

Spent mostly in Brno, his was an extraordinarily colourful life. The photographer Karel Otto Hrubý (1916–1998) read law at Prague University, but became a teacher of photography, even though self-taught in that field (three things he had in common with the great Jaromír Funke). He was, in addition, a jazz musician, and a writer on photography, a theatre photographer, and a photojournalist. In 1952, he put down roots at the Secondary School of Applied Arts in Brno, but twenty years later he established, and then ran for seven years, a correspondence course for amateur art photographers, which was gradually transformed into today's Institute of Creative Photography at Silesian University in Opava. As a professional, he was a member of the Czechoslovak Association of Fine Arts, but that did not at all prevent him from participating, in 1969, in the amateur Association of Czech Photographers (Svaz českých fotografů), and serving briefly as its Vice Chairman, or being conferred the French title Excellence FIAP (second only to the first degree, the AFIAP, Artiste de la Fédération Internationale de l'Art Photographique, in Paris). As if that were somehow not enough, he was, from 1965 to 1972, a member of VOX, a Brno-based group of amateur photographers, and was among its leading figures (together with Jan Beran, Miloš Budík, Antonín Hinšt, Vladimír Skoupil, Soňa Skoupilová, and Josef Tichý). But he was also one of the best-known Czech photography critics, a regular and rather stern reviewer of exhibitions in Brno and elsewhere. His reviews were published in the monthly *Československá fotografie* (Czechoslovak photography) as early as 1948. From 1960 to 1973 he also published in the quarterly *Fotografie* (later briefly called *Revue fotografie*, before returning to its original title). In addition to all these commitments, Hrubý also photographed a great deal, entered his works for exhibitions at home and abroad, and showed them together with the VOX group and, on rare occasions, in solo exhibitions too. He was, as well, among the most prolific authors and co-authors of photographic publications about Brno and the regions of Moravia. Together with Hinšt, he wrote the manual *Krajinářská fotografie* (Landscape photography, 1974). He also worked in radio. Beginning in 1972, he was among the first to show photos as slide projections with musical accompaniment. It was one of the phenomena of the time, one of the ways in which amateur photographers sought to express their ideas about art. As a musician, Hrubý was highly qualified for such an approach.

It is on the whole, then fair to see Hrubý as a workaholic with a vast range of interests. He somewhat reduced the number of his activities only after going into retirement in 1977 and then especially after suffering a heart attack the next year. In 1980, however, he began a new life: he moved to a village in south Bohemia, where he then returned to an old love of his – painting (which he had pursued in his early youth and, later, as a student in Prague).

The photographs of this highly active man have very few common features. They are works that mostly have no ambition to be individual. Rather the opposite: they seek to be generally communicable and to obey generally valid laws. The photographer rarely drew attention to their masterful compositions, and, if he did, it was usually when declaring his being part of the tradition of the interwar Avant-garde. Mostly, particularly in the quick selection of a shot of some event, Hrubý revealed an ability to choose an optimal view, so that we take the composition for granted. In his approach to light, he sought clear definition – though his evening shots were an exception. He was one of the few who knew how to photograph light as a motif or indeed as the subject matter, for example, sunbeams in a forest or a factory. We should recall how differently this motif has been used. Josef Sudek's portfolio *Svatý Vít* (St Vitus, 1928) contains works that show sunbeams as lines connecting terrestrial life with God. They serve Hrubý, however, for the adoration of work and treating the factory milieu as something sacred. By contrast, Václav Jirásek, in the then abandoned 'Vaňkovka' factory (today galleries) in Brno, sought sunbeams and sunspots perhaps as a counterweight to the rack and ruin there (1994). Hrubý mastered photographic effects and liked to use, among other things, contre-jour, which, by at least the 1920s, was a kind of test of his photographic abilities. But he did not want to dazzle with effects for their own sake: contre-jour for him was usually a means of removing details in order to emphasize the overall picture. Shadows cast towards the camera could also be used as a constructive element of the composition.

In the early period of his work, Hrubý did not seek at all costs to be different from his colleagues, to draw attention to himself by means of his distinctive style. Rather, he wanted to be just as good or better than his predecessors and contemporaries. In the photography of urban and rural life he was a successor to Karel Hájek, Václav Jírů, Jan Lukas, and similar artists elsewhere in Europe, Japan, and America. Despite the division of the world, there were, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, similar trends. Among Brno-based photographers in the 1950s, Hrubý had most in common with Jan Beran, Miloš Budík, and Bohuslav Burian, and he later worked with Vilém Reichmann. Among the influences on the Brno amateurs after the Second World War and then after the Communist takeover of 1948 was the Prague-based left-wing photographer and functionary Přemysl Koblic, who also used to come to Brno. All of these photographers, because of the Iron Curtain, followed on mainly from what they had seen or read in Czechoslovak photographic periodicals, high-quality illustrated magazines, and, eventually, catalogues of international photographic salons in which they entered their works for exhibition. The catalogues usually had few illustrations, but all the greater was the influence of the works reproduced in them. Of the photographs by members of the Magnum agency, probably only a

minimum was known. The first book about Henri Cartier-Bresson was published in Czechoslovakia in 1958. And though *The Family of Man* (organized by Edward Steichen), perhaps the most famous photographic exhibition ever, began its journey around the world in 1955, it never came to Czechoslovakia. Even finding the exhibition catalogue was difficult in this country, and became possible only later, with the slight political thaw beginning in about 1958. The position of Czechoslovak photography began to improve rapidly from that point, when the Ministry of Culture organized two exhibitions of art photography and it was thus acknowledged at the pinnacle of power that selected 'products' of this mechanical medium could rank among the traditional fields of art made by hand. One might expect that photographs on both sides of the Iron Curtain would differ from each other ideologically, but that is evident only sometimes. For example, some documentary and social documentary photographs from the United States and Europe have much in common with 'socialist realism'. There is a similar tendency, for example, to monumentalize feats of architecture and engineering, industry, and labour. This branch of photography had been developing since the 1930s. In Czechoslovakia at that time, it was chiefly Vladimír Hipman who published photos of industry and physical labour. Already at the *International Exhibition of Photography*, held in the Mánes exhibition hall, Prague, in 1936, he showed his *Worker*. In 1938, he had an exhibition, entitled *Steel*, at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague. This was followed by a calendar for 1939, entitled *Jak se vyrábí ocel* (How steel is made), and then several publications after the war. In the United States, an admiration for technology had been shown by Charles Sheeler, Paul Strand, and Edward Weston as early as about 1920, and the heroization of work was most contributed to, from the early 1930s, by Lewis W. Hine's photos of workers erecting the Empire State Building. (Hine documented industry in Pittsburgh for sociologists from 1908 onward.) In the Soviet Union, the ideological promotion of industry and work had an equally long tradition. In France from 1932 onwards, a photographer of Slovak origin, François Kollar, contributed photos to the gradually published booklets called *La France travaille* (France at work). In Germany *Arbeiterfotografie*, as it was called, dominated, and photographs of Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) often showed industry. In the 1950s Hrubý's counterparts in East Germany included Gerhard Kiesling, Lotti Ortner-Röhr, Alfred Paszkowiak, and Horst Sturm. The works of these and many other photographers from different countries form a background to Hrubý's photography, about which, however, he probably knew little more than what had been published in Czech and, sometimes, East German magazines, which were distributed in great print runs in Czechoslovakia. The photos with industrial and agricultural topics probably opened the way for him to photo-books (first, *Brno*, 1951) and to his teaching at the School of Applied Arts in Brno. Today, of course, we can no longer be sure if they are unambiguously pro-regime works. The photos, for example, of smoking chimneys would at that time have expressed admiration for increasing industrialization, but Hrubý's dark shots today seem very depressing. Indeed, that may have been his intention; after all, an

interest in environmental problems is evident in a great many of his photos, albeit later ones. Concerning Hrubý's having a broad cultural background, one has to take into account that probably everyone in Brno who spoke German used to tune in to Viennese radio and, later, television. These people constituted a particular social group, even though, for linguistic reasons, not as big as the one in the north of the country, which was made up of people who watched Polish television.

Some of the earliest of Hrubý's photographs with subjects related to work but also other topics, from 1946 to 1948, are in the style of New Objectivity. The precise, 'sharp' definition of the subject matter – including factory chimneys – in a diffused neutral light contrasts with his later 'Impressionist' shots from factories. Though they most certainly do not radiate optimism, it would be wrong to say that Hrubý shunned the new state ideology, even if he was not one of its enthusiastic proponents. The photo *Spring Work*, depicting from above a view through a blossoming tree in a field worked by a tractor, comes from 1949. There is nothing morally wrong with it, just as there isn't with most of the conformist work of that period, but the photos from the previous years are weightier.

Many of his photographs from the years before the Communist takeover are published here for the first time. A number of them are inventively composed, but all provide engrossing testimony about the period just after the Second World War. Probably the rarest document is a 1945 set from the internment camp for ethnically German Czechoslovaks which was established in Maloměřice, now a part of Brno. Nor after 1948, fortunately, did Hrubý fail to document important social phenomena. His work can usefully be divided into two streams: the first, and larger, comprising works focused particularly on photography as their subject or theme; the other comprises works focused more on the demands placed on art photography, which Hrubý had to meet. In other words, this is a matter of the polarity between the photographic image of the world and the world of the photographic image. Of course, no clear-cut dividing line exists between the two; the most powerful photographs often link a revealing theme with an unusual depiction. It is fair to say as well that Hrubý made formally inconspicuous exhibition prints with subjects of everyday life, and many such prints, after being approved by various committees and juries, were exhibited and published in the press. This was true of especially difficult shots made indoors. Technique, in addition to technology, has always played an important role in photography, which is something that, because of the ease of taking digital photographs today, we are in general gradually ceasing to be conscious of.

Hrubý's shots from streets and interiors are often reportage, and are interesting mainly because of their subject matter. He documented the Communist propaganda event called 'The Youth Are in Charge of Brno' (Mládež vede Brno, when for three

days in May 1949, young people were placed in charge of various enterprises, institutions, and city government), demonstrations, recruiting campaigns for workers on collective farms, nationalization, and other events. With time, we are becoming increasingly grateful for these photos. Any attempt to express those topics artistically would only have been to their detriment. Few have survived as prints; most of the ones in this publication have recently been made from the negatives. The photographer would surely perceive their meaning differently today.

This claim is supported by the fact that, among other things, Hrubý had a great interest in ethnographic subject matter. Apart from working on commission, in which a certain affectation appears in his photos, he photographed, mainly in Slovakia, a large and extraordinarily important set of photographs of rural life. He was not really seeking to depict traditional folk costumes, material culture, or work. Instead, he captured the faces and some of the customs of Slovak hill people, who lived in symbiosis with the majestic natural world around them. Fortunately, these shots, of which we are publishing only a minimal selection, have been preserved in the Ethnographic Institute of the Moravian Museum in Brno. They merit a book of their own.

The efforts of the Communist regime to change photography into an instrument of propaganda did not last long. 'Workers in photography', as they were called after 1948, were again allowed to make works of art. The main part of the rebirth took place with the depiction of everyday life, most often in efforts to discover the wonder, poetry, and extraordinariness of the ordinary.¹ Official ideology had a hard time objecting to this poetic style, which was also being applied, for example, in literature, popular music, the new 'small format' theatres, cartoons, caricatures, painting, and sculpture. Though similar efforts were made in many other countries in Europe and elsewhere, in Czechoslovakia the poetry of everyday life was extraordinarily developed and compelling. It could follow on from the programme of the wartime artists of the Skupina 42 (Group of '42), who chose as their manifesto an earlier essay by their theorist, Jindřich Chalupecký, entitled 'Svět, v němž žijeme' (The world we live in, 1940), and in the years around 1948 managed to elaborate it sufficiently, especially in verse and painting. Not until later, was the influence, for instance, of Robert Doisneau, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Italian Neorealists, being applied all over the world. The number of photographers who left their mark on the history of this poetic style was extraordinarily high in Czechoslovakia, and we have space to name only a few here. If we omit the forerunners of the wave of the poetry of everyday life in the 1930s and 1940s (chiefly Miroslav Hák and Václav Chochola), then Karel O. Hrubý holds a special place in this stream of work, both at its beginning, and in his photographs of interiors. Into his photo-book *Brno* (1951) he surreptitiously slipped two radical photographs, which we may reasonably see as picture manifestos of a movement celebrating the 'extraordinariness of the ordinary':

Brno – Podzim v ulicích (Brno: Autumn in the streets, p. 73) and *Brno – pohled s Kraví hory* (Brno, a view from Kraví hora, p. 75). The former brings to mind a whole series of subsequent similar photographs of streets in misty early evening twilight. The latter, by contrast, is fascinating for its unique conception of a sharply defined bare spot across almost the whole surface of the photo with a little strip of city in the background. Hrubý probably never again repeated this unique conception, and, as far as I know, even lost interest in the detailed presentation of surfaces that bring to mind the canvases of Art Informel painters. Another unique photo amongst his work is *A November Day* (1958), even though several similar photos were made by others in Brno (František Fojt, *When It Was Raining*, 1956), but also in Prague (Václav Jírů, *Snack Bar*, 1952, and *In a Night-time Mist*, 1952). Though such photographs were to some extent motivated by the challenge of taking them, the depressing mood of Existentialism and the Cold War materializes in them.

The shots of life in private homes are Hrubý's speciality. They follow on from the period before the Second World War and bring to mind German photography. Mainly, however, they are a variant of the Biedermeier style of the mid-nineteenth century. After all, everyday life in the twentieth century also took place mainly indoors, but creative photographers provided little evidence of that. It was not easy to distinguish their work with this subject matter from ordinary family photographs.

Another stylistic trend that left its mark on the works of almost all creative photographers was fine-art photography. On the western side of the Iron Curtain it was also called 'subjective photography', and was linked particularly with the founder of the Fotoform group, Otto Steinert. On this side of the Iron Curtain, however, it was impossible to adopt anything from the West, and the name 'subjective' had an outright provocative sound here. But otherwise the East did not differ much from the rest of the world. The common features of photography that declared itself art consisted in the reduction of the grey scale, making photography like graphic art, and heading towards abstraction. Additional possibilities were montage and various other approaches of manipulation carried out in the darkroom. Hrubý contributed to a purely formal component of art photography with only a few photographs. Interestingly, however, he also used 'abstraction' achieved by motion blur. Fine-art photography was given impetus by the necessity to continuously demonstrate that photography can be art. According to the then current understanding, this was possible only if the photographer's role in depiction was visible in the photograph. A photographer who did nothing more than capture reality was merely 'copying' it, and was therefore not an artist. An artist had to demonstrate at least an original way of seeing things, for example, in the choice of crop (it was also the period of a wide variety of print formats), the choice of lighting, and optical distortion. This conception was reflected also in photographic theory, practised in Czechoslovakia particularly by Ján Šmok with his polarity of the emotive

and the informative, in other words, art photography and non-art photography. The awareness that such theories are dependent on the times in which they have been formulated completely vanished, and, anyway, everything in the former political regime was meant to hold true for ever (and forever be perfected).

Hrubý was also among the best-known landscape photographers in Czechoslovakia. He became famous especially for his photographs of Slovak hills rippling with strips of little fields. Other of his landscape photos, usually shot from above and without a horizon, emphasize the graphic-art quality and geometric composition of the discovered place. The world-renowned Mario Giacomelli, for example, caught viewers' attention with this type of landscape work (and he was later followed by Franco Fontana with colour photographs), yet in Slovakia in the same period Martin Martinček and Igor Grossmann, to name but two, were discovering similar subject matter.

Photographers often did not think it necessary to date their works; nor did exhibition organizers or editors of books and periodicals. It is a great pity that the list of the 145 photographs from Hrubý's first exhibition, held in 1959, does not include the years of the works. Apart from the 'graphic-art' landscapes, most of Hrubý's surviving negatives are impressive landscapes with the horizon, evoking, for example, the works of Antonín Slavíček (1870–1910) and other Realist, Art Nouveau, and Impressionist landscape painters.

In the 1960s, probably in collaboration with his students, Hrubý made one of the first photographs of what is today called 'staged photography'.² The earliest photograph of this type, *Melancholy*, is from 1963 (other dating of this work is incorrect). Only research in Hrubý's papers has demonstrated that there were many of these. Like Jan Saudek and Clifford Seidling, Hrubý was among the first artists anywhere to use this new model of creative photography, which is to some extent based on Surrealism (whose practitioners in Czechoslovakia included Emile Medková and especially Václav Zykmund) and fashion photography. (It is a paradox of history that Hrubý and Zykmund knew each other personally, but Hrubý could have known only two examples of Zykmund's photos from 1944, which were shown at the *Surrealism and Photography* exhibition in the Funke Photography Gallery [Kabinet fotografie Jaromíra Funka], Brno, in 1966. Zykmund's photographs were no longer part of the exhibition when it moved to the Museum Folkwang, Essen, in 1966, and then to Bratislava and Prague, in 1968.) It then took another twenty years before they received the attention they deserve.) Among Hrubý's contemporaries, the works of Les Krims, for example, could surely never have been made without Surrealism. At the opposite pole of the imaginary polarity of staged photography one can legitimately place Sam Haskins's *Cowboy Kate and Other Stories* (1965), which almost merges with fashion photography. With Hrubý, however, the connection to models

is unclear. It seems that his staged photographs were intended for his students, who also performed in them. The frequent thematization of environmental protection merits particular appreciation. Environmental awareness, now particularly strong in Czechoslovakia, was only just getting off the ground. (The Brontosaurus Movement for young environmentalists, which is still active today, was born in 1974.)

Hrubý, through his pupils, played a big part in spreading staged photography. Among the most important group involved in this was the Brno-based Epos³ (1967–80), comprising Jiří Horák, Rostislav Košťál, František Maršálek, and Petr Sikula. It continued on the path Hrubý had set out on, and expanded it, even in the increasingly stifling atmosphere of the ‘normalization’ regime after the occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968.

Many of Hrubý’s works are among the best in Czech photography. When considering such a talented photographer, it is hard not to wonder what would have been if If, for example, he had not lived under a Communist regime. If he had not had to earn his living by teaching and making topographic publications. If he had not had to be so versatile. None the less, what he was able to achieve under the circumstances does him credit.

Antonín Dufek

¹ Lukáš Bártl, ‘Poezie všedního dne ve fotografii’, doctoral thesis, Department of Art History, Palacký University, Olomouc, 2012; idem, ‘Poezie všedního dne ve fotografii’, *Umění* LXII, 2014, pp. 36–54.

² Jiří Pátek, *Příjemné závislosti: Inscenovaná fotografie 70. let/Sweet Fixations: Staged Photography of the 1970s*, exh. cat., Brno: Moravská galerie v Brně, 2009.

³ Pavel Vančát (ed.), *Epos 1967–1980: Jiří Horák, Rostislav Košťál, František Maršálek a Petr Sikula*, exh. cat., Brno: Dům umění města Brna, 2016.