School Teachers brought a group of 17 teachers into the archive for a week, where they learned about the archive contents and explored ways of incorporating the archive’s themes and treasures into their teaching of history and Spanish.

In December and January, one of our institute alumni, Oscar Góngora, organized a special program for nine of his students from New York’s High School of Business and Finance. On five Wednesday afternoons, they visited the archive, where they were introduced to the collection and to the practice of archival research by Mike Nash, Gail Malmgreen, and James D. Fernández. Oscar is already making plans to bring another group of students to ALBA next semester, this time students enrolled in his AP Spanish class.

In June 2009, the institute will be offered to a new set of teachers in New York. We will also inaugurate a new institute site in Tampa, Florida, led by Fraser Ottanelli.

ALBA is now the most consulted archive in the United States and the most visited archive in the United States and Europe. Only 26 years old, Rosenblum had returned to New York less than a year before as one the most decorated photographers of World War II. Drafted in 1943 as a U.S. Army Signal Corp combat photographer, he had landed on a Normandy beach on D-Day morning, after which he had joined an anti-tank battalion in its liberation drive through France, Germany and Austria. He took the first motion picture footage of the Dachau concentration camp.

Born in 1919 into a poor Jewish immigrant family living on New York’s Lower East Side, Rosenblum had begun to photograph his neighborhood as a teenager, using a borrowed camera. In 1937 he joined the Photo League, a vibrant neighborhood as a teenager, using a borrowed camera. In 1937 he joined the Photo League, a vibrant photographer’s community of New York photographers, where he met Lewis Hine, Berenice Abbott and Elizabeth McCausland; studied with Paul Strand (who became a life-long friend); and worked on his first major project, the Pitt Street series.

Rosenblum embarked on his USC assignment in the late spring of 1946. He spent several months traveling through France and Czechoslovakia, where the USC had a number of projects. In France, Rosenblum visited the USC rest home at St. Goin (Aquitane); the Walter B. Cannon Memorial Hospital and recreation center in Toulouse; the Camp Clairac (Lot-et-Garonne) for underprivileged French and Spanish children; the Meillon Rest Home in Pau, which housed Spanish Nazi victims; and a summer camp and canteen in Les Andelys (Normandie). Starting in October, his photos began appearing regularly in the Unitarians’ monthly magazine, the Christian Register, which, under the editorship of Rosenblum’s friend Stephen Fritchman, had emerged as an important venue not just for religious liberals, but also for more radical voices of the Left. (Its contributors included Howard Fast, W.E.B. DuBois, Earl Browder, and Paul Robeson.)

At the annual meeting of the American Unitarian Association in May the next year, Rosenblum reported on his trip. “I can say that you have produced an epic story in the field of European relief, and history will judge it so,” he stated. “[Y]ou have produced an epic story in the field of European relief, and history will judge it so,” he stated. “[Y]ou are giving help to the finest elements of society, those people who began to fight back when we didn’t even know the meaning of the word.” By then, his photos had been picked up by mainstream media outlets such as the New York Times and Liberty magazine.

Established in 1940 by the American Unitarian Association (AUA), the USC was one of the mainstream media outlets such as the New York Times and Liberty magazine.
Rosenblum's work were drying up fast. By 1948, the number of USC-run programs had dropped by more than half. In early 1949, Noel Field, who had led the USC in December 1947, mysteriously disappeared, and over the following three years his name was prominently featured at a series of show trials in Hungary, East Germany and Czechoslovakia, where he was branded as an American spymaster. Rosenblum himself, meanwhile, had accepted a position at Brooklyn College, where he taught from 1947 until his retirement in 1986.

Their obviously dire circumstances, they appear strong, confident, dignified. Some of the domestic scenes—a family eating, a mother washing clothes—show their subjects’ determination to carry on with daily life. There are smiles, although they are always a bit wary. The lighting and composition, along with the unusually large depth of field, emphasize detail, line, and contour. Some portraits have the intense chiaroscuro of a renaissance painting. Other photos exude health and happiness, such as the group shot of children posing on a winding staircase at the USC rest home in St. Goin (an image used on the cover of a fundraising booklet from the Joint Antifascist Refugee Committee under the slogan “Help Us Climb the Stairway to Life”).

The portrait of a doctor examining a child at the USC dispensary in Toulouse, published in the November 1946 issue of the Christian Register, looks like an ad for a drug company. (Interestingly, medical advertising was among the few commercial assignments that Rosenblum ever took on.)

The Rosenblum archives hold 46 photos of Spanish refugees. Two were first published on the covers of the December 1946 issue of the Christian Register and the 1946 holiday issue of the New York Times Magazine.

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reporting on the Spanish Civil War was a job fraught with emotional and political tensions. Several prominent journalists abandoned neutral objectivity in favor of a deeply felt commitment to the Republican cause. Photographers, too, had a hard time distinguishing reporting from advocacy and the moral imperative to provide immediate help.

In January 1939, Capa was in Catalonia covering the exodus toward the French border. On the 15th, his camera frames a young girl laying exhausted on a couple of sacks at a refugee transit center in Barcelona. “She must be very tired,” he notes, “since she does not play with the other children; she does not sit. But her eye follows me, one large dark eye follows my every movement. It is difficult to work under such a gaze. It is not easy to be in such a place and not be able to do anything except record the suffering that others must endure.”

Capa—a displaced leftist Jew himself, after all—has a hard time accepting his passive role; but it is also clear that he hopes his images will sway someone else to take action. If the girl’s gaze made him uncomfortable, he knew that a photograph of that gaze could move thousands of viewers. Given their sympathy for the Republican cause, it is not surprising that photographers and filmmakers were quite willing to let relief organizations use their images of refugees to raise awareness and relief funds among the public. In the framework of a leaflet or ad campaign, the moral dimension of the images, often left fuzzy in the press coverage, was suddenly crystal clear: right next to them was a direct appeal to the viewer’s conscience and a clear recipe for action. “80,000 children look to us,” says an early leaflet from the Social Workers Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, entitled “Children in Concentration Camps.” The text leaves little room for ambiguity: “What you do today makes their world tomorrow.” “They have suffered too much,” “Send your check, your money, or money-order today.”

Fundraising materials like these show that their editors fully realized the power of images. And they clearly preferred those that combined notions of innocence and suffering—women, children and families—with the kind of gaze that sent a chill up Capa’s spine. In fact, the Social Workers leaflet features some of the Hungarian’s most touching refugee portraits: a mother in a French camp blowing her son’s nose; a dark-haired girl of about 10, a sleeping baby in her lap, looking earnestly, almost defiantly, into the camera, while a boy lies at her feet. Their misery was palpable, but helping them was easy: a donation of $1.50 buys a Play and Work Package with crayons and a drawing book; $40 will bring a child to the Americas.

Rosenblum

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Sofo museum in Madrid purchased a set of 30; in 2005 they were part of a Rosenblum retrospective at PhotoEspaña in Madrid. The 25 photographs displayed at the King Juan Carlos Center until May were given as a gift to the Taminent Library by the Rosenblum family. In the first time a large set from the series has been shown in the United States. Rosenblum’s photographs for the USC form an integral part of his career. Following in Hine’s footsteps, he recorded the impact on ordinary people—particularly children—of some of the major events of the 20th century, from economic depression to colonialism and armed conflict.

Working in East Harlem, Haiti, Europe, and the South Bronx, he was drawn to situations that revealed the experiences of immigrants and the poor. Early on, he made an important discovery. “I realized,” he said, “that I worked best when I was photographing something or someone I loved and that through my photographs I could pay them homage.”

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Human suffering above and beyond politics

Capa’s work is a good example of the blurring border between news coverage and relief efforts in the wake of the Spanish conflict. Although he had left Spain on January 28 and gone to New York, he returned to southern France in March to visit the camps at Argelès-sur-mer, Bram, and Le Barcarès, in part as an assignment for the Comité international de coordination et d’information pour l’aide à l’Espagne républicaine, the French counterpart to the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. As soon as the North American Committee in New York received a set of prints, they incorporated them into their own publicity. But they also sent them on to the American media, alerting them to the Committee’s one-million-dollar relief campaign. Capa’s photos from his March trip are as powerful as ever: famished Spaniards wrapped in blankets in front of improvised tents and huts in the sand; a corpulent French gendarme impassively contemplating a long row of identical wooden crosses on what can only be fresh graves; five squatting men with their trousers on their ankles in an endless, face-covered expanse of beach. The Committee’s efforts paid off: on April 16, the New York Times printed three of Capa’s images in its Sunday photo section on a full page dedicated to Spain, mentioning the campaign. In May, the New Masses did a full-page photo spread on the Spanish “heroes”: “These refugees, tempered in the blast furnace of fascism, are 400,000 living witnesses to the crimes of Franco. They are the most important refugees in the world.” The large cache of negatives from Capa, Tarro, and Seymour that were recently recovered includes 10 rolls covering the French camps. A selection will be shown at the symposium on May 1.

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the Modern Refugee

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the politics of humanitarianism

Refuge was the SRRC’s last large fundraising project before it succumbed to the political tensions undermining the Left’s relief efforts in the wake of the Spanish War. The Refugee Relief Campaign had initially come out of the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. But while the Committee’s goals were political in nature (as its name clearly indicated), the SRRC explicitly profiled itself as purely humanitarian—a “non-political relief organization made up of hundreds of individuals who are interested in aiding the Spanish refugees.” “This,” an informational handout emphasized, “is its sole purpose. It has no connection with any political group and does not engage in any other activity.”

It was an important distinction. During the previous three years, hundreds of organizations in many countries had drummed up support for Spain. Although from the beginning much of the fundraising had been geared toward humanitarian aid (in part because other forms of support were prohibited by legislation demanding neutrality or non-intervention), almost all of the organizations involved were clearly identified with either the Republicans or the Nationalists. (The main exceptions were the Quakers and the Red Cross.) During the war, most groups had focused on political work, particularly mobilizing public opinion in favor of one side or the other. Franco’s victory confronted these organizations with a different reality. Pro-Franco groups could tranquilly disband. But most of those supporting the Republic recognized that, even if they refused to give up the fight against fascism, the new situation in Spain called for different tactics and priorities. To be sure, the political struggle continued after April 1939—the goal now was to block international recognition of the Franco regime—but humanitarian work took center stage. The decision to return to the politics and to focus on humanitarian aid was as tactical as it was pragmatic. Of course it was overwhelmingly clear that the hundreds of thousands of Spaniards in France—among whom were also some former International Brigades—needed urgent help. What was needed more