Over the past twenty years, there have been thorough studies of the Czech avant-garde between the wars, yet the name of Přemysl Koblic was mentioned only occasionally. No individual exhibition of Koblic’s work was arranged during his lifetime or afterwards although his theoretical findings and photographic practice significantly influenced Czech photography and foreshadowed its future development. The only exhibitions that focused on his work were those organised in the 1960s and 1970s by Rudolf Skopec and the famous show Česká fotografie 1918–1938 (Czech Photography) prepared by Antonín Dufek and his collaborators in 1981. The only solo exhibition, a small reminiscence of Koblic’s work was organised by the writer of these lines at the Josef Sudek Gallery in Prague in 1997.

Přemysl Koblic was born on July 2, 1892, in Prague to a chemical engineer whose profession predestined his son’s life. In 1911, Koblic began to study at the Czech Technical University in Prague; however, his studies were interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War. After basic training he was sent to the Isonzo Front in Slovenia at the end of 1915, serving in the 91st infantry regiment and becoming an army photographer. Koblic’s photographs provided a realistic rendering of life in the trenches similar to the pictures of the four years younger Josef Sudek and many other photographers.

In the summer of 1918, Přemysl Koblic finished his military service and returned to the university. After graduation in the spring of 1919, he first became an assistant at the sugar-making department of the Czech Technical University, and later worked in the Patent Office (1921–1935) where he was in charge of photography, prints, and food.

Sports and photography had been two great passions of Přemysl Koblic since his childhood when his lifelong experimentation journey started. Prior to the First World War, he published his first technical texts and in 1920 he was already a member of the Amateur Photographers’ Club of Královské Vinohrady. Alois Zych, the long-time Amateur Photographers’ Club official and renowned photographer of nudes, was the most prominent member of this prestigious Prague club which from 1930 resided in the beautiful Valdek Palace. Over a decade, Robert A. Šimon, Václav Čerwenka, Jan Srp, Albert Keclík, Augustin Myška, Josef Prokop, and František Oliverius were the club’s most active members. Drahomír J.
Žánr – fotografi e výjevů published in his book viewpoint. The most coherent explanation was that Koblic was not asserting his own creative nists who defended or denied the photographic confl ict between the two tenacious antago- dispute under the pseudonym Fotolín Matlák (Horizon) Fotografi cký obzor (Photographic the pages of Rudolf Paďouk and Jan Lauschmann on ticipants the Brno Film-Photo group, which were crucial for his future work. In the mid-1920s, argu- mentative clashes over the new form and mis- sion of Czech photography culminated, which was refl ected in the harsh disagreement be- tween Rudolf Padouk and Jan Lauschmann on the pages of Fotografický obzor (Photographic Horizon) magazine. Koblic intervened in their dispute under the pseudonym Fototín Matlák (‘Photo Smudge’) using humour to ease the confl ict between the two tenacious antago- nists who defended or denied the photographic printing processes. Nonetheless, it did not mean that Koblic was not asserting his own creative viewpoint. The most coherent explanation was published in his book Žánr – fotografi e výjevů (Genre – 1931) where he states: “[…] if amateur photography searches its true determination, which is innate and nat- ural, it must be searched in particular, or at least strongly, in the depiction of movement, life, and activity. Speaking about activity and movement, the personal movement, the genre, is closest to man. The genre, particularly of people living in the city, surrounds their en- tire lives in all its beauty and plentiful varie- ty of shapes, lines, tones, colours, lights, and shades that are closest to man because they are his.” Koblic dedicated his life to elaborate on the methods of the photographer’s work in the street, which was naturally included in his approach. Perhaps the most famous genre photograph of Koblic was Kasaka (Sacklaw) sometimes called U stolu (At the Table) from the mid-1930s which Václav Chochola pointed out with admiration even over half a centu- ry later. Koblic’s contemporaries Josef Sudek, Jaromír Funke, Adolf Schneeberger, and oth- ers also photographed in the streets, rendering work motifs; however, none of them turned the modern city into a crucial photographic theme. Such a tendency emerged later, in the 1940s, and was connected with the Czech ar- tistic war Group 42 established in 1942, and its only photographer Miroslav Háč. Economic crisis affected the fi rst half of the 1930s and left-wing Přemysl Koblic col- laborated with the Brno Film-Photo group of the Left Front which was led by theorist Lubomír Linhart. Several politically charged works originated at that time: Pobílé nad Pra- gou (Picklocks over Prague), Dach Ignáce z Loyol- aly (The Ghost of Ignatius of Loyola). Yet, Ko- blic’s work departed from the newly emerging photojournalism of the Communist periodicals which often published anonymous images taken by ‘working-class photo reporters’. In the 1930s, two of his new books were included in the Odeon Publishing House edition Fotografie vůči světu (Photography Sees the World), edited by Jaromír Funke. The two published titles Fo- tografosvání v plenéru (Open Air Photography, 1937) and Zvětšování (Enlarging, 1938) were equipped with perfectly arranged photo ap- pendices and samples of the most up-to-date work. After Augustin Škarda resigned in 1936, Přemysl Koblic was the editor-in-chief of Fo- tografický obzor magazine and compiled the almanac Českoslavenská fotografie (Czechoslo- vak Photography, 1937). He closely cooperat- ed with Fotografie (Photography, 1933–1941) magazine, still undervalued, which was led by the theorist and photographer Karel Her- mann. Similar to Koblic, this long-time friend of his has not yet earned appropriate atten- tion. Alberto Vojtech Frčel, a traveller and cac- tus grower, was another friend of Koblic who visited him in his Villa Božinka in Košice. Not only did Koblic experiment in photo- graphic chemistry but he also promoted the emerging Czech production of photographic material (Foma, Ako, Neobrom), used his own small-format cameras, and cooperated with the Kola-Kolář Company. The tireless inno- vator shared his fi ndings readily in numer- ous articles and guides, and various courses and lectures held at amateur photo clubs and at public venues. In addition to the aforemen- tioned Czech Amateur Photographers’ Club in Prague, Koblic had an impact on further photo- and fi lm amateur associations, such as those of Vršovice and Žižkov. The photographic work of Přemysl Koblic and the technology he used also greatly infl uenced the ‘generation of magazine photography’ after the mid-1930s (Jan Lukas, Václav Jírů, Ladislav Sítenšek, Sláva Štochl, Josef Voříšek, and others) and foreshadowed topics of photographs refl ecting the spirit of ‘everyday poetics’ in the second half of the 1950s. Besides his choice of topic, the unique- ness of Přemysl Koblic’s approach lay in his spontaneity. Many of his photographs are sur- prising because of the ease of his excellent photographic technique. It was not a matter of technology but rather his skills; he could flawlessly expose his subject in a fraction of a second. Often they are images of people who were within reach of Koblic, at such imme- diate proximity that no one else had photo- graphed before. In his above-quoted publica- tion, Koblic suggests: “Putting the camera in one’s eye, quickly and dynamically, and focus- ing on the previously chosen group of people is hard for most of us because of inappropriate inhibitions that are innate to most people. For a genre photographer, the vivid surroundings must only be a subject of photography, nothing else, and all the discouraging thoughts about what could be said or imagined must be put aside inconsiderately.” The entire life of Přemysl Koblic was connected with the Prague quarter of Vršovice; he turned his fi at at Ruská Street No. 18 into an experimental photographic and chemical lab- oratory. Vršovice was in his spotlight for many years; he depicted it in all seasons throughout his life and even published many its photos equipped with texts. But he focused on oth- er Prague locations, too, such as Pražačka in Žižkov, Podoli, Braník, Košice, the mysterious quarter Na Františku, and many other places. In addition to the depicted reality, his pictures often render the tense social scenes which antici- pated the sociological photography of the 1970s and 1980s. Whether some of the pub- lished pictures were isolated experiments or parts of larger collections and series remains unknown. From the 1930s he worked with motion blur that brought unique dynamics to his photographs. The most famous and frequent- ly published example was his reportage from the Sokol Festival in 1948 Čtvrtá dimenze (The Fourth Dimension) where he used a wide-an- gle camera. In the next years, he quite un- fortunately became involved in the Czechoslo- vak Union of Socialist Photography and Nový
fotografie (New Photography) magazine which was published from 1950 and where František Doležal, the initiator of Socialistická fotografie (Socialist Photography) anthology (1951) and author of the dogmatic publication Thema v nové fotografii (Theme in New Photography, 1952) was the leading personality. It is rather significant that Koblic's photographs stood out from the average production of that time despite the odd alliance which propagated (never specified) principles of socialist realism in Czech photography. Although he tried to comply with the propaganda aim of photography, the 'progressive' content, and desire for 'vivid pictures' from the socialist presence, the results were often quite different. His long-lasting interest in the documentary depiction of reality including social relations resulted in the remarkable images such as Středisko lidového hlasování (The Centre of People's Voting). This chapter of Koblic's legacy, however, has not been analysed thus far.

Similar to Sudek, Přemysl Koblic resisted to be perceived only as a clerk with hard-earned personal status and his personal life was very eccentric even for the quite tolerant time. This was further enhanced by Koblic's bizarre interests, hobbies, and obsessions. Apart from photographic chemistry (Pextral developer remained popular long after Koblic's death), the construction of apparatuses (e.g. 'Pohotovka' / Prompt Device), and photographic terminology (osvit for the intensity of illumination was one of the many terms he suggested and which became widespread), the following interests of Koblic should be highlighted: chemistry in the food industry (a patent for yogurt production, diabetic sausages), bodybuilding (e.g. he was even a nude model for photographer Jindřich Hatlák), research of natural medicaments (sepia bone effects), astronomical observations, muddled linguistics (Pre-Slavic language – the earliest and most original European language), and mycology. Koblic's social exclusivity was further emphasised by his homosexual orientation.

Přemysl Koblic died in Prague on November 19, 1955, at the age of sixty-three. Owing to the unflagging efforts of Rudolf Skopec in Czech photography, the Moravian Gallery in Brno acquired part of Koblic's heritage and a large collection of positive and negative images arrived at the National Technical Museum in Prague. The personality and work of Přemysl Koblic is veiled in many legends recalled by contemporary witnesses. For example, Jan Lukas recounts how Koblic surprised him by conjuring a trick in the mid-1930s when he developed films under a pelerine thrown over a café table. Similar stories about 'The Magician of Vršovice' as Svatopluk Sova referred to him in Pestrý týden (The Colourful Week) magazine in 1943 overshadowed Koblic's true merit – his photography work.

Jan Mlčoch
Prague underwent a major change during Koblic’s life, especially in the 1920s and 1930s. Great Prague originated by joining the previously independent towns such as Královské Vinohrady, Žižkov, Karlin, Smíchov, and others in 1922. Under the supervision of the State Regulation Committee, housing development changed dramatically both in the newly joined areas and in the historical centre where single modern buildings, blocks of houses, and streets merged with the original houses. The new building contributed to the demise of the village character of some outskirts. After the stagnation during the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Koblic witnessed the era of the implementation of buildings which had been incomplete or designed prior to the ban of the building and designing activities in 1941, and the housing development during the two-year and the first-year plans.

Koblic’s pictures of Prague show his original style and topics. Save for a few exceptions, he did not photograph typical postcard scenes. Similar to many photographers, Koblic was naturally attracted to picturesque areas such as the vicinity of St Castulus Church and the Convent of St Agnes of Bohemia where the signs of demolition and redevelopment were still visible. Keen interest in everyday life on streets, the disappearing country character in the outskirts, workers on construction and demolition sites, fairs, markets, sports events, and Sokol festivals soon prevailed in Koblic’s work.

Koblic was not a true documentary photographer. For him, creating documents was a sporadic activity which, in addition to his contract work, included Sokol festivals and primarily “his” Vršovice. The lively snapshots taken in the streets, whose setting there was secondary at the time, became documents only after some time. Koblic had his favourite places where he repeatedly returned. One can only guess whether or not it was his intention to create collections which would today be called time-collecting. Although his photographs depicted the changes of some places directly, in many cases one does not realise the extent of these changes until they are compared with the current appearance.

Many pictures were taken from above, using balconies or windows of tall buildings. At other times, Koblic photographed from immediate proximity. Naturally, the view from above photography, which opens up a dimen-
sion unachievable from the street level, was not just Koblíč's specialty. Yet, his selection of places, such as ordinary yards or the averted side of the street not meant for the eyes of the public was especially unique. He liked to take pictures from unusual angles, against the light and during rain. He was a bright observer who was able to capture the atmosphere of a place and moment without flaw. Furthermore, his endless experimenting with photographic technology and the construction of his own devices contributed to the unusual geometry of many images. Sometimes they were wide-screen pictures with a deep depth of field, other times the lens with a longer focal length was used causing a significantly distorted perspective. The stereoscopic apparatus for 6 x 13 cm glass plates, which Koblíč used non-traditionally, was another specialty. With a few exceptions, Koblíč did not strive to create a stereoscopic image; instead, by changing the two lenses during exposure he managed to take two different pictures, often from very distant places, on the same plate. Both the images had a square format which suited Koblíč and which he generally recommended. This way, Koblíč created plenty of pictures of Prague before the mid-1930s.

Our story about Koblíč's photographs highlights those places that changed significantly since his time, often beyond recognition. For clarity, the current street names are stated. The historical names are used only for the no longer existing streets.

Old and New Towns, Lesser Town, and Hradčany

The photographs of the Convent of St Agnes of Bohemia and its vicinity are among the most valuable Prague collections from the documentary point of view. Koblíč repeatedly photographed Rášnovka, Ú Milosrdných, Kozi, and Anežská Streets and Haštal Square. The first pictures were taken in the second half of the 1920s when some houses on the embankment and part of Rášnovka Street were demolished for the construction of the Ministry of Commerce. They look toward the Kandert Spa on Revoluční Street, ruins of houses, terrain adjustments, and construction of the Ministry of Commerce on the plot of the demolished Central Municipal Storage on Na Františku Embankment. It is hard to estimate whether Koblíč photographed the demolition of the storage No. 1039 in 1925 (later the residence of the Ministry of Commerce) by coincidence or on purpose. Many pictures were taken from the windows of the Ministry of Commerce where Koblíč's employer, the Patent Office, relocated in late 1933. The windows provided a great view of Rášnovka Street (including its no longer existing parts) Malá Klášterní Street, and the embankment. These pictures are unique and are of precious documentary value as well as those taken from the street level. The curved Malá Klášterní Street was popular among many photographers, mostly its lower part with small houses clinging to the former Clarisse convent. But Koblíč made a complete photo-documentation with views of both sides. The same goes for the section of Rášnovka Street from Haštal Square to Klášterská Street where Rášnovka today de facto ends although formally it continues all the way to Revoluční Street. Many of these places were photographed at the time of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

Prior to its renovation, the Convent of St Agnes of Bohemia housed the poor; there were flats, all kinds of small businesses, and storages. In the series of pictures, Koblíč captured the life inside of the premises and local residents as well as random passers-by and the changing of the many company signs. The collection of 12 pictures from the beginning of the convent compound reconstruction during the 1940s is also outstanding.