

Faces of the underground

"A family mosaic of the gene pool... A typology of exceptional individuals... Their 'immortalization' is a personal tribute to these people." These are the words with which Rudo Prekop stated his intention.

It can be said that we create symbols to mean something. This has been universally true for a long time—since time immemorial, in fact.

Let us recall here the carving of an elongated female face in a mammoth tusk from the excavation at Dolní Věstonice. The man who so long ago and so successfully preserved the skeletally verified form of his female contemporary also hinted at the idea of a shadowy legacy of a living prefiguration, of its posthumous or directly cultish existence. More than twenty-five thousand years ago, knowledge obviously lacked the pathways through which to spread from the depths of the past and which would have passed the baton of portraiture to the artists of antiquity. They had to experiment again based on contemporary, though comparable, impulses. At the time when fleeting reflections from water surfaces—and later, much later, from polished metal surfaces—were first captured by a device called the daguerreotype, the unique artifacts more closely resembled magic rather than the boundlessly reproducible images of today. The contemporary chip setting of the world too often has the frequency of static, while the daguerreotypists still evoked the intransigence of shamanism. Rudo Prekop decided to photograph people from the once unofficial cultural scene using classical techniques, and to give their portraits the hallmark of the traditional solemnity of studio seances. This is the photographer's core subject. Even as a high-school student, he experienced, in his own words, "an inner defiance against the political order of the time and an effort to open up expressive positions forbidden by the regime."

Whenever we pose for the camera lens, we contribute to the imaginary image of the population. Of course, the collective appearance can never be fully represented, let alone overlooked. Even digitization cannot ensure the definition of the local character that is still sought after in places. But aren't the individualities themselves more interesting than the alloy of individualities?

Those who have "contributed to a qualitative shift in the cultural, social, mental, moral and generally human," to use Prekop's words again, have, by the weight of their personalities, earned not only this book but also the handmade care put into the author's enlargements of the representative exposures.

Faces attract enduring interest because of our insatiable curiosity about the humanity of others. However, if portraiture can be declared a royal discipline, it is also worth noting that it has not always been classified as such. It is understood that even before the advent of photography, portraits resembled their models, so that biblical and mythological material, supposedly requiring a more sacred image-making, were declared to be more supreme challenges. Meanwhile, their timelessness seemed unquestionable...

Yes, the story has been repeating for as long as mankind has been mankind. The mysteries of creation and destruction inspire attempts to imitate the first and face the second. Welcome to the era of genome editing...

Josef Moucha

A few words from a conservator

The Czech Underground community has relatively deep roots. When Martin Jirous "Magor" ("Loony") wrote the Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival in 1975, in which he formulated the basic postulates of the Czech Underground, the informal community had already existed for at least ten years. It had no unifying label; only the wearing of long hair united those who sat on the steps of the National Museum, listeners of the band Hells Devils, later The Primitives Group, or fans of Knížík's Aktual. And, at the same time, there were regional groups of long-haired youths in large agglomerations: in Brno, Olomouc, and especially in northern Bohemia. It is only now, when this period has become a subject of research interest, that we have created the encompassing term "proto-underground" to simplify things. Meanwhile, it is hard to say where the line between the proto-underground and the underground actually lies. In both cases, the protagonists have left distinct traces of themselves, be it in the form of samizdat lyrics, musical recordings, or artworks. However, what is absent from the era of totalitarianism is any systematic documentation of the activities of this social group, which is also true of the efforts of samizdat magazines. Paradoxically, the only such activity during the normalization period was undertaken by the State Security Service (StB), obviously in order to eliminate this phenomenon and the persecution of people associated with the underground. Only after the change in social and political conditions did publications, mostly recollections of the time and environment, begin to appear. Systematic research began only after 2008, when the History of the Czech Underground project was launched at the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes. One of the outputs of this project is the 40-part television series Phenomenon of the Underground, familiarly referred to as the "konzerva androše" (can of underground).

Sometime in 2015, Rudo Prekop sketched the outlines of another such "can" for me, this time in photographs of multigenerational portraits. This completely captivated me, as these glimpses into the intimacy of families are absolutely unique. The totalitarian era tended to force us to anonymize authors and their readers, viewers, and organizers of cultural events. In Rudo's project, on the other hand, the families of these people become the main entity of his work. The project took Rudo more than eight years to complete, and so it is understandable that some of those photographed unfortunately did not live to see the finished work. I am thinking of Dana Němcová, Sváťa Karásek, Binny Laney, Alfréd Michl, Pavel Brázda, Olda Hamera, Libor Krejcar... This fact alone gives the work a secondary, documentary dimension. Rudo Prekop comes at the last moment, when it is still possible to capture at least some of the protagonists of that unique phenomenon, the Czech Underground, for which he deserves great admiration and thanks.

František "Čuňas" Stárek

Portraits of undergrounders

The book of photographs by Rudo Prekop consists of portraits of personalities who were part of the Czech underground community of the 1970s and 1980s. Some of those portrayed are now considered important artists, musicians, poets, visual artists, even politicians, while others remain relatively unknown even decades after the fall of the totalitarian regime.

The Czech underground community, the Czech, to a certain extent Czechoslovak, cultural underground, which was formed in the early 1970s as a result of natural self-defense against the oppression, intolerance, and unculturedness of the collaborationist Husák's "normalization" regime, as a result of an effort to preserve at least a minimum space of freedom not only for creative work but also for free, uncontrolled, uncensored communication, for the natural development of interpersonal relations, certainly consisted not only of poets, writers, musicians, and fine artists but simply artists of all kinds. They were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people, maybe not creating but striving to have their share in the life of that internally free "ghetto" into which they were forced by the stupid intolerance of the renewed political-police totalitarianism.

The "island of freedom" of the Czech underground of those years was certainly not the only community resisting the normalization, trying to continue freely in what was possible to start at the end of the 1960s, when the shackles constricting Czechoslovak society briefly broke and fell off. Certainly, there were groups of writers who once published widely, but from the beginning of the 1970s they were limited to samizdat. One need only think of the Edice Petlice ("Padlock Editions") edition of Ludvík Vaculík and his friends, Václav Havel's Edice Expedice ("Expedice editions"), editions of Czech surrealists, various editions of Czech philosophers. There were groups of folk singers who often had great difficulty in gaining space for themselves and their audiences. The representatives of various churches and religious associations often had to resort to samizdat. Last but not least, we must of course mention the most important cultural-political, latently oppositional community of the 1970s and 1980s, which was Charter 77, whose main ideas many people from the older underground community identified with and accepted as their own. The peculiarity of the underground community, however, was that it brought together people not only on the basis of a common artistic or literary program or opinion, not only based on political opinion, but simply because they wanted to live in a small, defiant, but nevertheless free space. This was originally fought for by non-conformist rock musicians and their listeners, but later they were joined by poets and writers, artists, musicians originally oriented towards jazz, folk, sacred, and classical music, i.e., by far not only rock. These were simply creative people for whom this space of freedom was indispensable.

Prekop's portraits of the personalities of the Czech underground are a testimony to that time; each of these faces is marked by that time, when it was possible to live freely only in a kind of disguise, in secret, when it was necessary to make extraordinary efforts to live the way we wanted, without compromise, without having to be ashamed of ourselves. These are faces from which much can be read, and if the people so portrayed are together with their families, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, then much more can be discerned. Many of the personalities of the Czech underground are unfortunately missing here, especially those who were perhaps the most important in the 1970s, because they were the intellectual, spiritual, and artistic axis around which this part of the Czechoslovak unofficial, underground culture was formed: Ivan Martin Jirous, Egon Bondy, Jiří Němec, Milan Hlavsa, Jan Lopatka, but also the photographers and artists Jaroslav Kukal, Helena Wilsonová, Zorka Šágl, or Karel Nepřaš... All those who have already left us.

Prekop's album is therefore not only a collection of photographs of exceptional artistic value but also a very important work of documentary art. It follows, of course, the books of photographs by, for example, Jaroslav "Abbé" Libánský, Jan Šágl, Helena Wilsonová, Jaroslav Kukal, Ondřej Němec, the series of hitherto unpublished photographs by Petr and Pavel Prokeš, and many other, now little-known, documentary photographers.

This work by Rudo Prekop is a very significant contribution to the work of these photographers.

Martin Machovec

Human Portrait: An intergenerational confrontation of people from the unofficial culture of the underground

This publication is not an encyclopedia, a catalogue, or an all-inclusive almanac. It is a subjective selection, limited by the technical and technological possibilities of book production and exhibition collection.

Sometime at the end of 2014, I was sitting with Pavel Zajíček in the Prague café U sv. Vojtěcha, our favorite meeting point at the time.

Pavel says to me, "My daughter Gábina is coming from America." And I said, "Yeah? Does she come here often?"

"Hardly at all."

"What about the other daughter, Míša, is she here or in Sweden?"

"She's here."

"Well, then I should take a good picture of you all together. And we could invite your dad from Radotín. How is he?"

"Dad's good, an independent entity (ninety-four years old at the time), if you pay for the taxi, he'll come. So, I'll arrange it."

That's how the idea of the first photo shoot was born. Then I started approaching friends, then acquaintances, then strangers, to photograph them. I realized that this social group, this unique community of people, had not yet been pictured as a whole, and that it was high time to do so. Over seven years we have managed to approach, produce, photograph, and process about sixty families or individuals, which is a realistic ceiling for the possibilities of not so much a book but mainly an accompanying exhibition. I thank all those photographed for their time, trust, willingness, and dedication.

It was not possible to get in contact with some of the younger generation of descendants spread across the globe and every continent. Some couldn't even manage to be photographed solo on the given date. In rare cases, some were not interested in being photographed. Others were interested, but the project had reached its limits.

Technically, the portraits were programmatically created in the most complex, laborious, time-consuming, and financially demanding way. Studio lit, Hasselblad photographed on film stock, manually processed by the negative/positive process of the author's enlargements, which were subsequently reproduced and digitized into data after manual retouching, from which the publication was then compiled and printed.

That is how this book was created. Alongside the two people I dedicated the book to in the introduction, I also dedicate this publication to the memory of those photographed who did not live to see it published.

Rudo Prekop

2022

PICTORIAL PART / PHOTOGRAPHS OF PERSONALITIES

Pře

- ④ 1. Pavel Za
- ③ 2. Dana Něr
- ④ 3. Tony Duc
- ⑥ ④ 4. Pavel B
- Trlifajc
- ⑨ 5. Karel Ha
- ⑤ 6. Jiří Chr

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③

THE BASIS

Underground

P. Z.

THE NĚMEC FAMILY /
THE PALOUŠ FAMILY
SINGERS -
- SONGWRITERS



MEJLA 1

ajíce
ncová,
cháček
rázda,
ová
avelka
mel/Ch
Němec,



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Pavel Zajíček (* 1951), founder and leading personality of the band DG 307, musician, lyricist, poet, artist. Father Jaroslav (1920–2019), daughter Michaela (* 1971), daughter Gabriela (* 1992), grandson Rafael (* 2008), granddaughter Sofia (* 2011).

Born in 1951 in Prague-Radotín, after unfinished studies at the Faculty of Construction of the Czech Technical University, he worked in various manual professions. He came to the underground community through the family of Dana and Jiří Němec, in whose apartment on Prague's Ječná Street he met Martin Jirous, Mejla Hlavsa, and other members of the Plastics. He got on very well with Mejla in particular, and they decided to form a new ensemble together. Their musical inspiration was Knížák's Aktual. In 1973, they founded the musical group DG 307, which played intermittently from 1973 to 2016. The name DG 307 refers to the psychiatric diagnosis of "transient situational psychiatric disorder," which allowed young men to obtain the so-called blue book and avoid compulsory military service. With this diagnosis, Zajíček was hospitalized in an institution in Prague's Bohnice. The intention of the musicians of the DG 307 was to create "anti-music" to complement Zajíček's poems and lyrics. The group worked with sets and costumes, and their music was a musical performance created mostly with "non-musical" instruments, unusual rhythms, and alternating between musicians and non-musicians. Zajíček's poems are expressive, containing surrealism, colloquial speech, and so-called vulgarisms. He also contributed his lyrics to the group The Plastic People of the Universe. He published poems and prose not intended to be set to music as self-published works, and these texts were published collectively in the book Zápisky z podzemí (1973–1980) (Notes from the Underground). P. Z. is one of the most remarkable poets of the Czech underground of the 1970s.