

## Emil Otto Hoppe 1878-1973

a personal snapshot

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Bill Jay

Emil Otto Hoppe was born in Munich in 1878, the only son of a prominent banker, and was educated in the finest schools of Munich, Paris and Vienna. On leaving school he served apprenticeships in German banks for ten years, before accepting a position with the Shanghai Banking Corporation. He never arrived in China. The first leg of his journey took him to England where he met an old school friend. Hoppe married his sister and stayed in London. While working for the London Stock Exchange, he was becoming increasingly enamored with photography, and, in 1907, jettisoned his commercial career and opened a portrait studio.

Within a few years E. O. Hoppe was the undisputed leader of pictorial portraiture in Europe. To say that someone has a "household name" has become a cliché, yet in Hoppe's case the phrase is apt. Rarely in the history of the medium has a photographer been so famous in his own lifetime among the general public. He was as famous as his sitters. It is difficult to think of a prominent name in the fields of politics, art, literature, and the theater who did not pose for his camera.

After 1925 he devoted himself with increasing commitment to travel photography, in which he was equally successful, producing over 30 books illustrated with his own views. His autobiography, with an introduction by Cecil Beaton (who simply referred to Hoppe as "the Master") was published by the Focal Press in 1945, under the title Hundred Thousand Exposures.

During my own researches into photographers of the past, I was constantly encountering the name of E. O. Hoppe. I became interested in this person less for the "overwhelming" effect of his photographs than for his fellow photographers of the period. He would be a wonderful source of firsthand information. But it seemed unlikely that Hoppe was still alive. Sure enough on checking Helmut Gernsheim's tome on the history of photography, I was disappointed to learn that he had died in 1967. It was sad that I had missed, by so few years, the possibility of talking to a living link with past photographers.

Then, on 1 October 1971, I was astonished and delighted to read, in a contemporary photo-journal, "My Credo - E. O. Hoppe." There was no suggestion that the author was dead. As a shot in the dark I wrote a letter to Hoppe's last known address, and was astonished and elated to receive a reply from Hoppe's daughter who informed me that her father was still alive and residing in a small private nursing home, in the town of Andover, England.

I made arrangements with his nurse to visit him as soon as he was well enough to receive visitors. Eventually, on 1 May 1972, I drove to Andover and met a frail, craggy-faced old man of 94, with sparse white hair and leonine sideburns. He could sit in a bedside chair but was constantly in pain and it was agony for him to even move his position. He told me that two years previously, during a minor operation, his back had been accidentally broken due to careless handling by the staff.

This was the first of a series of visits that I made to see him. It was extremely touching that he valued our meetings so highly. After each visit his nurse would telephone or write to me, saying how much Mr. Hoppe enjoyed our talks, and would I please come again as he was in much better spirits for several days following our time together. She said that I was his only touch with his past life as a photographer. Understandably, few people knew that he was still alive.

Each time before I arrived Hoppe had prepared notes of his experiences and ideas, written in a shaky black scrawl with pain and painstaking care. It was difficult to decipher their meaning as the words resembled the crazed antics of an ink-covered insect. But I was immensely touched by the effort they cost him.

But it was the face-to-face personal reminiscences which I valued most highly. In his thick Viennese accent (although he had lived in England practically his whole adult life) he chatted about the famous and infamous, and about his own adventures and successes. Hoppe's body might have been frail but his mind was still robust. In the midst of general chat he would suddenly and excitedly relate an experience of perhaps 60 years earlier, punctuating his voice with wincing of pain as he moved in the excitement of telling. My own mind was less attentive; I could not dispel the feeling of strangeness that here I was, faced with a living link to the past, talking to a man who knew, in the flesh, those words on the pages of old journals and history books - Alvin Langdon Coburn, Furley Lewis, Sir Benjamin Stone, Frederick Evans, George Davison, Horsley Hinton, among the photographers, and George Bernard Shaw, Henry James, Rudyard Kipling, among the writers, and Anna Pavlova, Vaslav Nijinsky, Sergei Diaghiliev,

among the dancers, and and Hitler and Mussolini, among world leaders - and scores of others, including practically everyone who was anyone in the world of arts, letters, society and politics. He reminisced about the infamous and the ordinary, like his favorite model, Eileen, as well as the famous, about his adventures, successes and his perceived failures.

He talked most movingly of his hurt and resentment at the attitude of The Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain. He felt neglected and shunned by the institution which, in his perception, was the epitome and arbiter of excellence. It was his most fervent wish that before he died he would be awarded the Society's Honorary Fellowship as a mark of his achievements. He was extremely, and perhaps unreasonably, upset that other, less famous photographers, had been awarded this honor and that he had been rejected so many times. It had become an obsession of an old man. He said, "It is what I would like the most, before I die."

At this point I switched off the tape recorder. Hoppe was crying.

The next day I explained Hoppe's wishes to the officials at The Royal Photographic Society, and told them how they could make a grand old man so happy at the end of his life. I was informed that the Honorary Fellowship was not awarded for sentimental reasons. I agreed that this was right, but that many photographers had received the honor who had not earned it with such devotion to photography. It was suggested that I should write to the Council about the matter, but little hope was offered, particularly in the light of my own past and vocal criticisms of the Society.

Feeling that my own intercession would have scant chances of success, I determined to try a different route. I called Sir Cecil Beaton, an icon of establishment prestige in the field, and told him the story of Hoppe's hope. It was very satisfying to learn that due to Beaton's intercession, The Royal Photographic Society did confer the Honorary Fellowship on E.O.Hoppe just a month or so before he died, early in 1973, at the age of 95.

His last weeks must have been that much happier.

*Postscript. I wish I had been able to visit him and share in his pleasure. But I had already made arrangements to leave England, for what turned out to be a permanent move to the USA, in the summer of 1972. Hoppe knew that my visits were ending. In my last meeting with Hoppe, he gave me access to all his scrapbooks, personal notes*

*and reminiscences. And I still had his notes and his written memories which he had prepared for my visits. I donated these items to the Center for Creative Photography where they can be seen in its archives.*

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