

## **Photography as a Source in Research on the Lifestyle of Latvia “High Society” in 20’s – 30’s of 20<sup>th</sup> Century.**

**In the introductory part of the report I am going to look at the photographs from the magazine ‘Atpūta’ as a source of the social history.** A photograph is not a traditional source for the research of the history and up to nowadays it has not been properly explored. There are different visual technologies- photograph, movie, video, television. All these offer a visual look on the world; they translate the world in visual terms. However, this reflection is not always innocent i.e. the photographs are not always a transparent window to the world. There are two kinds of the reality- the reality ‘as such’, which we see when we eliminate the external characteristics of the picture, and the imagination what this reality has created about itself to the people of the past.

A part of the photos published in the magazine ‘Atpūta’ demonstrates the lifestyle of the swelldom in Latvia in 1920’s – 1930’s. They reflected the jet set of the society which was made up from the intellectuals, political figures, and entrepreneurs. The objective factors of that are:

firstly the great circulation what reached more than 70,000 editions of copies what indicates the interest of the society and the respect towards the information represented in the magazine.

Secondly, it is the long period of publication of the magazine (1924 – 1941) in the comparison to similar Latvian editions what existed only for a couple of years. There was a severe competition because in these twenty years of independence there were registered almost 2000 editions (magazines, newspapers, bulletins)<sup>1</sup>.

Thirdly, ‘Atpūta’ as a magazine existed in different political regimes – before and after the coup d’état in May 15. The work of the magazine was violently interrupted in the 1940 by the Soviet power. Thus the magazine reflects wide scope of the interests of the society. Using the photograph as a source for the research I advanced the aim of the work: to reveal the social history of the period from 1924 till 1940 and to explore the interpretation of the lifestyle of the social group reflected in the magazine – the swelldom - by analyzing a part of the photos from ‘Atpūta’. In the research the photographs were treated as independent historical source what allows getting acquainted also with the

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\* The research is based on the master paper by Baiba Tetere advised by as.prof. Ilgvars Butulis

<sup>1</sup> Treijs, Rihards. Latvijas Republikas prese. 1918 – 1940. – Rīga: Zvaigzne ABC, 1996, p. 3

social interests of that time. In the realization of the aim as a priority I set the procession of the sources: the classification of the photographs, the methodology of visual communication, and the interpretation and analysis of the information.

### **The Classification of the Sources**

At first I singled out groups of themes – all together 14– and created a table (see Table1) in order to do the classification and systematization of the sources more successfully. Table 1 ‘The classification of the Photographs from the Magazine ‘Atpūta’” schematically shows the qualitative parameters of the magazine which emerge from the chronological division and the division according to the themes. The task of the table is to show the wide exposure – all together 1702 units (photographs) lucidly and according to the structure. 14 groups of themes demonstrate the most typical tendencies of the pictures, each of which are characterized by definite criteria.

The principles of the groups were chosen because the magazine is structured according to definite themes which are repeated thus it is possible to classify the photographs. It is unachievable to make collection of the pictures by certain photographers because the authors of them were not acknowledged or it was done in very rare cases. It has to be pointed out that in this part a quantitative selection was done what do not pay attention to the details of the picture but just states the main tendencies of the visual material in the magazine.

Making a full research of the visual material of the magazine ‘Atpūta’ I separated a period of time from 1924 no.1 till 1940 no.826 when the editorial board was dismissed and the work was taken over by the supporters of the Soviet regime.

**1<sup>st</sup> group of themes** is the title page of the second spread what is found in the 3<sup>rd</sup> page. From 1924 no.1 till 1940 no.825 the contents of the magazine consequently follows immutable style. A photograph was used for the designing of the second title page. The conceptual changes of the title page started appear from 1926 no.73 when for the designing the photo portraits of well-known families (rarely also portraits of individuals) were used. For the formatting of the back cover several genres of the photograph were used: a portrait (a portrait, a family portrait, and a group/organization portrait), a reportage (staging of a situation with popular people; fixation of an event what is concentrated on the reflection of a definite person or persons), a landscape, still-life (e.g. a piece of art) an atmosphere photograph or a staged situation with models. For the

research the photographs of the following genres have been selected – portraits and reportages. Both – portraits and reportages have a realistic attitude what is characterized by clear lines of the shape. A photograph is always underwritten in applied style, all the persons are named, and sometimes the particular topical event what could be related to the portrayed person is mentioned. Thus the publishers conceptually have chosen visually documental informative manner.

The selected title pages all together create a serious number of sources i.e. 421 unit or 27% out of all 1702 selected sources. In Table 1 one can follow the chronological sequence of the magazine in the periods of three years starting from 1926 up to 1940.

The visual material of the **2<sup>nd</sup> group** ‘The Portrayal of/ the Reportage about a Popular Person’ is made of the photographs in which the person is reflected in different common situations (meals, hobbies, etc). For this part the following criteria have been advanced: a single photograph or a series of photographs, the stress lays on the portrayed person his/her family members; photograph/s is as a visual aid to a separate article about a popular person or without the article (there is just the underwriting); widely represented ‘staged reportage’ when a popular person imitates his/her daily customs. There are 237 photographs which correspond to the criteria i.e. 14% out of the total amount of the sources.

The **3<sup>rd</sup> group** ‘An Overseas Tour of a Popular Person/ Group of Persons’ is numerically small i.e. 34 units that is 2% out of the total. It is possible to set a description of the thematical group: standard itinerary photographs what depicts a popular person or a group of popular persons at some characteristic sight or object or group photographs what in the underwriting shows the fact of the tour.

In the **4<sup>th</sup> group** ‘A Popular Person/ Group of Persons Relaxing’ there are 51 photographs that are 3% out the total number of sources. As the criteria for the selection was advanced the following: a popular person or a group of persons relaxing what is reflected visually (e.g. a summer cottage in the background, a walk along a lake or a river, fishing, a boat-trip, etc) and explained in the text.

All together 11 photographs or 1 % out of the total are represented in the **5<sup>th</sup> group** ‘A Representative of Creative Personalities Reflected in the Process of Working’. The persons reflected in the photographs belonging to this group are representatives of the creative professions: writers, painters, sculptors. The conjunctive factor for this group is the plot of the picture. In the picture is seen clear staging of the creative work – the model is in the atmosphere of the work.

The **6<sup>th</sup> group** 'A Representative of a Creative Profession Reflected in the Connection to Some Topical Event' makes a collection of photographs where the picture is an illustration for the mass media to announce an event – an opening of an exhibition, the date and time of a concert. The photographs have the function of a visual advertisement. Moreover, the photographs of this group represent different genres – portrait, reportage – and only the underwriting tells about the event.

The **7<sup>th</sup> group** 'The Birthdays' covers approximately 62 photographs which had been published in the connection to a jubilee of a popular person. It is possible to single out such variants: the picture of the person whose anniversary is celebrated had been taken during the celebration together with guests i.e. the picture had been taken on purpose, or the photograph had been taken from archives i.e. a portrait is published in which the person is portrayed or is seen with his/her relatives.

In the **8<sup>th</sup> group** 'The Weddings' there are 135 units i.e. 8% out of the total number of sources. In this group there are following photographs: the portraits of brides and grooms which had been taken before the wedding or the portraits from the private achieves (companion portrait or two separate portraits), studio photographs in wedding dress, the depiction of the ceremony.

In the **9<sup>th</sup> group** 'The Burials' are represented 160 units i.e. 9% of the sources. It has to be mentioned that 160 photographs reflect 24 burials. In the magazine there had been mentioned the death of popular people – litterateurs, politicians, relatives of politicians, musicians, teaching staff, representatives of the armed forces, and clergy.

The **10<sup>th</sup> group** - the reflection of the life of Rainis in the photographs is a visual addition to the collection of aphorisms 'Lidotājs' and the first publication of his letters which in the magazine are published after the death of the poet starting from October 25, 1929 no.260 continued till December 2, 1932 no.422. As the visual material of the literary work are used the photographs which reflected Rainis in different periods of his life and in different situations – in the exile in Castanole together with Aspazija, with friends, participating in different events.

In the **11<sup>th</sup> group** of themes 'The Representative Events of the Government' are selected the photographs what correspond to the following criteria:

1. there are reflected the political figures of Latvia in the official festivity of Latvia, in the official parts of the jubilees of the cities, in the official events of the foreign diplomats (the affirmation of diplomatic corps, public dinner, etc);
2. a new functionary has been announced by the help of the photograph.

The **12<sup>th</sup> group** 'The Informal Events' forms the collection of 210 units i.e. 12% out of all sources. This category is formed of the photographs which correspond to the following criteria:

1. the informal events of the state (levees, balls, dinners, etc);
2. the visits of the political leaders of the state in the cities, towns, regions, and in organizations, offices, schools;
3. the participation of the politicians in festivities (the Song Festival, Mother's Day, etc)
4. the openings of exhibitions to which there are invited functionaries of a high rank;
5. different military events with the participations of politicians – army parades, maneuvers, riding and shooting competitions, etc.

The **13<sup>th</sup> group** 'The Self-advertising of the Publishers' has been specially highlighted out. There had been selected the photographs which correspond to the following criteria:

1. the publisher publishes separate photographs and reportages in which reflects the work of the editorial office;
2. reflects the portraits of the contributors (jubilees, weddings, or for example, photographs according to the profession – photographers, journalists, etc);
3. public activities of Emīlija and Antons Benjamiņi (participation in public events, family jubilees, relaxing, etc).

The self-advertisements do not appear regularly in the magazine. It is published in the case of a jubilee, innovations in the work of the editorial office. It could be called also the creation of the public image of their enterprise.

In the group 'Other Events' (**14**) have been selected the photographs which did not fit in any of the previously mentioned groups of themes. The themes of the pictures are not regular; they do not repeat or are represented in very small number. For example, there repeat the photographs in which there are reflected the summer cottages and the dwelling houses of popular persons.<sup>2</sup>

Charting the data allows to orientate freely in the wide scope of the sources according to the themes as well as according to the chronological development of time.

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<sup>2</sup> Atpūta. - 1927. - no.129. –April 22. ,p15.., Atpūta. - 1927. - no.143. –June 29, p. 14, Atpūta. - 1927. - no.149. –September 9, p 14, Atpūta. - 1931. - no.351. –July 24, p. 22, Atpūta. - 1931. - no.356. –August 28,p 7.

This system of the sources will help in the further methodological research of the visual material.

### **The Peculiarities of the Visual Sources and the Methodologies of their Usage**

A photograph as an object of the visual communication advances several conditions for the research because the interaction between a picture and the social world is conceptualized i.e. a spectator looks at the photograph as at the authentic reflection of the reality through his/her objective life experience. It needs a critical evaluation to consider a photograph as a source.

A photograph exists in a context (the context of the definite media). There are very many ways how we can 'read' and interpret a photograph, however, 'reading' some photograph we rely on many contextual clues which exist also outside the photograph. For example, when exploring the photographs from the magazine 'Atpūta' I look at them in the context of the magazine not as at an original. Moreover, the added text allows me to surmise the idea of the publishers, otherwise the picture becomes unreadable or polysemantic.

Thus it is possible to conclude that in order to look at a photograph as at a source one needs to take into account several factors what influence the context of the photograph. In order to reflect and to explain the contextual factors lucidly I have made a systematical table (Table 2) starting with the period of time what influences the media (the magazine) what for its turn influence the content of the particular edition and finally the photograph.

The research of visual communication within the social history does not describe a picture but explore how we look at it and what kind of information we receive from it. There are no standard methods of the research of the visual communication what could be used for all the cases. The visual methodology is dynamic because it has to be adapted to each particular research. The methods of the visual research most often are interdisciplinary e.g. the content analysis is borrowed from the sociology, the interpretation of the composition, the semiotics (used also in linguistics) – from the history of art.

Taking into account the data from the Table 1, the largest number of the sources is from the title page of the second spread – 421 units. This exposure of the pictures according to the stylistic criteria and the set up of the idea is the most definite and homogeneous. In order to successfully do the research of the wide homogeneous

(visually and contextually) collection of the sources it is advisable to use quantitative methods e.g. the content analysis.

### **The Quantitative Methods**

At first I am going to look at group of themes from the title page of the second spread of the magazine 'Atpūta'. The quantitative methods have been chosen because the selected photographs are united by aesthetic and formal characteristics as well as the principle of taking the pictures of the most popular part of the society of Latvia – the swelldom.

The unity from the title pages of the second spread has the same ideological and visual principles i.e. to show political, social, and cultural figures in a representative manner. For the creation of the genre of portrait or the group of portraits are used different elements starting from the facial expression of a model, the eye look up to the clothing and the surroundings. The combination of different elements (gestures, posture psychological expression, clothing, and interior) creates a specific image with its peculiarities and values. The language, gestures, clothing, etc are the common tools by the help of which one presents his/her social pretensions, desirable concept about him/herself, and about the identity. However, this kind of visual material has to be treated critically. It cannot be seen as an applied documentation because they can show fictive characteristics

Withal, the portraits of the genre of reportage especially highlighted the social status. The photographs were taken in the important, representative events (e.g. military parades, the parade of the world jamboree, etc) where the model is seen in a representative dress and in formal posture.

The historian of the Latvian press Rihards Treijs points out that at the beginning the selection of the pictures for the magazine was supervised by 'Junior' – son of Antons Benjamins<sup>3</sup>. I advance the 'subjective factor' of the publishers as one of the leading motives in the selection of the models. As an additional factor I would like to mention certain conformation of the magazine to the existing ideology. Jānis Kārklīņš in his memories about the work in the editorial office admits that till May15, 1934 the publishers Emīlija un Antons Benjamini were apolitical. With the beginning of the rule of

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<sup>3</sup> Treijs, Rihards. Latvijas Republikas prese: 1918 – 1940. – Rīga: Zvaigzne ABC, 1996.,p.271.

Ulmanis they had to follow certain requests and to oblige the government to retain and continue the publishing<sup>4</sup>.

In order to systematize the visual information from 'Atpūta' what I am interested in I created tables according to the principles of the qualitative analysis. Table 3 'The Professional Occupation of the People on the Title Page of the Second Spread from the Magazine 'Atpūta'' reflects professions the representatives of which the society of 1920's – 1930's was interested in. It has to be pointed out that in the creation of the table I took into account the explanatory text of the selected photographs in which there is revealed the professional occupation and the social status of the model. By the help of this table I wanted to find out the tendencies what could be observed in the professional spheres and their dynamics in the concrete period of the time (1924-1940). At the beginning I advanced blocks of professional spheres. I pointed out the representatives of the intellectuals, civil servants, and officials from the government, lawyers, representatives of the clergy, representatives of the agricultural sphere, and sportsmen. Then I divided the blocks of the spheres further into professions.

Analyzing the data from the table one can observe the following peculiarities:

1. if in the first period (1926 -1928) the intellectuals are represented in 47% of cases in the comparison to other spheres, then in the following periods a decrease is observed;
2. the sphere of the civil servants also shows a decrease;
3. the representatives of the government on the contrary starting from the first period shows gradual increase.

This quantitative data reflects the change of the values not only in the magazine but in the whole society. The magazine in the course of time did not change its motto 'a relaxing magazine for the whole family', but it cannot be ascribed to the selection of the pictures. There are two spheres what show cardinal alteration in the course of time: that is 'The Intellectuals' what at the beginning has the dominating role in the design of the title page which gradually is weakened, because a kind of the change of positions takes place in the society. It is possible to advance the following hypothesis: firstly, in 1920's the society lives in the pathos of the recently gained independence; secondly, in the research one has to take into account the essential tendency of the whole Europe of the period in between the wars – the change from the democracy to the dictatorship. Especially I want to stress the coup d'état realized by the Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis in May 15, 1934.

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<sup>4</sup> Kārklīņš, Jānis. Latvijas preses karalis. Atmiņas par Jaunāko ziņu laikiem. – Rīga: Karogs, 1990, p. 172.

Soon after it there started essential alterations in the scene of the press in Latvia. Several laws were passed what seriously influenced the liberty of the press.

On the whole Table 3 gave an insight into the dynamics of the visual reflection of the professional spheres the change of which can be explained by the changes in the state. The table reflects the changes of an initially sovereign and apolitical media in front of the political ideology.

Table 4 'The Characteristic Expressive Means of the Portraits/Groups of Portraits from the Title Page of the Second Spread' was made by distinguishing the elements of the expressive means: the look, dress, facial expression, surroundings. For each of these elements the variants are indicated to receive more precise information for the analysis of the expressive means of a photograph.

### **Conclusion**

The ample exposure of the pictures of the swelldom represented in the magazine 'Atpūta' allows fulfilling the advanced aim – to explore the interests and the interpretation of the lifestyle by the help of photographs. It is possible to observe changes of the reflection of the society by the help of photographs in the course of publishing the magazine (1924-1940). It indicates that a press photograph shows the impulses of the social life. In the periodical edition it is possible to observe the tendencies of the life of the society because an exposure of sources in the regular time is available.

When writing this paper I met the following problems: a photograph is an unconventional source for the historical research what requires specific methodological treatment. It is necessary to adapt the research methods for each research of visual communication. On the one hand, it gives great opportunities, on the other, it is necessary to set precise criteria according to which to evaluate and select the material in order to get the information about the social history from the photographs. In case it is not done a photograph as a source of history does not function because it implies too wide scope of information what does not give adequate results without systematical research.

In the research of the visual material from the press it is necessary to use both-qualitative and quantitative methods of the research of the visual communication. Each of this kind of methods offers specific possibilities of the analysis. Applying the content analysis it is possible to work with wide exposure of the pictures about the swelldom what was published in the magazine 'Atpūta'. It is possible to determine the intensity of the published photographs in the given period of time by systematizing the sources in the

chronological tables. Whereas the qualitative methods – semiotics, the method of visual interpretation – treats the analysis of the photograph individually what offers ‘deeper’ cognition about the examined time period. Combining the results of both methods it is possible to use a photograph as the main source of research for this paper