been created a few years earlier. In 2006, at the request of its director, Jean-Daniel Pariset, and of his colleague Anne de Mondenard, who was responsible for the early photography collections, Willy Ronis made a new selection from his negatives, which allowed for a final album to be made, also including 120 photographs.²⁰ This album was officially presented by the photographer to Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres, Minister of Culture and Communication, during a visit to the MAP at the Fort de Saint-Cyr.

The will drafted by Willy Ronis confirmed all his donations, and enriched them with his archives and his library. Agendas, notebooks, travel journals, book dummies, manuscripts and typescripts of articles and lectures, personal correspondence with some of his colleagues, including Brassai and Doisneau, audio and video recordings, and both handwritten and printed professional and personal documentation would all help to illuminate his work from its first conception to the different states of the photographic image: contact prints, work prints, press prints, test prints, exhibition prints. An important resource for understanding his practice (such as his tests and issues of retouching and reframing), the archives became an invaluable tool for researchers and curators.

In order for these sets to be shown and fully exploited by the institution that conserved them, Ronis also gave up all commercial rights to his images. To ensure that his work and the commitments that marked his career were respected, he entrusted the exercise of moral rights to four of his friends: Jean Guerry, Daniel Karlin, Roland Rappaport,

17. Previously, in 1968, in response to the requirements of legal deposit and mindful of being represented in national collections, the photographer had given the print department of the Bibliothèque Nationale one hundred $11\frac{3}{4} \times 15\frac{3}{4}$ -in. (30×40 -cm) prints to be mounted as an album. (These prints were not commented on frame by frame.) This donation was important for the photographer, who included it in some biographies he distributed to publishers and exhibition venues that showed his works after the 1970s [BnF, EP-35-BOX FOL].

18. “Note concerning the donation of the photographic work of Mr. Willy Ronis,” by Pierre Barbin, coordinator for the photographic heritage department, addressed to Christian Pattyn, Director of Heritage [MAP, Willy Ronis donation file].

19. The exhibition spaces in the Palais de Tokyo were at that time assigned to the Centre National de la Photographie, run by Robert Delpire.

20. The prints in the sixth album were made by Hervé Hudry, Ronis’s official printer at the Publmod laboratory.

and Gerard Uféras. Ronis's death in September 2009 opened a period of succession that ended on October 5, 2016, with the official allocation of the entire collection to the MAP. His last wishes, which related to maintaining the integrity of his work, are thus fully respected by the State.

Currently held at the Fort de Saint-Cyr, in Montigny-le-Bretonneux, Yvelines, the Willy Ronis archive contains 108,000 negatives, mostly film in 2 ¼ × 2 ¼-in. (6 × 6-cm) and 24 × 36-mm formats, as well as nine thousand slides. To this body of work is attached a series of contact sheets and contact prints—five binders for the 2 ¼ × 2 ¼-in. (6 × 6-cm) negatives (1,250 contact sheets); fifty-three binders for the 24 × 36-mm negatives (four thousand contact sheets); and 20,317 prints by the photographer—forming a unique ensemble that spans his entire career. Thus researchers can see Ronis's first exhibition prints, such as the montage entitled *Work for the war*, presented in 1934 at the exhibition *Documents de la vie sociale* at the Gallery de la Pléiade in Paris; his press prints from the 1930s, which bear the “Roness” stamp; prints of images published in the three following decades; and the many examples made for press and publishers until the 2000s. This part of the archive is also enriched with many exhibition prints from the years 1980–2000, which reflect the photographer's recognition after his donations.

NAVIGATING THE ALBUMS

“This selection is the photographer's own, and is therefore subjective, which determines both its merits and its limitations.”²¹

The albums, which for a long time were the only material sign of the donation to come, provided Willy Ronis with the opportunity to define his photographic work. For each image he selected, he gives the place, the date, and the context of the photograph. In the first five albums, he also often provides important remarks on the framing and printing of his images, pointing out the difficulties posed by some of them. Made over the course of twenty years, the albums are also a reflection of the trends and the evolution of the gaze of a photographer who, until the end of his life, continued to question his work. In his three introductions, Willy Ronis emphasizes the difficulty he faced in choosing the images that defined his work, since he is subject to “pangs of doubt, distortions of subjectivity, [and] the fear of self-betrayal.”²²

For the first four albums, Ronis notes the almost total absence of industrial and advertising photographs, but does not elaborate on the few images from the beginning of his career. Since his monograph *Sur le fil du hasard* (1980) was still fresh in his mind, the images it contains are almost all selected once more in the first four albums: 108 photographs out of a total of 113. His other major book, *Belleville Ménilmontant*, is widely represented in the albums, the sequencing of prints sometimes even following the layout of the book published by Arthaud.

The fifth album, donated in 1991, opens with a review of Ronis's work since the beginning of his career. Indeed, as the photographer was still rediscovering images in his archives through the editorial assignments that he received, he took advantage of compiling this new selection to introduce photos that he had rejected with regret a few years earlier, defining them as “not a collection of second choices, but rather, if I may say so, an overflow that has been saved.”²³ He also took the opportunity to introduce thirty of his recent creations, influenced by his pleasure in rediscovering the streets of Paris.

The final selection of a photographer who worked throughout the century, the sixth album contains many rediscoveries and additions. In a sign that the use to which photographs were put, and the manner in which they were shown, were changing, Ronis chose, for some shots taken with the Rolleiflex, to respect the square frame of the negative, as in the images of prisoners being repatriated (photos 27 and 475) or those showing Marie-Anne and Vincent playing in the snow, a subject he presented once more, but this time full frame (photos 118 and 487). This album was also the opportunity to show many nude photographs, as he was preparing a book on the subject with the publisher Terre Bleue.²⁴

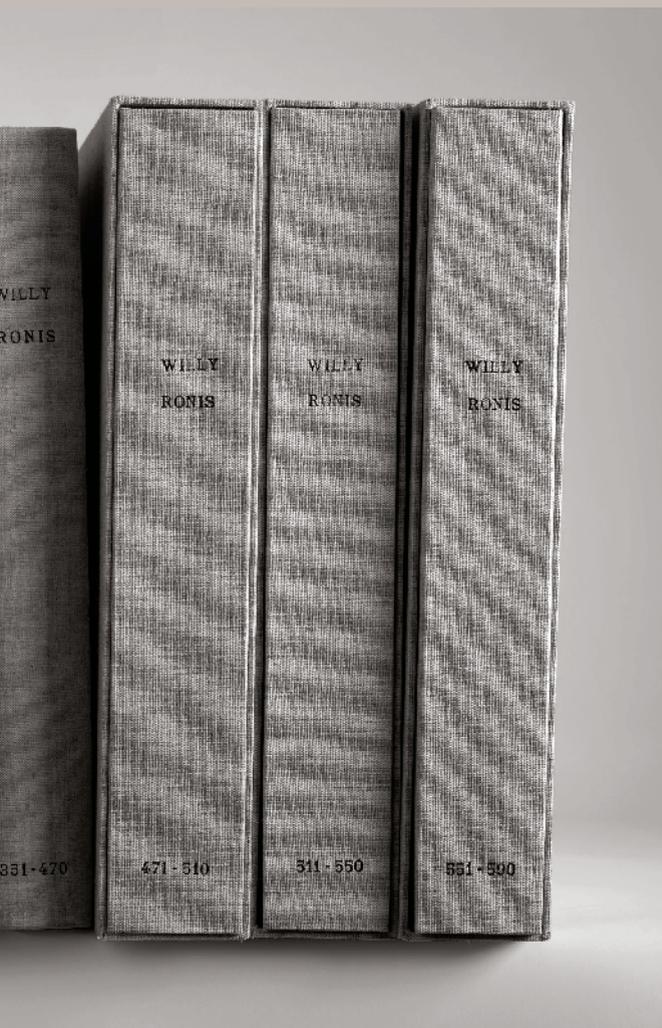


21. Willy Ronis, introduction to album 6.

22. Ibid.

23. Willy Ronis, introduction to album 5.

24. Willy Ronis and Philippe Sollers, *Nues* [Paris: Éditions Terre Bleue, 2008].



_____ Willy Ronis's six albums.
Photo Christophe Frontera, MAP.

A rare record among photographers, the archive also gives those who have chosen to preserve and highlight Ronis's work essential information about the classification of negatives and the reference numbers that he attributed to the images as he went along. As with many of his fellow photographers, Ronis's strategy of storing negatives was carefully conceived: he needed to be able to respond quickly to publishers or art directors and provide them with the image they needed. He therefore assigned each image a reference number that was then copied onto the back of the prints, which he organized by theme.

In addition, the characteristics of different photographic media also had to be taken into account. Medium-format images, such as those made with a Rolleiflex $2\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$ -in. (6×6 -cm) camera, can easily be cut into individual exposures. Ronis began to number his work in 1930, the year in which he began his career as a photojournalist, and continued until 1955,²⁵ following which he conducted his assignments with a 24×36 -mm SLR camera. He gave his images the code "R," followed by the number assigned to the year of the report, the number of the report in that year, and the number of the negative in the series. To give an example, the photograph *The return of the prisoners* (photo 27) bears the number R15/03/156, meaning that it is the 156th negative of the third report of that year, taken in the fifteenth year of his photographic career.²⁶ This series includes mainly projects produced for weeklies such as *Regards*, *Point de vue*, *Cavalcade*, or images intended for institutional sponsors, as with the *Air France* magazine. It includes nearly 380 photo stories—about 11,500 negatives—and represents a significant part of Willy Ronis's best-known work. In the albums, ninety-six photographs from this series were selected.

In parallel, Ronis began a second series devoted to his industrial and commercial projects and identified by the code "I." It follows the same principle as the previous one.²⁷ However, because he thought that these images, produced within a specific context, would not be reused in the future, or because the contract provided temporary exclusivity to the sponsor, the photographer was more lax about its organization. Therefore, many reports not assigned a number in the "Industry" series in fact represent about eighty assignments, or roughly four thousand negatives. It is interesting to note that this grouping includes all of his industrial sponsors, including Schlumberger, the Société Alsacienne d'Industrie Cotonnière, and the Ateliers de Construction Schwartz-Hautmont. Only four of these photographs are included in the albums. Nevertheless, among them are two major works by Willy Ronis, which have received a lot of attention: *The broken thread* (photo 102) and *The forge, Renault factories* (photo 103).

The photographer created two other series, preceded by the codes "F" and "P," which were used to organize photographs of which France and Paris formed the principal subject. Most of these were not the product of assignments, but rather the result of the photographer's wanderings. Intended for illustration purposes, these shots, unlike those of the two previous series, are classified not by a report number but by year. In his contact sheets, Ronis favored thematic groupings as a way of presenting them (photo 19). Finally, the photographer created several small series that cover very defined bodies of work, such as his images of snow made in the 1930s (code "N"), the photographs published in the book *Belleville Ménilmontant* (code "BM"),²⁸ photographs of manual trades (code "M"), and images taken in a family context and nudes, classified under "Divers" ("miscellaneous"; code "D"). Some series followed a specific logic, as he explains at length in the album commentary (see photo 61 for the series "BM," for example).

The use of an SLR camera from 1955 required Ronis to implement another strategy, since the film format meant that negatives could not be cut up into individual exposures. He therefore had to adapt his numbering system, introducing one based on the number of the contact sheet and the position of the shot in the selected strip. For Ronis, this change also went hand in hand with a reconsideration of his photos' ultimate purpose. Just as the SLR camera was becoming a necessity for him, he was receiving fewer industrial, advertising, and editorial commissions. The small format of the 24×36 -mm cameras allowed him to photograph more freely and to embark on a hunt for images that he pursued until the year 2000. True to his habits, the photographer nonetheless still used a letter to determine the theme of his series of

25. Although the series continued until 1958, at the end of 1955 Ronis traded in his Rolleiflexes for his 24×36 -mm cameras; from that point on, he used medium format only for infrequent commissions (see photo 488).
26. When in 1930 Ronis created his "P" series, covering images of Paris, he began to number his works, beginning with "00." His first photo story dates to 1933 and thus is labeled "R03."
27. The reportages from the "I" series were interpolated into those from the series labeled "R." Only the identifier changed.
28. The "BM" series grew with the different editions of the book, of which there are four; a reissue of the 1992 edition was even published in 2011.

photographs, even though it was no longer necessary for the classification. As a final point, it is worth noting that Ronis did not attribute any specific reference number to his color slides—just as they are absent from the albums.

PHOTOGRAPHIC STORIES

“The text–image relationship is almost always that of the horse and the rider. But who will be the horse and who will be the rider?”²⁹

The long entries in the albums that accompany each chosen image illustrate Willy Ronis’s attachment to the texts that always appeared alongside his photographs when they were published. We must go back to the photographs taken on Mediterranean cruises (photos 21, 357, 358, and 474) in 1938 to uncover the fundamental link between the photographer’s images and the text that should accompany them. Penniless, Ronis had managed to get himself hired as a photographer on a liner, where he responded to the demand of cruise passengers for souvenir photos. He took part in another journey on a freighter in September that same year. As his biographer Françoise Denoyelle explains,³⁰ he took advantage of stopovers to take photographs for himself, in order to bring back to Paris a significant body of work. On the advice of Robert Capa, he grouped his Mediterranean photographs into a single report and gave them a political angle, connecting them to the situation in the Balkans on the eve of the war. With Capa, he wrote a text about the geopolitics of the region, although the photographs are primarily touristic and picturesque. Each image was then distributed to newspapers and news agencies with a caption written by the photographer.³¹

Throughout his career, Ronis made sure that the titles of his published images did not distort the meaning he wanted to give them, echoing Edward Steichen’s words: “A photograph is worth ten thousand words, provided it is accompanied by ten words.”³² Since the liberation, *Life* magazine had assigned him several reports in France, such as that covering the great mining strikes of 1948 in Saint-Étienne, but an English magazine cropped one of his images from the story and rewrote the caption that accompanied it.³³ Thus the union delegate who faces the workers, themselves described in the magazine as “petit bourgeois,” was amputated from the *Rue Saint-Amand* photograph (photo 101), whereas in fact in the photographer’s mind the image illustrated the workers’ support for the unions. American magazines “paid handsomely, but captions were rewritten in New York. I did not like it.”³⁴ In a lecture titled “Le reporter et ses batailles” (The Reporter and his Battles),³⁵ given at the Société Française de Photographie, Ronis set out as early as 1948 the virtues necessary for the photojournalist, among which he emphasized the “right to refuse a job that goes against one’s sensitivity or opinions.”³⁶ Following several other mishaps related to the misrepresentation of the meaning of his images, he gave up working for the English-speaking press, and *Life* in particular.

Rather than placing his work in the context of the history of photography, Ronis often chose to tell the story of his images. The chronological nature of the albums creates a powerful illustrated account of the photographer’s career. His decision to comment on each of the images is not insignificant. For Ronis, this exercise, practiced by many photographers of his generation, went back to the magazines to which he contributed from the 1950s, such as *Photorama*³⁷ (in which commentary on two or three photographs appeared next to the table of contents in each issue³⁸). In his many articles, after a writing a general introduction Ronis provided a reading of his images related to their theme. These readings focused on the technique, the framing, or the lighting of the subject. However, as in the later albums, the anecdote behind the photograph was never forgotten. The technical comments already foreshadowed those that appear in the albums; Ronis even reused some texts, such as that for *The broken thread* (photo 102), originally published at the end of an article on industrial photography.³⁹ In another article, “Le photographe devant la réalité” (The Photographer in Front of Reality), seven of the eight published images are included in the albums (photos 56, 101, 120, 161, 169, 171, and 485).⁴⁰



LE PHOTOGRAPHE DEVANT LA RÉALITÉ



Willy Ronis
Paris
Photos de l'auteur

Tous ceux pour qui le monde extérieur existe trouvent dans la photographie, avant toute autre chose, un moyen d'information documentaire de la réalité, une possibilité simple et pratique d'établir des inventaires : pour l'amateur des lieux qu'il aime et des lieux où il s'est plu ; pour le professionnel des éléments du monde visible dont il a eu mission de présenter le reflet, au qu'il a de son propre chef estimés chargés d'un tel ouvrage qu'il n'a pu que les enregistrer par réflexe automatique encore plus peut-être que de propos délibéré. Tant être sensible et lucide devant ce que la réalité contemporaine présente de beau, s'amuser de ses ridicules et



Dinard, 1938. Je fis de cette petite scène quelques photos clichés et j'ai choisi celui-ci à cause des regards qui passent dans le loirain. 1/100 f/8, film 35.

29. Willy Ronis, “Une vieille maison dans un vieux village,” *Photorama* (December 1958), 613.
30. Françoise Denoyelle, *Le Siècle de Willy Ronis* (Paris: Éditions Terre Bleue, 2012), 67–70.
31. Robert Capa and Willy Ronis, “Les Balkans de nouveau en danger,” typescript (MAP, Willy Ronis archive).
32. Quoted by Willy Ronis in Ronis, “Une vieille maison,” 613.
33. Interview with Willy Ronis filmed in spring 2009 to promote the retrospective exhibition presented in Arles in July 2009 [http://www.jeudepaume.org/?page=article&idArt=2865, accessed on February 20, 2018].
34. *Ibid.*
35. “Le reporter et ses batailles,” *Le Photographe*, no. 665 (February 5, 1948); typescript of the original lecture given at the Société Française de Photographie (MAP, Willy Ronis archive).
36. Ronis gave various accounts of his break with *Life* magazine. For other *Life* commissions, see Denoyelle, *Le Siècle de Willy Ronis*.
37. The magazine *Photo-service*, which became *Photorama* in 1952, was published from 1944 until the end of the 1950s by Gevaert in Antwerp, Belgium. Alongside Belgian and Dutch photographers, many French photographers contributed, including members of the Groupe des XV such as Daniel Masclat, René-Jacques, Marcel Bovis, and Willy Ronis.
38. These were the illustrations on the cover, the inside cover, and, from December 1951, the back cover.
39. “À propos de photo industrielle,” *Photorama*, vol. 2, no. 11 (January 1958).
40. “Le photographe devant la réalité,” *Photorama*, vol. 2, no. 4 (July 1956).



Sortie du travail - 18.10h. Rue de Haris à Paris en novembre. Les ouvriers et bureaux s'éloignent lentement. L'édifice principal principalement de la ville. Illuminé de manière à la fois. Mon appareil petit format était tenu à l'œil de bras et incliné en avant au jour. C'est le balancement de la ligne employée qui détermine le cadrage. 1.25, f/2.8. Seul le 24/35 permet vraiment ce genre d'images, vu la profondeur de champ relativement grande des focales courtes aux grandes ouvertures. Film 35".



Cabines téléportiques - Hall des Pas Perdus, Gare St. Lazare à Paris. Les voyageurs s'alignent rapidement, afin de profiter de la vitesse extrême de trois passagers par seconde. L'attente est à l'heure, on ne voit que le dos de la tête avant l'entrée en ce lieu. Appareil petit format - 1.25 mm, f/2.8. L'ombre du jour dans le hall. Objectif ultra, no. cabines. Film 35".

____ Willy Ronis, "The Photographer in Front of Reality," *Photorama* [Antwerp: Gevaert], vol. 2, no. 4 [July 1956].

Similarly, during the summer of 1960 Ronis was planning a new book, at the request of the publisher Paul Montel, on the theme of candid photography.⁴¹ As he explained to his friend Herman Craeybeckx,⁴² Ronis worked by reusing the text he had written for articles and conferences in previous years. He addresses himself to an audience of enlightened amateur practitioners—the context in which he was most comfortable. In the thick manuscript for the book, following a lengthy introduction that includes many passages published in *Photorama* or *Photo-Cinéma*, he comments on images covering five themes that reflect the main lines of his photographic work up until that point: the city, interiors, outdoors, children, and work. He introduces a new dimension to his publications by commenting at length on fifteen images at the end of each section, in which he specifies the context of the shot, relates an anecdote, and notes the cameras and film that had been used. However, even though the commentaries on certain images, such as the photograph *The beguine*, *Bruges* (photo 110), were already almost fixed, any details relating to his personal life are completely absent. At the end of the 1970s, while Robert Doisneau encouraged Ronis to take up the pen to write a sequel to Beaumont Newhall's history of photography,⁴³ Ronis preferred to leave this task to a photographer like Pierre-Jean Amar, whose experience was more academic, in order to concentrate on his re-emerging career and on writing *Sur le fil du hasard*. Focusing on the images, the captions of this publication are very short, buried at the back, and Ronis chose to introduce the book with a text that was only autobiographical. It was not until Ronis's first four albums were compiled that the comments relating these images, which were almost all included, reappeared. In the majority of the publications that followed, the photographer left, with undisguised pleasure, the task of writing on his images to critics such as Bertrand Éveno, filmmakers like Daniel Karlin, or writers including Régine Deforges and Didier Daeninckx. However, he pursued his educational work in the form of interviews, documentaries, and lectures, and he continued to discuss his oeuvre by means of his photographs.

The texts of the first five albums had been put together around fifteen years earlier, but two other writing projects occupied the photographer between 2000 and 2006. In 2001, Ronis collaborated with Lionel Hoebeke for his series called *Derrière l'objectif de* (Behind the Lens of), devoted to the stories of individual photographers. Having provided a short introduction, Ronis went on to provide commentaries for some 222 photographs and contact sheets. While some of these texts were taken from his work done for the Ministry of Culture, others, such as that for *The children's barge* (photo 242),⁴⁵ are completely different and give the reader a fresh perspective on images that had been published many times. Furthermore, Ronis commented not only on individual images, but also on contact sheets or series of photographs. With the release of *Ce jour-là* (That Day) in 2006,⁴⁶ the relationship between text and image was reversed. Here, the photographer, offering a full autobiographical narrative, chose only fifty-four images, detailing, in a very literary manner, the story behind the moment each photo was taken. The text reads like a novel: horse and rider have swapped places. The photographer was a writer all along.

Matthieu Rivallin

Head of Collections, Photography Department,
Médiathèque de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine, Charenton-le-Pont

41. In the early 1950s, the Parisian publisher Paul Montel had released two books by Willy Ronis, *Photo-reportage et chasse aux images* (1951) and *Belles photos à la mer* (1953).
42. Between June and September 1960, Willy Ronis sent six long letters to Herman Craeybeckx (MAP, Willy Ronis archive).
43. Letter from Willy Ronis to Robert Doisneau, March 19, 1979 (MAP, Willy Ronis archive).
44. Willy Ronis, *Sur le fil du hasard* (Paris: Contrejour, 1980).
45. This photo, however, had been the subject of a full critical analysis in an article for *Photo-magazine* [July–August 1985].
46. Willy Ronis, *Ce jour-là* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2006).

EDITORIAL NOTE

Out of respect for Willy Ronis's work, we have reproduced the albums in their entirety and integrity. His texts have been kept as close as possible to the originals, with only slight harmonization and spelling and typographic corrections. Errors of identification and omissions are unchanged. The photographs are presented in the order in which they appear in the albums, with a chronological reset for the fifth (photos 351–470) and sixth albums (photos 471–590). The prints delivered by Ronis were digitized with their framing and possible imperfections intact. The majority of the photographs from albums 1 to 5 do not have titles, which constitutes a break with the photographer's usual practice. We have proposed simple titles, constructed, as much as possible, in the spirit of the author's own publications: generally a short description, followed by the location and the year. Ronis's habits regarding titles have varied. Nonetheless, the titles of some series do appear in his work (*Christmas week*, *Busker*, *The lovers of...*, *Subject seen from...*); they are applied as a matter of principle. For place names, we have preferred denominations as they were at the time of shooting (Leningrad, for example). All information has been verified by cross-checking different sources (personal diaries, contact sheets, etc.) that are sometimes at odds with the photographer's account of shooting conditions as he recalled them. Finally, the dimensions and reference numbers of the negatives as recorded by Ronis have been retained, with corrections where necessary.

Ronan Guinée, Head of Collections, Willy Ronis archive,
Médiathèque de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine, Charenton-le-Pont

DONATION 1 1985

ALBUM_01 : PHOTOGRAPHS 1 > 89

ALBUM_02 : PHOTOGRAPHS 90 > 179

ALBUM_03 : PHOTOGRAPHS 180 > 269

ALBUM_04 : PHOTOGRAPHS 270 > 350

T

he total number of photographs in these albums amounts to 350 images. The selection extends from 1926—the year when I received my first camera as a gift (I was fifteen and a half)—to 1983, the year in which the certificate of donation was signed. My selection is not the result of an arithmetic operation; in other words, the number of images representing the various topics covered is in no way proportional to the number of negatives that were devoted to them. Paris, where I lived and worked for most of my life, is represented by only 45 percent of the photographs. There are few industrial photographs, let alone fashion and advertising ones. My choice was guided solely by

the value of the images (in my eyes) and the conception I have built of their consistency with my nature. The precision I bring to the commentary of some old photos may seem surprising, but I have kept almost all of my diaries since my adolescence. Sometimes finding a few words on a specific date is enough to release a host of memories, which until then had lain dormant in my mind. The photographs are presented in chronological order, which leads to a number of repetitions. That was inevitable. Readers are not expected to have studied everything that precedes the period or the types of images that interest them and it was important to avoid duplicating cross-references.

To present the summary of such a long career is neither easy nor risk-free—it was done in the throes of doubt, the distortions of subjectivity, the fear of betraying oneself. Without the efficient help of Sylvie Cohen of the Association Française pour la Diffusion du Patrimoine Photographique (AFDPP), who calmly handled my outbreaks of indecision and tempered my nervousness, and the supervision of my young colleague Gilles Walusinski, I would still be struggling with my soul-searching. I sincerely thank them for the quality of their advice, as well as for their great patience.

Willy Ronis
August 1984



**Chevreuse Valley, Seine-et-Oise,
photo from my first roll, 1926**

NEGATIVE: 2½×4¼ IN. (6.5×11 CM) - F06/1

— 1

I took this photograph in the spring, during one of my many outings with a group of young people, visiting châteaux or going on excursions near Paris. I had just received my first camera: a 2½ × 4¼-in. (6.5 × 11-cm) Folding Kodak. This is the only photograph from that roll to have survived. I destroyed the rest a long time ago, because they did not seem very interesting to me. That may have been a mistake. On the technical side, nothing special to report. It's a blurry photograph, but I was not yet sixteen and it was my first roll, so I think we can be a little forgiving! The framing is shortened in the sky.



**Savoie, photo taken with
my first camera, 1926**

NEGATIVE: 2½×4¼ IN. (6.5×11 CM) - F06/3

— 2

This photograph was taken near Chambéry in Savoie, where I was at a summer camp. I had brought my brand-new 2½ × 4¼-in. (6.5 × 11-cm) camera. This photograph is to be printed full frame, without any specific indications.



**Carpenters from Corrèze,
summer vacation photo,
Cornil, 1928**

NEGATIVE: 2½×4¼ IN. (6.5×11 CM) - F08/1

— 3

This is also a vacation photograph, taken in Cornil, Corrèze, where, for several years, my mother, younger brother, and I spent our summer vacation.

The man in the center is the owner of the boarding house where we stayed. He also owned a sawmill. Here he is preparing a frame with his son-in-law (right) and a tradesman (left). This is a posed photograph. A souvenir photograph, but I like it anyway. Full frame.

**Self-portrait in the family
apartment, Paris, 1929**

NEGATIVE: 2½×4¼ IN. (6.5×11 CM) - 009/1

— 4

A self-portrait taken in the dining room of the apartment where I was born: 8 cité Condorcet in the ninth arrondissement, Paris, spring 1929.

Understandably, this photograph moves me because I see myself in a way that I cannot recall in my memory. It's also a proclamation of my love for music.

It is very difficult to print: the negative has probably been overdeveloped and the values are overly contrasted. At that time, I often developed my own films in my father's laboratory and I made mistakes.

What's more, it may be that this frame was overexposed: I was still just an amateur. Slightly cropped framing compared to the full 2½×4¼-in. (6.5×11-cm) frame.





**Construction of the Trois Quartiers
department store, boulevard
de la Madeleine, Paris, 1930**

NEGATIVE: 1 1/8 x 1 5/8 IN. (3 x 4 CM) - P0/63

— 5

Place de la Madeleine. I always liked backlight, even when I was still an amateur photographer. I was protected from direct sunlight by the scaffolding of the Trois Quartiers. I waited and then, suddenly, a horse-drawn carriage went past. There were not that many still in use in 1930. From the beginning, I used several cameras. The 2 1/2 x 4 1/4-in. (6.5 x 11-cm) camera my father gave me in 1926 soon turned out to be inadequate. It used film with eight exposures, so it needed to be reloaded often and was expensive; 2 1/2 x 4 1/4 in. (6.5 x 11 cm) is already a large format. There were cameras for sale in the window of my father's shop and,

from time to time, he lent me one, if I promised to take good care of it. I had adopted two cameras: a 1 5/8 x 2 1/4 in. (4.5 x 6 cm) and a 1 1/8 x 1 5/8 in. (3 x 4 cm). The 1 5/8 x 2 1/4 in. (4.5 x 6 cm) allowed for sixteen 1 5/8 x 2 1/4-in. (4.5 x 6-cm) exposures on a roll of 2 1/4 x 3 1/4-in. (6 x 9-cm) film; it had a focal length of 75 mm. It was a folding Ikonta camera with bellows. The 1 1/8 x 1 5/8-in. (3 x 4-cm) camera, another Ikonta, also allowed for sixteen 1 1/8 x 1 5/8-in. (3 x 4-cm) exposures on a roll of 2 1/4 x 3 1/4-in. (6 x 9-cm) film. I sometimes borrowed a 2 1/4 x 3 1/4-in. (6 x 9-cm) Ikonta camera with an excellent Tessar f/4.5 lens. This photograph is to be printed full frame.



**Construction site by
night in Paris, 1931**

NEGATIVE: 24x36 MM - P1/0111 [OR P2/64]

— 6

Photograph taken with a 35-mm camera, which was highly unusual for me at the time, that is to say late 1931. It was taken during military leave. One of my father's clients was a young Polish man who was studying in France. Passionate about photography and from an affluent family, he had been given a 35-mm Contax. We became friends and he sometimes lent me his camera. I think this is around a one-second exposure shot while leaning against a tree, because I don't believe I used a tripod. Looking at the photograph,

I now remember throwing a handful of straw into the brazier to create the flame I needed to light up my subjects (normally a brazier does not produce a flame). The film was Agfa Superpan, around 40 ASA. The negative is quite difficult to print from as the bright highlights need to be balanced with the areas that remained in the shadows. I do not remember the location at all. It must have been during one of my nocturnal walks in Paris. The people are probably the site watchmen. I had not asked them to move.





**Weightlifting, quai de la Râpée,
near the Pont d'Austerlitz, Paris, 1934**

NEGATIVE: 2½×4¼ IN. (6.5×11 CM) - P4/52

— 8

This is a place where acrobats often went before the war. For reasons I cannot explain today, I used to pick up the 2½×4¼-in. (6.5×11-cm) camera once in a while. Did my father think I borrowed the other cameras from the store too often? In 1932, after returning from military service, I was forced to help my father who had fallen very ill. So, despite myself, I became a professional photographer, but I really disliked being at the studio-store. I took comfort outside, by taking photographs like this one that were more to my taste, either on Sundays, when my father was on duty, or on Fridays, when the store was closed. Moreover, this photograph required some research, since it is taken from a high angle. I must have climbed up onto a parapet. Today, this area is a parking lot. The 2½×4¼-in. (6.5×11-cm) camera must have had a focal length of 115 or 120 mm. This is the only camera I owned in my own right until my father died in 1936.

**On the slopes of the Butte
Montmartre, from the top
of rue Muller, Paris, 1934**

NEGATIVE: 1⅞×2¼ IN. (4.5×6 CM) - P4/15

— 7

At that time, I was not aware that there was another photographer, a dozen or so years older than me, who also roamed through Paris at night with a tripod and whose name was Brassai. I only met Brassai much later on, in 1945 (see photo 163). Like all lovers of night photography in cities, I particularly liked the rainy days because of the reflections. This photograph is to be printed full frame.



**Under the Pont d'Austerlitz,
Paris, 1935**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×3¼ IN. (6×9 CM) - P5/43

— 9

I took this photograph on the banks of the Seine, one of my favorite places to walk. The character seen from the back is a homeless man walking along the quai de la Râpée, which is now a road along the riverbank. This photograph is slightly cropped. The difficulty is to make the clouds in the sky appear without losing any detail in the shadows on the right and at the bottom.

**Night at the cottage,
Todtnauberg, Germany, 1935**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×3¼ IN. (6×9 CM) - N5/58

— 10

A personal photograph: a friend in a chalet in the Black Forest, after a dinner of cold cuts, slices of buttered brown bread, and café au lait, according to a German custom. Single lighting: the oil lamp that can be seen on the table. It is not too difficult to print, although there are strong differences between the highlights and the shadows. Slightly cropped on the left side, after the pitcher, to remove unnecessary detail.

**Place de la République,
Paris, 1935**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×3¼ IN. (6×9 CM) - P5/62

— 11

This photograph was taken at place de la République, close to my father's shop, which was located at 15 boulevard Voltaire. I like this photograph to be printed a little gray, as suggested by the winter light. Full frame.







During the Popular Front victory parade, rue Saint-Antoine, Paris, July 14, 1936

NEGATIVE: 2¼×3¼ IN. (6×9 CM) - R6/10/[2]

— 12

This is the Popular Front, and the jubilant crowd on the march that went from the Bastille to Nation. Here, we are on rue du Faubourg-Saint-Antoine. I already preferred to photograph the sidelines rather than events themselves. I had been amused by this little girl in the Phrygian cap, echoing that of the flag, who was raising her fist without really knowing why. On the technical side, no specific instructions. Cropped negative.





**Place de la République,
Paris, 1937**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - P7/156

— 14

In the spring of that year, I finally bought the 2¼ × 2¼-in. (6 × 6-cm) Rolleiflex with the Tessar f/3.5 lens that I had coveted for such a long time. I bought it from a German refugee. Many refugees who were fleeing Nazism sold items they had brought to France—especially Leica, Contax, or Rolleiflex cameras—in order to survive. I used this camera until the end of 1954, and occasionally later on, for some industrial or studio photography. In 1937 (one year after my father's death), the store had already been sold, but my mother, brother, and I still lived at 117 boulevard Richard-Lenoir,

close to the place de la République where this photograph was taken. On May 25, in the late afternoon, I was returning from a shoot at Expo 37 when I chanced upon this scene. It had been exceptionally hot for a few days and workers at a nearby site had found a good way to cool off. I took five photographs and my diary entry for the next day reads: "took 4 photos swimming Pl. Rep. to *Ce Soir*." This is a different image to the one that was published, in 10¼ × 11-in. (26 × 28-cm) format, in the new issue dated May 28. Highly contrasted negative. Lateral cropping.

Val-d'Isère, Savoie, 1937

NEGATIVE: 1½×2¼ IN. (4.5×6 CM) - N7/90

— 13

Photograph taken in Val-d'Isère, which at that time was no bigger than a hamlet. I had gone to this slope using skis with climbing skins to save money on the cable car. That way, I could stay a few more days. The negative is to be printed full frame.



**Mont d'Arbois, above Megève,
Haute-Savoie, 1938**

NEGATIVE: [2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) ORIGINAL] -
2¼×3¼ IN. (6×9 CM) DUPLICATE - N8/221

— 15

Two years after my father's death, I had become something of a specialist in snow and winter sports photography. The store had been auctioned off due to debts that I could not pay in those times of crisis. It was sold in late 1936. I did not take anything away from it, except freedom. A very hypothetical freedom since I needed to find work. I had a great passion for winter sports and, since returning from military service, I took my vacation in the off-season, that is to say at the end of January, beginning of February. It was a pretty dreadful season for us, especially in those years of serious economic crisis, while in the summer we developed a lot of amateur work, which was a big boost. During this vacation, I had gradually built up real archives. What's more, I had met a fellow of my age, André Ledoux, who had founded a ski school and a winter sports travel agency. This photograph shows two of his instructors. It was taken on February 23, 1938. I found the clipping of the December 27, 1938, issue of the newspaper *Le Jour-Écho de Paris* where it appeared, in 7½×9½-in. (19×24-cm) format, to inform readers of the international exhibition of snow photography at the Grand Atelier



on rue Lafayette, a gallery belonging to the camera store and importer Tiranty, which no longer exists. The 2¼×2¼-in. (6×6-cm) negative was lost shortly afterward by an editor (a mishap that would happen to me again several times). Fortunately, I had a good print from which I was able to make a good 2¼×3¼-in. (6×9-cm) duplicate after the war. This print was made from that new negative. An alternative version of this photograph, from the same session but with a single skier, was published before the war as a poster for the French tourist board with the title *Neige de France* (France's Snow).

**The Pacific 231 steam
locomotive, Gare du Nord,
Paris, 1938**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - P8/108

— 16

It was only on April 30, 1939 (according to my diary), that I saw Jean Renoir's *La Bête humaine* (The Human Beast) at the Gaumont Palace. But I always liked locomotives and I often wandered the platforms of the Gare de l'Est after leaving the network's advertising offices, with which I worked frequently. The mechanic knew I was taking his picture. I probably asked him to look at me. Lateral cropping.

**Union delegate Rose Zehner
during a strike at Citroën-Javel,
Paris, 1938**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - R8/10/2

— 17

This photograph is taken from a report for the weekly *Regards* during a strike at the Citroën-Javel factories. My diary entry for March 25, 1938, reads, “7:30 a.m. Citroën Javel. Reportage with Léveillé and L. Guerin”— no doubt an editor and a union delegate—and then, “Took and brought 26 photos to *Regards* [5 p.m.],” on the same day. However, the full story contains forty-six negatives. I must have chosen those that, at first sight, seemed the most interesting and the easiest to print. The negative of Rose Zehner is very underexposed and I suppose I did not have the right grade of paper on hand. It was therefore neither printed nor, of course, presented. I found it while preparing my book *Sur le fil du hasard* (On Chance’s Edge), in L’Isle-sur-la-Sorgue in 1979. When it was published in late 1980, this is the photograph which was most often reproduced in

the daily, weekly, or monthly press. A friend of Rose Zehner, having recognized her in the photograph published in *L’Humanité*, told her immediately. Rose wrote to the paper, which sent me the letter—a magnificent letter. Thus began a written and then telephone correspondence, until the following summer when I received Patrick Barbéris, a young filmmaker who was visiting my home to make a short film. Talking about this and that after the shoot, I told him this story. He found it so extraordinary that he immediately decided to meet this woman. Then the phone rang: it was Rose Zehner! This is how a second film was born, relating my reunion with the former Citroën union member in September 1982 in Paris. Lateral cropping.







**Workers in the yard during
the strike at the Citroën-Javel
factory, Paris, 1938**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - R8/10/6

— 18

This photograph is from the same story as the previous one. It shows the workers playing soccer in the yard during the strike. This negative, highly underexposed and poorly composed during the shoot, is heavily cropped.

**Closing of the market between
architect Victor Baltard's
Les Halles and Saint-Eustache
church, Paris, 1938**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - P8/148

— 19

It's the end of a morning market at Les Halles, in front of Saint-Eustache church. I think that the woman was throwing the cauliflowers to her colleague so that he could put them away because, as a Parisian who frequented markets regularly, I don't remember customers being served in this way. The negative is cropped but retains almost the full height of the 2¼×2¼ in. (6×6 cm).





**Fisherman on the Marne river,
Fay-le-Bac, Seine-et-Marne, 1938**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - Z8/36

— 20

On a weekend (Sunday, August 7), I had been invited by a high-school friend to his parents' property near La Ferté-sous-Jouarre. I couldn't resist the backlight; it was as if a backlight-master was calling his dog-photographer. At the whistle, the animal runs up, eye switched on and camera loaded for a new image. Still, for the ear to perk up, the backlight needs to outline a subject. Here, the subject is a worker fishing at the edge of the Marne. I say a worker, because before the war the way people dressed characterized them much more than now, and the cap was really a hallmark of the male working class. Some never took it off, except to sleep. Photograph cropped on both sides.

**At the Durrës market,
Albania, 1938**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - B8/258

— 21

Why Albania? Why Durrës? Of course, in 1938 I didn't have the means to treat myself to a cruise. A friendly and enterprising fellow who I got to know during a military period had offered to take me on a Yugoslavia-Albania-Greece cruise in exchange for work, reserving the right to use my photographs for his advertising, without exclusivity. I could also take portraits of the passengers on the boat and ashore, photographs that I developed at night to deliver them the next day (a big success). This photograph was taken during a stopover at the Durrës market. The negative must be cropped, because of a problem in winding on the film (two overlapping negatives). This framing does not quite satisfy me, but I think I captured the scene well.





**Robert Capa, Megève,
Haute-Savoie, 1939**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - 2¾×4 IN. (7×10 CM)

DUPLICATE - N9/316 OR DN9/316

— 22

An impromptu portrait of Robert Capa. I had returned to Megève in the spring of 1939, for a commission from the sports travel agency mentioned in photo 15, and, by chance, on the afternoon of April 7, I ran into Capa on the slopes of Mont-Joux. I had known him for three years already and we were very close. Amused by this chance encounter, we photographed each other. When Capa died in 1954, I remembered only very vaguely having photographed him in 1939. Moreover, I know through Pierre Gassmann and Romeo Martinez that there are few photographs of him, strange as that may seem. I found the negative while preparing my book *Sur le fil du hasard* (On Chance's Edge), in 1979. It had been damaged and had never been reproduced before. Since the Pictorial laboratory made a duplicate from a carefully retouched print, printing it is no longer a problem.

**By the edge of the fountain in
the Luxembourg Gardens on the
eve of war, Paris, mid-June 1939**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - P9/120

— 23

Since the end of 1936, having become a freelance photographer, I had been systematically building up my archives, encouraged by the favorable reception that they had received from the French tourist board and the SNCF railroad company, among others. But, in 1939, I added images linked to current events to my general interest photographs: hence the sad and pensive face of this soldier, reflecting the drama about to unfold.

The framing of this photograph is tilted. It was fashionable then. I didn't give myself over to this trend very often because I was wary of stylistic affectations and already aware that they could make images feel dated. But in this case, I found that the framing accentuated the despondent expression of this fellow, who was not so much younger than me, as in 1939 I was twenty-nine years old.





Jacques Prévert at Tourrettes-sur-Loup, Alpes-Maritimes, 1941

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - [D]11/5

— 24

In 1941, I had left Paris for Nice, where I worked with Marcel Duhamel in a traveling theater company, taking care of stage management and set maintenance. Marcel Duhamel was part of the Bande à Prévert group. That is how I met the Prévert brothers, with whom I immediately became friends. Jacques was then living in Tourrettes-sur-Loup, and one day when he had invited me over with some friends, I photographed him as he lifted the curtain to enter the room. Cropped photograph.

Vestiges of the liberation at place Vendôme, Paris, 1945

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - P15/61

— 25

With this photograph, we make a four-year leap in my life because I did not take many pictures during the occupation, except for a few snapshots that are only of interest to me and my family. This photograph dates from winter 1945 and is part of a report retracing the footsteps of the occupation and the struggles of the liberation, commissioned by *Point de vue* magazine. I wanted to draw attention to the bullet holes in the glass door of a fashion house on place Vendôme. The flow of cars and the two characters chatting calmly on the sidewalk create a much livelier image than if the space had remained empty.



Django Reinhardt, with his brother Joseph in the background, Paris, 1945

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - R15/2/15

— 26

I had met a certain Charles Delaunay at Saint-Cyr fort in 1931, during my military service. Housed in the same room, we became friends, united by a passion for jazz. Having later become president of the Hot Club de France federation and the director of *Jazz Hot* magazine, he arranged a meeting for me with the great guitarist-composer. Django had just been playing for a long while. His brother Joseph, in the background, is still improvising. It is February 19, 1945, in a ground-floor apartment on avenue Frochot, and it is cold. Additional lighting with two floodlights. Lateral cropping.



**Prisoners' return,
Gare de l'Est, Paris, 1945**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - R15/3/156

— 27

Back in Paris at the end of 1944, I had to make a place for myself again in the profession. It wasn't too difficult because there was a great need for images: the illustrated press was putting itself back together and those who knew how to work easily found takers. I had also been to see my pre-war clients: the tourist board, the SNCF, the travel agencies, and the illustrated magazines. This photograph is taken from a major

story commissioned by the SNCF on the French railroad's efforts for the repatriation of prisoners. The story had kept me occupied through the second half of April and many of its images were used by various publications. I did not give this photograph to the client at the time; I felt it was too intimate. Today, time has passed and it no longer matters. I also included it in my book *Sur le fil du hasard* (On Chance's Edge). Lateral cropping.

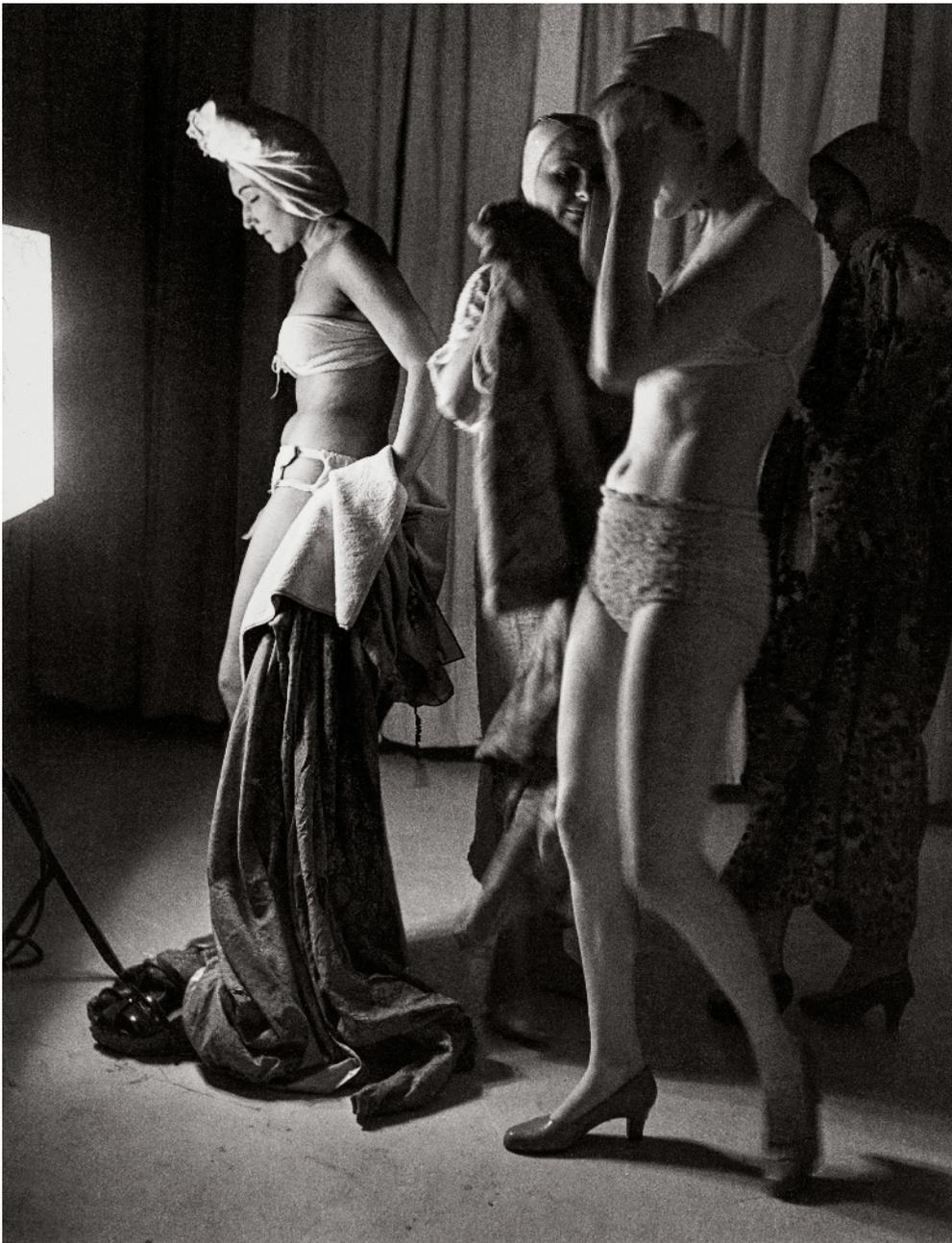
**Victory Day, Grands Boulevards,
Paris, May 8, 1945**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - R15/4/5

— 28

It is "V-day," May 8, 1945, on the Grands Boulevards in Paris: an American tank full of jubilant Parisians passes by. That day, I had a number of non-commissioned photographs. I must have placed a few, but there were so many photographers to "cover" this event that, of course, no one was counting on me; for that matter I do not remember if this photo was reproduced. There is only one technical aspect that I would like to point out: the tank was driving quite fast. So, I knowingly used a shutter speed that was not too fast to allow for a slight blur in the trees in the background, which precisely renders the impression of movement. The print is a little tricky to make because the bottom of the image is underexposed. Care must be taken not to lose detail in the shadows. Lateral cropping.





A break on set, Joinville-le-Pont studios, Seine, 1945

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - R15/10/22

— 29

Photograph taken from a story commissioned by *Point de vue* magazine on the shooting of a movie entitled *Le Roi des resquilleurs* (The King of the Free-Riders). The music hall girls, who had done the previous scene and had remained motionless for a long time, were warming themselves under the spotlight during a break in filming. I was not a film set photographer. I was supposed to shoot the movie as it was being made: the preparation, the rehearsals, the backstage, and so on. As a matter of fact, I have always preferred to photograph the sidelines of the main subject, rather than the event itself. Light cropping of the negative.

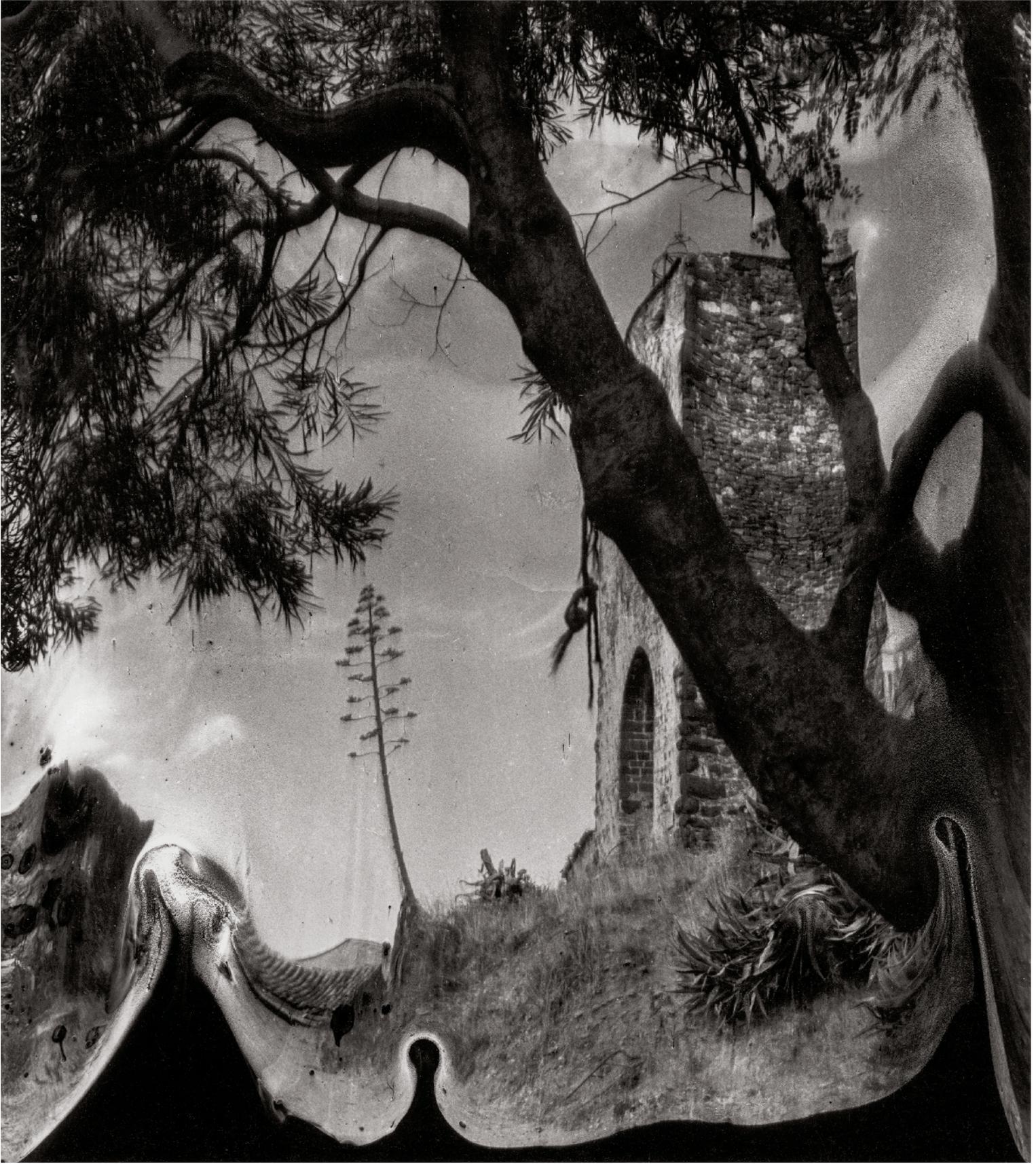
The Girondin winemaker, Cagnac, 1945

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - F15/257

— 30

It was during the summer vacation. We had joined my wife Marie-Anne's parents in a village in the Gironde. They knew this winemaker who made very good wine and, during a visit, I thought he had such an amazing "mug" that I photographed him. I have several photographs of him in fact, but this is the most distinctive one. The man died soon after, having failed to observe the diet prescribed by his doctor: no more than three quarts (three liters) a day. He drank seven. Photograph cropped on the sides.







Fusion, Cogolin, Var, 1945

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - FD15/5 [OR D15/5]

— 31

A view of Cogolin, a small village in the Var. This is obviously a very special landscape, since it is deformed by a fusion of the gelatin emulsion. In these times of scarcity, I used leftover film from the American surplus, reconfigured to 2¼×2¼-in. (6×6-cm) dimensions and reconditioned in homemade laboratories. These emulsions were often either out of date or altered in some way by time. They melted easily and I experienced this kind of accident in several instances, sometimes even on entire rolls.

This phenomenon and its funny effects had amused Prévert: shortly afterward he composed a poem entitled “The Mysteries of the Dark Room” which, accompanied by four fused photographs including this one, appeared in the review *Quadrige* of May 1946. This poem also appears in the collection *Soleil de nuit* (Night Sun) (Gallimard, 1980). Subsequently, I intentionally caused the emulsion to fuse by heating film immediately after washing it.

Fishermen, La Bocca, Cannes, Alpes-Maritimes, 1945

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - F15/15

— 32

That same summer, we left the Gironde for the south of France by motorbike, since we did not yet have a car. In fact, in 1945, the manufacture of automobiles had only just resumed, and second-hand cars were selling for top dollar.

I photographed these fishermen in the vicinity of Cannes, in La Bocca. I have a great fondness for this photograph. I totally recognize in it my taste for on-the-spot composition. A few seconds later, I shot the same scene in total chaos. I wonder if I didn't do it on purpose, to show that one or two seconds is enough to destroy or rebuild harmony.

It's a very difficult photograph to print. The negative was damaged during development, most likely by clumsiness. Negative heavily cropped on all four sides, because I was located a little far from the scene, on a dike.



**With the Roma of Montreuil,
Seine, 1945**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - R15/29/3

— 33

Uncommissioned series of photos, taken in October 1945, about a group of settled Roma who worked in tinplating in Montreuil, near Paris. The series was published in part in *France Illustration* shortly thereafter. I had surprised these two girls doing themselves up. One of them looked up at me. Is that regrettable? I do not deny a certain complicity between the photographer and the person being photographed (see photograph 16).

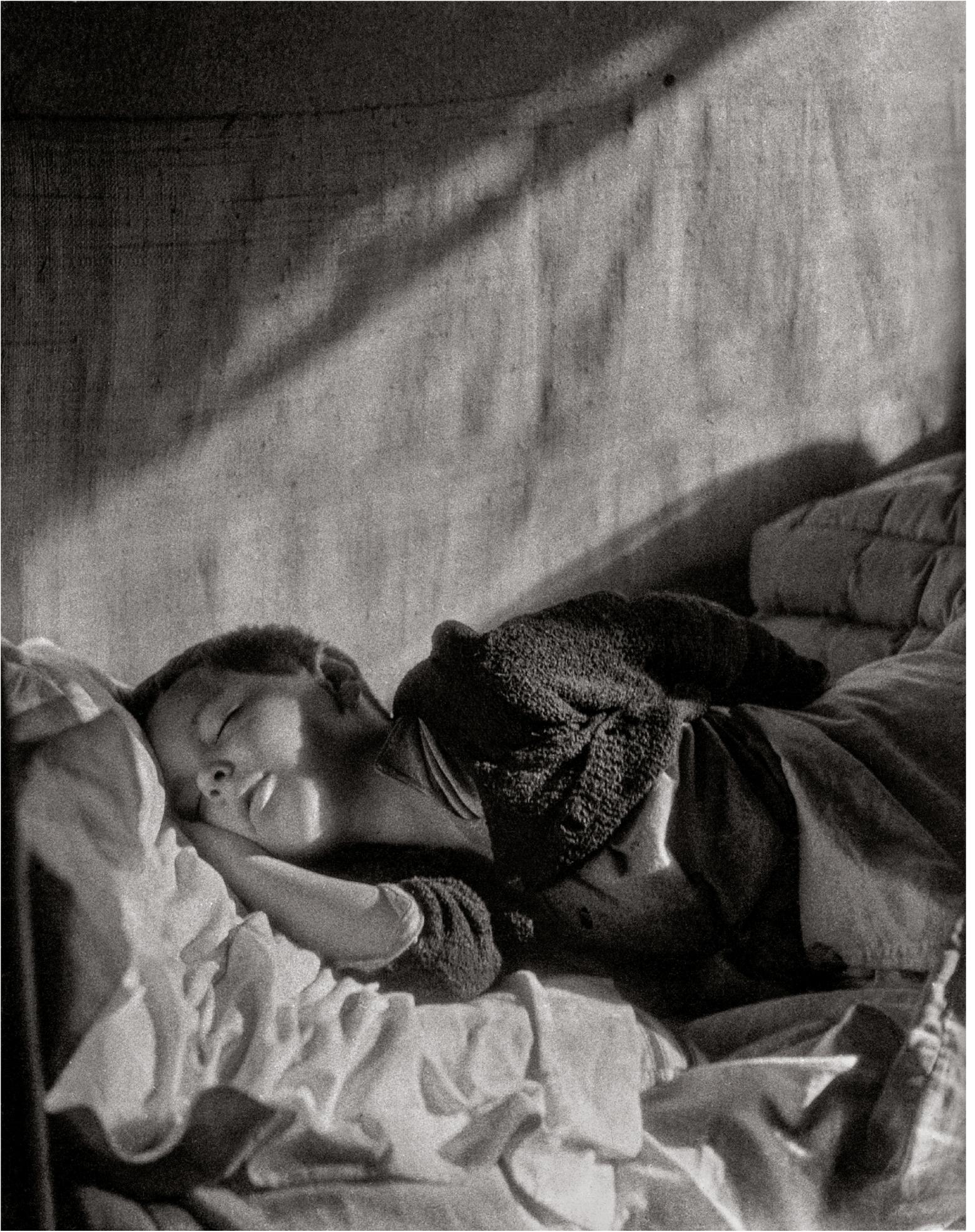
**With the Roma tinplaters
of Montreuil, Seine, 1945**

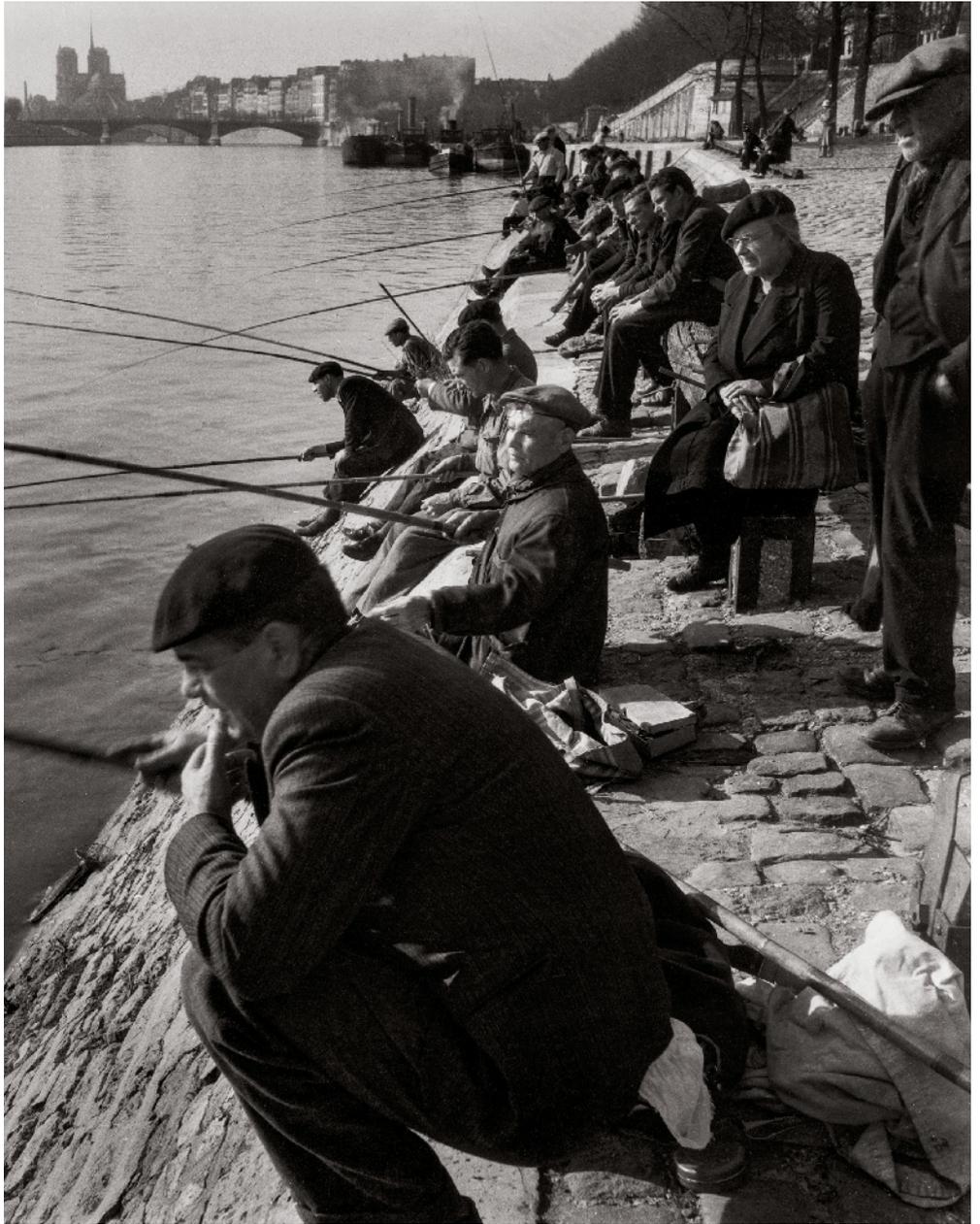
NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - R15/29/19

— 34

I went back to Montreuil two or three times. The report took some time to get going, but I was patient and diplomatic enough to be able to photograph freely. I brought Marie-Anne along and she had her palm read by an old woman from the community, which made shooting easier. The man on the left is working on tinplating a cooking pot for a hospital kitchen. Virtually full frame.







Vincent asleep, Paris, 1946

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - E16/10 BIS

— 35

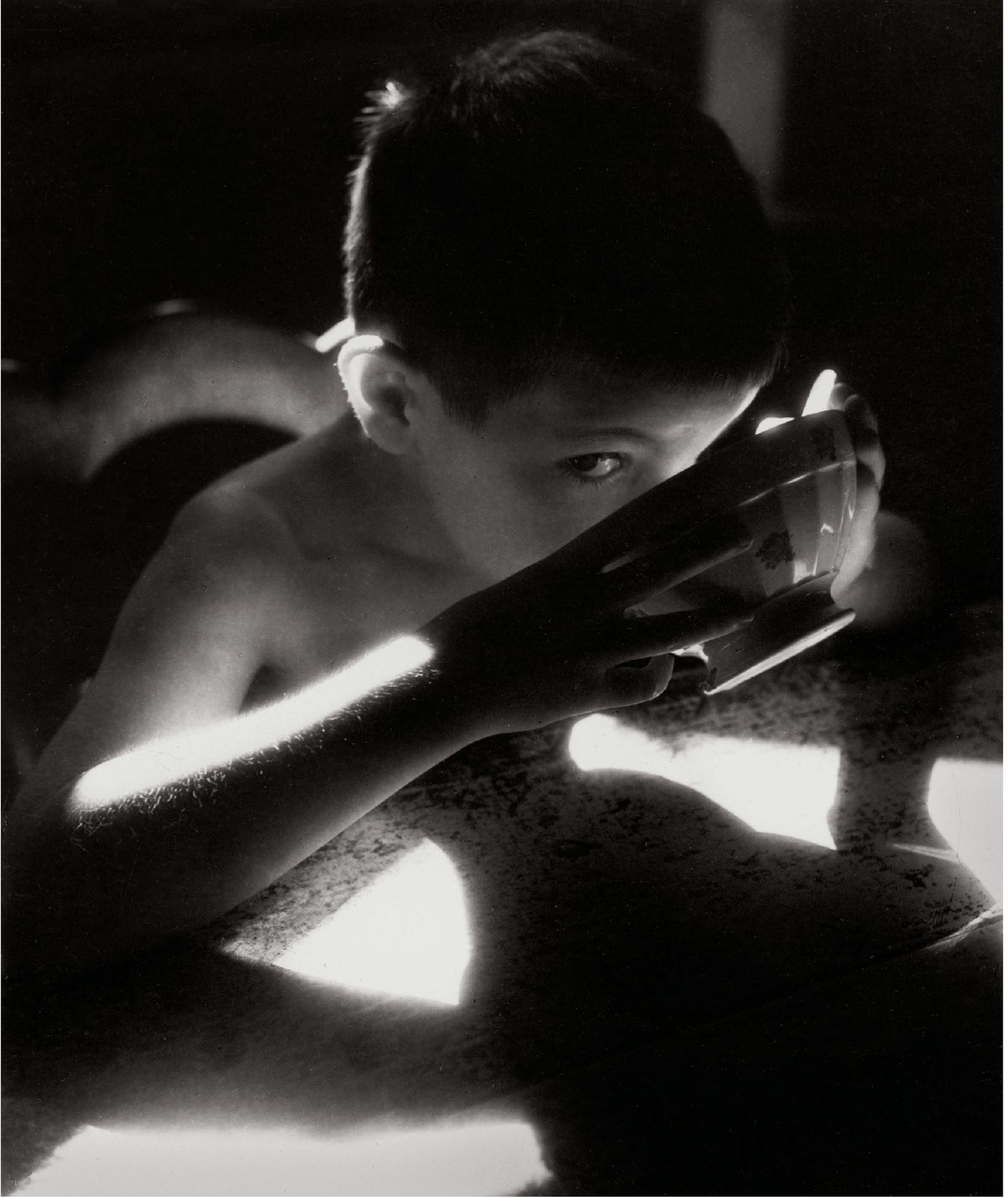
A winter morning on boulevard Richard-Lenoir. Marie-Anne had just opened the curtains. I had to be quick, before the shock of this royal ray of sun roused Vincent from his sleep. Lateral cropping.

**Fishermen, quai Henri IV,
Paris, 1946**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - P16/122

— 36

Quai de la Râpée. I walked along the Seine, one of my favorite photographic expeditions. Since the fish weren't biting, the fishermen were enjoying a little sun on this chilly spring day. This bank is now closed off to them: cars stream along it at full speed, hurried by the passing time.





Vincent with a bowl, Cavignac, Gironde, 1946

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - E16/29

— 37

During the summer, in the Girondin village mentioned previously, Vincent was having breakfast in my parents-in-law's home. I took this photograph in a similar way to the one of Vincent asleep (photo 35). All of a sudden, the light was so beautiful, so amazing, that I jumped on my camera to seize this fleeting moment. This undertaking was all the more difficult because Vincent, knowing that he was being watched, could very well jeopardize the result, either from embarrassment or by playing to the camera. What was important to retain from that moment was the reflection of the sun from inside the bowl. Here is an anecdote about this image: during the 1960s, I was showing this photograph, among many others,

to an advertising agency when the "art buyer" took it and asked me: "Do you know this child?" "Yes, very well." "Can we photograph him?" "Yes, but he is doing his military service." She then kept this photograph to show to an art director. When it was returned a few months later, I saw the same image taken by another photographer advertising a food product. I immediately called this colleague, who is an excellent photographer and a good friend, and he knew nothing about this story. He was probably told, "We would like to have a child drinking, with the sun behind him," and given a sketch. That is advertising. Or at least, it is much of the time!



Countrywoman, Cavignac, Gironde, 1946

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - F16/246

— 38

In the same region. Marie-Anne and I followed this old peasant woman who invited us to her home. The only memory I have left, besides the rugged good nature of the person, is the invitation to drink a glass of red at her place. Which we did in glasses as bottomless as soldiers' cups. Lateral cropping.

Jetty on Arcachon bay, Gironde, 1946

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - F16/330

— 39

Fruitful summer. The launch we have just boarded will take us onto Arcachon lake. I took this low-angle shot just before casting off. The Rollei lens was probably fitted with a medium orange filter, hence the darkened sky. No particular printing difficulties. Cropping on both sides.





**Selling fries, rue Rambuteau,
Paris, 1946**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - P16/232

— 40

This scene took place on rue Rambuteau, in front of Les Halles market, in the corner of a café. It is backlit just as I like it: a nice shot of sun. The opportunity was there to be seized. This photograph is not easy to print because there are underexposed areas and other very dense areas on the film.

Marcel Achard, Paris, 1946

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - R16/22/2

— 41

September in Paris. The Rapho agency had sent me to do a short story about the writer Marcel Achard in his apartment. Artificial lighting, using two floodlights on light stands. Easy to print. Lateral cropping.



**Busker, boulevard Richard-
Lenoir, Paris, 1946**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - DUPLICATE* - P16/251

— 42

From the window of our apartment at the time, on the fourth floor of 117 boulevard Richard-Lenoir. One morning, I heard music coming from outside. From my office, framed by the wrought-iron detailing supporting the balcony handrail, I saw a busker playing his soprano saxophone. That is how I captured the memory of that little scene.

This photograph is cropped at the sides only. The print requires a lot of retouching since the negative has a number of flaws whose cause I cannot remember.

* In 1984, a number of original negatives, very hard to print for various reasons, were replaced by duplicates made from carefully retouched prints, including the above image, and the following photographs: 68, 79, 94, 108, 112, 129, 131, 136, 176, 199, and 242.



**Bistro at the Old Port, Marseille,
Bouches-du-Rhône, 1946**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - F16/753

— 43

In November of that year, the great American magazine *Collier's* had commissioned me through Rapho to do a story on the Foreign Legion in Marseille. Of course, alongside this story, I took a lot of photographs for myself in the sunny city. We are in a bistro in the Old Port; the atmosphere is just like Marcel Pagnol's *Marius*. The couple's shadow is heavily slanted. My line of sight was north-south; therefore the photograph was taken in the afternoon (southwest sun). Moreover, a cup of coffee can be seen on the right-hand table. Partial cropping.

**Couple at the Old Port, Marseille,
Bouches-du-Rhône 1946**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - F16/764

— 44

Marseille, November 1946. These young people were in tender conversation beside the Lacydon where the Old Port was built. I was out in the open and they would have seen me working. I preferred to ask permission to photograph them. I do not remember ever having been refused. The number of this photograph, F16/764, indicates that it was made after the previous one (753). The direction of the shadow being roughly north-south, this photograph must have been taken around noon on the following day.







**Rain on place Vendôme,
Paris, 1947**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - P17/13

— 45

Place Vendôme in Paris on a rainy day, probably in the first quarter of 1947. A chance photograph. I was hanging around the area. I may have been coming back from the Rapho agency, whose offices were nearby. I must have seen a woman stepping over that puddle and noticed that the Vendôme column was reflected in it. As luck would have it, just at that moment, a cohort of girls was let out for lunch from the neighboring fashion houses. I recorded several jumps: this one was the most successful. A good example of what is known as a previsualized photograph. To print this photograph, it is useful to keep the upper pavement areas light and to push the black of the clothing.



**Porte de Vanves flea
market, Paris, 1947**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - P17/55

— 46

Only three years after the liberation. We still lacked a lot of things in our household and we were flea-market fanatics. We often went either to Clignancourt, to the iron and ham fairs on boulevard Richard-Lenoir, or to porte de Vanves where this photograph was taken. I found this scene so moving: a young girl, a student no doubt, reading while waiting to sell her outfit. I remember showing this photograph to Jean-Pierre Chabrol. We were both working for *Regards* at the time, and it was with him that I did the story on a gang of youths in Belleville in 1955, which appears later in this collection (photo 165). When he saw this photograph, he thought there was a whole story to be told about it. He may have done so. Slightly cropped photograph.

**Porte de Vanves flea
market, Paris, 1947**

NEGATIVE: 2¼×2¼ IN. (6×6 CM) - P17/57

— 47

At the Vanves flea market, probably on the same day. A pile of wallets and used purses spread out on a blanket. A deal has just been struck between adults. The child apparently already knows what money is. As for framing, I crop a part of the negative on top and on the sides, to focus the attention on the essential.



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A department of the French Ministry of Culture, the MAP is concerned with safeguarding, cataloging, and promoting the archives in its holdings. It encourages in-depth study of the Willy Ronis archive and has delegated the management of its commercial interests to RMN-Grand Palais, thus complying with the photographer's wishes as expressed at the time of his donations to the French State.

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