



Introduction

Over the past twenty years, there have been thorough studies of the Czech avant-garde between the wars, yet the name of Přemysl Koblíček was mentioned only occasionally. No individual exhibition of Koblíček'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 Koblíček's work was organised by the writer of these lines at the Josef Sudek Gallery in Prague in 1997.

Přemysl Koblíček was born on July 2, 1892, in Prague to a chemical engineer whose profession predestined his son's life. In 1911, Koblíček 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. Koblíček's pho-

tographs 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 Koblíček 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 Koblíček 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 Červenka, Jan Srp, Albert Keclík, Augustin Myška, Josef Prokop, and František Oliverius were the club's most active members. Drahomír J.

Růžička was its honorary member and Josef Stanislav Krofta, who returned from America, became a regular member. Jiří Jeníček, the former member of the rival Czech Amateur Photographers' Club, later joined in as well as Antonín Johann, Josef Pelech, Josef Voříšek, Jaroslav Kohlík, Julius Andres, Ladislav Siten-ský (one of the youngest members), and many others. In 1923, Koblíček joined the rival Czech Amateur Photographers' Club in Prague (later known as Nekázanka). The works of that time still reflected the abating aesthetics of pre-war photography with its typical melancholy and manual work which produced positive images (gum bichromates, etc.), and the post-war need to create 'beautiful photographic images'. However, Koblíček soon took interest in civilian motifs such as railway stations, street bustle, and human work: *Na stavbě (At the Construction Site)*, *Průmyslový motiv (Industrial Motif)*, *Asfaltér (Asphalt Worker)* which were crucial for his future work. In the mid-1920s, argumentative clashes over the new form and mission of Czech photography culminated, which was reflected in the harsh disagreement between Rudolf Pačouk and Jan Lauschmann on the pages of *Fotografický obzor (Photographic Horizon)* magazine. Koblíček intervened in their dispute under the pseudonym Fotolín Matlák ('Photo Smudge') using humour to ease the conflict between the two tenacious antagonists who defended or denied the photographic printing processes. Nonetheless, it did not mean that Koblíček was not asserting his own creative viewpoint. The most coherent explanation was published in his book *Žánr – fotografie výjevů (Genre – Photographing Scenes, 1931)* where he states: "[...] if amateur photography searches its true determination, which is innate and natural, 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 entire lives in all its beauty and plentiful variety of shapes, lines, tones, colours, lights, and shades that are closest to man because they are his." Koblíček 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 Koblíček was *Kavka (Jackdaw)* sometimes called *U stolu (At the Table)* from the mid-1930s which Václav Chochola pointed out with admiration even over half a century later. Koblíček's contemporaries Josef Sudek, Jaromír Funke, Adolf Schneeberger, and others 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 artistic war Group 42 established in 1942, and its only photographer Miroslav Hák.

Economic crisis affected the first half of the 1930s and left-wing Přemysl Koblíček collaborated 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: *Paklíče nad Pragou (Picklocks over Praga)*, *Duch Ignáce z Loyoly (The Ghost of Ignatius of Loyola)*. Yet, Koblíček'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 vidí svět (Photography Sees the World)*, edited by Jaromír Funke. The two published titles *Fotografování 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 Koblíček was the editor-in-chief of *Fotografický obzor* magazine and compiled the almanac *Československá fotografie (Czechoslovak Photography, 1937)*. He closely cooperated with *Fotografie (Photography, 1933–1941)* magazine, still undervalued, which was led by the theorist and photographer Karel Hermann. Similar to Koblíček, this long-time friend of his has not yet earned appropriate attention. Alberto Vojtěch Frič, a traveller and cactus grower, was another friend of Koblíček who visited him in his Villa Božinka in Košíře.

Not only did Koblíček experiment in photographic 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 innovator shared his findings readily in numerous articles and guides, and various courses and lectures held at amateur photo clubs and at public venues. In addition to the aforementioned Czech Amateur Photographers' Club in Prague, Koblíček had an impact on further photo and film amateur associations, such as those of Vršovice and Žižkov. The photographic work of Přemysl Koblíček and the technology he used also greatly influenced the 'generation of magazine photography' after the mid-1930s (Jan Lukas, Václav Jirů, Ladislav Siten-ský, Sláva Štochl, Josef Voříšek, and others) and foreshadowed topics of photographs reflecting the spirit of 'everyday poetics' in the second half of the 1950s.

Besides his choice of topic, the uniqueness of Přemysl Koblíček's approach lay in his spontaneity. Many of his photographs are surprising 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 Koblíček, at such immediate proximity that no one else had photographed before. In his above-quoted publication, Koblíček suggests: "*Putting the camera in one's eye, quickly and dynamically, and focusing 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 Koblíček was connected with the Prague quarter of Vršovice; he turned his flat at Ruská Street No. 38 into an experimental photographic and chemical laboratory. 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 other Prague locations, too, such as Pražáčka in Žižkov, Podolí, Braník, Košíře, the mysterious quarter Na Františku, and many other places. In addition to the depicted reality, his pictures often render the tense social scenes which anticipated the sociological photography of the 1970s and 1980s. Whether some of the published 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 frequently published example was his reportage from the Sokol Festival in 1948 *Čtvrtá dimenze (The Fourth Dimension)* where he used a wide-angle camera. In the next years, he quite unfortunately became involved in the Czechoslovak Union of Socialist Photography and *Nová*

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 Koblíček'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 Koblíček's legacy, however, has not been analysed thus far.

Similar to Sudek, Přemysl Koblíček 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 Koblíček's bizarre interests, hobbies, and obsessions. Apart from photographic chemistry (Pextral developer remained popular long after Koblíček's death), the construction of apparatuses (e.g. 'Pohotovka' / Prompt Device), and pho-

tographic terminology (*osvit* for the intensity of illumination was one of the many terms he suggested and which became widespread), the following interests of Koblíček 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. Koblíček's social exclusivity was further emphasised by his homosexual orientation.

Přemysl Koblíček 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 Koblíček'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 Koblíček is veiled in many legends recalled by contemporary witnesses. For example, Jan Lukáš recounts how Koblíček 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 Koblíček's true merit – his photography work.

Jan Mlčoch

Introductory photo | Prague-Vršovice, Rostovská Street from U Vršovického nádraží Street, undated (1939–1945).

Closing photo | Prague-Vršovice, The corner of Rostovská and Petrohradská streets, undated (c. 1940).





Prague in Pictures by Přemysl Koblíček

4

Pavla Vrbová | Romana Kmochová

Prague underwent a major change during Koblíček's life, especially in the 1920s and 1930s.¹ Great Prague originated by joining the previously independent towns such as Královské Vinohrady, Žižkov, Karlín, 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, Koblíček 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.

Koblíček'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, Koblíček was naturally attracted to picturesque areas such as the vicinity of St Castulus Church and the Convent of St Agnes of Bo-

hemia where the signs of demolition and re-development were still visible. Keen interest in everyday life on streets, the disappearing country character in the outskirts, workers on construction and demolition sites, fun-fairs, markets, sports events, and Sokol festivals soon prevailed in Koblíček's work.

Koblíček 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. Koblíček 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, Koblíček photographed from immediate proximity. Naturally, the view from above photography, which opens up a dimen-

sion unachievable from the street level, was not just Kobic'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 × 13 cm glass plates, which Kobic used non-traditionally, was another specialty. With a few exceptions, Kobic 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.² Both the images had a square format which suited Kobic and which he generally recommended. This way, Kobic created plenty of pictures of Prague before the mid-1930s.

Our story about Kobic'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



[01]



[02]

documentary point of view. Kobic repeatedly photographed Řásnovka, U Milosrdných, Kozí, and Anežská Streets and Haštal Square. The first pictures were taken in the second half of the 1920s when some houses on the embank-

ment and part of Řásnovka Street were demolished for the construction of the Ministry of Commerce. They look toward the Kandert Spa on Revoluční Street,³ 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 Kobic photographed the demolition of the storage No. 1039 in 1925 (later the residence of the Ministry of Commerce) by coincidence or on purpose.⁴ [01] Many pictures were taken from the windows of the Ministry of Commerce where Kobic's employer, the Patent Office,⁵ relocated in late 1933. The windows provided a great view of Řásnovka Street (including its no longer existing parts) [02], 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 Kobic made a complete photo-documentation with views of both sides. The same goes for the section of Řásnovka Street from Haštal Square to Klášterská Street where Řásnovka 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, Kobic captured the life inside of the premises [03] 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.⁶ [04]



[03]



[04]