

Jack Paynton 1908 – 1994 The Unknown photographer.

I inherited from my father, Jack Paynton a photographic collection of large black and white photos, and around two thousand negatives clad in brittle parchment little envelopes, each, carefully inscribed in pencil at the top with instructions on the print method, the place, the subject, and the date it was taken. The boxes also include glass plates and occasional colour slides. The whole lot were given to me from my mother some years ago, probably because she could'nt think what to do with them, and could'nt bare to throw them away.

The collection starts in 1924, I think at number 7 inscribed on the envelope, and ends roughly in 1967 with number 3398, when my father sold his large wooden, leather-bound Soho Reflex camera and took up rather obsessively growing roses, and rare fruit trees instead.

Jack Paynton was born in Tower Hamlets, to Russian, Polish emigre parents who came over in 1905, his parents spoke Russian, Yiddish and hopeless English all their lives. Jack grew up as Jacob Pogorelsky, but he and his brother changed their names on the 14th March 1930 to Paynton. Joseph had a hat factory, and Jack pursued an administrative career in retail trade associations, and was awarded an MBE for negotiating a wartime no-strike deal between the Board of Trade and the Rag trade unions. Jack never discussed his past, and was a devoted anglophile.

I started combing through the negatives for a variety of reasons, some of them are dissolving into a blue haze, some are of images or places that no longer exist, and I was curious about the life of my father of whom I knew very little about until after my mother's death in 1997. There are a myriad of images, I share with my father a meticulous attention to detail, so although some of the images are in poor condition, technically they are fine. It seems he was given or bought a camera in about 1923 and he started to photograph, friends, holidays in Sussex. I found glass plates of grandma and grandpa Pogorelsky sitting stiffly and awkwardly on chairs, they are not named, but numbered from 441 - 447. Soon after this in the thirties unfold grand trips, whaling boats in Norway, trips to Bergen, Capri, Corsica, Monte Carlo, Austria, the Alps, Switzerland, Belguim, Paris, and the Paris Exhibition of 1936. Small airports, fish markets and scenic vistas. There are many pictures of London, the North of England, Dorset, Lyme Regis etc. The photographs stop in 1939, and re-start in 1947 in Dubrovnic after the War. They give way to pictures of

Hampstead, fairgrounds, circuses, fifties and sixties suburban life cricket matches, school plays, sculpture shows, industrial life. We were routinely photographed my mother, brother and myself, dressed up in our best attire under hot lights and too terrified to move.

Bill Brandt lived in the same street as we did in Belsize Park, and came from the same sort of background, and my mother claimed an acquaintanceship. Jack belonged to a group of devoted and highly gifted amateur photographers who exhibited at the London Salon of Photography and other venues around the country, they took a passionate interest in the technicalities of their craft and experimented with novel photographic effects. Jack won awards, and exhibited in Wakefield, York and Warwick as well as London. He lugged his large camera everywhere by hand along with tripods, light meters (he never owned or drove a car) He started off using glass plates, and then adapted his equipment to use roll film. He built a darkroom in the house in Hampstead, another room housed the dry-mounting press, the size of a mini car. He taught me how to develop photos, and from the age of ten I spend happy hours dabbling in smelly developing fluids that turned ones clothes yellow.

I am not sure what he wanted to say as an artist, I feel they have something of a voyeur, an observer in them, his pictures often show solitary figures stranded in austere or abandoned settings, or stepping away from a crowd. An odd –one-out that took another odd-one-out to notice. Another recurrent theme is the circus, and funfair imagery, with its undercurrent of edginess and danger half-masked by show and stagecraft. Some of the landscapes have an arresting lyrical and dreamlike quality, and some have a sinister atmosphere. Jack specialised in night photography, and for me, being an elusive being. We are hoping to reprint many of the images.

Jo Lamb 2007