

N. JAY JAFFEE

American, 1921–1999

## Learning to Skate, Livonia Avenue East New York, Brooklyn

1949

Gelatin silver print

19.4 × 16 cm (7<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.) Image

35.6 × 27.8 cm (14 × 11 in.) Sheet

Gift of Jamie Niven, 1980.122.001.BB

After profound experiences as a soldier in World War II, N. Jay Jaffee found solace in photography. The camera helped him to concentrate his attention, express his feelings of melancholy and reconnect with other people. Nathan Jaffee was born in Brownsville, Brooklyn, the son of Jewish immigrants from Russia and Poland.<sup>1</sup> Yiddish was spoken in their home. Jaffee's childhood was sometimes difficult. His father worked as a cutter in the garment industry, but his mother was asthmatic and the family moved several times in search of a suitable home for her. When Jaffee was seven years old, an older brother was killed in an industrial accident. In 1932, the family settled at the western edge of Crown Point, Brooklyn. Nearby was the Prospect Place Market. This bustling district, the center of a thriving, diverse community of immigrants from Eastern Europe, was the gathering place for Jaffee and his friends during his adolescent years. He attended secondary school at the New York School of Printing and was trained as a pressman, layout artist and typesetter.

Jaffee's mother died when he was 15 years old. He left school and began working as a typesetter. Soon both his father and older brother moved away from New York City, leaving him on his own. Eventually he found camaraderie and political kinship in the Wholesale and Warehouse Workers Union, Local 65,

headquartered at Tom Moony Hall, on Astor Place in the East Village, where Jaffee met his future wife.

Jaffee was a printing-plant foreman when he was drafted into the Army in 1942. He served three years in the 104th Infantry Division and became a squad leader in the 415th Infantry Regiment, the Timberwolves, a unit trained for night fighting. They were involved in heavy combat on the Northern Front over six months. In late October and early November 1944, the 415th Infantry Regiment were involved in the Battle of the Scheldt, fighting in rain and snow alongside Anglo-Canadian allies.<sup>2</sup> They suffered many casualties in order to recapture the Scheldt Estuary and open the port of Antwerp so the Allied offensive in northwest Europe could be resupplied. With other members of his regiment, Jaffee was awarded a Bronze Star for distinguished service in this campaign. Dismayed by military power structures and suffering from the trauma of combat, he was haunted by his wartime experiences, but like many combat veterans he seldom spoke of those events or their effects on him.<sup>3</sup>

Jaffee had married on leave in 1945, and after the war he and his wife Isabel were eager to settle and begin a family. They rented the top floor of a duplex in Brooklyn and painted the apartment in lively colors. Jaffee had no desire to return to the



printing plant and eventually found a career as a salesman of commercial printing.<sup>4</sup> The return to civilian life was challenging; Jaffee suffered with post-traumatic stress disorder and feelings of melancholy, and he had lost some of his prewar memories. When his brother took up photography as a hobby he followed suit, wanting his children to have clearer memories of their early lives than he had. Jaffee bought a Kodak Monitor folding camera and began to photograph his home, his neighborhood and the city. Some of his photographs convey a sense of despondency and dread—images of isolated figures in overwhelming cityscapes of looming, darkened buildings and rubble-strewn vacant lots surrounded by wire fences. However, he also photographed pleasant human interactions. A few blocks from home he discovered the Blake Avenue Market. There, while focusing his camera on everyday life, Jaffee found relief from feelings of dread.

In 1948 Jaffee signed up for a 10-week photography course at the union hall in Astor Place, taught by Sid Grossman. This noted documentarian recognized Jaffee's talent and offered encouragement and advice about equipment and technique.<sup>5</sup> Jaffee also began to visit the Photo League, a membership organization in Manhattan where amateur and professional photographers combined resources to finance shared facilities.<sup>6</sup> Modest dues supported the maintenance of darkrooms, meeting rooms, a gallery and classes, at a time when photography was not taught in trade or art schools. Most League members were very like Jaffee: first-generation New Yorkers who had been educated in public schools. Many were well read, with wide knowledge of history, music and art. Their politics leaned to the left. Nearly a third of the Photo League members were women, many serving as club

officers. These photographers chronicled urban life with a sense of social consciousness. Monthly meetings at the League often featured presentations by leading photographers, critics and historians. Jaffee attended lectures by W. Eugene Smith, Paul Strand (Cat. nos. 48, 66) and others. After about 18 months, with increasing family responsibilities, and the intention of building his own darkroom, he stopped visiting the Photo League. He had been guided and encouraged by colleagues he met there, and had learned that he was part of a historical lineage of photographers.

This remarkably tender photograph taken on the street reflects Jaffee's acute perception, his skill at capturing a powerful moment and his gift for storytelling.<sup>7</sup> When he noticed this girl skating haltingly forward, supported by her father, Jaffee artfully framed his image: the concrete sidewalk seams plot a recession into the distance, while on the right, diminishing vertical mullions between tall storefront windows reinforce the processional effect. The young girl teeters on the roller skates strapped on her shoes. The adjustable straps hang down in long tails, showing how small she is. Her father—larger, visually darker and stable—slowly steps forward, supporting her by lifting her waistband, which raises her slacks and exposes her socks and narrow ankles, accentuating her insecurity. The angle of his head suggests a meaningful glance at the girl, emphasized by a chevron of light pointing up from the pavement, even though his face is not visible. A dog can be seen in the gap between father and daughter, its feathery tail at the apex of the triangle. The girl seems to be distracted by animal, reaching out toward it with her hidden right hand. The arms of father and daughter cross near the center of the photograph, suggesting a

bond of reassurance and trust that seems also to be a visible symbol of affection. Another child beyond, perhaps an older brother, is confident enough on his skates to chat with friends. He and his friends are bundled up. The young girl wears a wool coat and a felt hat topped by a yarn bobble. It must be winter, and the girl may be trying out a holiday present. What appears to be a pair of knitted gloves lie on the sidewalk in front of her—another obstacle from which she must be protected. Jaffee often photographed people from the back, bringing the viewer into a scene with him. These images reveal how expressive posture can be, and the photographer's sensitivity to people and events.

In 1950 Edward Steichen purchased three of Jaffee's photographs for the Museum of Modern Art and included them in the exhibition *Photographs by 51 Photographers*. One of these, *Bryant Park*, has received wide attention. It represents five businessmen sunning themselves on the stone steps of the William Cullen Bryant monument.<sup>8</sup> Despite their proximity, these men ignore each other, preferring a quiet, personal lunchtime moment. The theme of New Yorkers striving to preserve some personal space is common in Jaffee's photographs; so is the subject of loneliness and alienation in the city.<sup>9</sup>