



Carl Mydans
1938

A native of Boston, Carl Mydans (1907-2004) was born into a family of second-generation Russian immigrants. He studied journalism at Boston University, where he first learned how to take and develop photographs. After he graduated in 1930, he found work as a reporter for *American Banker*, but eventually bought a 35-millimeter Contax camera, which was a competitor to the more-famous Leica brand. The Contax was small, and enabled its carrier to easily roam about and take photos with a

minimum of advance preparation. He quickly mastered the camera, and began to sell his work to *Time* and other magazines.



In 1935, Mydans was hired as a photographer with a U.S. federal agency called the Resettlement Administration, which later became the Farm Security Administration. He traveled throughout New England and the South, documenting the failed end of a rural-based economy, and gained a reputation for his images of bedraggled Arkansas farmers and their families. It was the Great Depression, and the poorest of America's poor were devastated by the economic downturn. One picture, of a Tennessee family living in a hut built on an abandoned truck chassis, portrays the misery of the times as starkly as any photographs by his more celebrated contemporaries in the FSA.

After a more than a year with the Farm Security Administration, Mydans was hired by *Life* magazine just before its debut issue hit newsstands in late 1936. He was only the fifth photographer on its staff, joining an impressive roster that included Alfred Eisenstaedt

and Margaret Bourke-White. He spent 40 years with *Life* and delivered some of the most potent images of American triumph in World War II — in mid-1945, Mydans captured the famous image of General MacArthur striding ashore, who had declared, when the Japanese came in 1942, "I shall return," and Mydans' photograph of the formidable general immortalized that claim for posterity. Earlier in the Philippines capital of Manila, Mydans and his wife were captured by incoming Japanese troops in January of 1942. They were held captive for almost two years—first in Manila, then Shanghai—and were later released in a prisoner-exchange agreement. After a brief respite in New York, both Mydans and his wife returned to the combat zone, this time in Europe as the war wound to a close. Mydans also captured another memorable image — the end of the war in the Pacific, when General MacArthur and the Japanese delegation signed the official documents of surrender on board the *U.S.S. Missouri* in September, 1945. In all, Mydans travelled more than 45,000 miles during WWII.



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