Fortunata Obrąpalska (née Fortunata Szurowska) was born in 1909 in the city of Vолодьomyr-Volynskyi (now Ukraine). Photography was present in her family home since she was a child. In 1930 she got her first Leica on the occasion of graduating from secondary school. Her older brothers were also amateur photographers. Even so, she delved into the subject years later, after meeting her future husband Zygmunt Obrąpalski. They met in Vilnius, where Fortunata moved after being forced by financial problems to withdraw from her studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. She started studying at the Chemistry Department of the Stephen Báthory University in Vilnius where Zygmunt was an assistant. In 1935 Fortunata and Zygmunt got married. A year later she also started botanical studies. In 1939 Fortunata graduated in the Faculty of Chemistry and started to work in the laboratory of “Biofarm”, a pharmaceutical company based in Vilnius; but in fact she had already decided to devote herself to photography after meeting Jan Bulhak in 1938.

Jan Bulhak was an outstanding photographer and originator of the idea of Polish “native photography”. All of the Vilnius photographic society circled around this charismatic artist trying to imitate his style and follow his ideas. Bulhak, later called a “father of Polish photography”, believed that photographic landscapes should play an important role in the state-building process. The issue of national art was extremely important during the period of Partitions and after Poland regained its independence. For him, photography was a mission and photographers (or “photographics”, as they called themselves) should serve the country by uniting the characteristics of an artist, scientist, tourist, and technical expert.

Fortunata showed him her earlier works – mostly landscapes, charming streets of Vilnalobos.
For Fortunata taking a technically good photo was only a first step. Not only was she choosing the frame very carefully, but then she turned the photo upside down and added a title which was as important as the picture itself. The titles were very surrealistic.

nius, and scenes of rural life. Bulhak encouraged her to continue her artistic work. Solid chemical education, her love for art, and the approval from “the Master” was enough for her soon to become one of the most innovative figures in Polish photographic world.

During the Second World War Fortunata and Zygmunt organized two conspiracy exhibitions in their apartment (in 1941 and 1942), and Bulhak was a kind of patron of both of them. They showed their own works and photographs made by their friend, Michał Nowicki. In this period she was making mostly landscapes, cityscapes, portraits, and still life. She was creating in realistic conventions with elements of pictorialism, which was popular among other artists from that period, creating under the huge influence of Bulhak. Her works were very “impressionistic” and imitated painting.

After World War II, when Vilnius became part of the Soviet Union, Fortunata Obrapalska moved with her husband to Poznań where they settled and co-created the cultural life of photographic society. Fortunata joined SMF (Association of Photography Enthusiasts) where she was a very active member and soon became the Secretary of the Board. She also started a two-year course in the artistic college in Poznań. Her style started to change.

In 1947 her works appeared in the 1" Polish Photographic Exhibition in Poznań where she received a prize for a photograph entitled “Dusk”. This photomontage was probably made in 1946, but delighted critics were sure that this kind of landscape could be seen only in Lithuania.

She participated in many significant exhibitions in Poland and abroad and received a number of awards. She also became a member of other photographic societies. Her apartment was an editorial office of “World of Photography” – the first post-WWII periodical devoted to photography in Poland.
She explored new areas of photography. She made many portraits in which the shadow of a portrayed person played the most important role. She tried to make “artistic documentation” of physical phenomena. She used new techniques – solarization, photomontage, etc. Fortunata pushed aside the ideas of “native photography” and reached back to the achievements of the pre-war avant-garde.

Fortunata’s works appeared not only in strictly photographic exhibitions. Her great success was her participation in the 1st Exhibition of Modern Art in Kraków, which was one of the biggest artistic projects in postwar Poland. Her photographs were shown next to works of the most important Polish modern artists, inter alia Tadeusz Kantor, Tadeusz Wróblewski, and Jerzy Nowosielski. This not only confirmed her status as an outstanding artist, but also confirmed the status of photography as art. She also cooperated with an artistic group from Poznań, 4F+R, but she was never a formal member of the group.

During that time, Polish photographers and theoreticians tried to discover the proper language of photography. The community was divided, and two paths were most popular. Some claimed that, if photography wants to be art, it needs to imitate painting. Others tried to find language characteristic only to photography, saying that a painter has a power over his work – especially a composition – that a photographer would never have. It is interesting that Obrapalska was in a way torn between those two concepts.

The 1st Exhibition of Modern Art took place in 1948. Fortunata was at the high point of her career between 1947 and 1951, when she created her best works. She made a cycle of photographs called “Diffusion in Liquid”. The cycle was a result of her experiments with depicting physical phenomena. Fortunata chose to show only one of them – the diffusion of two liquids of different colour (water and ink). That cycle was noticed by the artistic community, and in 1948 she received an award from the Minister of Culture.

During that time she was constantly being accused by critics of copying the works of Otto Croy, a German photographer and author of popular photography textbooks from the 1930s. Otto Croy published his photo in one of his textbooks with a short instruction on how to make a picture of the physical phenomenon of diffusion. He explained what kind of dish is best for it and how to build it, what kind of light the photographer should choose, etc. That is all. For him it was just another technical instruction next to the chapters devoted to how to take a good image of sunlight or mist.

Fortunata felt that she had to answer those accusations, so she wrote a short text entitled “Surrealistic effects in photography”, which was published in “The world of photography”.

Photograph from an exhibition "Fortunata Obrapalska. Retrospektywa"
Kraków, Muzeum Historii Fotografii, 06.11.2001-06.01.2002, Curator: Monika Kozieł-Świca
She wrote: “Pictures taken by me do not depict some accidental states, like it was in the case of Dr. Croy’s works, but rather this phenomenon was a basis and a method to have images carry significant meaning, and not only a tangle of black and white stains, no matter how beautiful.”

For Fortunata taking a technically good photo was only a first step. Not only was she choosing the frame very carefully, but then she turned the photo upside down and added a title which was as important as the picture itself. The titles were very surrealistic, like “Dancer”, “Silence”, or “Curse”. Those accusations showed that Polish critics and theoreticians still did not do their homework on the pre-war avant-garde.

Critics, sometimes anonymous, pointed out the fortuity of her work. Fortunata answered: “Nobody accuses pictures of clouds of being ‘accidental’, even though photographers cannot control the clouds in the sky. What is important is that they are correctly composed, and that is determined by skillful selection of one phase from an infinite number of random and chaotic states”. Regardless of those accusations, the cycle “Diffusion in Liquid” received a very positive response from the audience, and remains today a kind of trademark of Fortunata Obrapalska.

In 1949 the new Polish government implementing socialist ideology reached out also for art. Now, the only valuable art would be socialist realism and previous formal experiments of photographers like Obrapalska or Zbigniew Dłubak would become a symbol of worthless and dangerous decadent art.

Obrapalska had to change her style again, but she never surrendered completely. Even though she was forced to take photos that were “ideologically correct” she was still making art. During that period she was photographing mostly workers. But the socialist message was not important for her. She continued expe-
rimenting with form and composition. Her photographs are not similar to typical paintings made in the spirit of social realism, but referred to achievements of the pre-war avant-garde (especially Constructivism). She also experimented with different techniques, using solarization and duplicate paper negatives. Those “new” works were very similar to her previous cityscapes where the human figure was only an element of composition, which is clearly visible in “In Brewery” or “Potatoes on transporter”.

Even so, creating in the spirit of social realism was not enough for her, because in 1954 she started her long-term and very interesting co-operation with the Botanical Garden and Agricultural University of Poznań. Her job was to make photographic documentation of flowers. She always loved to photograph flowers. But even though she herself was a Botanical Studies graduate the final result was far from strictly “scientific documentation” and may be considered artistic work in itself.

This job was all she was doing until the late 1970s when she decided to give up photography for good. Officially, the reason was an allergy to Metol, which was commonly used in the dark room as a photographic developer. It was a double loss for Polish photography – not only did she stop taking new pictures, but also...
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drifted away from photographic and artistic society and in effect became a forgotten artist. Even though her works were shown at many exhibitions of a historical nature, she had her artistic comeback in the late 1990s with two individual exhibitions in Poznań (1999) and Kraków (2001). Her photographs were also presented in the Starmach Gallery in Kraków (1998, 2000) and Zachęta – the National Gallery of Art in Warsaw (2000).

After giving up photography she devoted her time and effort to her other hobby, which was philately.

For Fortunata Obrąpalska, art was never a battlefield. She was not fighting for ideology; she was simply looking for beauty. That is why she could easily find herself in so many different styles. In every one of them she could find something interesting for her. She, as an artist, was almost invisible – she wrote only a few articles. She was extremely modest and not interested in any kind of controversy.

Fortunata Obrąpalska died in 2004 in Poznań. Now she is classified as one of the most important Polish photographers. Soon, the Galeria Piekary in Poznań will open another exhibition of her works. Her photographs are enriching collections of the Art Museum in Łódź, the National Museum in Wrocław, the National Museum in Poznań, the Museum of History of Photography in Krakow, and many private collections.

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