

# Iren Stehli – So Near, Yet So Far

Iren Stehli (born 1953) established her reputation with photographic essays from the Czech Republic. Over a period of decades she accompanied Libuna, a Roma woman living in Prague, through the ups and downs of life. The result is a unique long-term study during which the photographer not only maintained the stance of an objective observer, but also became a friend and confidante. In addition to that “work of a lifetime”, Iren Stehli has undertaken many other projects since 1974. These are all characterised by a very special blend of fascination and empathy. The exhibition at the Fotostiftung Schweiz is the first survey of the oeuvre of this photographer, who was born in Switzerland and lives in Prague.

The different facets of Iren Stehli’s photographic language are most clearly expressed in the work “Libuna”, which was also published in book form by Scalp Verlag, Zurich, in 2004. Although this work comes close to reportage, the images engage more with inner atmospherics and sensitive portraiture than with objective information or external events. The dynamics of the compact narrative and the drama of the skilful composition almost make one overlook that the essence of this life story is borne along by the peaceful photographs: images in which the main theme is the rooms themselves or individual objects – a wall decoration, clothes lying on the floor, a tablecloth or an indoor plant. Iren Stehli’s sense for the poetry of everyday life and her keen interest in minimalist composition combine to form an aesthetic scaffold, so to speak, by means of which she constructs her visual status reports.

Static shots and what are in fact still lifes also play a pivotal role in other works by this photographer. Indeed it is these photographs that indicate the extent to which her work is in the tradition of Czech photography, first and foremost that of Josef Sudek. Stehli’s photographs challenge viewers to get involved in their particular symbolism, their apparent emptiness, their compositional precision and brittle realism. On closer inspection, chasms reveal themselves behind the visible surface, so that following the tracks becomes an adventurous exploration closely linked with people present or absent. Stehli’s works superimpose aesthetic interest and sociological research, a clear preference for a reduced formal idiom and the psychologically-tinted milieu study. Yet the main point is always people, and the photographer adheres consistently to a humanistic tradition that is guided by respect for others.

The exhibition “So Near, Yet So Far” reveals the consistency with which Iren Stehli has pursued her path since the 1970s. The survey it presents highlights just how closely linked the different work groups are – be that narrative projects like “Slama, the Tailor”, the description of the social climate in “Fish Buffet”, conceptual series about streets and facades, the “Czech Look” in display windows in Prague or the poetic concentration of everyday situations. Seen together, these works provide great insight into the atmosphere in Czech society during the period of Real Socialism and the years of the velvet revolution after 1989. They evoke a chapter in recent history which still seems so near and yet already so very far away.

Peter Pfrunder curated the exhibition in collaboration with Iren Stehli.

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Accompanying events:

Sunday, 13 April 2014, 11.30 a.m.: Iren Stehli in conversation with Karin Salm – tour of the exhibition.

Tuesday, 22 April 2014, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.: Generations at the museum – Workshop in the exhibition “So Near, Yet So Far”. People of different age groups approach the works in a playful and entertaining way. Reservation: [vermittlung@fotostiftung.ch](mailto:vermittlung@fotostiftung.ch).

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Franca Comalini

## A conversation with Iren Stehli

***Iren, your origins are Swiss and Czech. Why did you study and then stay on in a country behind the "Iron Curtain" in the 70s?***

My mother grew up in former Czechoslovakia, and my father is Swiss. I grew up in Zurich, but my mother spoke with us in her mother tongue ever since we were children. So I have always been familiar with the Czech mentality, although we couldn't travel to Czechoslovakia in the 50s. In 1963, when I was ten years old, I visited Prague for the first time, together with my sister. We got to know our numerous Czech relatives, in particular our grandparents, whom we had never seen before. After graduating from high school, I decided to go to Prague to deepen my knowledge of the Czech language. A month before I was supposed to return, I fell in love and stayed. He was a painter, an artist. I got to know a lot of new faces, among others, a photographer. She showed me her studio in Malá Strana (the Lesser Town of Prague), her darkroom, how she developed and printed photographs. She opened a door onto a new, unknown world.

***You discovered a new medium.***

On the one hand, I discovered photography, on the other I encountered a new city and its culture. In my dormitory, I met people from Mongolia, Bulgaria, the Soviet Union – from worlds that were foreign to me. The cordiality of the people, but also the melancholy of the city and of the dreary everyday life in "Real Socialism". All of this left such a strong impression on me that I felt the need to respond, to photographically document what I saw.

The rhythm of life seemed to be slowed down. Time seemed to take on another dimension. I strolled through the city for days on end, looked behind the façades and discovered new worlds. The hidden beauty of Prague backyards, the scurrilous sign language of socialist window dressing, the cheap restaurants, and the bars with these impressive, sometimes totally freakish types. There was no money anywhere, but there was nevertheless a lust for life.

When I decided to take the entrance exams of the Prague Film Academy (FAMU), I got to know two photographers, who showed me photographic techniques and offered me a lot of support. At the time, I travelled to Slovakia, where I got to know some Roma. I photographed them and used the portraits as a part of my application for the entrance exams. I was accepted and attended FAMU for five years. I then opted for postgraduate studies. I was one of the few Western students in Prague.

***Did you have any contacts to photographers in Zurich?***

No, I was kind of submerged in a local world, the Prague scene. During my studies, I met many interesting people, among others, Anna Fárová, who was teaching at FAMU. She introduced us to the work of numerous native and foreign, classical and modern photographers. In 1978/79 and 1980/81, she and a group of us photographers organized exhibitions in the lobby of a theatre, about the topic "here and now", exhibitions that were "tolerated" by the regime. The final show, with all the works from the previous shows, was held at the Plasy Monastery near Pilsen – even Henri Cartier-Bresson came to see it.

***During your studies, you already photographed Libuna. How did you first meet?***

I met Libuna Siváková for the first time in 1975, in the dormitory where I lived at the time. She and her mother worked there as cleaning ladies. Occasionally, I would talk with them, until one day her mother invited me home. I got to her apartment through a courtyard, and suddenly I was in a completely unexpected world. Libuna and her cousin happened to be there too.

The women wanted to be photographed just like they had seen it in Western magazines. They posed accordingly, and a kind of game developed. They were very graceful, very spontaneous and natural. I photographed what happened in front of my camera just as spontaneously. That's how it all started. Libuna, too, invited me to her home. She lived in a one-bedroom apartment in Prague Zizkov. She was 19 years old at the time.

I visited her again and again, as I was magically attracted to her. She seemed like just a girl, yet she already had a family. She was drowning in work, and it seemed to me that her husband left her alone with her worries.

***What kind of person is Libuna? Where did her parents come from? How did she grow up?***

Her mother was Slovak. Her father died young. He was a Roma. Libuna adored him and described him as an excellent violinist. She and her siblings grew up with a group of musicians with whom her father would play music at home for days on end. He was a policeman. Apparently, he was well respected and had a good reputation. I think that Libuna has inherited her pride, perseverance, and ethics from him.

***As impressive as this woman might be, with her femininity and her motherhood – she had six children, so your way of living as a woman and hers are radically different.***

When I got to know Libuna, I was 22-years old and obsessed by photography. I could not imagine having a family like she did. The encounter with her opened up a new world to me: a world full of intensely lived emotions. Libuna's spontaneity and ease attracted me, as did her ability not to plan, to let life simply take its course. I considered Libuna very beautiful. I liked her thick black hair as well as her expressive eyes. All of her children have inherited them.

***Tell me about Libuna's relationship to her husband. How did she behave towards him?***

She has remained true to the tradition of the Roma, in which the husband has the final word, on the outside at least, even though Libuna is an entirely independent woman, full of self-confidence and the power to survive. Her selflessness and generosity made her give up her own wishes for the sake of her family. Her children were of the greatest importance and value to her.

***What about family planning? Why did Libuna have so many children?***

In socialist Czechoslovakia during the 70s, family planning was not accessible to everyone. The pill was hard to find, and abortions had to be allowed by a commission. Moreover, Libuna followed her tradition and simply just accepted her pregnancies. She was full of love and tenderness for her children.

***How did Libuna cope with the prison term of her husband?***

She accepted her lot as if it were a matter of course, which I admired. Her children were the meaning of her life and the source of all her joy. She started to work again and supported the family by herself. When her husband returned, Libuna lived with him and her children again. Years of relative prosperity and stability ensued. Her husband, Lád'a, worked in a beer hall, and Libuna divided her time between the children and occasional odd jobs. She became pregnant again, and in 1987 her first son was born. The couple was very happy.

***She had another daughter.***

Yes, I am the godmother of Libuna's last daughter, Irenka, and of her son Ládicek. The christening of her son was a big event.

***Libuna and Lád'a are grandparents and parents almost at the same time. In the photographs, we can observe the development both of individuals and of a family.***

Sometimes the daughters lived with their partners. During socialism, the living situation in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, and in Prague in particular, was very difficult. There was a housing shortage. Endless waiting lists were the norm. Thus, a lot of people, not just Roma, were living with their parents.

***They all cling to each other out of necessity, out of love, all in the same apartment... It's an amazing transformation of these two rooms.***

The Roma have a very strong sense of togetherness and are able to share the smallest and narrowest spaces. What is important is the close proximity of the rest of the community. When they are by themselves, most Roma feel lost and abandoned.

In her first year of their marriage, Libuna and Lád'a moved into an empty one-bedroom apartment next to the apartment of Lád'a's mother. When the building was demolished in the course of the redevelopment in Zizkov, a working-class neighbourhood, the State gave them a new apartment in one of the prefabricated high-rises on the outskirts of Prague.

***How did you feel about your life at the time, living in between two worlds, Zurich and Prague? Where did you live at the time?***

In 1983, I returned to Zurich, because I could not renew my residence permit after graduation. But whenever it was possible, I travelled to Prague. It was a very difficult time. I missed Prague and my Czech friends and the discussions I had with them. There were times when I felt like a foreigner in my own country. When I went to Prague, it felt like coming home. Libuna and her family always received me with open arms.

In the 80s, I had the impression that my time in Czechoslovakia was over. Whereas commuting between east and west became increasingly difficult for me, Libuna and her family didn't consider my frequent absences significant. Our friendship just continued.

***The life of Libuna's family ran like a thread through your life...***

There was this attraction and the desire to keep taking photographs, to remain with the subject. When Libuna's daughter became pregnant at 16, I naturally wanted to document this. Something new and unforeseen was always happening. It was like in a movie that went on for over a quarter of a century.

***Daughters and grandchildren lived with Libuna. How did she secure her income?***

In the 90s, Libuna worked in a cafeteria. Democracy brought about major changes for all citizens in Czechoslovakia and across all of Eastern Europe. Adjusting to a free-market economy was a great challenge for most. A lot of Roma don't have sufficient formal education. Thus, integration into the new society was and still is particularly problematic. On top of that, Roma are often the first to be laid off. The nationalist tendencies that are on the rise all across Europe exacerbate these difficulties even more.

***Shortly after the Velvet Revolution, you returned to Prague.***

In 1993, one year after the division of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia, I became head of the Prague branch of Pro Helvetia, which supports cultural exchange between Switzerland and the Czech Republic. My knowledge of the intellectual and artistic milieus in both Prague and the Czech Republic, as well as in Switzerland, was very important for this job. During this time, I kept taking pictures of Libuna's family, whenever possible.

The upheaval of the 90s has left deep marks on Libuna's family. The place where Lád'a had worked at the beer hall for years – and where he was very much appreciated – had to close. He was jobless. He tried to find work, which was very hard in general and especially difficult for a Roma. He worked as a waiter for a while, then as a cab driver, but even there he encountered difficulties.

Once again, Libuna had to provide for her family. The daughters were at home with their kids; they didn't work, or else only periodically. The family situation came to a head. Libuna became sick and had to stop working because of her bad health.

On top of everything else, the house where the family had lived was sold to a company that vacated all the apartments in order to renovate the building. The apartment in Karlin, the family's home of many years, was dissolved.

From: *Libuna*, Scalo Verlag, 2004 (abbrev. slightly). With the permission of the author.

**Addendum 2014**

Libuna's 10th grandchild was born in 2000. She herself became ill and could no longer work. In late October Libuna and Lád'a travelled with part of the family to Belgium, where relatives of Lád'a's were already living. In October 2001, I visited her for the first time in Belgium. They were living on social security and waiting for their asylum case to be dealt with. In 2003 Libuna and Lád'a were extradited. They returned to Prague with their two youngest children, where they found themselves practically on the street. They quarrelled a lot and then separated. Libuna made a living with casual jobs. Meantime, one of her daughters got married in Belgium and Libuna went there in summer 2004 for the wedding. While there she met John, a Belgian communist with Polish roots. They married in 2007. One year later Libuna was diagnosed with cancer. She died in July 2009.