

Doc Chat Episode Twelve Transcript

JULIE GOLIA: Welcome, everybody. We're going to start in just a minute or so. We'll give people time to come in. All right. Hi, everybody, and welcome to Doc Chat. And it's our last Doc Chat of 2020. I'm Julie Golia. I'm the curator of history, social sciences and government information here at the New York Public Library. For those of you who haven't attended yet, Doc Chat is a weekly program series from NYPL Center for the Research and the Humanities that digs deep into the stories behind the library's most interesting collections and highlights ways that teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. In this episode, Nora Dolliver, who was librarian in General Research Division at the Stephen A Schwarzman building, is joined by Julie Herrada, who is the curator of the Joseph A. Labadie collection at the University of Michigan. And the Labadie Collection, for those of you who don't know, is one of the oldest, largest and most comprehensive collections of its kind with materials on anarchism, anticolonial movements, antiwar and pacifist movements, atheism and free thought, civil liberties and civil rights and much more. And I'm going to include a link to the collection in our chat in just a moment. So what are we talking about today? Julie and Nora will be discussing a series of early 20th century photographs of protests in New York City. They'll be interrogating what the images might tell us about the subjects, the photographers who captured them and the library that collected and described them. Our guests are going to speak for 10 to 15 minutes before we open up the conversation. During the program, feel free to use the chat function to share general comments. So make sure that you change your chat mode to panelists and attendees so that everybody is included in the conversation. Once we begin the question and answer segment, I'm going to ask you to use the question and answer function rather than the chat function to share your questions. If you want to remain anonymous, make sure to click that option before submitting your question. We also want to know a little bit about you. So please fill out the poll that I am about to launch now. And with that, I'm going to hand it over to Nora.

NORA DOLLIVER: Okay. Thank you, Julie. And thanks all of you for joining us for the last Doc Chat. And thank you other Julie, Julie Herrada. For those of you who don't know, I actually worked for Julie at the Labadie Collection until about a year ago when I left to start this job. So this is actually a reunion for us. And right behind me, you probably can't see it, but that is a poster that Julie gave me of the first curator of the Labadie Collection. So this is sort of a reunion of multiple generations of Labadie workers today. So we're going to be talking about a series of photographs that were taken by Percy Loomis Sperr. So I'm just going to tell you a little bit about him. And then we'll dive in to talk about the photographs. And that's who we are. Okay. So a few facts about Percy Loomis Sperr. So he was born in 1890 in Columbus, Ohio. He grew up there and in Houlton, Michigan, which is in the [inaudible]. He went to Oberlin College and moved to Staten Island in 1924. And he was actually a failed -- I shouldn't say failed. He wanted to be a writer. He had the intention of being a writer who would illustrate his stories with pictures. And he sort of described himself as not much of a camera fan. He said his interest is really in the story rather than the picture and that the story that interested him most was the tale

of the city of New York. His photos were also described by someone working for the Milstein Division, which is the division of NYPL that they're held in, as dry and dense. But she was recommending that these pictures be acquired. But she did call them dry and dense. Most of the pictures that I've seen from him, they're actually not of people at all. They're of changing New York, so especially buildings that were about to be demolished or in the process of being demolished. But his other favorite subject was the harbor. And so the library has tens of thousands of his photos. Many, maybe most of them are digitized. And so some of those were taken on contract with the library, especially those changing New York demolition photos. But then others were purchased from him after his death, which was in 1964. And at that time, he was working -- actually, he was the owner of a bookstore. A used bookstore. And so the pictures that we're talking about today, I don't know if they were taken for the library or acquired afterwards. But they're part of a collection of New York street views. Then, again, it's like about 30,000 collections, mostly his photos, mostly his -- some by also Lewis Hine. And those were sort of kind of separated a little bit. And those were the ones that captured social conditions as opposed to Sperr's, which were street views. So this is the first photo of his that I want to share with you. And I'm wondering if anyone wants to put in the chat any first impressions from these. Go ahead and just take a look. Dry and dense. Yeah. Not a current staff member. No. So these photos -- yeah, Union Square. Yeah. So a few people are noticing that it's Union Square. And that's exactly right. It looks cold. Yeah. Yeah, it does look cold. You're right. Although, actually, it's funny you say that because -- oh, yeah. Okay. So somebody else said -- sorry, I'm trying to read the chat. It's going very quickly. So a few people have noticed that the setting was Union Square. That's true. And actually, these are, like, some of the very few of his photos that aren't organized geographically. They're organized topically. So most of these would have been under Union Square. Then, yes, somebody else pointed out all men, which I can see why you would say that from the picture. Yeah. Photo of people's backs, not faces. How about you, Julie? What were your sort of first impressions when you saw this picture?

JULIE HERRADA: Well, I'm not familiar with New York buildings and geographic locations. So I didn't know where. But it looks like a large demonstration. And I was wondering -- my first thought was, you know, where are the police? Because there's always police at large demonstrations. And I didn't see any in this picture.

NORA DOLLIVER: Yeah. So -- yes. I'm going to minimize the chat now and pull it back up so that I can focus on one thing at a time. But that's -- oh, those are the captions for the photos. So somebody pointed out the Hebrew sign. And that was like -- it's actually Yiddish. But Sperr did not know what it said. He just said that this is a Jewish group. And the only sign that he really went into detail with was one that said Free the Scottsboro Boys in English. But Julie, you pointed out, you're aware of the police. And that was -- this is one picture where you can't really see them. A lot of the pictures that he took -- so this is another -- this is another -- speaking of the Hebrew sign, this is pictures of people holding the Yiddish Communist Party newspaper Freiheit. And he just wrote, like, a radical Jewish paper. He didn't know. But on the subject of police, here's another picture from the same march. So it's hard to read the sign on over here. But it says for the right to strike down with police brutality. And his caption says marchers who

protest against police brutality. For several years, there's been little disorder at these demonstrations. At one time, however, particularly under police commissioners McLaughlin and Whelan, red baiting was a popular sport. Nearly every communist demonstration resulted in a few crackheads and a few murders for the cause. And this next picture, to answer your question, that's where -- there are the police. They're on horses. And the caption for this one was marchers being kept in bounds by mounted policemen. So, you know, there are a few different ways that, you know, we would use these maybe in the classroom. What's your sort of initial thought about, like, what could be the value? Or is there value in using these in teaching?

JULIE HERRADA: Well, if you can sort of identify some of the events or the locations, that's a big help. A lot of photographs come in that don't have any identification on them. So these photographs are actually pretty helpful that they have a date. And they have a location. And they have a little bit of context and commentary about the subjects in the photograph. I would like to match up primary sources with these photographs since we know the dates and the locations. Maybe we can narrow down the event. And we can narrow down some more information about the exact day and what they were protesting and what their issues were.

NORA DOLLIVER: Absolutely. So for these particular photographs, they were all -- they were all taken -- the ones that we just looked at were all taken on May Day in 1934. This next one was taken in 1937. He took kind of a -- he took most of his pictures from this kind of series were '34. There were a few from '37. And then there were a few sort of like one off, like, smaller demonstrations of communist, a few antiwar protests that he photographed. And some of them -- like you were saying, Julie, some of them do have that pretty detailed information about when and where. And some of them are just like Battery Park sometime in 1933, you know. And there's not a whole lot of information. So one, I mean, one approach, if we want to pair them with primary sources, keeping in mind, right, that we're all working with a pretty necessarily limited set of materials because we're limited to what's available online right now, though, we'll talk about some other things that we might use in a perfect world, is going to be online databases, right, of historical newspapers. So one approach that we could talk about is -- that students might enjoy is using newspapers to, you know, compare to -- first of all, using historical newspaper databases through NYPL's article and databases page to look up coverage of the event. And so, I mean, I -- I looked through a few of the sort of mainstream New York newspapers. I looked at the Daily Worker, a few other pictures. What kind of things, Julie, like, would you be looking for in the paper?

JULIE HERRADA: Well, I would like to compare different newspaper reporting of the same event. So how the reporter and how the newspaper has a take on, you know, whether it's numbers of the crowd, like, some mainstream or conservative papers might have a lower number of the crowd to kind of minimize the event. And radical newspapers on the left would maybe want to embellish the crowd numbers so that they can show how important their event was. And just to kind of compare the reporting on that.

NORA DOLLIVER: So one thing that several of the -- I mean, the number -- actually, I was assuming that there would be like a pretty big difference or discrepancy between the numbers reported across different newspapers. There really wasn't. And it's a number that seems like so high that I kind of can't believe it, which is 100,000 marchers in Union Square. And, I mean, it's sort of interesting -- like, would you have estimated that it was that many from that picture?

JULIE HERRADA: No way. I mean, it's hard to tell from the ground level. And there's no, you know, overhead, like, from the window of a building, from shots of the crowd. So it's very hard to tell. And the other thing I wanted to mention, too, is, I think somebody in the chat said that this -- that the photographer was like an outside observer of these events and not really a participant. So that might also have an effect on what kind -- what the picture looks like and where -- and, you know, where he shot from and what things he shot.

NORA DOLLIVER: You know, something that I didn't mention about the photographer but that's kind of interesting is that he had meningitis as a child. And he walked with a limp his whole life on a crutch. So when we're picturing him like following around the march, like, he's holding a camera and, you know, walking using a crutch, which is pretty amazing to picture. But yeah, you're right. He was literally an outsider. It's interesting, though. Like, we were talking about this earlier, like the sort of stock photo quality of some of these protest photos, where it's just like this aerial shot. And I found an article in the Daily Worker about how, like, some -- it was, you know, the reds -- not the reds. They didn't call them the reds. But they made their own reel because they were so fed up with all those sort of like aerial shots that didn't show -- that didn't show their banners in enough detail, that didn't show the American flags, which I was sort of surprised that that was one of their quibbles. So I mean, if we look at these papers, the -- I think comparing the framing is definitely helpful. So, like, with the New York Times, there was -- there's a lot of focus on the police preparations for the event. Right? There were 1500 police. I think, like, every police officer in the city was working overtime. They were guarding, like, the Rockefeller's mansion, all that. And there was a lot of concern that the rival marches, the socialists, which were up in Madison Square Garden, and communists, would lead to a clash. And so they were trying -- they were trying to avert disaster. And so the framing was sort of, you know, the police are guarding the parade. And then you see the headline, 100,000 rally here with no disorder. Daily Worker -- so yeah, the number -- the numbers are higher in the Daily Worker. But they kind of claimed that it was 100,000 at the march, then maybe another 100,000 in, like, a mass meeting, which I have to assume that's some -- that there was the same 100,000.

JULIE HERRADA: That picture before -- the slide before does have the aerial -- yeah, that's a pretty good aerial shot.

NORA DOLLIVER: Yeah, that's a lot of people, right?

JULIE HERRADA: Especially on the left. Yeah, there's lots and lots of people there. There could easily be 100,000 people there.

NORA DOLLIVER: So the left is the communists in Union Square. And the right is the socialists in Madison Square. There was a more anemic one, as the Daily Worker said. And then the New York Amsterdam News, their coverage, on the cover, pointed out that the mothers of the Scottsboro Boys were in the march, which is true. New York Herald Tribune, they had their own spin on it. It was the framing of how much money did the city lose from the parade, because the marchers were walking past all the shops. And no one wanted to go shopping. Kind of a familiar framing. But so, you know, how would you -- this is how, you know, I would have to teach it using only online resources. If you could use whatever you want in the Labadie, what would you use?

JULIE HERRADA: Well, I would be looking for anecdotal, you know, text about the march or some letters, maybe, that described, you know, somebody having attended the march or talking about the march or may be one of the organizers talking about the march. I would want some extra, you know, anecdotal or historical information about that, including some fliers that announced the march, because that's a lot of -- the way that people got the word out is just, you know, distributing fliers and thousands of them every day for, you know, the week leading up to the march.

NORA DOLLIVER: And -- oh, sorry.

JULIE HERRADA: No, go ahead.

NORA DOLLIVER: And another material that you could use is the Michigan Central Police Mugshot -- do you want to talk a little bit about this collection?

JULIE HERRADA: Yeah. So this is a collection that is -- came to us last year and is still kind of coming to us in small batches. A man is donating these. These are like -- they're not three by five cards. They're a little bit bigger than that with mugshots of people who've been arrested for -- a lot of them were arrested at demonstrations like the one we're talking about today but in Michigan and Detroit. And this particular person, Will Gear, he is not a Detroiter. He was a very famous actor. He played Grandpa Walton in the Walton series. But in the 1930s, he was a Communist Party member and an actor and an activist. And he was also called before the House on American Activities Committee in the 1950s and refused to testify. But these are -- right now we have about a hundred of these mugshot photos that were the property of the Michigan Central Railroad, who had their own police force. And they -- so they just collected these so that they could identify the communists, you know, in there.

NORA DOLLIVER: Like when they were passing through?

JULIE HERRADA: Yeah, passing through, riding the trains or whatever. And they would arrest them on the spot.

NORA DOLLIVER: Wow. So Julie Golia's head just popped up, which I think means that it's time to start taking questions. That went by so fast. But if we have time, maybe we could talk about a few other Labadie odds and ends. Maybe somebody in the Q&A will ask us that.

JULIE GOLIA: And I'll pop the link to the Labadie Collection back into the chat just again. Guys, this is fascinating. And I know you had one eye on the chat. But the chat is rocking.

NORA DOLLIVER: Oh, is it? Oh, no. I minimized it almost immediately. So I have no idea what anyone was saying.

JULIE GOLIA: Maybe that's good, because there's just so many really wonderful ideas about ways that these can be used, and I think in all different kinds of ways and collections. Now I'm going to start with a very specific question that one of our attendees has. And I have to tell you I googled it ahead of time. And I had trouble finding it. But maybe one of you knows. Does anybody know what kind of camera Sperr was using at the time?

NORA DOLLIVER: No. [inaudible] answer no, I don't.

JULIE GOLIA: I know. I know. And I have to tell -- Mitchell, to answer your question, I did some searching on it. And I wasn't able to find. But there are quite a few books by Sperr in our catalog. And the answer may lie in one of those. So I would encourage you to go check out NYPL's collections and see if you are able to find the answer.

NORA DOLLIVER: It's possible that, like, Photographer Identity catalog has something. I mean, I don't know if it has that kind of information.

JULIE GOLIA: That's a great point. And I just will remind everybody, again, I hate to tamp the chat down. But if you have specific questions, please do put them in the question and answer module. All right, guys. Just to start it off. I was really fascinated by the captions. And in some ways, they are like their own different kind of primary source. And I wonder if you could speak a little bit about, you know, who wrote them, and what they can tell us and how we should analyze them?

NORA DOLLIVER: Yeah. So as far as I know, Sperr himself wrote them. And to me, it's sort of -- I'm reading it through this lens. Like, he wanted to be a writer. And I mean, he put a ton of detail in some of the captions. Some of the captions, he didn't. He was like, this is a group of communists. Their flags are red. I mean, some of them were, like, really not much information. And some of them, he really -- I mean, you know, Julie made that comment about, you know, he's writing these as an outsider. And there was a ton that he just, like, didn't know about, you know, iconography. Just, he couldn't recognize a lot of these things. But he also did clearly, you know -- he tried to translate, I think, some of the imagery that they used in a way that his audience could make sense of the photo. So that's kind of how I see the captions. And Julie, if you have a different take --

JULIE HERRADA: Not really. I think you're right that he wrote his own captions. Whether or not he actually applied them or typed them on the back of the photos, that's a different question. But I think he did describe them as he saw them.

JULIE GOLIA: You know, guys, I couldn't help but go to today. We're living in an era of protest now. In what ways might engaging the moment that we're in or the past four years that we've been or even in the past, you know, 20 years that we've been in -- how might we dialogue with these photos that are primarily from the 1930s?

NORA DOLLIVER: Do you want to start, Julie? Should I start?

JULIE HERRADA: Go ahead.

NORA DOLLIVER: Well, I think that they're definitely a way to sort of engage students just in terms of, like, thinking about the narrative that -- especially, like, the media was building, that these different media sources were building. I think there's just so much that would resonate with students, right? You know, I mean, so much of, like, the same -- and also, a lot of these -- like, we've seen literally the same things happen in Union Square like last month. Right? And so I think a lot of that will be familiar to students. And I think that that could -- I think that would help them look at sort of the media coverage with a critical eye because they're used to doing that right now. So I mean, that's my first thought is just, you know, how, you know -- even asking things like, how have you been frustrated by, you know, mainstream media coverage of events that you might have participated in, that your friends participated in? How do you think you would have felt if you were in one of these marches that, you know, the -- how would you have felt about the narrative that the Times or the Herald Tribune was presenting about what you were doing, why you're doing it?

JULIE HERRADA: I also think that if you compared some of the photographs that we see from today's demonstrations, you would look at these old ones and think that they're pretty tame, and there isn't a lot of action or activity or anger or emotion in them. And I mean, granted, this was probably a pretty tame demonstration.

NORA DOLLIVER: This one was. Right.

JULIE HERRADA: Yeah. And you don't see -- I mean, there's a lot of other photos that are not necessarily of this day but that have people fighting and fighting the cops and all that. But now you look at the photographs. And there's so much more emotion in the photographs.

NORA DOLLIVER: These are dry and dense.

JULIE HERRADA: Yeah. I don't know what to say. But yeah, it's hard to compare those types. So you would have to find something that's a little bit more comparable of an actual street battle or something.

JULIE GOLIA: So we have a couple really interesting questions. Well, first, just a note from one of our colleagues, Phil, in the Milstein division, who is literally holding Sperr photographs in his hand --

NORA DOLLIVER: And he helped me find all this information about, Sperr, by the way.

JULIE GOLIA: Phil -- shout out to Phil. They're very small, he says. And they're handwritten on the back and then likely transcribed by the library. So thank you, Phil, for that detail. Joseph asks, do you see anything distinctive to Sperr's formal aesthetic, his style or approach? And where does he fit into a longer tradition of documentary photographer? Joseph notes that he sees him as very different than, like, Lewis Hine, who was so focused on human figures. And here, it feels much more pulled back.

NORA DOLLIVER: So I do not know anything about photography. I would agree with your observation that his photos are very different from Lewis Hine's. And the library also -- I mean, I think I mentioned this already. But they saw it this way, too. You know, Hine was documenting how people lived. And Sperr, they saw it as like he's documenting the city, right? So these are really the only pictures of people that I've seen from him except for like a couple of, like, neighborhood praise and things like that. But I can't comment on his formal style.

JULIE GOLIA: Quick question. Was Sperr a freelance photographer? Or did he work for somebody?

NORA DOLLIVER: Yeah, he was -- as far as I know, he was freelance. I've seen him referred to as like an official photographer of the City of New York. But I think -- I don't think he -- I'm not sure he was employed by the city. He did work, like, on contract for the library. And then he also sold pictures, like, in lots.

JULIE GOLIA: Interesting. Interesting.

NORA DOLLIVER: He wasn't, like, on staff, as far as I know.

JULIE GOLIA: I wonder if either of you can speak to this attendee's question about whether there were many women photographers at the time. Were they interested in protests such as the ones that Sperr captures? I'm interested for this both in NYPL and other institutions and, of course, the Labadie Collection.

NORA DOLLIVER: Julie, do you want to take the question about the Labadie? I don't --

JULIE HERRADA: I don't know exactly. But I don't think that there are many women photographers in general. And as far as women photographers who are also on the left and protesting, I think there were very few at that time. Of course, there are many more now.

NORA DOLLIVER: Oh, sorry?

JULIE HERRADA: Of course, there are many more now.

NORA DOLLIVER: I think he was -- I mean, was he a contemporary of like Berenice Abbott? Was she also from Staten Island? And, like, I guess there's Alice Austin. I don't know who else was taking pictures of these events. I think also, I mean, something to point out is, like, most of the people that were taking pictures for these events worked for the news organizations that, like, the Daily Worker was mad at. And so they were on contract with some magazines and newspapers.

JULIE GOLIA: And actually, one of our people attending is our photography curator, Elizabeth Cronin, who reminds us that actually, there were a number of women photographers, particularly on the left. And actually, the New Deal and a lot of the organizations associated with -- the Works Progress Administration and whatnot, you see a lot of photographers like Berenice Abbott coming out of those traditions, Dorothea Lange. And so I think that Julie is right. This is a time when men far outweighed women in the field. But the -- in the 30s, and I think because of this connection to the left, you do start to see that flowering.

NORA DOLLIVER: That's a good point about the WPA. I was googling Sperr earlier. And I saw somebody was asking on a forum if anyone knew if he was WPA. And I think the answer was no. But I see why they thought that in a way.

JULIE GOLIA: Yeah. I'm going to ask one last quick question. And it is about moving image. So do you look for moving image history pieces as an additional primary source? Nora, do we have anything like this as moving image in NYPL's collections?

NORA DOLLIVER: That's a good question. And honestly, I don't know because almost all the moving images are not accessible off site. And I've spent, like, almost my entire NYPL career working from home. So I actually don't know what we have that's moving.

JULIE GOLIA: Yeah, I think it's a really good question.

NORA DOLLIVER: It's a good question. Yeah.

JULIE GOLIA: And for people who are interested in our collections, reach out to our general humanities librarians. And also, I will say Schomburg has a pretty incredible moving image division up there as well. So lots of different places to look for those at NYPL. Julie, how about at Labadie?

JULIE HERRADA: We don't have a lot of moving image from that time period. And like Nora said, almost none of it is digitized and online and available.

JULIE GOLIA: Well, folks, Nora, Julie, thank you so much for a wonderful finale to our fall season of Doc Chat. It was just such a great way to end. And a big thank you to all the people who are participating in the chat not just today, but for the past several episodes. It's such a wonderful, sort of community and conversation that we see happening here. So normally, I point to the next Doc Chat. But this is the last Doc Chat for this season. But we have a really wonderful lineup coming up starting in the end of January. So please stay tuned because we've got lots of great stuff coming up. So as always, the documents that we looked at today and other related resources along with the video and the transcript of today's episode will be published shortly in a post on the NYPL blog, which we will send out to all registrants. And all previous episodes can be found there as well. One of the easiest ways to find Doc Chat posts is to subscribe to the Research at NYPL channel of the blog. I'm also going to put it in the chat for everybody. I have no doubt that you'll all be missing Doc Chat over the next few weeks. So make sure to catch up on your episodes there at the link that I just put into the chat. And make sure to follow us on social media and sign up for our research newsletter to get all the news about this series and others coming up. Nora, Julie, thank you again. And thanks, everybody.

NORA DOLLIVER: Thank you.

JULIE GOLIA: Take care.

JULIE HERRADA: It was an honor and a pleasure.