

# Slovakia through the eyes of Karol Plicka

An exhibition of photographs and film screening

by Michael J E Ivory



Guests at the opening of this exhibition at the Slovak Embassy were treated to a splendid array of this master-photographer's black and white photographs of Slovakia as well as to a rare screening in the neighbouring Czech Embassy of his pioneering documentary film, *Zem spieva/The Earth Sings*.

The event was sponsored by the BCSA and the National Museum of Slovakia as well as by both embassies. It was introduced by Daša Ferklová, the museum's curator responsible for Karol Plicka's legacy, and by Ivan Plicka, Karol's son.

Paying tribute to Plicka in both embassies seemed entirely appropriate, as Karel/Karol was a true representative of the Czechoslovak idea, born Czech but affected deeply by Slovakia and its people, and committed to bringing them to the attention of a wider world.

Known in the West in the Communist era mostly through his beautifully produced, large format books of photographs of the

Czech lands and Slovakia, indispensable souvenirs for visitors to Czechoslovakia in the days when few alternatives were available, Karol Plicka (1894-1987) was an honoured, almost heroic figure in prewar and postwar Czechoslovakia. He had been born into the large Czech community of Habsburg-era Vienna, and as a child was inspired by the lusty singing of the Slovak washerwomen working in his father's laundry. In early adulthood, like other young Czechs following President Masaryk's call to help build the unity of newly founded Czechoslovakia, he moved to Slovakia. Here, as a talented musician, he was employed by the Matica Slovenska to travel the length and breadth of the country recording its extraordinary wealth of folksong.

His heart was touched and his eye moved by what was then an unspoiled peasantry, its traditions still an integral part of daily life. On occasion, as he went from place to place, often on foot, the church bell would peal on his approach, and he would enter an apparently deserted village, its inhabitants peering anxiously from behind their windows at the supposed tax-collector, often their only visitor from the outside world.

But Plicka was adept at gaining their confidence and indeed winning their affection, and



A photograph of two Slovak girls playing (1947) and left, Ivan Plicka as a young boy in 1932

would soon be sitting in farmhouse or pub recording the seemingly inexhaustible flood of song pouring from country people's throats for his (and posterity's) benefit. An astonishing total of some 40,000 songs collected by him are preserved in the National Museum's archives.

Eventually, however, it was the visual treasures of the country which gripped him, costumes, church processions, traditional buildings, crop patterns, and above all the people themselves, from children at play to grizzled ancients. These were captured, first in countless still photographs, then on film.

Completed in 1933, *Zem spieva* enjoyed the support of the president, who had previously made Plicka the gift of a movie camera. The film is regarded as a pioneering work of documentary cinema; it was furnished with a musical soundtrack by František Škvor and was superbly edited by Alexandr Hackenschmied. Before it, Plicka had made other films, *Za slovenským ľudom/In Search of the Slovak People* of 1926 (sadly lost), and *Po dolách, po horách/Through Valleys and Mountains* of 1929 (most of which survives).

A visit to the United States in 1935/36 resulted in *Za Slovákmi od New Yorku po Mississippi/In the Steps of Slovaks from New York to the Mississippi*.

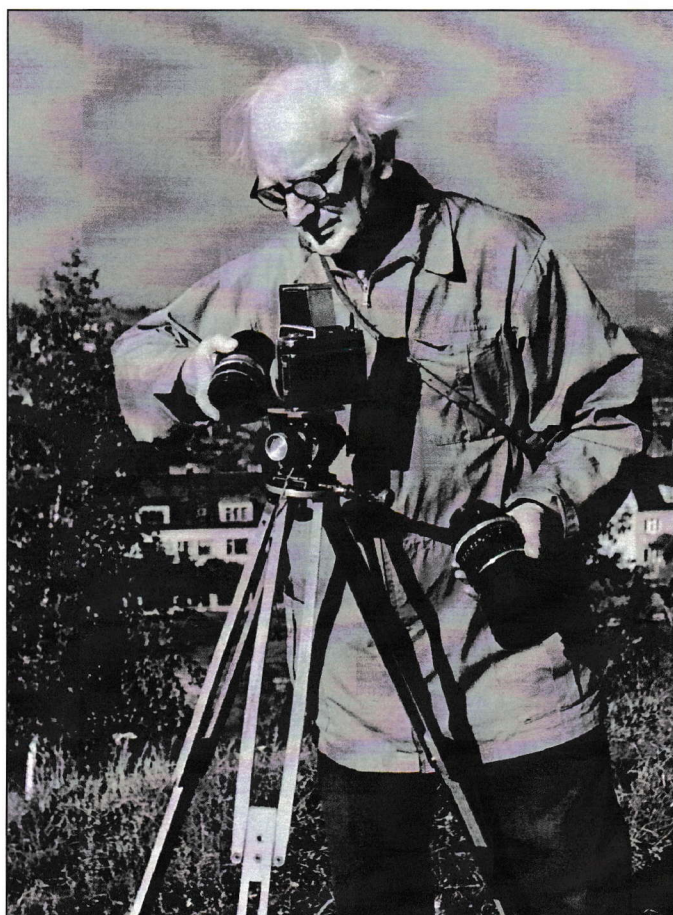
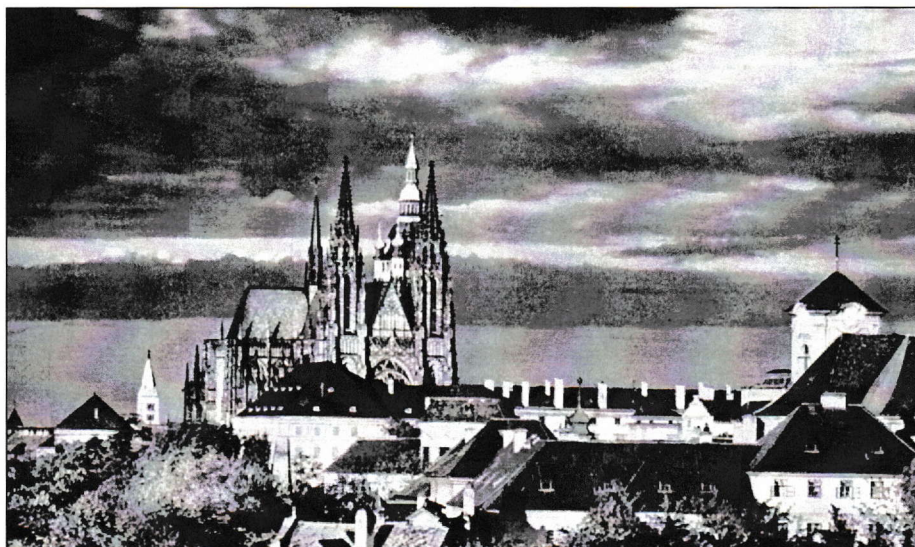
In love with Slovakia and its people, after 15 years Plicka felt more Slovak than Czech, and planned to build a permanent home in the Tatras.

This was not to be: in 1939, like many others, he and his family became victims of the break-up of Czechoslovakia and were forced to return to Prague. Here, conscious of the



Clockwise from right: Prague Cathedral in 1939 from the western side; Karol Plicka at work in Prague in 1965; women sowers working in the fields in 1926 in eastern Slovakia

All pictures courtesy of the Slovak National Museum in Martin



city's vulnerability to wartime destruction, he occupied himself with systematically photographing the city's incomparable architectural heritage, an extraordinary one-man effort which might be compared with the official, infinitely better-resourced *Recording Britain* project of the same period.

After the war he returned to Slovakia as director of the national film organisation in Bratislava, while in Prague he helped found the world-famous FAMU school of film. A creative spirit rather than an administrator, he soon preferred to devote himself to further photographic work, resulting in the series of volumes mentioned above. These range from *Praha královská/Royal Prague* of 1957 to his final book of photographs, *Levoča*, published in 1980.

Plicka's work has sometimes attracted crit-

icism. His portrayal of a happy Slovak peasantry has been dismissed as staged, while his photographs of wartime Prague have been characterised as cold and lifeless. This however is missing the point, and he himself made it quite clear what his intentions were in both cases.

In the Introduction he wrote to his book *Slovakia*, he maintained that "neither improvisation nor accident feature in these photographs", and he was with Anatole France in "choosing beauty over truth, because I am sure that it contains within it a higher and deeper truth than truth itself".

Thus he felt justified in getting his Slovak subjects to wear their traditional costumes while at work in the fields rather than just to church on Sundays. In Prague under the Protectorate, his concern was not to evoke

atmosphere but to seize in the sharpest possible detail the city's threatened architectural treasures. His *Prague* has been described as "a unique document of the city, unspoiled by cars, advertisements, TV aerials or graffiti".

In 1984, Plicka's 90th birthday was celebrated in the great hall of Prague's Wallenstein Palace. Many of those present had travelled at their own expense from their far-off villages in Slovakia, bringing with them home-made cakes as well as wine from their vineyards, tributes to the man who had immortalised their traditional way of life.

A year after his death in 1987, the National Museum of Slovakia installed an attractive display devoted to his life and work in the old manor house of Blatnica, a village in the idyllic Turiec valley in the heart of Slovakia.