

4 The photographer

Der Fotograf
Le photographe

Kapitalets byggnader, mördarbinas kupor, honung för de få.
Där tjänade han. Men i en mörk tunnel vecklade han ut sina vingar
och flög när ingen såg. Han måste leva om sitt liv.

The halls of capital, like hives of killer bees, made honey for the few.
There he too served. But in a dark tunnel he spread his wings
and flew when no one saw him. He longed so to relive his life.

Tomas Tranströmer, *Epigram*

SQUAWKING SEAGULLS CIRCLED above my head, amidst small clouds being chased across the sky by assertive gusts. Azure-blue sky met gun-blue sea. Before me was a picturesque beach property on the Bay of Finland near Porvoo. An elderly gentleman was working in a lush garden that fronted a wooden house that must have been at least a century old.

An old friend from EFTA times had invited me along to visit her parents at their summer home. Just two days before, I had attended a retrospective of her father's paintings in Helsinki, so I was looking forward to meeting the artist. The great painter welcomed me and shook my hand on the portico of his home, after having dried his on his pants. He was a stately man, not very tall, but with quiet dignity. As we entered the house, I was eager to start a conversation with him, having been impressed by his oeuvre and craving to learn more about it.

In particular, I had noticed that his paintings showed a dedication to stringent composition, as buildings were concerned, quite like my own ambition to keep lines in my pictures exacting and well organized. When I dared ask him about the reason for his discipline in that regard, his answer was short and to the point, as is so often the case with Finnish males:

It was for him to paint and for me – the viewer – to interpret his paintings!

With this scene in mind, I am in a bit of quandary about whether I should follow the painter's example or try to be forthcoming about my work as photographer. But, considering that his work has been well known and well analyzed for decades now, whereas my pictures – even if they represent the efforts of a lifetime – have never been shown to the public before, I feel obliged to put some comments on paper after all.

An insight, gained from working on my Ph. D. Thesis reinforces this decision. The dissertation took many years to complete. In between bursts of activity, there was often a hiatus of many months. Whenever I was ready to follow

up earlier work and reopen my manuscript, I always discovered that my earlier drafts appeared to be written by a stranger. With time gaps of months and sometimes years, one's brain tends to forget the precise feelings and insights that fired you up to put things in writing in the first place. When this happens you are left with the bare skeleton of letters on paper. These completely lack the overtones of your creativity often needed to interpret the meaning of your earlier deliberations.

In a similar manner, most of my photographs have been patiently resting – unexamined – in the cupboard for many years. In my younger days, I did not have the means to invest in a darkroom and its equipment, and could examine my black/white negatives only through making contact copies. In later years, there was no time to spend on making enlargements of all those negatives, even though I now had the necessary means.

Only very recently, when approaching retirement, did I get my act together and engage a fellow photographer to make prints of a small sample of my negatives, about two hundred of them, out of the tens of thousands that I have kept in limbo. When I was looking at those prints, whilst preparing this book, they appeared to me like pictures made by an outsider, since I had long forgotten the feelings and urges that made me take them.

Still, the pictures in this book speak to me with a clear and decisive voice, even as if the voice belonged to a stranger. They let me take a close look at myself in a rather cool and detached manner, without the usual conceit and excuses that tend to cloud your self-assessment. For that reason, I think it worthwhile to present you with my comments.

I have always been a photographer. My earliest efforts were made when I was about eleven years old and was told by my grandparents to take some pictures of them together with friends. I still remember that they were very pleased with the outcome and positively surprised by its quality. Consequently, they gave me a simple box camera, which I put to good use. But soon my parents followed suit by presenting me with a more advanced roll film camera, which I

used for five years, starting at the age of twelve. In retrospect, the result was not remarkable, but there is one picture I treasure, since it shows, for the first time, an ambition to go further than simply documenting my relatives and friends. I could enlarge it myself in those days – the school in Graz had a darkroom – and I gave it the title *Das Tor zur Freiheit*. I do not recall the reason for this title, but it proved rather prophetic, considering that I was only thirteen years old.

But my photographic eye started to really develop only twelve years later, when I bought my first SLR camera, a *Praktica Nova* with three exchangeable *Meyer* lenses. After the first glance through its viewer, I've never looked back and am still at it, busy clicking views, with the camera ever changing, in line with increasing capability, income and age.

Coming back to the pictures, some aspects common to them surprise and intrigue me. For instance, as I have already mentioned briefly, most of them appear strictly composed, depicting reality as a very well ordered scene. It is as if nature had let all the pieces of the puzzle fall into their right place in time for me to take it all in with the camera. Of course, this orderliness is rather the result of painfully choosing your motive and selecting, among the chaotic scenes that surround you, the precious few details that lend themselves to be portrayed in serene order. Even so, I must have spent much additional effort in singling out the precise angle of view and framing to achieve the desired effect in each picture.

I must admit to being rather surprised by this achievement, since my inner life – to my regret – is one of chaos and anxieties. How can a disorderly and disturbed mind produce views of such strict order and perspective? I can only explain it by a subconscious effort of mine to put restraint on my unwieldy interior by conjuring up reality in accordance to my wishes. In other words, what I was unable to do with myself, I could at least attempt by corralling the views around me into serene order.

Looking at the dates at which the pictures are taken, one notices that my photographic life has not been marked by continuous activity. Instead, short-term periods of hec-

tic picture taking in great creative bursts have been lodged within long years of inactivity. These short active periods coincide with times either of great stress, illness or change. This may have reinforced the inclination to produce serene calm in my pictures, as a way to find solace in a hobby removed from the ordinary way of life. The photographic activity in itself may have helped me resolve difficult circumstances in my life, sparing me from seeking help and solace from outsiders.

Looking at the content of the pictures, rather than their composition, it becomes clear that the main motive has, with rare exceptions, been inert objects. Early on, I must still have been interested in interaction between human beings, and now and then, a landscape has sneaked in. But the bulk of my work is firmly focused on buildings, their placement in the surroundings and against each other, as well as their surfaces, touched by the light at various directions of the sun.

In many pictures, the buildings appear immaculate, with facades looking as polished by the light. But, on some occasions, there seem exceptionally to be cracks in the unblemished surface, as if opening up a window into my troubled interior. Had I only produced more of these “windows”, I would be an artist today, instead of a photographer!

Even if most of the pictures focus on buildings, you would expect their surroundings to be populated by human beings. After all, the photos are showing scenes located in two large capital cities. Alas, the opposite is the case. It is as if the towns of Stockholm and Brussels had been hit by a plague, emptying them of their population, and with only the odd tourist visiting them shortly after the catastrophe.

This is partly explained by the fact that the bulk of my city views have been photographed with large format view cameras. You use those cameras hand-held only on rare occasions, usually relying on a tripod to optimize composition, resolution and sharpness. In addition, you try to avoid quickly moving subjects, since they would disturb the overall effect. But then, why did I employ those unwieldy instruments, instead of the small 35 mm cameras that street

photographers use? We are back at the question why I usually seem to have avoided people in my pictures. Trying as I may, I cannot give you a good answer to that question. Instead, I have to resort to the dictum of the Finnish painter and leave it to you readers to form your own interpretation.

Let me rather point to a rare quality, dear to me, which I found in some of my pictures, whilst preparing them for printing. It is located, if I am lucky, on some surfaces when a texture is just so and when an angle of lighting is just right. Whenever this occurs, it can most appropriately be called *glow*.

It is difficult to define this property in words. Instead, I would invite you to have a look at the spread on pages 134 and 135 as an example. Please hold the book at an oblique angle to the light source, such as a table lamp, and try to avoid any reflections on the two pictures. I trust you will see what I mean. It is this property, which I can see most prominently in only a handful of prints, which makes all my efforts as a photographer over the decades worthwhile.

Whenever I am in a depressed mood, I just have to glance at one of those precious images to make me whole again. Thus, I believe, the circle is now closed; a troubled mind has sought and found relief in a treasured occupation.