Photographers' Escape Route:

The Camera Club as a Place of Control and a Platform of Resistance

in the Postwar Soviet Union

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Photography in the Soviet Union and in the so-called Communist Bloc countries in Europe developed quite differently from the west after World War II. In the absence of free art market and in circumstances of severely limited freedom of expression and restricted human rights in general, all forms of art were integrated into the larger framework of Soviet communist ideology and politics. Art photography had a very marginal place in this framework. In this paper, I am addressing the quite paradoxical role of camera clubs that originally were established as places of control and indoctrination of workers, but that in some exceptional cases became platforms of relative freedom of style and communication for artists, partly protected by their hobbyist status and not belonging to the official arts establishment. The two decades following Stalin's death in 1953 are discussed, starting with the so-called Khrushchev's Thaw (the mid-1950s – early 1960s).[1]

The paper focuses on a case study of Riga Camera Club, founded in 1962 in Riga, capital city of Latvia (Soviet Socialist Republic of Latvia then). This club is viewed as one of the leading entities raising discussions and public awareness on art photography in the Soviet Union. It can be argued that all three Baltic countries annexed to the Soviet Union after the war – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, despite being geographically small, had a significant influence upon arts and culture in general of the postwar Union. These countries had retained their distinct European cultural identities even under cultural policies and infrastructures imposed by the Soviet government. During the interwar years, they had enjoyed all freedoms and challenges of democratic nation-states, and their cultural milieus remained different from that of Russia and

[1] Gitman and Stigneev have observed that "World War II and the period prior to Stalin's death in 1953 left no particular mark on Soviet photography. It was only during the succeeding Thaw period that state pressure relaxed" (29).

the rest of the U.S.S.R. As Russian art critic Iurii Gerchuk has observed, they became the "inner abroad" of the Soviet Union, and "for us, the products of the Baltic bore the unmistakable stamp of the European culture we so desired" (Gerchuk, 82). This aspect partly explains why the Riga Camera Club in particular gained a reputation of artistic avant-garde and even certain creative resistance in Soviet Union (Barkhatova, 57, Stigneev, "The Force of the Medium," 70. Also see: Neumaier; Rosenfeld and Dodge; Trilupaityte).

1. Amateur Photography Movement

Camera clubs in the Soviet Union had little in common with camera clubs in the west, which had been examined from the sociological perspective by Pierre Bourdieu and others already in the mid-1960s (see Bourdieu; Castel and Schnapper). In addition, the institutional background and creative output of the organized amateur photography movement in postwar Soviet Union was quite different from that of the early post-revolutionary years. However, the postwar years saw a revival of the basic principles of the Soviet workers' and collective farmers' camera clubs that had flourished briefly from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s when the movement faded under the pressure of Stalinist regime. [2]

During the mid-1950s and early 1960s, amateur photography movement was actively endorsed by the Soviet regime and promoted by the all-Union magazine *Sovetskoe Foto [Soviet Photography]*. It was seen as an appropriate, technologically advanced hobby for an enlightened and empowered Soviet proletarian (Klavins, 13-16). According to Valerii Stigneev, "a growing number of Soviet citizens took up photography as a hobby that was promoted by the Soviet

[2] For a general overview of the Soviet amateur photography movement in post-revolutionary years, see Sartori, 127-35 and Wolf, 32-46. See also Burgin, 177-86.

system as a progressive, contemporary pastime for a supposedly industrially and technologically well-developed country. Within the general Soviet discourse of collectivism, they were joined in camera clubs that 'quickly became virtual universities of photographic culture'" ("The Force of the Medium," 68).

And indeed, camera clubs were established at almost every industrial plant and Palace of Culture throughout Soviet Union. In most cases these clubs, a "distinct phenomenon of late totalitarian society" (Klavins, 13), were places of a "cultural" pastime, offering workers basic advice on using photographic equipment backed up by mandatory lectures of Leninist ideology. It is worth noting that similar processes can be observed also in the Central and Eastern European countries of the so-called Communist Bloc. For instance, in Czechoslovakia "the totalitarian period with its escape areas and unbelievable extent of free time made photography something of a national hobby" (Patek, 9, see also Chalupecký, 33).

The official art institutions, such as artists' unions, art academies, and museums, had a total control over the field, and they excluded photography from their hierarchy of artistic media (see Akinsha, Barkhatova, Stigneev, *Vek Fotografii. 1894 – 1994,* and Rosenblum, 559). The role of photography in the Soviet media hierarchy was limited to the politicized journalism with ideological and didactic functions. According to Susan Emily Reid, photography as medium was even understood as "the antithesis of art" on the basis of lacking "the trace of the artist's unique poetic vision or authorial engagement with the subject" (37, see also Akinsha, [39).]

Only one major avenue existed for young artists who were interested in fine art photography and desired to exhibit their work publicly: they could join the ranks of camera clubs, officially becoming photo amateurs. Considering the lack of art market or any other official and legal avenue for fine art or experimental photography, even more important is the

fact that camera club membership was a prerequisite for anyone wishing to legally exhibit and publish photographs as independent, self-commissioned works of art. The amateur label itself implied a significantly lower level in the social hierarchy than that of professional artists and professional (i.e., press) photographers. It emphasized the lowly hobby status of fine art photography. Economically speaking, fine art photography doubtlessly was a hobby. Production and exhibiting of works was not motivated by eventual economic benefit, and the artists most often were employed in other, "non-artistic" fields (Svede, 245). At the same time, it can be argued that a generation of young artists and photographers took advantage of this marginalization. They used the structure of the camera club, an institution of the workers' organized leisure as a legal background for their artistic practices and ambitious goals, and "exhibitions organized by the [camera] clubs became major cultural phenomena, providing an outlet for talented people to express themselves" (Stigneev, "The Force of the Medium," 68).

The story of Riga Camera Club is one of the most notable examples of this functional shift. The club was founded in 1962 in Riga, the capital city of Latvia. Contrary to the majority of workers' camera clubs throughout Soviet Union that were established in virtually each factory and kolkhoz "from above," by representatives of the party or labor unions following centralized guidelines, the establishment of Riga Camera Club was originally initiated by a group of young artists and photographers.[3] Thus this organization can be viewed partly also as a grassroots initiative that exploited the officially recognized institutional framework as a tool for legitimizing artistic practices of its members and as a platform for their creative ambitions that far transcended the expectations and limitations of the organized leisure of Soviet workers.

[3] According to the memories of a founding member, photographer Janis Valters Ezerins. An excerpt from these memories is quoted in Tifentale, 22-24.

2. Place of Control

Of course, Riga Camera Club, just as any other similar club in the Soviet Union, was integrated in the official structure of the Soviet cultural policy. It definitely was a place of "ideological supervision" (Demakova, 23) and censorship by the Communist party officials. Its members were subject of total control and surveillance, typical for the Soviet regime. An insight into some events that led to the foundation of the Riga Camera Club will shed a light on the Soviet cultural policies of this period.

Local branches of an All-Union organization, Association of Popularization of Political Knowledge and Sciences, were responsible for dissemination of the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism as understood by the Soviet communist government through organization of propagandistic lectures, presentations, demonstrations, preparing and broadcasting radio programs etc. ("Historical Reference About the Activities of Association of Popularization of Political Knowledge and Sciences of Soviet Socialist Republic of Latvia", 1). In order to carry out this vast program, People's Universities of Culture were established by this Association in all larger towns and cities in Latvia in 1958 ("Minutes of the 4th Congress of Association of Popularization of Political Knowledge and Sciences of Soviet Socialist Republic of Latvia. Decisions, "237). They were supposed to provide effective "propaganda of the scientific communism and the great heritage of Lenin" ("Minutes of the 5th Congress of Association of Popularization of Political Knowledge and Sciences of Soviet Socialist Republic of Latvia. Decisions", 164) among the masses of workers and kolkhoz laborers by offering evening courses program in the form of lectures and seminars held at least twice a month in two years' length. The certificate that the alumni received after completing the program was supposed to be

considered as an advantage when selecting candidates for promotion to higher positions in organizations responsible for cultural and social activities ("Proceedings No. 8 of the Executive Council Session of the Association Popularization of Political Knowledge and Sciences of Soviet Socialist Republic of Latvia," 122).

One of these People's Universities was established in the Central Club of Printing Industry Workers in Riga on September 15, 1959 ("Proceedings No. 34 of the Session of the Executive Council of the Latvian Committee of the Labor Union of the Culture Workers," 176). This branch of the People's Universities opened a Department of Journalism under the auspices of the Union of Journalists of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Latvia, and this department attracted a record number of around five hundred auditors ("Annual Report on the Activities Accomplished by the Union of Journalists of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Latvia in 1960," 5). Among the mandatory propaganda lectures, also classes of photo reportage were offered by several journalists and photojournalists, members of the Union of Journalists (Janaitis, 139).

And right there, in these extremely popular classes of photojournalism, a small group of young people met and found out that they share a passion for photography as an alternative means of expression of their artistic ideas, not necessarily related to the official dogmas of press photography. One of the lecturers, a member of the Union of Journalists, photographer and television cameraman Vilnis Folkmanis actively supported this group (Folkmanis, 2). Upon graduating from the People's University, a group of twelve decided to establish a camera club in order to be able to organize exhibitions of their work. Riga Camera Club was officially founded under the auspices of the Central Club of Printing Industry Workers in February 27, 1962 ("Minutes No. 1 of the Initial Meeting of Photo Amateur Club," 1). After just a couple of months, in May, the first collective exhibition was opened, establishing a tradition of annual

exhibitions. These exhibitions, their public reception and recognition as well as a growing number of reviews in local papers and magazines gradually raised visibility of fine art photography during the following decade.

3. Place of Resistance

Creative efforts of the photo amateurs, although formally censored by the Communist party officials, were outside and below the hierarchy of official art media and therefore were not subject to the same rules and restrictions of subject matter and means of expression enforced by the highly institutionalized system of state commissions governing "high art" – painting, sculpture, and graphic arts. Thus the organizational structure and social status of an amateur camera club served as a platform for creative resistance in ways neither expected nor explicitly endorsed by the Soviet regime, however tolerated.

First, it is possible to speak of certain, albeit limited, freedom of expression. The amateur status provided an opportunity to explore formal issues and subject matter that was quite the opposite to the official and dominating Soviet doctrine of photography that emphasized the ideological function and preferred realism. The young artists and photographers meeting at Riga Camera Club were seeking escape routes from the politicized press imagery and developed strictly apolitical, aestheticized, and formalistic style. As Eduards Klavins has observed, these creative pursuits were conceived as "an occupation with 'pure' art in contrast with the propagandistic photojournalism of the present day" (Klavins, 13, see also Barkhatova, 57).

Most often these artists did not perceive their activities as an open rebellion against the Soviet regime. Rather they did not even wish to enter in any sort of dialogue with it. Instead, they chose to immerse themselves in "pure art," staying as far as possible from politicized

everyday life (Barkhatova, 57). Yet, such a choice can be seen as a form of creative resistance. Choice of aesthetic and formalistic approach to photography clearly distinguished these works from the surrounding and dominating propagandistic photojournalism.

Artists associated with the Riga Camera Club turned to psychological portraiture (Gunars Binde, *Psychological Portrait*, 1962; Janis Kreicbergs, *Portrait / Zenija,* 1964; Sarmite Kviesite, *Girl on a Swing*, 1966; Gunars Janaitis, *Man and Woman (Couple),* 1967) and cinematic narratives resembling Italian *Neorealismo* (Gunars Binde, *The Wall,* 1964; *The Gate*, 1965). Sometimes they withdrew in their private visions and dreams (Zenta Dzividzinska, *Strawberry Field,* 1968) or focused on darkroom experiments and manipulations on the verge of abstraction (Peteris Vanags, *Silence, or Peace of the Departing Winter*, 1964; Egons Spuris (*Expression*, 1966; series *Vibrations*, 1967-72; Valters Ezerins, *Crystallography* cycle, 1963-68, *Portrait with a Cigarette*, 1968). Finally, Riga Camera Club members were among the pioneers of Soviet nude photography in the 1960s, resuscitating a subject generally outlawed by the regime. Although some of the works may look naïve or anachronistic to a present-day viewer, they were considered to be rather daring under the severe puritan censorship, where even a remote suggestion of eroticism was anathema to Soviet policy. Images that might have any erotic or sexual connotations were virtually nonexistent in the Soviet public sphere (Engelstein, 786). The photographs discussed in this paper paradoxically were considered sufficiently modest and artistic to pass the censors as achievements of amateur photographers' mastery (such as Janis Gleizds, *Nude I*, 1968-69).

In a time when open criticism was unthinkable and meaningless, when media and official art were saturated with politically active imagery, staying outside officialdom and escaping into private visions was one of the few ways to nurture creative subjectivity and individuality while

staying within the limits of legitimacy, i.e. securing their rights to exhibit their work publicly in the regular exhibitions organized by the camera club.

Second, the amateur status opened up new avenues for unparalleled freedom of communication. Although physically isolated from the rest of the world by the practically impassable Soviet border, artists and photographers associated with Riga Camera Club found a unique channel for informal communication with their peers all around the world. Whereas artists could not cross the border physically, it turned out that their photographs could. During the 1960s, amateur photographs most often were free to cross the border as long as the images remained apolitical in their subject matter and titles.[4] In the early 1960s, several members of Riga Camera Club started mailing their photographs to the juries of the international exhibitions or salons of photography taking place in different places of the world, and their work was gradually accepted in this circuit.

International juried exhibitions of photography have been an integral part of history of photography since the nineteenth century, when the first camera clubs and societies of photographers organized their first international salons of fine art photography, summoned juries to select works and distribute awards, and published catalogues of these exhibitions (Rosenblum, 308).[5] In the 1960s, these international exhibitions typically were organized by camera clubs, most part of which were founded after World War II, however several of them had been established already in the Pictorialist era. For instance, Edinburgh Photographic Society opened

[4] For a detailed discussion on censorship of private correspondence during this period, see (Strods, *PSRS politiskā cenzūra Latvijā, 1940 - 1990;* Strods, *PSRS politiskā cenzūra Latvijā, 1940 - 1990. Dokumenti un materiāli*).

[5] For a discussion on analogies between these salons of photography and earlier bi-annual and annual salons of art held in Paris, see Patek, 76.

its first international exhibition in 1861, and it continued to organize Annual International Exhibitions of Pictorial Photography in 2012 (See Stubbs). The activities of these clubs and salons themselves are worth further exploration because they disappear from the histories of photography somewhere at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The establishment of new camera clubs and thus new international salons of photography worldwide was especially stimulated by the first international organization aiming at promotion of creative and amateur photography, namely FIAP (*Fédération Internationale de l'Art Photographique*, the International Federation of Photographic Art), founded in 1950 in Bern, Switzerland. FIAP was founded as an organization with a global and pacifistic mission that addressed mainly amateur photographers in the western sense of the word. Even though this organization and its efforts has not left any trace in history of postwar art, it can be argued that FIAP and its activities had a profound impact on the development of art photography within the Soviet Union where this global amateur forum was embraced as one of the scarce possibilities for young artists and photographers to connect with the outside world.

The new federation installed a new variety of salon – a juried exhibition with FIAP patronage. During the following decade, hundreds of camera clubs worldwide started to organize such salons annually or biannually, attracting new and returning participants with the multi-level system of FIAP distinctions. Honorary titles like AFIAP (*Artiste FIAP*) and EFIAP (*Excellence FIAP*) were awarded to participants on the grounds of quantitative results: certain number of accepted works in the international juried salons with FIAP patronage guaranteed professional-sounding titles that could be added to the photographer's name, reminding the ones signifying academic rank or professional affiliation.

Thus FIAP and its activities can be seen as a catalyst of creativity and stimulus for competition among photographers: competition became "the center of interest of the amateur life" (Patek, 78). Amateur photographers in many countries were eager to obtain an honorary title from an independent, international organization, and even more so within the Soviet Union and communist bloc countries. Any appreciation of foreign origin was very much desired as it connoted superiority over, or at least relative independence from, the local art establishment that denied the medium its artistic potential. This aspect later has been criticized as deforming the idea of artistic autonomy, originality, and self-sufficiency (Demakova, 23).

Photographers associated with the Riga Camera Club were among the first from the Soviet Union who started to compete for these awards. Already in the mid-1960s photographs by members of Riga Camera Club were accepted in a couple of international salons of photography,[6] and number of acceptances was growing through the decade. More than thirty international salons exhibited works by artists from the Riga Camera Club in 1972 (see Tifentale).

The annual or biannual international salons of photography in the 1960s operated on a similar basis as their prototypes in the nineteenth century. Salons organized by amateur camera clubs accepted and encouraged international submissions by mail, disseminating the calls for submissions through the specialized press, and the participants and awardees were selected by a jury. Exhibitions were documented in printed catalogue listing all participants and awardees, statistics of received and accepted works, and often also selected reproductions of works

[6] For instance, the First International Salon of Photographic Art in Épinal, France (1965, works by Janis Kreicbergs accepted); the Twenty-ninth International Salon of Photographic Art in Buenos Aires, Argentina (1965, works by Gunars Binde, Gunars Janaitis, Sarmite Kviesite accepted).

preferred by the jury. The printed catalogues were the most important element of this circuit, as the exhibitions were held virtually all over the world and each exhibition could have been attended only by small local audience. All participants whose work was accepted usually received a copy of the catalogue, and this global circulation of the catalogues connected amateur photographers even in the most remote parts of the world, including the otherwise isolated photographers in Soviet Union. In addition, participation in these exhibitions substituted travel "at a time when artists were forbidden to travel freely" (Svede, 230). The sheer sound of foreign and sometimes exotic cities added an aura of exception to the otherwise marginalized art photography, as the exhibition geography of such scope was a much envied accomplishment.

4. Conclusions

Marginalization of art photography and its lowly status as a worker's hobby at the same time opened up unpredicted avenues. Amateur label and camera club membership provided young artists with a narrow escape route between censorship (and self-censorship) and freedom of expression, between protest and conformism. The case of the Riga Camera Club is an example of an amateur camera club, despite being a place of control, censorship, and surveillance by the ubiquitous Communist party officials, became also a place of certain creative resistance, a place offering freedom of style and freedom of communication with peers at the other side of the Iron Curtain.

Further inquiry could lead to new discoveries about the role of the global movement of amateur photography in the 1950s and 1960s. The worldwide network of camera clubs, the annual international exhibitions organized by these clubs as well as the catalogues disseminated across borders, served as a vehicle for exchanging ideas among like-minded people whose

creative ambitions transcended political or economic limitations. This network had especially significant impact on cultural life in places like the Soviet Union where freedom to travel was severely restricted and circulation of information censored, but at the same time the amateur movement organized around camera clubs was actively endorsed by the Soviet regime.

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