



Jewish Museum Berlin

Background Information

**：“The Lawyer with the Camera”
Foreword by Cilly Kugelman,
Program Director of the Jewish Museum Berlin
Excerpt from the Publication**

For half a million Jews, life in Germany would change radically after January 30, 1933. Any future family or professional planning was now in vain, even if few recognized it at the time. That was also true for the young law clerk Fred Stein from Dresden, who had to find a completely new direction for his life. He had planned to complete his doctor of laws degree, but this was now denied him for reasons of “racial affiliation.” Stein’s choice of career was based on an ambition to defend the rights of those with neither means nor advocates. Even in his schooldays, he was already attracted to socialist ideas and wanted to play an active role in making the world a better, fairer, place. In high school, the half-orphan, who had lost his father when he was six years old, distanced himself from the Jewish traditions practiced at home and began to take an interest in politics. He got involved with the socialists and the “Kameraden,” a Jewish hiking club founded in 1916 in Breslau, which was devoted to the full integration of Jews into German society. In his leisure time, he devoted himself to his hobby, photography, using a cheap camera he purchased for three Reichsmarks.

In the summer of 1933 the 24-year-old married Liselotte Salzburg, a year younger than himself, who shared his passion for photography. They gave each other a Leica as wedding gift, an expensive investment for them at the time and an emblem of the emotional harmony in their relationship. The camera was easy to carry around, allowing them to take pictures relatively unobtrusively and spontaneously. It was the ideal camera for enthusiastic amateurs and professional photographers alike. The wedding couple would unfortunately have little opportunity to try out their Leica in Dresden.



Their political involvement forced Fred and Lilo Stein to feign a honeymoon to France in October 1933, a trip from which they would not return. Paris was the first destination for many leftist activists, artists and intellectuals whom the »Gleichschaltung« threatened with persecution and imprisonment. Among them were Social Democrats such as Rudolf Breitscheid and Willy Brandt; Communists like Willi Münzenberg; writers including Lion Feuchtwanger, Alfred Döblin, Anna Seghers and Joseph Roth; and intellectuals such as Walter Benjamin, Ludwig Marcuse and Leo Strauss. Fred Stein knew some of them well. These émigrés remained in Paris for months or even years, forming a German cultural network that voiced its opinions in French publications and German exile magazines.

Like many of the refugees from Nazi Germany, whose numbers would soon swell to nearly 10,000, the Steins were sure they would be staying in Paris for only a short time before soon returning to Dresden. These hopes were eventually dashed, however, and as their savings dried up they had to find a new livelihood in their adopted home. The obvious solution was to turn their hobby into a career.

“Fred had a good eye, “ noted his wife Lilo in a biographical interview decades later. Now the joint wedding gift, the Leica, really proved its worth. Fred Stein, to whom the technical side of photography was of lesser importance, said of the camera that it “worked all by itself. “ And he likewise worked on his own. He never took a job with a company or agency, remaining self-employed and independent throughout his life. The gifted dilettante developed into a renowned photographer whose portraits were soon drawing acclaim from the most prominent of his contemporaries. After a debacle with friends who said they wanted to teach him professional photography but then only exploited his talents as a retoucher, he opened his own Studio Fred Stein in a small apartment, the first professional studio with a darkroom in the bathroom.

Stein’s interest in people and their joyful, sad, comical or contradictory circumstances led him to pursue two different directions: the sociology of the street and the psychology of the portrait. On his rambles through Paris, he



photographed the aged inhabitants of the Jewish Marais quarter, which had escaped the city's modernization efforts in the 19th century and still had a small-town atmosphere. He observed Parisians living in poverty and those leading fashionable lifestyles, his photographs telling stories of purposeful pedestrians as well as down-and-out *bons vivants*. With his finely tuned sensitivity to curious and paradoxical constellations, and his ability to release the shutter at the precise moment when something remarkable happened, his photos managed to condense complex episodes with surprising twists. In addition to these melancholy, in some cases politically charged accounts of what was happening in society, Stein also created atmospheric shots of the streets and squares of Paris, helping to turn the city into the romantic icon that still captivates the imaginations of so many people today.

While busy establishing a reputation as a roaming street photographer capable of distilling the mood of the moment, Stein was also making a name for himself as a portrait photographer. His photographs of friends and acquaintances who had become famous refugees were in high demand by newspapers and magazine publishers.

Stein had the opportunity to come into contact with these celebrities at important events in which he also took a personal interest, such as the International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture, which took place in Paris in 1935. He expressed his respect for political and artistic figures and their work by requesting permission to photograph them. His ambition to portray prominent contemporaries was thus never based on economic considerations alone, and it is just this combination of esteem for the person and the cause he represents with the opportunity portraiture offered him to earn a living that makes for the special appeal of Fred Stein's photography. In many cases, he had to muster a great deal of patience and perspicacity to capture a telling shot of a politician or writer. The Writers' Conference offered an ideal opportunity. Stein came home with pictures of Boris Pasternak, Ilja Ehrenburg, Gustav Regler and André Malraux.

Stein continued to cultivate his photographic predilections and signature style in the USA, where fate took him in 1941. With a new Leica and a Rolleiflex for



square formats in tow, he began to conquer the streets of New York City, assimilating himself into this unknown environment with its alien inhabitants by means of his camera. Just like in Paris, he collected scenes that look like frames taken from a feature film. And in New York as well, Stein demonstrated his gift for capturing that single, revealing moment: the non-repeatable gesture, the spontaneous movement, the decisive turn that constitutes the climax of a story. His numerous portrait studies of émigrés and public figures in the USA betray a marked psychological acuity; he knew just how to expose the unvarnished character and personality of his sitter, without any need for subsequent retouching.

Fred Stein was well aware of the responsibility the photographer bears for showing respect to his subjects and ensuring the veracity of his pictures, whether they portrayed people on the street or in their own living rooms. In this sense, he became in a completely unexpected way an advocate for humanity.

Publication

Fred Stein. Paris New York, ed. by Dawn Freer, Heidelberg/Berlin: Kehrer 2013.
24 x 31 cm, 200 pages, English/German ISBN 978-3-86828-429-4
49.90 euros.