

A Prodigal Son Returns

A TROVE OF ROBERT CAPA PHOTOGRAPHS FINDS A HOME IN HIS NATIVE HUNGARY.



IN 1931 an 18-year-old bohemian called Endre Friedmann fled from his native Budapest to Berlin, after having been arrested during a political crackdown, one of the many to roil Hungary during the 20th century. Before long, he had reinvented himself with a new, Americanized name—Robert Capa—and built a formidable reputation as a cosmopolitan war photographer. He returned to Hungary only three times: once for a few weeks in 1933, after Hitler rose to power in Germany; again for an evening in 1947, to check on relatives who had survived

the war; and then for several weeks in 1948, shooting photographs that later ran in the American magazines *Illustrated* and *Holiday*.

More than 60 years later, in early 2009, Capa was effectively repatriated by his homeland, a cultural milestone that was little noted by the Western media. On behalf of the of the Hungarian National Museum in Budapest, the Hungarian government paid 300 million forints (about \$1.4 million at the time) for a master set of 937 of the photographer's definitive works, as well as 48 vintage prints and other material.

The set, published in 1991 in an edition of three, was assembled by Capa's biographer, Richard Whelan, and his youngest brother, Cornell, also a photographer and the founder of the International Center of Photography in New York. The portfolio includes Capa's candid shots of Trotsky speaking in 1932, which helped make his name; his iconic images of Republican soldiers in the Spanish Civil War; his photographs of the D-Day landings at Normandy, postwar Europe, the Soviet Union and Israel; and his last image, captured moments before he stepped on a landmine in Vietnam

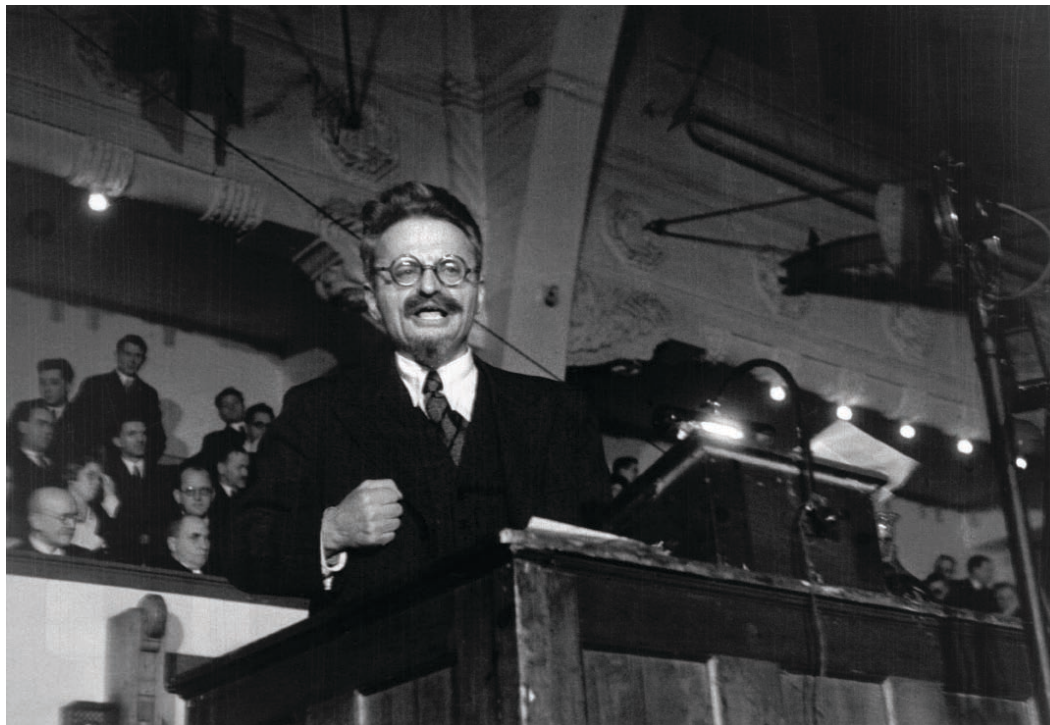
in 1954 while on assignment for *Life* magazine.

Cornell Capa sold the first portfolio to the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum in 1991 and gave the second to ICP the following year. As for the third, says ICP director Willis Hartshorn, Cornell was hoping for Paris, Capa's sometimes home base, or Budapest. But "we weren't really actively motivated to place them," adds Hartshorn. "We were more concerned over time that it go to the right place."

In early 2006, with Cornell's health failing, the Hungarian-born journalist Kati Marton helped Whelan approach the Hungarian government on his behalf. As Ambassador Andras Simonyi, then Hungary's envoy to the U.S., recalls, "They asked me, 'Is the Hungarian government interested? After all, the Capas were Hungarian.'"

They had found the right person. Simonyi's aunt, the photographer Ata Kando, and her friend, the photographer Eva Besnyo, had both grown up with Capa in Budapest. Besnyo helped him get his first job as a photographer in Berlin, and he and Kando lived in the same house when both were refugees in Paris in the 1930s. "I had a longstanding passion for photography and Capa," Simonyi says. "So I really got into it." (He was also spurred by

Robert Capa, *A Tame Wolf*, Hungary, 1933.



the fact that, some years before, his colleagues in Mexico City hadn't been given the chance to purchase the so-called "Mexican suitcase," a cache of 4,300 negatives taken by Capa, David Seymour and Capa's lover, Gerda Taro, during the Spanish Civil War; it is now owned by the ICP.)

But in 2007, because of some governmental disagreements over foreign policy, Simonyi was replaced as ambassador. The deal lay dormant, recalls Hartshorn, until Jakab Orsos, the director of the Hungarian Cultural Center in New York, and Istvan Hiller, Hungary's minister of culture and education, heard about it. "It didn't require

convincing," Orsos says. "It required negotiations about the price, the nature of the acquisition and which museum was going to receive it." (Sadly, both Whelan and Cornell Capa died before this was achieved.)

The work finally arrived in Hungary in stages, from January through April 2009. Although the original plan was for Budapest to build a new center dedicated to Capa's life and work, that idea is now stalled due to



From top: Robert Capa, Leon Trotsky lecturing Danish students on the history of the Russian Revolution, Nov. 27, 1932; David Seymour, photo of Capa (at left) in Hungary, 1948.

the current world economic crisis. Yet Capa's work itself has been warmly received. A small 10-day show of highlights from the collection at the National Museum drew 15,000 visitors. Starting in July a bigger, more expansive show at the Ludwig Museum attracted 65,000 visitors over four months. "People really enjoyed it, and were really touched," says Livia Paldi, chief curator at the Mucsarnok/Kunsthalle Budapest, who organized the Ludwig show. A smaller exhibition is now touring the country, and Paldi says that her show is likely to travel to Pecs later this year.

As for Capa, his identity is being reinvented once again, this time as a product of the Hungarian avant-garde. Paldi points out that like Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and André Kertesz before him, Capa's ideas about life and art were forged when he participated in the circle of Lajos Kaszak, a linchpin of early 20th-century Hungarian modernism. And Simonyi notes out that Capa was born in the building that once housed the Pilvax Cafe, where the plot for the 1848 revolution was hatched.

"He was one of those incredible cosmopolitan photographers that Hungary should be proud of," says Simonyi. "But he never denied that he came from downtown Budapest."

—CAROL KINO