

REMEMBERING PRAGUE



by

Vladimir Kabelik



I left Prague with my family in 1981 when I was thirty years old. Before our departure, my wife and I spent months fixing our house in a successful ruse to lessen the attention of the ever-suspicious authorities. In fact, it was part of our carefully detailed plan to escape from then-communist Czechoslovakia. With no word to betray our intentions, we quietly packed our car one morning, put our two young sons in the back seat, and headed for the southern border. We never expected to see Prague again.

Reflecting on my time in Prague growing up in a family of filmmakers, I can see that my creative life was somewhat predestined. Fortunately, the political climate in the 60's was already different from the 50's; people were no longer shot or sentenced to life in prison for their beliefs. Filmmaking, together with literature and theatre, became a popular outlet of public outcry, and film directors of the "Czech New Wave" were winning appraisals worldwide. Nevertheless, just before I entered the Film Academy, the "Prague Spring" came and changed my life forever.

The year of 1968 was an unforgettable event. I was 17 years old, but already seduced by photography. Suddenly, many taboos disappeared, and creativ-

ity was not only officially permitted but flourishing everywhere. It was not a true democracy but we did not know the difference. The subsequent Soviet invasion and the public suicide of Jan Palach the following year were tragic experiences that had a definite impact on the whole nation. (Jan Palach was a student of Prague's Charles University, who burnt himself to death on January 16, 1969, in protest against the Soviet invasion and the cowardice of the communist authorities.) Aside of their political meaning, they forced me to realize my own priorities – one of them being a strong urge to document, as best as I could, what was happening around me.

As months passed, the political landscape of Czechoslovakia had changed. The secret police were everywhere and the political tension also dramatically changed my photographic interests. No longer did I feel the need to photograph people; I switched to black and white, and my themes became more personal than before. Quiet trips became my daily ritual, looking to capture with my camera the loneliness and desperation of the times. The photographs in this portfolio are from those outings.

Trusted relationships were treasured. Luckily, as a young man, I met several

great photographers who enriched my life not only through their images but even more through their life philosophy, which was straightforward and honest. Miroslav Hak and Josef Sudek, both in the last decade of their lives, had a great influence on me creatively and personally. Not only were these two men great artists willing to discuss various topics and techniques, but most importantly, they were not afraid to share their feelings – knowing well that politics is not worth twisting their spines. Their single-minded, nonchalant behavior – not dissimilar to their own photographs – was of a great contrast to many of my filmmaking colleagues. A good photograph will always be a good photograph, regardless of who took it and when.

In the late seventies, I attempted to produce a documentary film about the upcoming generation of Czech and Slovak photographers, titled *Generation '70*. We spiked the script with cryptic references to the political situation, and following the wisdom of my Film Academy professors, we also supplied some very obvious provocations to mislead the censors. The strategy worked well and after a few rounds of "dramaturgical corrections," the innocent-looking movie was approved for production. Not surprisingly, the documentary was banned immedi-

ately after it was completed. So, I again took my camera for a long, quiet walk.

Life in exile is a challenge on its own – full of great losses and tiny victories – yet giving up is not an option. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall I have shot more films and taken many more photographs. And finally I visited Prague again. It was good to be back because I missed this city terribly. Prague today is even more beautiful than when we left nearly 25 years ago. A few days after our arrival, however, I had the most remarkable realization: The surroundings and language were familiar, but I was experiencing them as a sort of whisper, or perhaps a shadow. I no longer belonged to this place; my time here was over. Still, I am very grateful to the wonderful city whose demise brought me my freedom, and for the experiences that led me to know my heart so young.





Jan Reich



Generation 70



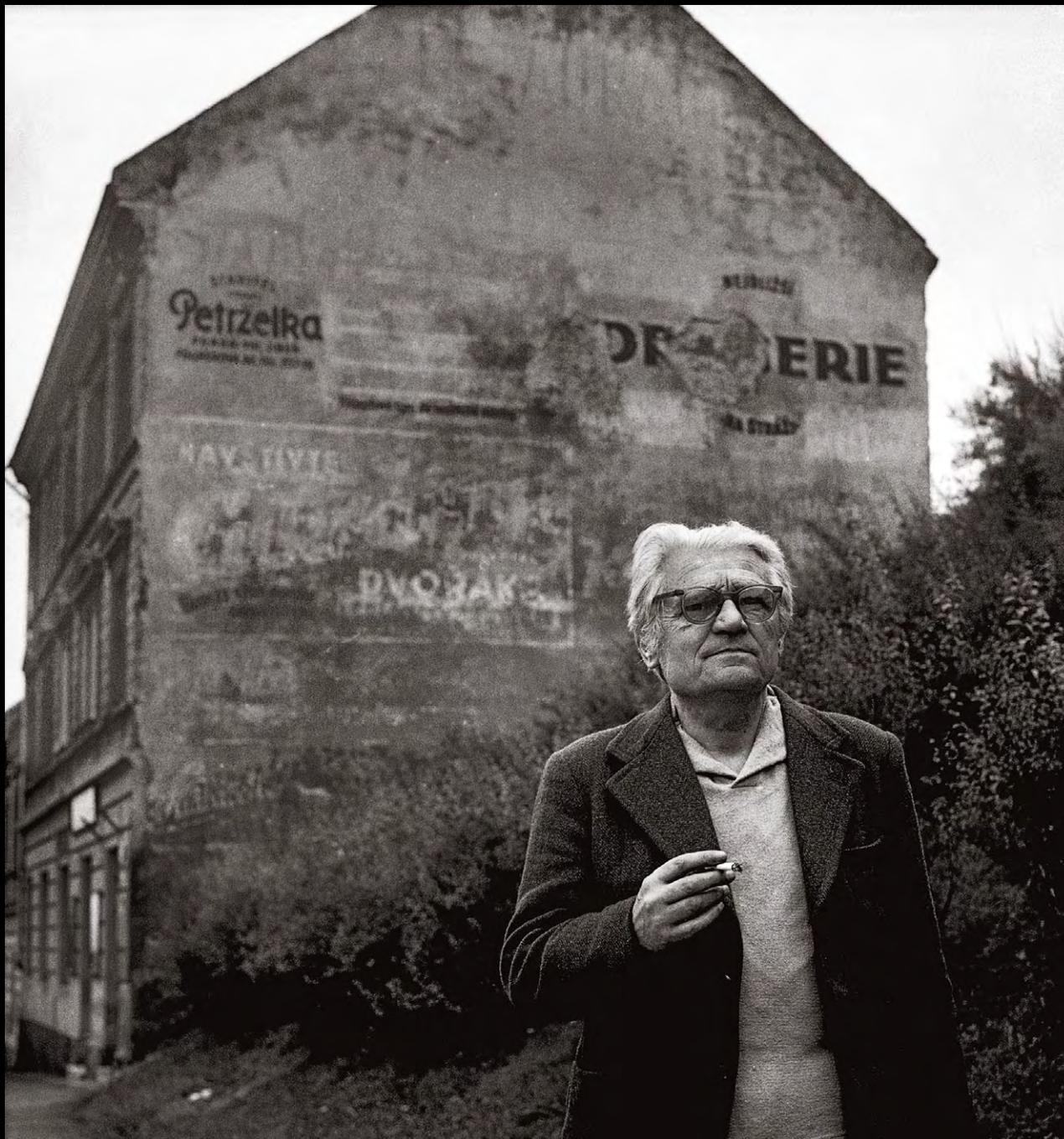
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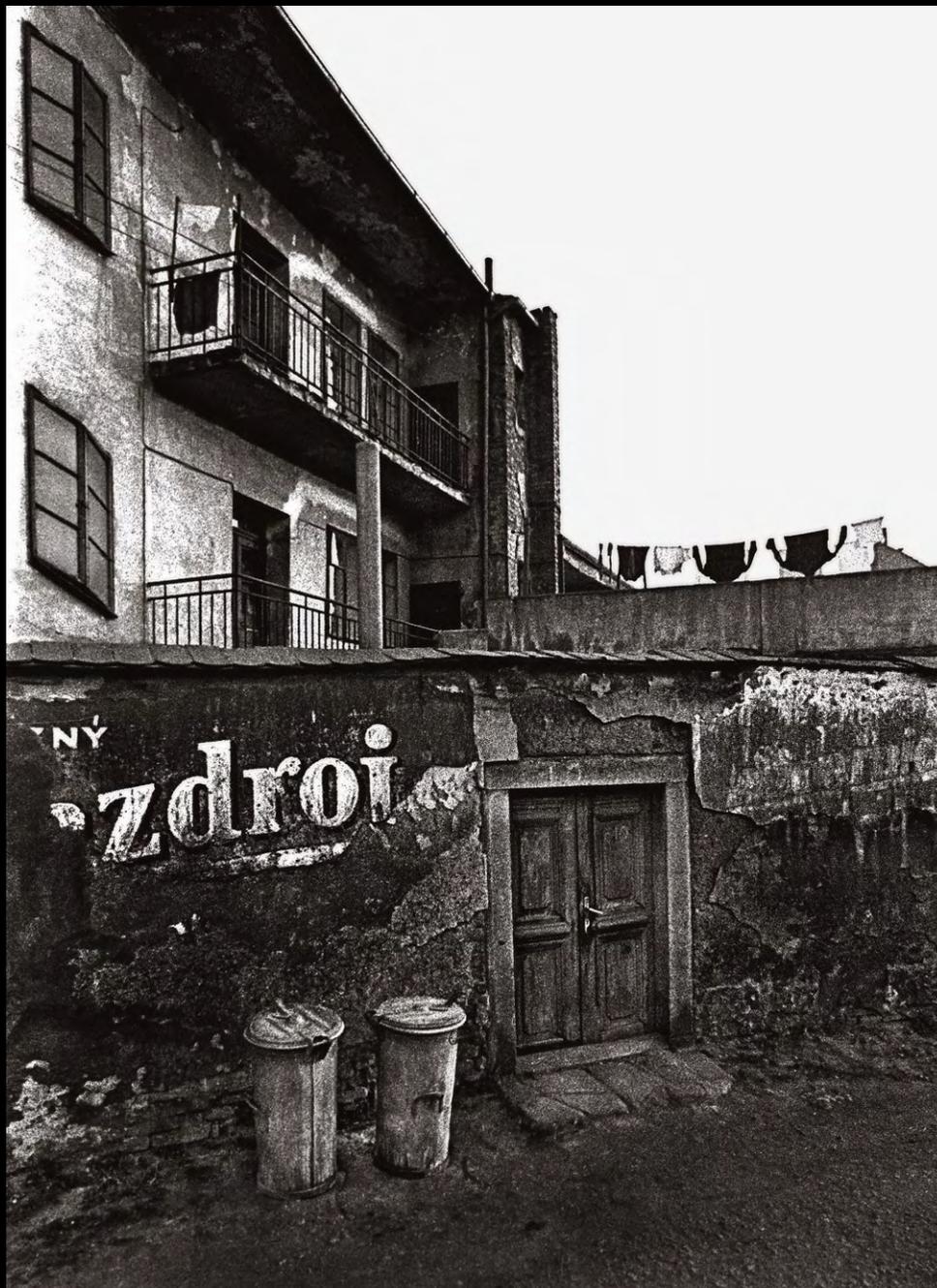


Miroslav Hák



Shoe Store





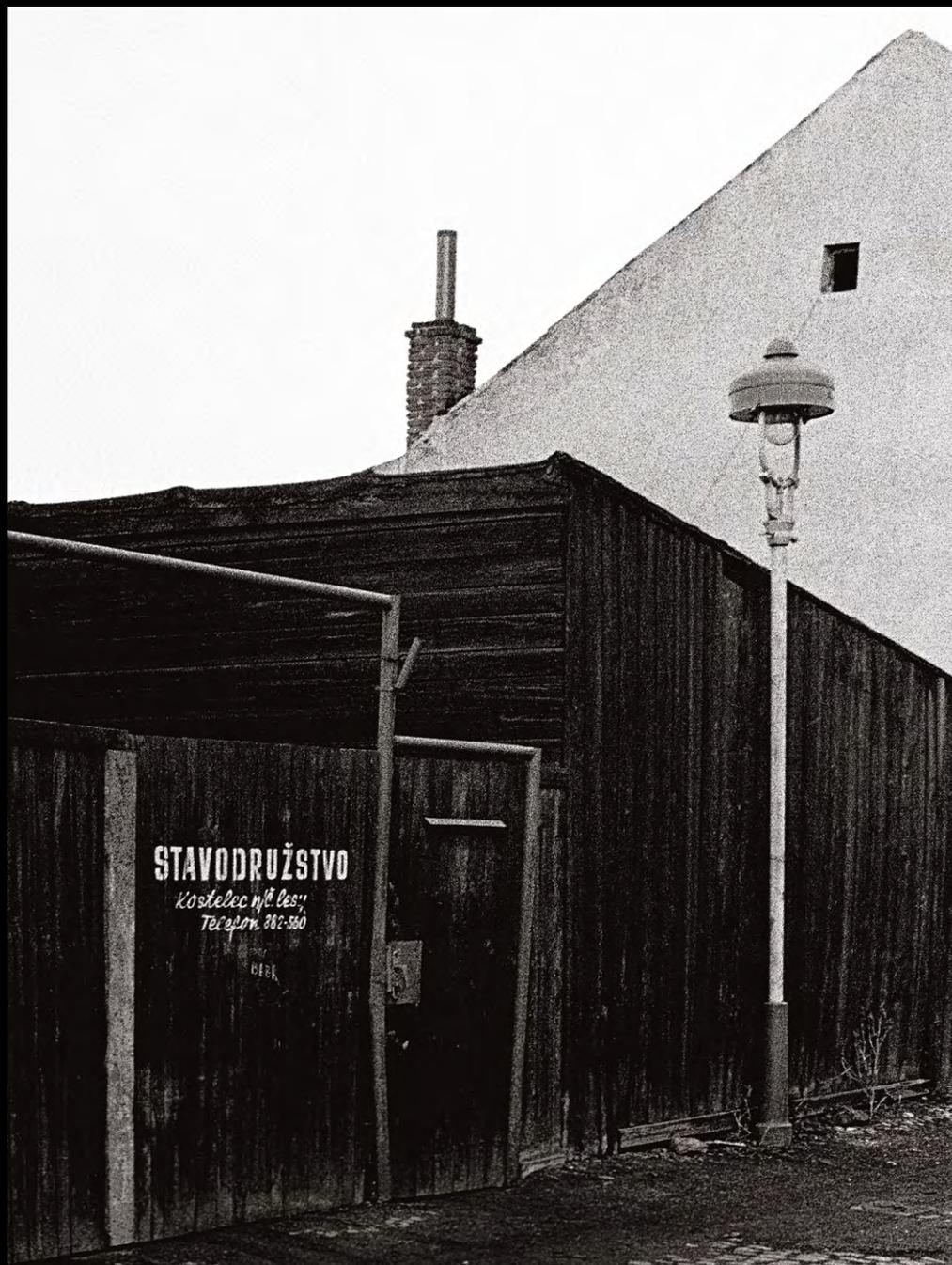
Prazdroj



U Svoradu



Still Life With Owl



Stavodruzstvo



Trash Cans





Pushcart and Astronomy Poster





Gypsy Girl



Lamp and Chimneys



Calvary



Freedom



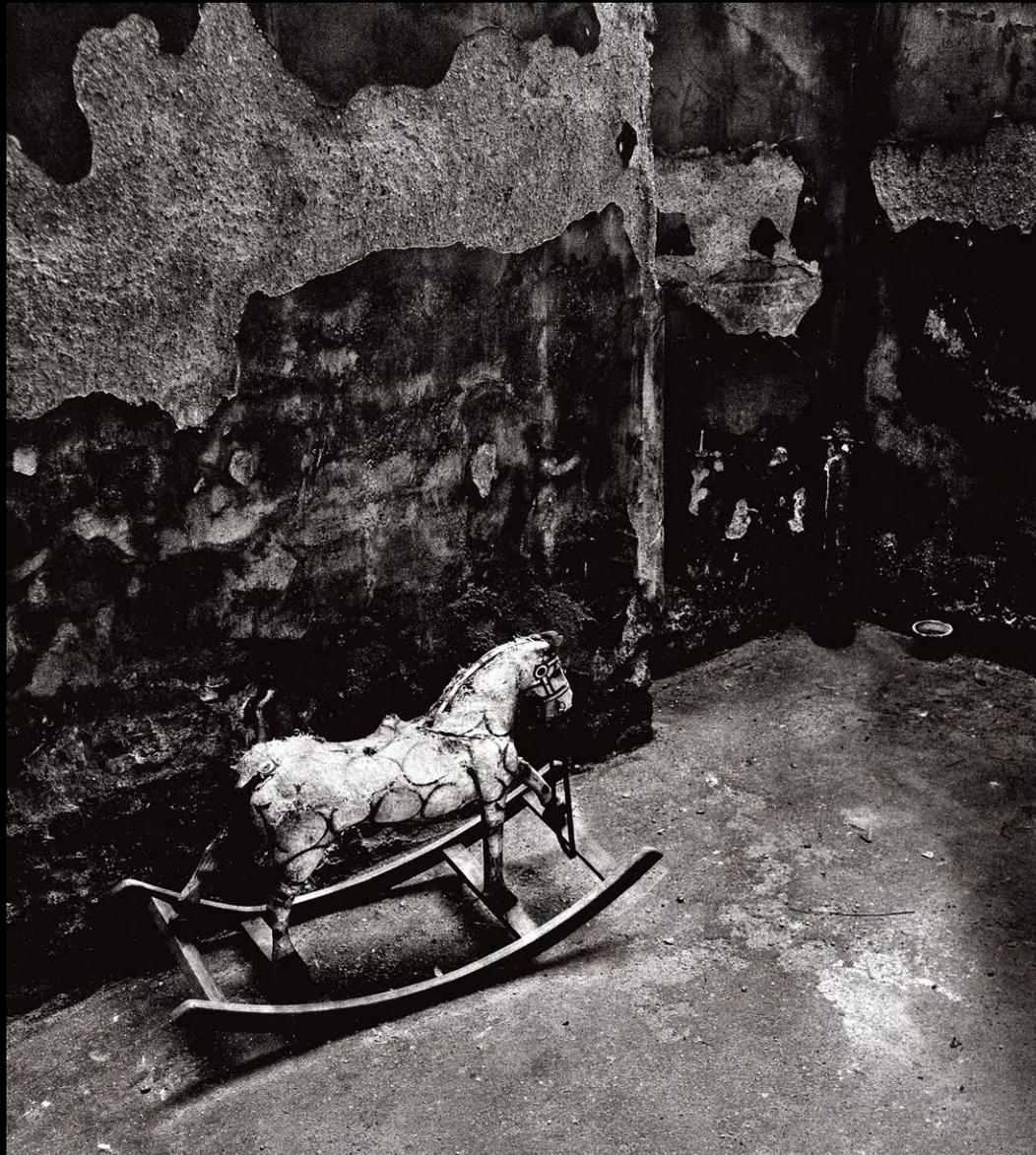


Old Rack



Torso





Rocking Horse





My Aunt Ali





In the Attic



Still Life With Stove & Painting



Roofs of Prague



White Benches



Vltava River



Chimney, Car, and Posters



Still Life With Beer Bottles



Baby Carriage



The General





Reflections



Mattoni



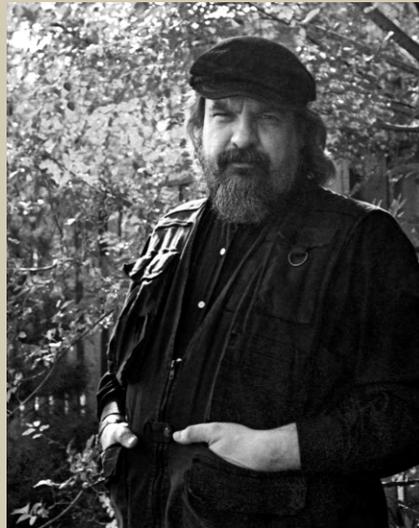


Vladimir Kabelik was born into a family of filmmakers in Czechoslovakia in 1951. A third generation filmmaker, he earned a Master of Arts degree in documentary filmmaking from the Academy of Film and Television Arts in Prague.

In 1981, 30-year old Kabelik escaped illegally from his communist homeland and immigrated to Canada with his family. Since 1984 he has been affiliated with Sheridan College (located just west of Toronto in Oakville, Ontario, Canada), where he is currently a professor of film and television production. He has also been working in Canadian television and film, and has produced independent documentary films primarily for CBC and Vision TV.

When switching from the subject of filmmaking to photography, Kabelik states that he has always admired the work of Josef Sudek, “but my friendship with Miroslav Hak has forever cemented my love and understanding of photography.” He particularly enjoys the music of J.S. Bach and The Beatles; their music has sustained him in long darkroom sessions.

His wife, Eva Kabelik, was a lawyer in Czechoslovakia, but followed her artistic inclinations after immigrating, and now creates stylized ceramic sculptures. They have three children.



Web site: www.kabelik.com

Works with: Currently works with Asahi Pentax 67 II. Prints are made in “Carbon Piezography” process (scans film negs and prints with carbon pigment inks on fine art paper).

Thumbnails 1/2

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Thumbnails 2/2

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