

Irena Blühová's Social Reportage

Irena Blühová
Claudia Schramke

curated by:
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20.6. – 12.9. 2024

Irena Blühová (1904–1991) is primarily known as the “mother” of Slovakian social photography – a phenomenon that was part of the broader Interwar Central European documentary movement. For the photographer, *photographic dramas* depicting poverty, hard work and the undignified living conditions of people in remote Slovak regions were *a protest against injustice, oppression and the humiliation of humans*. These, however, constituted only a fraction of her extensive reportage work. With equal interest, she documented the everyday and festive lives of people in the countryside, cities, and markets, and the everyday reality of her friends and contemporaries. As described in her memoirs, Irena Blühová's work would thus be more accurately defined as “*to see completely, to globally capture the flow of life, in its lawful contexts. [...] in photographic terminology, the primary expression (for it) was ‘snapshot.’*”¹

The exhibition *Irena Blühová's Social Reportage* attempts to outline the scope of this multifaceted work in its contemporary context and the framework of the Interwar visual culture of the First Czechoslovak Republic. In addition to the author's and new prints, the exhibition presents contemporary periodicals and publications in a network of reciprocal relationships. With her intervention in the exhibition, graphic artist Claudia Schramke responded to a specific aspect of Blühová's work – the call for solidarity. She spent several months in Bratislava, Prague, and Berlin visiting soup kitchens for people in need to capture, through reportage illustration, the act of helping and reciprocal support. Her colourful reportage drawings thus refer not only to Blühová's way of working but especially to her message to future generations: “*Keep changing the world and do it better than we could.*”²

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The Slovakian regions of the interwar period gave rise to a specific branch called *social photography*, which is today considered a part of the international workers' documentary movement. Characteristic

images of child labour, poverty and the deplorable living conditions of the rural proletariat, taken by socially-critical Slovakian photographers, showed the other side of the proclaimed democratic and progressive First Czechoslovak Republic. In their time social photographs were already placed in sharp contrast to the idealised ethnographic documentary photography and film, represented by Karel Plicka (1894–1987), the well-known ethnographer, folklorist and director of the film *Zem spieva* (The Earth Sings; 1933). In his work, Plicka depicted regions of Slovakia as panoramic preserves of ancient culture. His approach was criticised by contemporary advocates of engaged photography as “a quest for unrelated images that are called to distract the eye from the reality and contemporary life of a country that has no reason to sing.”³ This distinctly contradictory view was also experienced when defining Irena Blühová’s work in the later discourse of art history, referring to a famous quote by Slovakian art historian Iva Mojžišová: “Plicka photographed a land that sings, Blühová a land that has no reason to sing.”⁴

The extent of Irena Blühová’s surviving photographic legacy, however, proves that she documented her country and the life of its people in its entirety – including situations from everyday life in towns and villages, holiday processions and activities at fairs, even spontaneous capturing of close friends and portraits of her family. Not only does the majority of her work contain images that do not fit into commonly employed categories of photographic styles, but the themes of her images often overlap, making it impossible to draw firm boundaries between them. After all, isn’t this multiplicity, defying rigid categories, inherent in any professional or amateur photographic estate?

The exhibition *Social Reportage of Irena Blühová* outlines the diversity of the photographer’s work in a network of representative images and opens a discussion on the nature of (interwar) social documentary, which could, from a sociological point of view, be any realistic figurative scene. Blühová’s photographic activity is presented here through several thematic subdivisions – *Vernacular Photography*,

Sociographic Reportage, Social Photography as Art, Sociofoto, Bauhaus and Ethnographic Documentary – which are organically intertwined in her work, acknowledging that it is impossible to find a clear demarcation between them or to reduce Blühová’s work to a single genre. The exhibition of Irena Blühová’s photographs thus presents a multifaceted reportage of society viewed from various positions – as a left-wing idealist, amateur photographer, progressively oriented student, cultural documentarian and engaged artist.

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Vernacular Photography

The phrase vernacular or folk photography describes the mass spread of this medium, which began to be used by a wide range of people in the early 20th century as a means of expressing their vision of the world. With the democratisation of the availability of the hand-held photographic apparatus, the vast majority of overall photographic output began to consist of seemingly “ordinary” family photographs, capturing children, portraits of friends, and snapshots. At the age of twenty, Irena Blühová acquired a German Goerz-Tenax camera, which she used in the early 1920s to capture events around her, including parades and markets, portraits of her family members, partner, acquaintances and comrades. This is evident from a number of photographs, including a shot of the *Futbalové ihrisko v Považskej Bystrici* (Soccer Field in Považská Bystrica; 1926) or a shot of *Nízke Tatry* (The Low Tatras; 1928) depicting rock climbing – the sport which she, apart from skiing, photographed most often.

Sociographic reportage

Blühová saw the importance of the active role of the photographic image, which at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s was considered to have the potential to change political conditions and arouse public opinion. When recalling her time of active political engagement,

Blühová stated that “[j]ust as the pen was a weapon for the writer, so was the photographic apparatus for us.”⁵ The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, of which she was an active member, used Blühová’s photographs of Horná Mariková in parliamentary interpellations and as part of its agitational activities. Blühová directly participated in sociographic expeditions, capturing complete reports of Slovakian regions to draw the attention of the public and the political representation to the undignified living conditions of the local population. The footage from the series *Kysuce – Kysuce a Následky a příčiny kretenismu* (Kysuce and the Consequences and Causes of Cretinism) was published in the pages of the Slovakian leftist magazine *DAV*, the Czech magazine *Tvorba*, even the German *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung (AIZ)*.

Bauhaus

Irena Blühová decided to apply to the Bauhaus in Dessau based on the motto “*Understanding the concept of creation correctly means helping people [...]*”, coined by the second director of the school – left-wing architect Hannes Meyer. From 1931 to 1932, she studied in the publicity department of Joost Schmidt while also attending the studio of Walter Peterhans, the photographer of the New Objectivity movement. In addition to experimental school exercises involving photograms or multiple exposures, she also took photographs depicting the environment and daily operations of the institution. Blühová photographed her classmates in workshops, during meals, and on field trips, as well as the people involved in the operation of this prestigious school, such as the famous *Upratovačka na Bauhause* (Cleaning Lady at Bauhaus; 1931). The photograph *Úsmev* (Smile; 1931), of which the original positive was most likely part of the Prague exhibition of social photography in 1933, also comes from her “Bauhaus” period.

Sociofoto

During the Interwar period, several Slovakian photographic groups came together under the name Sociofoto to disseminate a social documentary program that would meet the contemporary demands for socially radical and effective visual messaging. In 1933, Irena Blühová co-founded the Bratislava branch with photographer Barbora Zsigmondiová and Fric Stroh. When presenting their photographs at exhibitions and in print, following the example of Soviet workers' photographic practice at the time, the individual photographers of these photographic groups renounced their own signatures to act under collective signage as a unified working collective. The photograph *Tabačiarky* (Tobacco Workers; 1936), signed by Irena Blühová and depicting the process of tobacco curing, most likely originates from one of Sociofoto's collective actions. Evidence for this is the existence of a photograph by Barbora Zsigmondiová with an identical subject.⁶

Social Photography as Art

The position of social photography in Slovakia differed considerably from its perception in the Czech part of the shared interwar state, where emphasis was placed on the artistic qualities of the photograph from the beginning. In 1933, the group *film-foto*, established around the organisation of Czech left-wing intellectuals *Levá fronta* (the Left Front), initiated the first domestic exhibitions of social photography in Prague and Brno. After her return from the Bauhaus, Irena Blühová also exhibited in these exhibitions – both individually in the category called “children” and as a member of the Bratislava group Sociofoto. In Prague, she exhibited two photographs under her own name – *Úsmev* (Smile; 1931) and *Drevený koník* (Wooden Horse) (between 1930 and 1933). Because Blühová's titles of photographs were usually descriptive, it was possible to identify two that correspond in date and motif to the images listed

in the exhibition catalogue. A year later, at the *Second International Exhibition of Social Photography* in Prague, Blühová presented the photograph *Veľa kameničia – málo chleba* (Many Stones and Little Bread; 1933) from the Slovak Kysúce region.

Ethnographic document

The most famous proponent of ethnographic work in interwar Slovakia was the aforementioned Karel Plicka, who, as a documentary filmmaker for Matica Slovenska, often captured traditional folk culture idyllically, both photographically and on film. In the late 1930s, Blühová studied under his guidance in the film studio at the School of Arts and Crafts in Bratislava. Since the early 1920s, her documentation of folk and religious processions teetered on the edge of vernacular photography and exploratory ethnographic documentary, as can be seen in the footage of holiday processions or in the images from the series *Život a práca bačov, pastierov a honelníkov* (Life and Work of Chief Shepherds, Shepherds and Herders). Blühová's interest in documenting traditional folk culture can be most clearly seen in her photograph *Spevákky – Predvečerný spev* (Singers – Singing Before the Evening; 1942), in which she captured singing girls in traditional Eastern Slovakian costume. This photograph was taken during the Second World War, during which she was illegally hiding in the eastern regions of Slovakia.

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Note on author's prints:

In the 1970s and 1980s, to rebuild her photographic archive, which had been largely destroyed during World War II, Irena Blühová began to copy and further reproduce her interwar photographs. She re-shot several of her own surviving original positives and reproductions published in the period press or books

on an analogue camera. Through this process, Blühová created a new negative from which she then developed new photographs. She did not shy away from various types of “post-production”, such as excessive enlargement without regard to the quality of the resulting photograph, or manually cropping the positive to balance composition.

A search through the artist's estate also revealed a set of partially damaged original silver-gelatin prints from the 1920s and 1930s, mostly consisting of portraits of children. The nature of the damage to the positives, with a missing gelatin layer and exposed silver layers with uncontrolled light reflection, made it impossible for Blühová to (re)-photograph these images in the conditions of her home. For the purposes of the exhibition at Fotograf Gallery, in order to bring visitors closer to her process of working with her legacy, we commissioned a new analogue copy of the damaged positive of *Drevený koník* (Wooden Horse; 1930–1933), in the manner used by Irena Blühová in the 1970s and 1980s.

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Claudia Schramke: Three Times Soups, Please

In 1980, Irena Blühová called on the young emerging generation to engage in activism, to which she, in the spirit of leftist idealism, dedicated a large part of her interwar photographic work. Remembering her work from the 20s and 30s, she added a wish: *“Keep changing the world and do it better than we did!”*⁷

Graphic artist Claudia Schramke responded to this call with her intervention in the Fotograf Gallery exhibition. By choosing the theme of soup kitchens for people in need, she followed a specific feature of Irena Blühová's work, namely the call for solidarity and reciprocal help. For several months, Schramke depicted, in a reportage illustration, the volunteer soup kitchens in Berlin (Suppenkuche Franziskanerkloster Pankow), Bratislava (SPOSA

in cooperation with Depaul), and Prague (Food not Bombs).

In several moments Claudia Schramke's drawings subtly refer to the medium of photography: be it the reportage-like method of on-the-spot capturing or the installation itself, in the basement of the gallery, where drawings can be examined on celluloid film strips, much like a photographer making test contact positives in her home darkroom. Equally significant for Schramke are her drawings on the gallery walls, reminiscent of Blühová's pioneering photographs from the 1920s, reflecting a gradual democratisation of artistic expression and a nuanced exploration of the intersection between artistry and social activism.

In her series of drawings, *Three Times Soups, Please* (2024), Schramke formally follows Irena Blühová's photographic snapshots. During their creation, she meticulously observed, quickly and concisely captured volunteers preparing food, talked with them as they worked, and captured specific details of cooking and work in individual kitchens. The names of the people she met in Berlin, Bratislava, and Prague and fragments of their conversations thus complement the drawings as short reportage notes. In a soup kitchen, human contact is as important as the food itself - in Berlin, for example, it's also a place to meet, talk, and play games. However, it's not just about having fun: preparing a sufficient amount of food is hard work, and the vast majority of people in these initiatives do it in their free time. Just as you'll find people all around the world who don't have the security of a warm meal, so will you find people who decide to help them out of their own goodwill.

Volunteering to serve food to those in need is an action that people do because there is a failing social system in their city that inexplicitly relies on people helping each other. This is precisely the situation, in which Schramke and Blühová's reportages meet: social systems today, just as they did a century ago in interwar Czechoslovakia, often deliberately neglect the basic needs of life for people in need. The primary response that precedes systemic improvement of their

conditions is thus rapid assistance from „below“. Both artists focus on how each of us can help people, opening up the theme of solidarity as a basic human response to social injustice.

¹ Irena Blühová, Vzpomínky Ireny Blühové, in: *Fotografie XXIV*, nr. 2, 1980, p. 28.

² Ibidem.

³ J. Tůma, Zem spieva, ale o čem?, in: *Tvorba*, nr. 45, Issue 8, 1933, p. 712–713.

⁴ Iva Mojžišová, Dve cesty od tvorby k odboju. Grete Schütteová-Lihotzká a Irena Blühová, *Ars*, nr. 1, 1989, p. 80.

⁵ Irena Blühová, Vzpomínky Ireny Blühové, in: *Fotografie XXIV*, nr. 1, 1980, p. 18.

⁶ Ľudovít Hlaváč, *Sociálna fotografia na Slovensku*, Martin 1974, p. 93.

⁷ Irena Blühová, Vzpomínky Ireny Blühové, in: *Fotografie XXIV*, nr. 2, 1980, p. 28.

Irena Blühová (1904–1991)

Irena Blühová, born into a impoverished family of a Jewish merchant, worked at a young age as a clerk in Považská Bystrica to financially support her education. At seventeen, to fight against the poverty she witnessed daily in her youth, she joined the newly founded Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. As a result of joining the party, she was transferred from her place of work to Kysuce, one of the poorest regions of Slovakia. Here, as part of her agitational work, she began to photograph her first sociographic reports, which were published in progressive leftist periodicals such as DAV or Tvorba, but also served, for example, for interpellations for communist MPs in parliament. Blühová's photographic work, however, was far more diverse. Apart from critical documentary, she was dedicated to capturing her friends and comrades during various sporting activities, with a special interest in documenting skiing and rock climbing. Although Blühová spent most of her time in Slovakia, she travelled across Europe with her partner at the time, painter Imro Weiner, where she came into active contact with Western European modernism. Originally self-taught, Blühová decided to professionalise her photographic work by studying in the Weimar Republic at the most famous modernist art school, the Bauhaus, which combined an experimental approach to art with cosmopolitanism. She spent between 1931 and 1932 at the Bauhaus, under the motto "*Understanding the concept of 'creation' correctly means helping people [...]*," a tradition upheld under the leadership of the leftist architect Hannes Meyer before she was forced to return to Czechoslovakia with the rise of fascism in Germany. Upon her return, she opened the Blüh bookstore on Mariánská Street in Bratislava, serving as a meeting place for leftist intellectuals with ties as far as the International Workers' Aid (IAH). Just before the outbreak of World War II, she was able to complete ceramics courses with Julia Horová at the progressive School of Arts Crafts in Bratislava, while also attending the film department of the Czech director Karel Plicka.

She survived the Second World War underground. She worked in a fuel production plant in eastern Slovakia under the alias Elena Fischerová. After the end of the war, her photographic activities were curtailed “*in favour of building up the Czechoslovak Republic,*” to which she contributed as co-founder of the Pravda publishing house (1945–1948), administrator of the Society of the People’s Art Industry (1948–1950) and later as director of the Slovak Pedagogical Library (1950–1965). During these years, Irena Blühová focused mainly on portrait photographs of her loved ones, but from the 1970s onwards she began actively photographing again. After more than thirty years, she continued her original interwar series such as *Život bačov* (The Life of the Shepherds) or *Osobnosti* (Personalities), while simultaneously creating new series inspired by flora. She also actively participated in exhibitions at home and abroad.

Claudia Schramke’s (*1985) long-term focus is graphic and communications design. She has published several books, such as *Der Hund* (The Dog), which deals with the sensitive topic of otherness in childhood, and *Weissensee vor Zehn* (Weissensee before the Ten), in which she focuses, in a journalistic manner, on the invisible work behind the scenes of the Weissensee Kunsthochschule Berlin, where she studies visual communication. For several years in a row, she has shaped the visual identity of the prestigious Berlinale Film Festival with her unique graphic style.

Architecture: Mike Ma
Digital prints: Jan Maštera
Analogue copy: Evgenij Smirnov
Production: Pavel Matěj
Technical production: Jakub Tulinger
Marketing, communication: Jan Hladonk
Social media: Tereza Vacková
Director of Fotograf Gallery: Viktorie Vítů
Director of Fotograf: Markéta Kinterová
Fundraisign & executive manager: Marie Rozmánková
Translations and proofreading: Gabriela Benish Kalná, Gilles Yann Smrkovsky

We would like to thank Jaroslav Beránek, Karel Císař and Klára Prešnajderová for lending us works from their private collections.

Acknowledgements: Till, Lasse & Piet Beese, Julie Černá, Veronika Daňhelová, Food Not Bombs, GAMU, Eliška Klímešová, Lukáš Kropáček, Daniela Kurková, Martina Pachmanová, Ulrike Schramke, Steffen Schuhmann, SPOSA, Suppenküche Franziskanerkloster Pankow, Petr Tureček

ACCOMPANYING PROGRAMMES:

1.7. & 3.9. 2024 18.00 – guided tours with the curators

9.9. 2024 18.00 – discussion with Fedora Parkmann and Julia Secklehner

programmes for schools on request (guided tour, workshops focused
i) on exhibition architecture, ii) on the life story of Irena Blühová,
iii) on Bauhaus and its role in Blüh's work)

booking and further information at viktorie.vitu@fotograf.zone

The exhibition is being created in cooperation with the Slovak Design Center and with the support of the Czech-German Future Fund. The accompanying programs for the exhibition, as well as the creation of accompanying texts and sheets for children, were supported by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. The Fotograf Gallery project is financially supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic and in 2024 is supported by a grant from the City of Prague in the amount of 700,000 CZK.



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