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Dreamer or Strategist? Reconsidering Czech Photographer Josef Sudek

Josef Sudek (1896–1976), Czechoslovakia’s most famous photographer, was known not only for his creative work but also for his peculiar physical appearance. Sudek had lost his right arm fighting in the First World War, and his posture was stooped and crooked.¹ The inhabitants of Prague often observed him as he photographed the city’s architecture and glimpsed him as he carried his heavy camera along the streets.² Sudek’s former assistant Sonja Bullaty described him as a “gnomelike man with…bent shoulders and sloppy clothing” who was “a familiar figure on the streets of Prague.”³ Sudek’s curious appearance also left an impression on foreign visitors to his studio. One such visitor was writer and photographer Charles Sawyer, who wrote, “[Sudek] is stooped with age, his face is grizzled and stubbly, and his voice rattles. He speaks in grunts, his frame is bent, his ragged clothing is held together with safety pins. The right sleeve of his sweater hangs empty.”⁴

Sudek’s physical characteristics may have offered some inspiration for the rich mythology that arose around his personality. Critics and curators have portrayed him as a mystical, dreamy, and reclusive artist who turned to photography in order to escape from reality. This superficial view, however, fails to take into consideration his many shrewd professional decisions. Sudek was not only a dreamer but also an astute, capable, and strategic artist whose calculated choices helped him to survive under an oppressive Communist regime.

¹ See Fárová, Josef Sudek, 22–24.
² See Stříml, 85.
³ Bullaty and Fárová, 15.
⁴ Sawyer.
Both Czech and foreign writers contributed to developing Sudek’s mythic reputation as a magician, a hermit, and an impractical dreamer. Sawyer concluded his 1977 essay by likening Sudek to a “19th-century monk” on account of his seemingly ascetic way of life and because of his photographs, which rarely referenced the political, social, and technological realities of the twentieth century. In 1979, Lee D. Witkin, founder of one of America’s leading photographic galleries, described Sudek as “somewhat of a recluse” who had withdrawn from society. Sudek’s unusual appearance even inspired comparisons to magical creatures. In 1999, Anna Fárová, the foremost authority on Sudek, wrote, “He reminded one of a gargoyle on St. Vitus Cathedral, or a Baroque statue on Charles Bridge, a bizarre angel, a satyr or faun.” She associated him specifically with Prague’s built landscape, linking him to the two landmarks that he famously photographed. Prague’s inhabitants felt that Sudek belonged to their city and was a part of its mythology.

Sudek’s mythic reputation persists to this day. For example, in Irish writer John Banville’s 2004 novel *Prague Pictures* the author recalls smuggling Sudek’s prints from Communist Czechoslovakia into Austria. Struck by Sudek’s exquisite images, Banville calls him “a kind of alchemist,” not only suggesting that magical transformations occurred in his darkroom but also linking him to the legendary alchemists who inhabited Prague Castle in the sixteenth century.

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5 Ibid.
6 Witkin, *London, and Shestack*, 247–48. Witkin’s comment referred to Sudek’s solitary nature and tendency to keep even close friends at a distance from his private world. His claim that Sudek was a recluse, however, is rather exaggerated, since Sudek had many friends and admirers and often participated in group exhibitions. See Birgus, 13.
8 See Sudek and Durych; see Sudek and Poche.
9 See Mlčoch.
10 Banville, 66; see Burton, 48.
Echoing Sawyer’s remarks, Banville also describes Sudek as “a relic of the nineteenth century.”\footnote{11 Banville, 60.} This description likely referred to Sudek’s use of an antique camera—an 1894 Kodak Panorama, two years older than Sudek himself—and to the timeless quality of his photographs.\footnote{12 See Yates, 1515.} Banville’s evocative descriptions, as well as Bullaty’s, Sawyer’s, Witkin’s and Fárová’s, suggest that Sudek was a relic of the past, removed from society, confined to his cluttered studio, and oblivious to the world around him.\footnote{13 Czech poet Jaroslav Seifert described Sudek’s studio as “a phantasmagoric mess.” Fárová, Josef Sudek, Poet of Prague, 6.}

The apparent disconnect between Sudek’s photographs and their social and political contexts may have substantiated his mythic reputation. While living in Prague, Sudek survived the Second World War, the 1948 Communist coup, and the 1968 Soviet invasion;\footnote{14 See ibid., 83, 87; see Burton, 165–66.} the majority of his photographs, however, reflect nothing of this violence, upheaval, and repression.\footnote{15 Sawyer believed that none of Sudek’s photographs reflected the social and political events of the twentieth century. He wrote, “There is nothing in his photographs that reflects the great social upheavals that have changed the world in his lifetime.” Sawyer’s generalization is not entirely accurate, however. Sudek did in fact document the destruction of Prague’s city center in the Second World War. These documentary photographs are not widely reproduced or exhibited and are not among Sudek’s most popular works. A select few are reproduced in Fárová’s 1999 monograph, Josef Sudek. Sawyer; see Fárová, Josef Sudek, 94, 98–99.} His cityscapes capture medieval passageways, Gothic cathedrals, and Baroque statues as if they were frozen in time. His enigmatic still lifes play with the reflections and refractions of light through glasses of water. These lyrical photographs earned Sudek the nickname “Poet of Prague.”\footnote{16 Fárová, Josef Sudek, Poet of Prague, 6.} At first his photographs perplexed American audiences, who expected his work to reflect their vision of Czechoslovakia as a suffering country, the victim of countless tragedies during and after the
Second World War. Illustrative of this attitude is Gene Thornton’s 1977 review of Sudek’s landmark retrospective at the International Center of Photography in New York. Thornton wrote of the photographs, “This is a rather strange offering from Prague where people have suffered so much from recent history.” Thornton likely anticipated from Sudek something similar to Czech photojournalist Josef Koudelka’s series *Prague, 1968*, which documented the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. Koudelka began exhibiting his photographs in the United States in the early 1970s and therefore may have been the point of reference for Americans trying to understand current trends in Czechoslovak photography. When Koudelka was documenting invading tanks (see Figure 1), Sudek was photographing endless arrangements of mirrors, goblets, frames, and glass fragments as still lifes in his studio (see Figure 2). Koudelka’s and Sudek’s photographs could not be more different. In contrast to Koudelka’s documentary practice, Sudek’s subject matter seemed bizarre and inexplicable. The rich mythology that arose around Sudek may have served to explain his unconventional approach to making pictures, yet it fails to account for his ability to think practically and strategically. Sudek was indeed private and eccentric, but he was also pragmatic, resourceful, and keenly aware of his surroundings.

Life in Communist Czechoslovakia presented Sudek with serious obstacles, which he overcame with remarkable shrewdness. When the Communists seized power in 1948, the government began to nationalize publishing houses and photography studios. Strict censorship denied freedom of expression and instead demanded that art serve the state ideology. For

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17 Sudek’s first exhibition in the United States after the Second World War was in 1968, at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery in Lincoln, Nebraska, just two months before the Warsaw Pact invasion that crushed the Prague Spring. See McLoughlin.
18 Thornton.
19 See Koudelka and Král.
20 See Eskind and Drake.
21 See Birgus and Mlčoch, 149.
example, in September 1950, the Artist’s Union commissioned Sudek to photograph a monumental statue of Joseph Stalin. Although it is not known whether Sudek accepted the commission, this episode nevertheless suggests that the new regime expected Sudek to glorify the state with his photography.\textsuperscript{22} Never serving an official ideology, Sudek’s vision remained deeply personal and individualistic, qualities that the regime did not tolerate.\textsuperscript{23} Further trouble arose in 1953, when currency reform left Sudek with barely enough money to continue his work. High-quality photographic papers became increasingly difficult to obtain.\textsuperscript{24} In response to these obstacles, Sudek carefully assessed his situation and found practical solutions to his problems.

First and foremost, Sudek managed to keep his private studio despite the Communist government’s plans for confiscation. Starting in 1948, people who owned photography studios were forced to give up their businesses to the Fotografia cooperative, a centralized organization of photographers.\textsuperscript{25} Sudek, however, used his professional connections among Czech painters, sculptors, and architects to help establish an alternative to the Fotografia cooperative—an independent photography division within the Union of Czechoslovak Artists. This was made possible by Sudek’s influential relationships with members of both major prewar art associations, SVU Mánes and Umělecká beseda (Arts Society).\textsuperscript{26} That Sudek had connections in both of these prewar art associations is particularly remarkable, since artists tended to belong either to one or to the other.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{22} See Fárová, \textit{Josef Sudek}, 107.
\textsuperscript{23} See Fárová, \textit{Josef Sudek, Poet of Prague}, 6.
\textsuperscript{24} See Fárová, \textit{Josef Sudek}, 108.
\textsuperscript{25} See Birgus and Mlčoch, 149.
\textsuperscript{26} See ibid., 169.
\textsuperscript{27} See Mlčoch.
Establishing this separate photography division within the Union of Czechoslovak Artists allowed photographers like Sudek to acquire the status of “photographer-artists,” which gave them a greater degree of freedom than their colleagues in the Fotografia cooperative. These “photographer-artists” could keep their private studios and were allowed to work freelance.  

Members of the photography division in the Union of Czechoslovak Artists besides Sudek included Jindřich Brok, Josef Ehm, Tibor Honty, Jan Lukas, Josef Prošek, and Ladislav Sitenský, among others. The division first appeared publicly in 1950, and by 1952 its membership had grown to forty-nine. Although socialist-realist critics writing for the journal Nová fotografie (New Photography) harshly criticized the “photographer-artists,” their division persevered.

Sudek also demonstrated his resourcefulness by managing to obtain photographic materials despite restrictions on imported goods from capitalist countries. Sudek acquired papers manufactured in Western Europe and the United States by companies such as Kodak and Gevaert. In order to obtain these products, he relied on a network of Czech friends, colleagues, and relatives who had emigrated. He wrote to them to ask for certain materials, and they either mailed these products to him in Czechoslovakia or brought them to him in person when they visited. Sudek’s most helpful contact was his former assistant Sonja Bullaty, who moved to New York in 1947. In a letter from 1954, Sudek asks Bullaty whether “[she] could get [him] a price...”

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28 While the “photographer-artists” were allowed to work freelance, they could only be paid for their work after a committee approved their photographs. See Birgus and Mlčoch, 169.
29 See ibid.
30 See McDermott, 110–13. Precisely what kinds of photographic materials were available from other Eastern Bloc countries and the Soviet Union remains for now unclear and will be the subject of further research.
31 See Fárová, Josef Sudek, 108.
32 See Bullaty and Fárová, 22.
33 See “Sonja Bullaty,” 76. Besides Bullaty, Sudek’s network included, among others, his former colleague Doctor Brumlík, also in New York, as well as his cousin Marta Hodgkiss in England. See Fárová, Josef Sudek, 97, 114, 143; and Bullaty and Fárová, 15.
list for pigment paper from Hanfstaengl in Munich or the Autotype Company, London and West Ealing, as well as one package of 9x12 photographic paper (of any brand) for copying by daylight.”34 This letter reveals how difficult it was for Sudek to obtain photographic materials himself or even to get a price list from a supplier in West Germany.

Through the 1970s Sudek continued to have difficulty obtaining the photographic papers he needed. By then American institutions had become interested in his work and were asking to exhibit his photographs. From 1972 to 1973, the International Museum of Photography in Rochester, New York, obtained seventy-three of his prints. Rather than asking for money, Sudek requested that the museum send him Kodak photo paper.35 He likely realized that one benefit of promoting his work abroad was increased access to products manufactured by foreign companies. He actively followed the availability of certain materials abroad and devised strategies to obtain the products he needed.

A final example of Sudek’s pragmatism is his successful publication of photography despite state censorship.36 In 1956, Sudek published his first major monograph, which reproduced 232 photographs from all periods of his career, from 1915 through 1955.37 Publication of such a volume at first seemed highly unlikely, since Sudek had already been accused of formalism by Communist critics.38 In their eyes, formalism was synonymous with cultural elitism and Western decadence, and therefore photographs deemed as such were nearly impossible to publish.39 The

34 Fárová, Josef Sudek, 108.
35 See ibid., 147.
36 See Birgus and Mlčoch, 149.
37 See Linhart.
38 See Fárová, Josef Sudek, 111; see Birgus, 22.
39 See Chilvers, 260.
Communist authorities also banned artwork with religious content. For instance, in 1951, Sudek tried to publish photographs of St. Vitus Cathedral, but his work was rejected for its subject.40 Sudek overcame censorship by collaborating with Marxist photography and film critic Lubomír Linhart on his 1956 publication.41 The two had met as early as 1933, when Sudek showed his work in Linhart’s exhibition of socially concerned photography.42 Sudek’s work likely appeared incongruous with the exhibition, since Sudek never devoted himself to social documentary photography.43 Nevertheless, in his introduction to the 1956 publication Linhart stressed Sudek’s participation as evidence—albeit very weak evidence—of the artist’s early commitment to socialist values.44 Linhart also quoted Marx and Engels as well as Soviet socialist theorists like Maxim Gorky and Anton Makarenko in order to assure his audience that Sudek’s art was consistent with Communist ideology.45 He wrote:

Sudek’s life task is to uncover through the art of portrait photography these…admirably beautiful faces…of the simple working people, of the heroes of our time and of our glorious path to socialism, of our beautiful citizens, who are creating a new society of glorious pioneers of this great historical epoch, in which all paths lead to communism.46

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41 See Birgus and Mlčoch, 84; see Jeffrey, 32–33.
42 Linhart’s *International Exhibition of Social Documentary Photography* was on view in the Palais Metro in Prague from April 22 to May 5, 1933. This exhibition included seven photographs by Sudek. Linhart curated a second, similar exhibition in 1934. See Birgus, 17; see Birgus and Mlčoch, 84–85, 364; see Linhart, 26.
43 See Birgus and Mlčoch, 84.
44 Sudek did not agree with Linhart’s interpretation of his photography as socially critical. See Linhart, 26; see Birgus, 17.
45 Linhart, 35, 38, 41.
46 “Sudkovým životním úkolem je objevit portrétním uměním ve fotografii ty…krásné tváře…prostých pracujících lidí, hrdinů naší doby a naší slavné cesty k socialismu, těch našich krásných občanů, tvořících novou společnost slavných pionýrů této veliké historické epochy, v níž všechny cesty vedou ke komunismu.” Linhart, 39.
This assessment of Sudek’s portraiture is hardly accurate. One need only compare a typical socialist realist photograph by Czech photographer František Pajurek (see Figure 3) to Sudek’s portrait of his long-time friend and mentor, Czech Cubist painter Emil Filla (see Figure 4). 47 Whereas Pajurek captures the communal joy, vigor, and fervor of a May Day Parade, Sudek depicts Filla as haunting and ghostlike, eerily emerging from the darkness. Unlike Pajurek’s accordion player, Filla is no “beautiful citizen” celebrating Communism.

Although it mischaracterized Sudek’s style, Linhart’s introduction nevertheless must have pleased the Communist government enough to allow Sudek’s photography to be published. Although Sudek did not share Linhart’s dogmatic point of view, the introduction did not bother him. 48 He understood the practical utility of Linhart’s interpretation, which clothed his photographs in socialist realist rhetoric. Sudek’s willingness to situate his work as ideologically harmless ultimately earned him great success. Even though Sudek never photographed a single triumphant factory worker, the government awarded him the honors of Artist of Merit in 1961 and Order of Labor in 1966. 49 He navigated the politics that guided artistic censorship with great dexterity, finding ways to be published without ever sacrificing the quality of his work.

While Sudek’s timeless photographs of still lifes, studio windows, and city architecture may indeed represent an escape from difficult political circumstances, they also embody a remarkable story of survival. Sudek shrewdly overcame enormous obstacles, including the collectivization of photographic studios, the scarcity of photographic materials, and state censorship. The contrast between his pragmatic character and the dream-like quality of his photographs makes his œuvre especially intriguing. Although he enjoyed an extensive network of

47 Birgus and Mlčoch, 150; Fárová, Josef Sudek, 219; Lahoda, 44–45.
48 See Fárová, Josef Sudek, 111.
49 See Fárová, Josef Sudek, Poet of Prague, 89; see Fárová, Josef Sudek, 143; see Yates, 1516.
professional and personal contacts in Czechoslovakia and abroad, his photographic world of enchanted gardens and legendary forests remained intensely solitary and private. Ultimately, Sudek was both a dreamer and a strategist. This “Poet of Prague” resists a single interpretation.

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50 See, for example, Sudek’s photographic cycles *A Walk in the Garden* and *Vanished Statues*. Fárová, *Josef Sudek*, 125–31.
Appendix

Figure 1. Josef Koudelka, *Picture 001* [Warsaw Pact tanks invade Prague, Czechoslovakia, August 1968]. © Josef Koudelka/Magnum Photos.

Figure 3. František Pajurek, *Come and Join Us [May Day in Czechoslovakia]* (first half of the 1950s). Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague, Czech Republic.

Works Cited


