Postcard from New York-Trio from Terezín

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In December of 1948 the photographer D.J. Ruzicka sent a postcard to an unknown recipient. It is a memorable image: a shadowed boat inhabits the right foreground while Prague's "Lesser Town" Malá strana appears as a series of indistinct shapes, nearly black. Silhouetted against a dramatic sky is the castle, Hradčany dominated by St. Vitus Cathedral. Like a Dutch landscape, the heavens with their swirling clouds occupy fully half the photograph. This is a fine example of both Ruzicka's style and the pictorialist tradition in photography.

Four years and two months earlier Gideon Klein had completed a string trio in three movements. In the center of the piece, longer than the two outer movements combined, is a theme and variations movement. Here is the theme:

Audio Example 1: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0001.101>

Both of these images, the visual and the musical, have something we might choose to call an identity relatively independent of any obvious external stimuli. But they also have contexts that are broader than the images themselves. In fact, each is set off by both the specific language of title and expression, and by extended dialogues that shape the way we might react to them.

The first addition to the photograph seems innocuous enough. The artist tells us the title is "Soumrak se sklaní nad Prahou" or "Dawn Over Prague."

Does the title simply confirm what we have already suspected about the image? What if I have purposely misled you and "Soumrak se sklaní nad Prahou" actually means "Dusk Falls Over Prague?" This actually turns out to be the truth, or at least the truth as far as translation will carry us. I apologize for the deceit, but this may have been the best way to get you to experience how we might look at sunsets differently from sunrises. Incidentally, no one seems to have studied this, and there is hardly any information about any physical differences between these daily events. As far as I can tell, there is nothing to suggest that we can know whether we are looking at morning or evening shot unless someone tells us. So even Ruzicka's innocuous title has some real information for us. Of course perhaps it is possible to regard the image without caring whether it is sunset, sunrise, or just a cloudy Winter day.

Up to this point we have avoided discussion of what may be considered the photograph's subject, if we can speak of such a thing. This particular skyline has in recent years become almost as familiar to world travelers as New York's: Prague, with the Vltava (Moldau) River in the foreground and the classic castle, Hradčany on the hill. Yet it will be difficult to ascertain the importance of Prague in the consciousness of a particular viewer, so it might be that the sunset is the real subject of the work after all, considering that the subset of human beings with experience of sunsets dwarfs that subset with experience of Prague.

Does the Klein Trio have something like a subject, and not only in the obvious musical sense of the word?

The title of the slow movement is both more and less specific than that of the photograph: “Variace na téma Moravské lidové písně” (“Variations on the theme of a Moravian Folksong”). Trying to quantify the effect of the title on the experience of hearing the work will be impossible, but in some ways the title must strike variable resonances in its beholders, much like the image of Prague. Some will know what “Moravian” means and have an attitude towards it, a cognitive charge—they might even know the tune; to others the word will blend with others like “Moldovian” and “Mazovian” to suggest some Eastern European or even more generic “other.” There are also more local perceptions: Moravia is not only the home province of the composer in this case, it could, without too much twisting and turning, be considered Czechoslovakia’s “slow movement;” its hills and fields and villages sandwiched between Bohemia and Slovakia (the poet Jan Skácel once suggested that the Moravian national anthem was the pause between the Czech and Slovak anthems).

Here is a version of the song that might give some sense of how Klein heard it. The singer is Dušan Holý, and though the recording was made in the 1970s, Holý, born in 1933, was a “boy wonder” and was reconstructing a version he had certainly heard while Klein was still alive:

Audio Example 2: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0001.101>

The song has several different texts, but the one common to all variants is the first stanza, so we can assume Klein knew the words as well:

Ta kněždubská věž	The Knezdub Tower
Ta je vysoká	it is high,
Vyletěla na ňu	Up onto it flew
Huska divoká	A wild goose

Here, again, is the opening of the variations movement:

Audio Example 1 (again): <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0001.101>

While one could argue that neither the title nor subject of the photo or the movement are necessarily part of the internal spatial relations of the composition, we accept both as having some role in determining how we come to understand those relations, and to some extent, we admit that once we have assimilated them it is difficult to imagine returning to a neutral position regarding their relationship to the image, though we imagine this could be done. But the process changes more radically when we move from this level into an area we might call, the political realm.

Drahomir Joseph Ruzicka was born in 1870 in Trhová Kamenice, a village in Bohemia about 60 miles east of Prague, near the town of Chrudim. His family emigrated to Nebraska in 1876.

Ruzicka moved to New York City in 1884, studied medicine in Vienna in the late 1880's and in 1891 graduated from New York University with a medical degree.

Ruzicka and his wife in a self-portrait

He was an early experimenter with X-rays but stopped after he suffered from exposure to radiation. Yet in his own words he was hooked: "Watching a plate develop had its charms. The pleasure of seeing an image come up was intriguing." Ruzicka quickly affiliated himself with the amateur pictorialist tradition and was influenced by both its more traditional wing and the so-called Photo-Secessionists led by Alfred Steiglitz, Gertrude Kasebier, Edward Steichen and Clarence White, photographers who applied some of the standards of 19th century painting to the new technology of picture taking. (As I understand it the word "amateur" did not mean "unprofessional," in a qualitative sense, but rather served to distinguish this group from commercial photographers. Today these amateurs would be considered "professional art photographers.")

During his periodic returns to Prague, which begin in 1912, he helped to jump start new movements in Czech photography, encouraging practitioners to move away from sentimental pictorialism to something that became known as The New Objectivity. Some of its prominent practitioners were Jan Lausmann and Josef Sudek.

As the following images show, Ruzicka placed great emphasis on creating visual structures, landscapes and searching out different types of light.

Here we have one of many studies of the roofs of Prague (Old Roofs, 1925):

And another titled “Winter Evening, Prague” taken the same year:

We may note the careful composition, use of framing effects, control of light and use of shadow.

For the sake of comparison we may juxtapose this image with that of a contemporary postcard:

The postcard is quite well done, and foregrounds the famous statue “commemorating” a historic bit of Czech anti-Semitism, but compared to Ruzicka’s photograph it is flat and without nuance.

Ruzicka was a well-known fixture in New York and one of the city’s fine photographers:

He was known for his urban images, such as “The Canyons of New York” (above).

“The Conquering Light” featuring a sidelong view of the Empire State Building:

“The Perisphere,” taken at the New York World’s Fair of 1939, the kind of photo which, in effect, created a compromise between a more conservative tendency towards rather static pictorialism, and more abstract, modernist approaches:

And most famously his images of the vanished Penn Station, actually light studies as much as anything:

The photograph at the center of our interest was probably taken at some point in the 1920's, and it might actually be identical to one called "Prague Twilight" taken in 1921 according to Jiří Jeníček, a Czech photographer who spent time with Ruzicka when he was in Prague. Though he lived until 1960, Ruzicka did not return to Czechoslovakia either during or after World War II, making his last visit in 1936.

The postcard as a communication device was born around the same time as Ruzicka, about 1870, and by 1900 cards were being made out of real photographs. By the late 1930's color "Photochrome" cards began to appear, but Ruzicka, like many other photographers continued to place his black and white photographs directly onto to postcards.

On the back of this one we have been looking at, he has written: "The shadows are falling fast and faster all about us—how long will the Hradčín stand!? With best wishes of the season from D.J.Ruzicka N.Y. Dec '48."

We have suggested that knowing even the title of this picture may encourage us to read certain things rather than others, and see even abstract relationships in different ways. But these lines take us into a far more specific role of participant and viewer.

For this holiday sentiment was written not a year after the bloodless Communist coup that began in February of 1948. Although there was a good deal of support for the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia most Czechs were unprepared for the coup, and certainly had not endorsed the kind of hard line Stalinism that would become its legacy. Even if he had not been in contact with friends abroad Ruzicka might have read an article in Time Magazine in March 22, 1948 that contrasted, somewhat oddly, Nazi tolerance of the conductor Vaclav Talich with his firing by the Communists saying that, "conductor Talich's dismissal was a measure of public order as natural for a Communist as it would be for a New York cop to take a pistol out of a maniac's hands." As events, including the death by defenestration of the beloved Jan Masaryk developed, it became clear any notion of a socialist paradise was out of the question and the Communists spent much of 1948 gradually tightening the vise. It was in this atmosphere that Ruzicka wrote his lines. The "Hradčín," by the way, is an intimate (via the diminutive) reference to Hradčany, the castle at the symbolic heart of Prague.

If we read the photographer's words and then flip the postcard over it is difficult to regard the image the same way. How do Ruzicka's words change it? Is it possible that we have been given a metaphor of motion, of "fast-falling" shadows? Has the photographer somehow managed to animate

his image? Or perhaps is it that now we notice that Hradčany, the castle, stands out as a bastion of pride, or more likely a small speck about to be overcome by a darkness that is both symbolic and menacing? Was this conflation of image and reality the intention of the author at any point? We may remember that this postcard is being sent and surrounded with text by its creator probably more than 20 years after it was first created. What authority do such comments have? Are they like words that can be withdrawn or emended like Mahler's programme for his First Symphony? Or has the creator somehow only realized the potential of his image in the context of this political event that threatens his world?

Although Gideon Klein's Trio was created and contextualized around the same time as Ruzicka's message, the composer was almost fifty years younger and the circumstances vastly different. Born in the Moravian town of Přerov in 1919, Klein moved to Prague while a teenager in order to take advantage of musical opportunities. A brilliant pianist, and a composer in the process of assimilating a wide range of traditions, from the blues to twelve and quarter tone composition, he was just beginning to make his career when shadows began to fall, as it were, fast and faster on him and his world. By the late 1930's he was forced to perform under an assumed name, Karel Vránek. An attempt to study in London proved abortive.

Thus Klein's Trio was also put together in the context of realities that inflect whatever identity it might have apart from them. Like Ruzicka's postcard the Trio is in part a kind of comment on Czechoslovak and international events, although arguably far more sinister ones, for it was written in the Terezin concentration camp in 1944 and completed nine days before Klein was transported to other concentration camps where he was killed under unknown circumstances in January of 1945. It is well known by now that after the decision to implement the Final Solution had been made, Terezin

was used as a significant propaganda tool, especially to hoodwink the Red Cross who visited it in June of 1944. The camp was sometimes billed as “Hitler’s Gift to the Jews.” Aware that the war was being lost, and having finished a particularly harrowing propaganda film about Terezin, the Nazis systematically began to empty the camp. It was in this desperate atmosphere that the Trio was completed, and in which Klein strategized how he might ensure the work’s survival. He did this in part by giving the score to a woman who was only part Jewish, erasing all traces of its location and possibly changing the dates of composition, and further making sure the piece looked innocuous and benign. How does all this information transform the musical substance, particularly the invocation of something as highly charged as the Holocaust? Once again, I do not believe this can be quantified, but the implications of the information would tend, like Ruzicka’s allusion, to reinforce images of heaviness and menace, of drama and weight over lightness and grace. The same sounds, but differently integrated:

Video Example: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0001.101>

Painting of Klein made in Terezín by Charlotte Burešová in 1944.
Courtesy of the Jewish Museum of Prague.

So we might find, under the pull of my rendering of Klein's story—necessarily incomplete and skewed—that the passage assumes another identity, more sinister, brutal, more piercing (what Barthes calls a *punctum* in *Camera lucida*). I have located what I would consider the apotheosis of this piercing in a later, conspicuous passage in the very middle of the Trio and I'd like to look briefly at that as a kind of referent.

Here the line, a jumbled caricature of the theme, at least as dramatic as the Ruzicka photo, plunges downward a full two octaves before recovering briefly and then oozing down once again to instrument's bottom note.

Audio Example 3: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0001.101>

Incidentally, I've offered four versions of the cello solo: in manuscript, in printed score, as an audio recording and as a performance video. I do not think, at this point, we can say which of these is "the piece" in the same way that we can say "this is the photograph" (actually framed in my living room) for whatever that's worth.

While the passage itself has no title of course, there are careful instructions for the way in which it is to be set off from the rest of the movement. Even though most listeners will never be aware of these they give the performer—the one charged with, perhaps, letting the listeners know whether they are regarding a sunrise or sunset—significant information. *Con gran espressione quasi improvvisato senza rigore*—the passage is further marked *f* and *con sordino*. What does this tell the cellist to do? At the very least the first part of the instructions say something like "Play this using all the markers of strong expression." Let's imagine, though, that the *con gran espressione* were missing: we thus are only being told to play in an improvisatory style without regularity. What would this suggest? It forces us to posit the idea of a norm, and then to depart from it—to distort it—in order to realize the desired instructions. The *con gran espressione* adds to that some unquantifiable aspect of intensity, and possibly even contortion, something reinforced by the attempt to play *forte* while being restrained by a mute. The passage thus requires some careful imagination to piece together, both from the cellist and from any audience.

The only real equivalent to this in Ruzicka's photograph, the only "expressive marking" is easy to miss, and may not mean much at all:

It is that odd ungrammatical but not impossible punctuation directly before the season's greetings, the combination of the question mark, needed to pose the question and the exclamation point to add—intensity and instability to the query.

While we are considering punctuation, and somewhat as an excursus, it might be a good idea to comment on one thing which bound these two otherwise different figures, their hyphenated identity. The father of one of my students once exclaimed. "When I was in Russia they said, get out of here Jew! So I went to Israel and they said: you are no Jew! Now I live in Brighton Beach and they call me a Russian." Such is the fate of hyphens. Ruzicka and Klein both "enjoyed" this status, this doppelganger of identity, which gives you twice as much or nothing depending on how you slice and dice it. Considered an American by the Czechs, Ruzicka was usually considered a Czech by the Americans, a Czech-American. Klein, in the same way, is usually identified as "a Czech speaking Jew," a "Czech composer of Jewish background," a Czech-Jew. That these seem natural designations is only further proof of our epistemological disarray on this matter, since we do not usually say that Smetana was "a Czech composer of Christian background." And noting these hyphens, that push one out further and further from any putative "center," we also conclude that they were a critical part of the way each figure was forced to confront the world although, once again, the consequences for Klein were more dramatic.

For while both Ruzicka and Klein are commenting on political events it is clear that they are doing from different vantage points. Ruzicka is acting as a citizen of a what is sometimes called "a democracy" who sends his message freely out into the world (this does not and cannot answer the question of whether, in 1948, this particular photographer is acting as a Czech patriot, an FDR liberal democrat or an incipient cold warrior). Klein, regardless of his politics, is a prisoner in a concentration camp, and we need to approach his Trio in a slightly different way.

Hovering over these proceedings, I hope, has been a simple gesture: we look at the postcard, turn it around, read the back, and then regard at the image again, noting the ways it may have changed in some incalculable but very real ways. This might be a kind of semantics, meant either cognitively or metaphysically, but to some extent all images need to be decoded, though it may ironically be subtle issues of intentions and rights—otherwise somewhat banal—that cause us to reimagine painterly images like Ruzicka's. In other words, we may see fit to overcome under these circumstances, notions of the intentional fallacy, and actually cede to the photographer a special right to read and interpret his own images, in addition to the time-honored right to title the image. And if we do cede to a photographer, or a composer, the right to title, and if that title may be thought to have meaning for understanding, then why not allow the creator of a work more leeway?

Klein's Trio, may, however, offer a slightly more subtle metaphor for at least some views of serious art. Because its journey to any audience was far more perilous—in effect, the Trio had to figure out how to escape from Terezin—it was likely conceived in such a way as to strike one potential audience (Nazis, let's say) as harmless (a theme on a Moravian folksong, how sweet!) and another group of aficionados (say "us") as the opposite of that, as laden with meanings. Thus while Terezin may be considered a kind of Potemkin Village, where a fake façade conceals a harsh reality, the Trio is quite the reverse. A deceptively light and even bland exterior—and here I would argue that the short, folksy outer movements serve as this surface skin—conceals a world of turmoil within, including

references to Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*, Verdi's *Requiem*, the blues, and Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade*. While both the Ruzicka and the Klein, then, have implications that only emerge after some study and thought, the latter is a letter sent in secret code to unknown readers, and in its short and long term structures reflects the pressure of that secret.

Ruzicka's postcard and Klein's Trio both serve political purposes, although once again there are differences, with a possible metaphorical jolt. Ruzicka sees "all": as an American citizen he must have closely followed the war and its aftermath; he understands, at least from a broader standpoint, what we now routinely refer to as "geopolitical realities." His comment, tacked on to what is probably a twenty five year old image, is simultaneously impersonal and highly personal, both in its tone, but also in the quick and somewhat weird slide from "Oh no!" to "Merry Christmas." Klein, on the other hand, sees no grand picture, and cannot see one from his particular perch. For him, there is only a chilling echo of the old saying, "all politics is local." And yet in that intensely local world he *lives* the kind of history Ruzicka sees as if he were following it in a newspaper, or reading it on the back of a postcard.

It is appropriate to ask whether both artists have somehow lessened the potential value of their work by allowing political events to too narrowly circumscribe it. While Ruzicka's "shadows are falling" comment guides us in ways that may seem significant, it may also restrict us, as does Klein's (or our own) tendency to conflate such things as the Kneždub tower, the shooting of the wild goose, and betrayal from the folksong, with the walls and guarded towers of Terezin that surrounded the composer as he wrote the Trio.

If indeed such images confine us, there is little to be done, and to close we might choose an echo of J.T.S. Mitchell's perverse question: What do Pictures Want? because in the end our two images do share one important characteristic. They embody in an especially concrete way what is almost a parody of idea of Art as *communication*. As we noted, both the photo titled "Dusk Descends Over

Prague” and “The Kneždub Tower” Trio movement were meant to “have legs”; the postcard was an artistic missile, deliberately intended to target specific recipients and speak to them; the Trio was primed to sneak out of a concentration camp packed with evidence of how someone, a local someone, was actually responding to large scale events. If this process takes us into a realm distant from certain assumptions about the purpose of “art” construed more narrowly, it does force us to keep turning the postcard over, again and again, just as we chase such musical and visual images back and forth from their geopolitical objectivity, where they can be theorized and essentially disposed of, to the deepest and messiest core of local events, where they will continue to haunt us.

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The Knezdub Tower?

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