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Schicht, Baťa and the Rest / The Advertising Market in Inter-War Czechoslovakia

Pre-war advertising in Central Europe is inseparable from the name Schicht and the commercials promoting its Saponia, “the soap with the deer logo”, Radion washing powder, the toothpastes Kalodont and Thymolin and the margarines Ceres and Vitello. Schicht’s advertising items are still plentiful at collector’s auctions today. The joint-stock company Jiří Schicht – part of the Unilever holding from the 1920s – had developed the most varied styles of commercials and advertising events since the late 19th century, aimed at the urban as well as rural audiences. Advertising became omnipresent in the metropolitan milieu and in newspapers and magazines; its diverse forms came to pervade households and bombed the public several times a year with seasonal campaigns designed by various companies. Cinemas also served advertising purposes, projecting black-and-white and colour commercial slides, later often followed by screening commercial films, prior to the main program.

Czech companies, too, were building their unmistakable image in the 1930s when Irena Leschnerová and Karel Dodal arrived on the film advertising market. The Orion chocolate products, fabrics by Prokop and Čáp, Kulík Coffee, the Brouk and Babka department stores, the assortment sold by Waldes – all these had their unique style, while the most noticeable commercials came from the Zlín-based Baťa. And although Schicht more or less mirrored the

traditional style of imperial German advertising, Baťa followed the modern tendencies of American commercials.

When the avant-garde designer and artist greatly skilled in commercial graphics, Zdeněk Rykr, pondered poster design as one of the distinct advertising means, he noted: "A poster is like a young girl. It must be amusing, in fact even flirtatious, elegant and *chic*. No matter the seriousness of the subject. It should be effortless in presentation and refined in pathos. It has something of the 'gentleman rogue', something of a little white lie and something of social convention in it. – It floats above truth and dances above life. It lampoons heavy issues and ridicules virtues. And we vainly attempt it here. We are not enough airheaded for this. The dark cloud of Czechoslovak gloominess hangs above it with an almost suffocating surge."¹ The well-known author of the Orion brand logo precisely grasped one of the elementary maladies in Czech advertising during that period, which included the sphere of commercial film clouded by the "gloominess" from the 1920s to the beginnings of sound film.

Czechoslovakia and the world alike viewed the contemporary production of film commercials as marginal, as a matter condemned to short-run consumption, and most film producers merely tolerated it as a source financing their more important projects. With few exceptions, commercials were utterly anonymous works – they often lacked opening credits (similar to the TV commercial spots today); their producers provided their names only in the censorship proceeding documents, and also their authors usually remained anonymous to the grief of today's archive keepers. But had it not been for advertising commissions, Karel Pečený would not have published the first Czech newsreel *Elekta Journal* and many Czech feature films would not have been made. More or less all producers, including the AB company, were involved in commercial film. Those specializing in this field were, for example, the Degl Brothers, Poja, Elekta Journal (Karel Pečený from 1930), Favoritfilm, Josef Vilímek or, respectively, Propaga, Slavia (later Reklama Slavia) and, during the 1930s, Josef Kokeisl, Baťa Zlín (later FAB), Baal, Unionvox, Ludvík Guba, and Fišer and Lehner. The Brno-based companies active in this business were, for instance, Leopold Barič, Bruna Brno, Legia Brno and Terra film. One of the most significant producers in the Czechoslovak advertising film market was the Piras agency and its offshoot, Piras-Thalia, which produced most of the commercials for the

Schicht company, often in either German or Viennese studios. Commercials promoting Schicht products did not surpass conventional models, although some of them – such as the washerwoman fighting imps in the *Bublees* (Bublínkové) – are still charming even today.

We can distinguish several approaches to the advertising plan, the narrative, in the colourful mixture of these productions. The first type was short spots presenting a product and a brand and based on montaging either moving or static pictures. Another type employed the feature-film narrative, constructed with concern to the subject of the commercial. The latter usually comprehensively portrayed the peripeteia of the film's heroes, solved in the end easily, quickly and at a reasonable price thanks to the promoted products. These commercials were aptly described by the journalist Karel Poláček in one of his columns: "One can rarely guess from the story of such films which commodity would be advertised: the excellence and prime quality of the recommended article is only revealed at the end and one can never comprehend what the previous history was actually about and how it is associated with the subject of promotion."²

Yet another category of films somewhat combined methods characteristic



Posters by Zdeněk Rykr, who worked for Baťa, Kulík, Čedok and others. His most famous achievements are his Kofila and Orion designs, used to these days, while the latter (in the form of four-pointed star) gave name to the chocolate factory of František Maršner.