

# We are all anonymous

## THE "ISTVÁN SOLTÉSZ PHENOMENON"



The only remaining items in the estate of István Soltész (1938-1983) of Tibolddaróc are 272 black and white 35mm rolls of film, several 6x6 contact prints on serrated paper, some medium format negatives, and a good number of colour photographs. Normally the fate of the photographs would have been the same as with any family estate: disintegration after a few generations of esteem or misplacement. In this case however, István Soltész (born 1967), the youngest son of István Soltész became a professional photographer, and driven by respect, conscience and after a while professional excitement, in 1995 he began reprinting the negatives he had come across. (The family refrained from introducing the "Sr." and "Jr." constituents to resolve the identity of names, therefore I will also refrain from using them throughout the present paper.) After making contact sheets, approximately a hundred framed exhibition prints were made onto Forte museum quality paper. Selections from this body of work were on show in November 1996 by the Miskolc Gallery, in autumn 1997 at the "Contemporary Hungarian Photography" show in Pécs (László Cseri wrote about this in the journal *Fotográfia*), and in September 1998 at the Tibolddaróc elementary school. In addition, 40 photographs from another series of prints were exhibited at the 1998 Katowice show of the series of exhibitions "Circumscribed Pictures" (*Körülírt képek*) organised by the Department for Cultural and Visual Anthropology of the University of Miskolc.

Throughout the exhibitions the photographs of István Soltész were welcomed with the enthusiasm of discovery and unquestionable professional esteem. His surprisingly flawless composition, the expressive power of the images, and the immediacy with which he told the life of his village were highly appreciated. What formed in the minds of the viewers was unanimous: no other photojournalist or documentary photographer could have created such an authentic close-up of this theme. These remarks refer less to the exhibition at the Tibolddaróc elementary, where, as expected, the act of reception operated primarily on the level of recognising events and figures, and retelling the depicted stories.

At the same time, even an outsider could raise the question: but after all, whose photographs are we viewing now? Undoubtedly, young István Soltész made prints of nothing else than what was on the negatives (each print was strictly full-frame). Without his expertise, however, these photographs would be nonexistent: this was proven by the medium-format contact sheets presented at the Miskolc show, whose visually intriguing nature could be discovered only in relation to the exhibited prints, even by the expert eye. Also, pointing out these couple of hundred shots out of ten thousand was again the work of the young Soltész: if the elder István Soltész had thought of organising an exhibition of his photographs - probably he did not - he most certainly would have chosen completely different frames from his negatives. Did he not see the values of his own photographs? Is it possible that there are amazing but misplaced photographs in any family archive? As Sándor Kardos used to say: the photographer is sometimes touched by the finger of God. There most certainly are one or two good photographs in any ten thousand. A couple, but not more.

Here is that early shot from 1964, for instance, depicting two bartenders in the local pub of Bükkábrány. The photo was taken on a co-op excursion. The preceding and subsequent frames on the negative provide no context for the shot; the figures are neither relatives nor acquaintances - they were captured for the sake of the photo. The balanced spatial composition, which evokes Sander, the attire, gestures and expressions of the figures give a precise report on the social



status, personal attitude, emotions and hierarchy of the two figures. The background and the choice of tones consequently serve the creative intention of the photographer. The ethnographic authenticity of the details is indubitable. And by showing a peeper, the photographer even allows himself some visual play, rendering the interpretation of the photograph multi-layered. Could all this have been created unconsciously? Hardly conceivable.

And yet, there is not one momentum in the career of István Soltész, which would demonstrate a conscious and prepared creative process. His parents and grandparents were farmers, and there is no record in the scant memories of family history of any kind of intellectual endeavour. He was deprived of proper schooling at its due time, as he had to leave the Miskolc polytechnic in the mid-fifties for financial reasons. He later graduated by his own means, and acquired certification as chartered accountant. Further details of his life also testify the hardships of getting along in the dismal village at the foot of the Bükk Hills. He married at 23, raised two children, built a house, and became the head accountant of the Ferenc Rákóczi Farmers' Co-operative. His first camera was probably a Pajtás. He must have purchased his more serious camera, the much used Exa later, from his own salary. His darkroom was the bathroom (he bought his first enlarger, an Opemus 6x6, around 1965, on a 6-month payment plan). He made an increasing number of photographs until the end of the 60s. He subscribed to the journal *Fotó*. He never submitted his photographs to exhibitions, but some of his shots on viticulture were hung on the wall of the co-operative's office. In the mid-seventies he switched to a Yashica Electro 35, and colour technique, which resulted in the deteriorating

quality and dwindling number of photos: his theme was now just the close family. With the increasing burden and fatigue his workplace imposed on him, photography gradually disappeared from his life. He died at the age of 45.

From the mid-sixties he almost always had his camera on him, taking pictures of everything he considered important in his close environment or during excursions in the village or the neighbourhood, on trips abroad. He took photos at hunts, hunters' banquets, on the occasion of first communions, engagements, weddings, mayfests, harvests and excursions, on family events and in everyday situations. He took portraits, full-body shots, group shots, genre pictures; sometimes he would position his figures, or give them enough time to compose themselves, other times he just took snapshots. According to his son's accounts, some of his rolls barely carry more than one noteworthy shot, while on others - especially towards the late 60s-early 70s - almost all frames crave to be printed.

The contrast between his career and his pictures, between his imaging knowledge and these photographs leads us to conclusions - obviously phrased before, but very vivid when viewing these photos - about the nature of photography as such, beyond this unique, individual performance. Looking at these photographs again and again, our thoughts continue along four - not necessarily intertwined - threads. The sequence of the four chapter titles should be something like: "The anonymous photographer", followed by the singular and unique image maker István Soltész, then the "two István Soltész's" and finally the "István Soltész phenomenon".

"We are all anonymous" - says Pierre de Fenoyl. That would be nice, but the history of photography is full of attitudinising,



gushy, intrusively intimate pictures. Still, with most of the photographs, their maker is willing to submit to the moment, to identify with his situation. He accepts that he cannot control every detail of the photograph. Thus minute facts and certainties may seep in in the background. Of course all images - either as objects or as depictions - are possible sources for the eye scrutinizing the shades of history. Those compositions, however, which were admittedly taken at a given place and time, in a given situation, will more probably behave as evidence, offering "thick description". Especially those photographs... (This is one of the remarkable circumstances of studying photographs: one should avoid definitive declarations, since every thesis has a counterexample in the history of the photograph.) So, especially those photographs, which correspond to Jacques Maquet's definition of "instrumental form" when thinking about aesthetic value: those that have the quality of efficient utility in their customary environment. The instrumental and - at least partially - random nature of the photograph which depicts "life" are therefore deeply related: the authorship of the successful photograph cannot be attributed to "purely the author's action".

The mentality of István Soltész is that of the ideal anonymous photographer. In the course of data collection, the villagers unanimously confirmed that "the 'photo' was always hanging from his shoulder, he recorded moments". For instance, take that group photo of six people taken at a grape harvest in 1969, against the backdrop of a horse carriage packed with tanks in the autumn forest: on the one hand, its glory is its instrumentality - it is an ideal point of departure for recognition and thus remembering and storytelling, with anecdotal and timeless features, formulating personal and role-type characteristics. It is indeed about the six of them (and the photographer), about that ordinary and therefore, with time, increasingly hazy year, the autumn, the grape harvest, the co-op, the carriage, collegiality, friendship (and the unaccountable inside stories). At the same time the rubber boots, the patch on the knee, the Soviet camera (Zorkij, Zenit or Fed?) hanging in the neck: flashes of customs, values, destinies, actions. A chronicle of "the village" and two generations in the row of caps and hats.

Let us observe our mode of perception: running our eyes through the details without the compulsion of forming an opinion, without inhibitions, giving way to recognitions that unexpectedly come forth from the ordinary. (It is in line with Roland Barthes's description of *studium* and *punctum*, if we discard judgment, which the always conscious Barthes could never go without.) What surfaces here is "what history lacks", the order of existence beyond the immediately recognisable, the truth of experience known to be past, the authenticity so craved for by the viewer of photographs, the substantial similarities in the differences.

Could all this have been created unconsciously? Again - hardly conceivable. István Soltész innocently lived his life in a village that hardly knew anything about itself, among people driven by other things than figuring out how to leave a trace. The curiosity of Tibolddaróc - its miserable condition before the war - can be gathered from Zoltán Szabó's *Tardi helyzet* ('Conditions in the village of Tard' - which, interestingly, got its title from the neighbouring village across the hill). The famous cave homes that had been

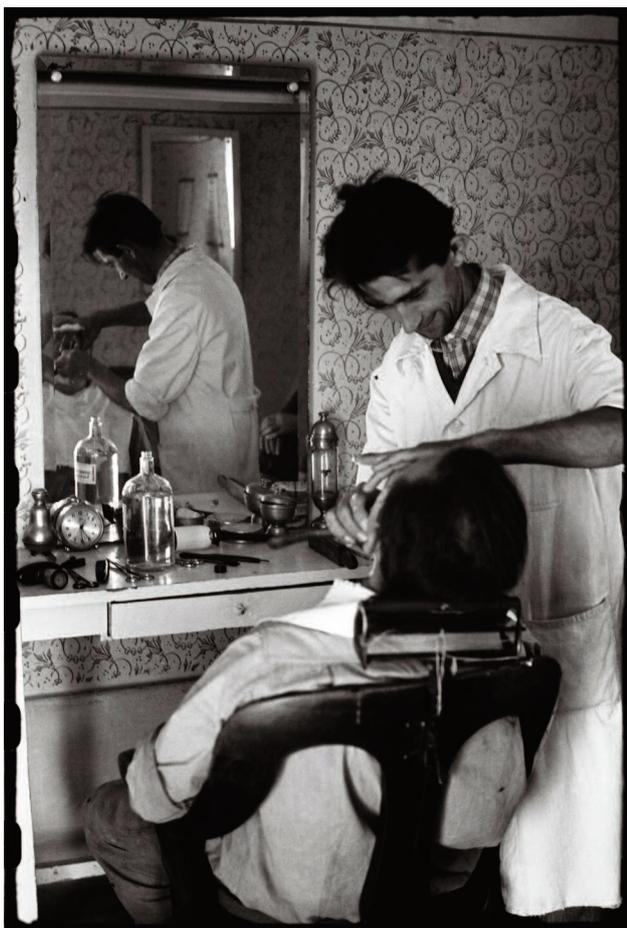
documented in writing and photographs, and raised to symbols of poverty, were already uninhabited by the 60s; families went out of their bounds to build detached houses. Peaceful years, individual opportunities, collective hunting banquets, grand weddings, good-humoured co-op trips to Moscow, drinking bouts at the cellars at the end of the village. István Soltész's latent visual truths are formed within the framework of "feasible thinking".

That shot of a wedding feast in 1972, in which the young couple turns towards the camera revealing a lot about their character, is apparently one of the "most brilliant average pieces". We immerse in the bittersweet gaze of the bride, and shiver looking at the shut eyes of the husband and his smile of a proprietor's satisfaction. At the same time, the picture allows the gaze to wander towards the edges: the wardrobe's style, the patterns of the roll painted wall, the caoutchouc doll sitting in the armchair and the half-eaten cake all tell us tales of destiny. We feel that our eyes perambulate the image via the route defined by the photographer, every element an intended part of the composition; and at once we think of the fortunate incident that made it possible for all these visual elements to appear in the viewfinder. It therefore has the selective and finite features of the "good photograph" and the verbose nature of the anonymous picture, its heterogeneity offering a lot of browsing.



This photograph is two-faced in other respects, too. One of the figures, the young lady in bride's dress, is a relative, the photographer's niece. The photograph still lacks a kind of intimacy, the confidentiality of in-family photographers. At the same time, it lacks the matter-of-fact air of professional photographers, or the typifying simplification of journalists, or the aestheticizing of amateurs. István Soltész observes with unflinching care, keeping a strictly equal distance from each theme. The most typical characteristic of his approach could be said to be accuracy: visual, ethnographic, emotional accuracy. Therein lies the essence of his photographs: he discovered that extraordinary possibility of photography, which, neither suggests a sense of reconstruction, nor of construction and is familiar and immediate in a manner no other medium is capable of. If enough heritages like that of István Soltész became public, would they modify the history of Hungarian photography, up to now written mainly by art photographers and aestheticians? The desired answer is: yes. And not only

because the photographs of Soltész enrich the “menu” of our cultivation with hitherto unknown “pleasures”. The pictures of anonymous local chroniclers, travelling photographers, photographing discoverers, naive village photographers and provincial studio photographers would reveal an incredibly detailed view of the everyday of the past century and a half, full of experiences. There exist somewhere a vast number of photographs relating the true nature of photography by their mere existence. The history of photography, which has so far focused on technical and aesthetic aspects, would suddenly acquire multiple readings - open to professionals and the public alike. However, the program of “publishing the Hungarian visual heritage” is an almost hopeless task.



István Soltész captured the local barber in 1966. The portrait format and the two mirrors in the image produce a complex spatial construction; despite the narrow, concentrated composition, the shop can be “perambulated”, the decoration on the opposite wall can be seen together with another person waiting for a shave. The point of view is a little below eye level, creating a rather fortunate composition: the master’s facial expressions complete the expressiveness of the scene. The puckish smile of the lanky, white-gowned figure at the moment of exposure may be an embarrassed reaction to the shot, or a moment of banter with the client. Shaving is done with expertise. The classic tools of the trade are on the table. In that moment, however, whoever had the task of putting down the bits of

information on the image would be in trouble if the description of the image had to approach a verbal accuracy equal to its visual accuracy: the names of objects and tools, their methods of use, “archaeological” value, details of the lives of the people on the photo, their relation to each other, to this moment, to the photographer and to the photograph, the future fate and impact of the photograph... That there is no need for all this? That the moment speaks for itself? I don’t think so: if we fail to capture the images in words, all we have to theorise about is ourselves. And about the time, which was exactly half past one (if the clock was accurate). István Soltész’s accurately formulated photograph draws the invisible aspect of life worlds into the domain of the visible. We should approach it with the same austerity to prevent all of this from undeservingly mouldering in our hands.

And if enough heritages like that of István Soltész became public? But are there indeed such heritages and only the research should be done more meticulously, or we are looking at some mysteriously singular, unparalleled oeuvre? And in case the former was true, what should we name this little known mentality: naive photographer?

The choice of term might even be fortunate had we recalled its original interpretation by Kandinsky: It was precisely the “power of depicted things” that Kandinsky valued the most in the work of Rousseau the toll collector. Thus, precisely not the representation of some collective unconscious, but an extraordinary, individual invention of making things seen, founded on very much worn-out visual traditions. The strange thing is that the “power of depicted things” in fact lies in the masterly use of visual traditions in the photographs of István Soltész. Their conscious use, we might add, but how could he have known all this about Sander, Kertész and Cartier-Bresson? Definitely not from the journal *Fotó*. One of the most important aspects of studying the creation of images is the transfer of visual knowledge, the issue of acquiring the devices of expression. However logical it would be for István Soltész’s photographs to be characterised by irregularity and a non-customary system of proportions, there are no traces of this. In his case outsidership did not produce a behaviour, vision and style analogous to that of a “Sunday painter”; his images are characterised precisely by “the unsettling peculiarity of obvious things”. For the sake of the history of photography we may hope for similar heritages to turn up, but it will in fact be the new finds that highlight the peculiar uniqueness and inimitability of his photographs, his power of image creation, his mentality.

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The first photograph shown in this essay was taken on the occasion of an excursion in 1958. This image is from the very first 35 mm film that my father ever exposed. It is very likely that the picture was taken by a good friend of him, who subsequently became my godfather. My father is on the right, my mother is in the middle, and a friend of my mother is on the left.  
*Istvan Soltész*