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Inge Morath, Photographer With a Poetic Touch, Dies at 78

By DOUGLAS MARTINJAN. 31, 2002

Inge Morath, a photographer who brought a whimsical, lyrical touch to her images from travelogues to reportage to portraits, died yesterday at New York Hospital in Manhattan. She was 78 and lived in Roxbury, Conn.

Arthur Miller, her husband, said the cause of death was lymphoma.

"She made poetry out of people and their places over half a century," Mr. Miller said.

Her work included striking portraits of both posed celebrities and fleeting images of anonymous passers-by. Her feeling for places as reflected in images of Boris Pasternak's home, Chekhov's house and Mao Zedong's bedroom was so sensitive that some viewers insisted they could see invisible people.

But many critics said the pictures spoke eloquently for themselves.

"Inge Morath possesses the priceless quality of making the world look as though it had been discovered only this morning and she was present with her lens to record its bright freshness," Harrison E. Salisbury wrote in *The New York Times Book Review* about the couple's book "In Russia" (Viking, 1969).

In the later phases of her long career, Ms. Morath produced books with her husband: he provided words and she the pictures. Beyond their respective artistic talents, the books were enhanced by his easy access to top figures in culture and other fields and her great facility with languages. For example, she spent years learning Chinese before the couple tackled China.

In an essay in *The New York Times* concerning their book "In the Country" (Viking, 1977), Mr. Miller suggested such collaborations allowed the two to play with notions of time. "As always, the camera sees the past -- all it can see -- and here it speaks of a symmetry of action and thought and a revolution based on empirical common sense, when in truth these people watch the television news for the event on Wall Street, in Washington or Korea that will affect the price of fertilizer and crops," he wrote. "The surreal emerges from the fragility of what camera and mind can grasp as real."

Inge Mörath (with umlaut over the o) was born on May 27, 1923, in Graz, Austria. (She lost the umlaut somewhere in her international career.) Her parents, both scientists,

were well off and brought her up in their liberal Protestant tradition. They moved frequently, and were living in Berlin at the outbreak of World War II.

She was drafted to work in an airplane factory with Ukrainian prisoners of war after she declined to be a Nazi supporter. The factory was regularly bombed; after one bombing, she remembered running through the streets of the devastated city holding a bouquet of lilacs above her head. In an interview with Joyce Wadler that appeared in *The New York Times* on March 18, 1998, she recalled walking through the countryside and witnessing the horror of war.

"Everyone was dead or half dead," she said. "I walked by dead horses, by women with dead babies in their arms. I can't photograph war for this reason."

After the war, she used the language expertise she had honed at the University of Berlin to translate for occupying Americans, and then to work as Austrian editor of an American government-controlled magazine. She began to write articles to accompany the photographs of Ernst Haas, and was invited to Paris by Robert Capa with Mr. Haas to serve as an editor of the just-founded Magnum agency.

She began photographing in London in 1951, and assisted Henri Cartier-Bresson as a researcher in 1953 and 1954. In 1955, after working two years as a photographer, she became a member of Magnum, which functions as a cooperative.

Her many foreign assignments included a trip to Iran for *Holiday* magazine in 1956; there she wore the traditional chador and traveled alone most of the time.

In the late 1950's she saved Audie Murphy, the actor and war hero, from drowning when he was in Mexico making a movie "The Unforgiven." Ms. Morath jumped into a cold mountain lake in her underwear, swam a half-mile and dragged Mr. Murphy back by her bra strap -- at least in her telling.

Other notable assignments included shooting the stills in London for John Huston's film "Moulin Rouge" (1952), in which she had to make do with three rolls of color film because it was so scarce at the time. She developed a lifelong friendship with Mr. Huston, something she often did with her subjects. "Photography is essentially a personal matter, a search for inner truth," she said.

In 1960, she was photographing the filming of "The Misfits" in Reno, Nev. One of the stars was Marilyn Monroe, who was accompanied by her husband at that time, Mr. Miller. She took a famous image of the two together: Mr. Miller, with his cigarette, Monroe leaning out the window with her back turned.

But she said that it was difficult to get them close enough together to photograph. The marriage soon broke up; Ms. Morath married Mr. Miller in 1962, and they had one child, Rebecca, who lives in Manhattan. Rebecca has one son.

Ms. Morath -- who practiced yoga, swam daily and was a vegetarian -- continued to photograph until two weeks ago. Elliott Erwitt, a veteran photographer for Magnum,

remembered her as a wonderful hostess. "It was kind of a permanent salon that she managed beautifully," he said. "She was at ease in any situation."