

Ferenc Berko

and the fickleness of fame

Bill Jay

It would be comforting to know how a reputation is created, but fame is fickle. It depends on a vast intricate web of influences and the subtle interactions of a myriad of forces, few of which are under the control of the artist. The photographer performs a delicate and finely tuned balancing act on a tightrope of chance. It is never certain that even the finest photographers will achieve recognition during their lifetimes. Others have recognition thrust upon them for a short time only to observe, with some puzzlement perhaps, that it is as quickly withdrawn. And we cannot speak of those photographers throughout history who have never received recognition, no matter how well deserved, because their names remain unknown.

One photographer who understood these words better than most was Ferenc Berko. Throughout his long career (he made photographs for more than half a century), Berko flirted with fame. Recognition for his work has dipped and soared, often settling lightly only to fly away. There have been times in the past 50 years when Ferenc Berko seemed destined to be numbered among the best-known photographers of the age; at other times, his name has merely elicited a question mark. This was frustrating both for Berko and for anyone attempting to assess the merit of his work. Both would have liked to confront this indecisive, weak-willed ghost called fame, grab him by the collar and demand the verdict of history. Fame is not only fickle but also a dumb vacillator.

Ferenc Berko thought about these things, and who can blame him? He was as exasperated by the ebb and flow of fate as any photographer who feels his own worth. Of course, Berko did not talk about his incubus since that would have been a breach of good manners and Berko was nothing if not a gentleman. He was a tall slim man with a Beatonesque elegance and soft-spoken, self-deprecating air. After one interview and his return to Aspen, where he lived, he was quick to write, apologizing for “talking too much” about his life which “is much too personal and full of details which, I’m sure, would not be of any interest” to the readers. I believe he was wrong, and hope he would forgive me for saying so. His shyness and deprecatory manner were probably important clues to the values implicit in his gentle photographs; certainly they are clues to the elusiveness of fame, which embraces aggression and walks warily around the meek. Biography is the stuff of the life; the life permeates the prints.

Ferenc Berko was born on 28 January 1916, in Nagyvarad, Hungary (which became part of Romania after the Second World War), the son of a psychiatrist, as he would be known today. Then, he was a doctor of nervous diseases and a follower of Freud. Although born a Jew, the father became an agnostic, like so many scientific men of the day, and was politically of the left if not a member of the Communist party. He was a busy man, caught up in the troubles of his patients and writing papers on their case histories for the scientific press.

Ferenc was not close to his father, literally and figuratively. For most of the year he was away at school in Dresden, Germany. During vacations he was encouraged to travel extensively in order to study languages. His mother died when he was two.

While at the Gymnasium (the European equivalent of high school) in Dresden, Ferenc Berko made

his first photographs at the age of 12 with a Kolibri camera and became enamored with the work of a prominent German pioneer of the miniature camera, Dr. Paul Wolff. At the same time he began an interest in films and film-making, which remained a passion in his life.

Meanwhile his father had moved from Hungary to be in charge of the Psychiatric Department at Lahmann Sanatorium, near Dresden. Ill and overworked he committed suicide, by giving himself an injection, after arranging for Ferenc's adoption by a German car manufacturer. (The Adler company has since been associated with typewriters). His new parents were not only wealthy but supporters of the arts. Their home in Berlin was a center of contemporary culture, filled with modern furniture and paintings, and regularly visited by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Hans Poelzig and other leaders of the German art scene.

Between 1929 and 1931 Ferenc was living in Frankfurt, while attending yet another Gymnasium, and deepening his commitment to photography. He was now using the Leica camera to record his classes, fellow students, the teachers and other facets of his life. Personally, these were happy times for Ferenc; politically, the times were uncertain and traumatic. The rise of Nazism was creating tensions even within the family. His mother foresaw the horrors of fascism and his father was a fervent supporter of the Nazis. Family turmoil was fueled by the fact that Ferenc was half Jewish, even though he had no nationalistic or religious upbringing. As Hitler's popularity and power increased, Ferenc's mother deemed it wise to send him out of the country.

In 1932 Ferenc left Germany and lived in Hampstead, London, with the aim of completing his education. But he was now so absorbed by photography and film that he worked as a still documentary photographer and movie producer-director-cameraman in the daytime and completed his college courses in evening and extension courses, which included the study of philosophy with C.E.M. Joad at the University of London.

One of the most famous photographers in the world at that time was E. O. Hoppé, another European immigrant, who was renowned for his portraits and travel pictures. Hoppé encouraged the young Ferenc to specialize in photojournalism and to document London. One of Berko's London scenes, of the Thames river, was used by Leitz Inc. as a giant mural in order to show the capabilities of the 35mm format. Ferenc also won first prize in a competition for the best photograph of the Coronation celebrations of the new King.

Ferenc Berko's work with the still camera never excluded a love for film-making. With two young Englishmen he produced, directed, photographed (with hand-held 35mm Eyemo cameras) and edited several short documentary films which were nationally distributed in commercial cinemas. He also became coeditor of Avantgarde magazine, a small publication devoted to the best of contemporary art films.

In 1937, at the age of 21, Ferenc Berko married his childhood sweetheart, Mirte, who had fled Germany to be with him. The Germans did not allow marriages between Aryan and non-Aryan. The same year Ferenc and Mirte moved to Paris, and while his wife modeled for the fashion houses, Ferenc photographed the city and worked as volunteer cameraman and photographer in various film studios.

Throughout the late 1930s the photographs by Ferenc Berko were being published, with increasing frequency, in Photography, Paris Magazine, Minicam, Lilliput, Coronet, etc., and in yearbooks such as US Camera Annual and even in Naturist (many of Berko's photographs of this period were nudes, mostly of his wife, Mirte).

In 1938 it seemed evident to Berko, if not to the politicians, that war was imminent. As a German he would not be welcome in England; as a Jew, he dare not risk capture during an invasion of France. So he left Paris for Bombay, India, as a cameraman for a German-trained Indian film-producer. The

Berkos lived in India for nine years. In the frequent vacations between film work, Ferenc did a great deal of documentary photography, with both Rolleiflex and Leica, in and around Bombay and in all areas of India when filming on location. At the same time Berko was continuing his series on nudes and producing a growing body of work of color abstracts from nature. These photographs were sent back to European journals where they were widely published and acclaimed.

One and a half years after arriving in Bombay, Berko opened his own studio in conjunction with the British Advertising Agency, D.J. Keymer. Financially more stable, Berko was able to shoot more, and more varied, subjects, including Indian sculptures, personalities, dancers, temples and so on, while continuing his more personal, or creative work, in nudes and abstracts, and his documentary films for the Directorate of Kinematography for the British Army. In 1944 he was given the rank of Staff Captain. He also made several documentary films for John Grierson's organization in England. Meanwhile his European reputation had reached a peak. By 1947, when he was repatriated to England, his still photographs had been published in most of the journals seen by photographers. He was known and respected by Andre Kertesz, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Margaret Bourke-White, who had stayed with him in India. Bill Brandt had personally selected a portfolio of Berko's Indian prints for publication in Lilliput; another set was published in Du; and an exhibition of photographs of Indian bronzes was held at the Victoria & Albert Museum.

Prior to his departure from India, Ferenc Berko had received an invitation from Laszlo Moholy-Nagy to join him at the New Bauhaus in Chicago in 1947. Berko was ambivalent about the offer. Although he was anxious to live in America for a short time, he had reservations about his teaching abilities. But Moholy-Nagy insisted – and then died. His widow, Sibyl, repeated the offer and Berko began teaching film and photography at the Institute of Design with Arthur Siegel and Harry Callahan. Art Sinsabaugh was already there, as an advanced student, and before long the staff was joined by Wayne Miller and Aaron Siskind.

This was not a happy time for Ferenc Berko. He was terrified of lecturing; he did not find the students committed (they were mainly disinterested G.I.s); the pay was low and the living conditions miserable; and, perhaps most disappointing of all, he did not find a close-knit community of fellow enthusiasts but isolated individuals, wary of divulging their photographs to each other. Berko evidently felt particularly alienated from Arthur Siegel whom he describes as “a difficult person” but, with typical humility, adds that “it was probably my fault that I did not profit more from this experience.” Whatever the reason for his “failure” at the Institute, Berko is rarely mentioned as an early member of the faculty at that important and pioneering place in the teaching of photography. Berko was again in limbo.

Again, an invitation changed Berko's direction. He had become close friends with Walter P. Paepcke, director of The Container Corporation and a supporter of the arts, who had financed the New Bauhaus beginnings in Chicago. Paepcke invited Berko to visit Aspen, then a near-deserted mining town, which he planned to convert into a cultural center. The offer was generous. Paepcke would give Berko enough freelance work in photography and film if he would live in Aspen and help develop the area as an artistic haven.

Berko considered the offer for six months, while making a film in London. Paepcke wrote regularly, urging Berko to Aspen. In 1949 Ferenc Berko moved to Aspen, Colorado, where he lived until his death on 18 March 2000. He was 84. During these years, Berko amassed an immense body of work, continuing his series of color abstracts which he had begun in Chicago, and augmenting his portraits with the distinguished personalities in every field who visited Aspen for its cultural conferences. These portraits include: Mortimer Adler, Herbert Bayer, Saul Bellow, Leonard Bernstein, Marcel Breuer, Aaron Copland, John Dos Passos, J. Ortega y Gasset, Martha Graham, Henry Kissinger, Arthur Knopf, Diego Rivera, Mies van der Rohe, Arthur Rubinstein, Albert Schweitzer, Stephen Spender, Igor Stravinsky, Thornton Wilder and hundreds more from every area of the arts, letters, sciences and politics.

In 1951 Ferenc Berko organized one of the first, most influential, conferences on photography at Aspen. Among the participants were Ansel Adams, Minor White, Dorothea Lange, Frederick Sommer, Eliot Porter, Laura Gilpin, Wayne Miller, Nancy and Beaumont Newhall, and John Morris. In fact, the conference was all chiefs and no indians. Everyone sent their own photographs in advance for display at the conference (Ansel Adams prints were for sale at \$30 and \$50) and slides were projected for all the participants. Berko's color work was acclaimed as being innovative and influential, and for a brief time, he was again touched by fame. His influence was felt by such diverse photographers as Harry Callahan, Eliot Porter, Ernst Haas, Charles Eames and many others. André Kertész supported Berko's application for a Guggenheim Fellowship with the words "I consider Ferenc Berko one of the significant photographers in our profession." It did not help.

Such "almost made it" events have been the pattern of Berko's career. A portfolio of his color work had been selected as a major essay in Life magazine – until, at the last moment, the portfolio was replaced by one from a young photographer who had recently arrived in America, Ernst Haas. Helmut Gernsheim wrote that Berko's color work is "magnificent" and "vibrant" and that in his reportage work "he reaches the level of the greatest photographers." Gernsheim predicted that these prints "will soon find their way into many collections," but the crowds did not stampede to Aspen. To his credit, Gernsheim practiced what he preached: he selected 70 prints by Berko for the collection at the University of Texas.

In many respects Ferenc Berko remains a photographic enigma. Where does he stand in relationship to the reputation of his peers? Why are his friends and colleagues so well known while Berko languished in semi-obscurity? Perhaps he would now be a major figure in 20th-century photography if he had not gone to Chicago, or not gone to Aspen; if he had concentrated on one field of photography and not been so diverse; if he had not combined still photography with film; if he had concentrated on color abstracts and by-passed black-and-white documents, or vice versa; if he had been a more aggressive promoter; if he had organized more shows and publications; if he could have found a university teaching position; if...

This backward-looking list of "what might have beens" is a joyless, frustrating act. The fact remains that Ferenc Berko demonstrated over half a century, and with an astonishingly varied and immense body of work, that his reputation is in need of a careful reappraisal. In the past ten years there has been a heady acceleration in photography towards contemporary art concepts with the attendant promotion of stylistic pyrotechnics at the expense of deeper values. Yet in the single-mindedness of the race we might be rushing past some of photography's most stable and meaningful bodies of work.

Published in Sun in the Blood of the Cat, Nazraeli Press, 2001