



**MARIAN SCHMIDT
FOUNDATION**

BIOGRAPHY

Marian Schmidt was born in Żyrardów, Poland on 21st April 1945, two and a half weeks before the end of World War II.

He was the second son of a married couple: Leokadia Knobelman and Józef Schmidt.

His parents escaped from the Warsaw ghetto in 1942 and miraculously survived the Holocaust. After the Warsaw uprising, they took refuge in a leather tannery in Żyrardów where Marian was born on a table covered with newspapers. The family moved to Kraków and in 1946 to Paris. A year later the Schmidts with their two sons Kazimierz and Marian immigrated to Venezuela. He spent his childhood in Venezuela.

At the age of twelve Marian began taking photographs and making short documentary films with the equipment recently acquired by his father to preserve family souvenirs: a 35 mm Konica rangefinder camera and a Canon 8 mm film camera outfitted with four lenses. Films and photography became Marian's passions. At the age of fifteen, deeply moved by the films of Ingmar Bergman, Marian decided to become a film director. His parents, who belonged to a generation valuing practical professions that would guarantee making a living, were against his decision and refused to finance his future film studies in Los Angeles. His father wanted him to be an engineer.

In 1961 Marian was accepted as a student at the University of California, Berkeley. His professors discovered he had a great talent for mathematics and encouraged him to major in this field of knowledge. In 1965 he received his B.A. with honors in mathematics. Brandeis University (in Waltham, near Boston) offered him a very generous scholarship for the duration of his mathematics doctoral studies. During his first year at Brandeis he met John Forbes Nash (subject of *A Beautiful Mind*) whom

he befriended and admired. He appreciated the mathematical conversations he had with him.

In 1966 Schmidt felt that there was something missing in his life. The intellectual dimension wasn't sufficient for him. He asked his parents, who were already living in the US at that time, to ship him his Nikon F (his Konica was stolen in Caracas and was replaced by a Nikon). After five years of not taking pictures, he exposed his first roll of film at the Waltham cemetery, which was heavily covered with snow. There was one image he liked. He showed its enlargement to a fellow student, who borrowed it and disappeared. He came back a week later from New York saying that he had shown the photo to Ben Shan, the famous painter and photographer. Shan asked the student to convey to Schmidt his admiration for the picture, encouraging him to continue photographing.

Schmidt returned to photography during the free occasions he had from mathematics. A year later he had the opportunity of meeting for fifteen minutes a student of the great photographer Minor White. He looked at Schmidt's photographs and told him: "You are afraid of people. You are too far from them and one cannot sense your attitude towards them and even their feelings. Sell your Nikon with the telephoto lenses and buy a Leica with a 50 mm lens... Your photographs are ugly. You have to acquire a sense of beauty." And Schmidt humbly followed his instructions. He acquired a visual culture by studying with attention reproductions in albums and originals in museums of masterpieces of great painters in the history of art. He continues to do it all the time. Obviously, he sold his Nikon and bought a Leica.

Schmidt also made an experimental film with the recently acquired cinema equipment by the university.

The summer of 1968 was a turning point in the life of Marian Schmidt. His father was dying and the 23 years old Marian Schmidt had to interrupt his studies in order to transfer his father to a better hospital in Los Angeles.

In July 1968 Schmidt was invited to attend at Berkeley the Pure Mathematics Symposium in Global Analysis, which corresponded to the direction of his Ph.D. thesis. After attending a few lectures, he chose to go almost every day to San Francisco to take photos. He realized that mathematics wasn't his true vocation and he would rather become a film director and photographer. However, he decided to complete his doctor's thesis to avoid having doubts and complexes on his intellectual

capacities. He did not want to repeatedly question himself for the rest of his life on whether or not he could do it.

At that time, a series of unexpected events, difficult to explain intellectually, occurred in his life.

During his stay at Berkeley university, a friend suggested that he read books by Jiddu Krishnamurti and novels by Hermann Hesse. The readings, together with a series of events led to Marian's first spiritual peak experience as described by psychologist Abraham Maslow.

At a similar period of time, Schmidt also took part in an encounter with the Hippie Rabbi Schlomo Carlebach.

Marian describes this encounter as follows: "The people coming to him were from all types of creeds or faiths. In the courtyard of the synagogue, rabbi Carlebach positioned his guests in a circle, started playing the guitar and singing very simple words, which anyone could easily repeat. We all danced around a fire, holding hands, repeating the same words. I lost the feeling of time. Afterwards, he chose each one of us by touching our forehead with his. When his forehead touched mine, I felt a very strong and warm electric current circulating between them. For the first time in my life, all my tensions were gone, and I felt a tremendous inner peace."

The following month Marian went to visit his parents in Phoenix, Arizona. His father was already home from the hospital in Los Angeles.

One day, Marian was lying on the couch in his room reading Herman Hesse's novel, *Demian*, when he had an out-of-body experience, which took him into a deep spiritual state. He experienced feeling complete freedom, lightness, universal love.

Schmidt realized that if Krishnamurti and Hesse were able to induce such an experience in him, then that is the true role of an artist. To open up and receive an unknown positive, peaceful, transcendental energy, which is transferred to his/her creation and which a prepared public would be able to absorb. Schmidt decided to look for the spiritual dimension in his future creative works, even if he didn't achieve any results. This experience was a turning point in his later approach to photography when he became an active photographer.

As a result of Marian's deep experiences he became aware that he was much more attracted by a spiritual dimension than by intellectual creativity, which he had previously emphasized. His realization

confirmed that his path was not to become a mathematician, but rather a film director and photographer. He also realized that transcendence is the most important content in any creative work.

Back at Brandeis, he was surprised to learn that Abraham Maslow, the department chair of psychology had invited Krishnamurti for a series of public talks in October. After the talks Schmidt spoke with a journalist who asked him about what he had learned. Krishnamurti's secretary listened to the conversation and invited Schmidt to dine with Krishnamurti. In the spring of 1969, Schmidt solved an important problem in math and finished his thesis. His adviser, Prof. Richard Palais,

told him that he had a choice between teaching at Harvard University or obtaining a postdoctoral fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. At the same time he received an offer from Krishnamurti to teach at the newly founded school in Brockwood Park, England. To the dismay of friends and professors, after obtaining his Ph.D in June, he abandoned a promising academic career and followed Krishnamurti to England and Switzerland. At this time he became a passionate photographer, getting close to people, expressing their feelings, looking for romantic and poetic "treasures" in everyday life, trying to compose images close to paintings. Without being conscious of it, he became a humanist photographer. It was one of his most important living experiences. Next he went to Rome where he spent a few months taking photographs.

Due to a misunderstanding with the head of the Brockwood Park School, Schmidt quit his job and found himself in Rome. On his way there he met by chance, near Bern, Bruno Hesse, the oldest son of Hermann Hesse, who showed him the watercolours of his father. He had the luck to meet in Rome Federico Fellini and Michelangelo Antonioni. Thanks to the latter, he obtained a job as assistant in New York City with the producers of "Steppenwolf" based on Hermann Hesse's novel. Several months later, the film producers ran out of finances. For several years Schmidt held several jobs to survive: teaching mathematics and photography, free lance photographer (his first commercial assignment was the album cover of Santana's Abraxas), lighting designer at the ACSTA I Theater -an Off-Off-Broadway theater, assistant to Czech film director and Oscar winner Jan Kadar. During the summers, he made two photographic trips: to Mexico and Western Europe. He also directed a half hour fiction film "The Daughter" based on his own screenplay. It was shown at the Chicago International Film Festival and on Danish Television. His first photographic recognition came from André Kertész, who chose two of

his Mexican pictures for the ASMP (American Society of Media Photographers) exhibition of young photographers at the Diana Gallery in New York. While living in New York, Schmidt studied the Stanislavsky method of acting. He was accepted as an auditor by Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio. Also while working as a lighting designer at ACSTA I, he learned acting techniques from the old Russian theater director Sonia Moore (Sophie Evzarovna Shatzov), a former student of Yevgeny Vakhtangov, in Moscow. He later applied these techniques in his portrait photography.

In 1974, Schmidt decided to return to his native country during the summer and also visit Prague. He had letters of recommendation from Jan Kadar and Marian Melman (husband of the famous actress Ida Kamińska) and also a press card from ASMP, where he had become a full member. Schmidt's first impressions of Poland were influenced by the twofold education he received in Caracas. At home his parents spoke Polish, the first language he learned.

Thanks to the letters of recommendation he had, to his ASMP press card and to contacts given to him by Poles living in New York, he met quite a large number of people in a short period of time: from famous film and theater directors to farmers. It was like a rolling snowball growing in size. Among the directors he met were Jerzy Kawalerowicz, Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Zanussi and Konrad Swinarski. Wajda and Zanussi invited him to take photographs while they were filming "The Promised Land" and "A Woman's Decision" (Bilans Kwartalny) respectively.

Schmidt travelled extensively in Poland photographing every day life and important social, cultural and religious events.

Schmidt chose a mixed approach: what the American photographer Walker Evans called "a documentary style" and what the French photographer Edouard Boubat called "the search for hidden treasures in everyday life." For Evans, documentary style is neither documentary photography nor photojournalism (we can also add now that it is not "street photography"). Documentary style photographs should transcend the subject, the moment in reality. One should feel in them what some people call poetry. For Edouard Boubat photography is a form of meditation. You go out with your camera and you don't want anything, you don't expect anything. What is it that you take? You take nothing, you are seized. But that nothing is unique, irreplaceable. You stopped for an instant, you looked at the effects of light – for it is light that creates. Time goes by, but the atmosphere of what you photographed remains.

In 1976 he married actress Marta Dutkiewicz. His photographs were published regularly in several leading Polish magazines.

Schmidt went back to New York with his wife in 1978. Thanks to his photographs of Poland, he became a member of the photo agency “Black Star.”

In 1978 do 1980 he was employed by the University of Ryad in Saudi Arabia to make several documentaries.

Two years later he and his wife settled in Paris. Schmidt joined the photo agency “Rapho,” where he was associated with photographers Edouard Boubat, Robert Doisneau and Willy Ronis. He also met Henri Cartier-Bresson. The Parisian period (1980-1997) was very fruitful for Schmidt.

In 1982 Thanks to his contacts with French mathematicians began his project “Hommes de science: 28 portraits” culminating in the publication of a book and an itinerary exhibition of portraits shown in three countries. Henri Cartier-Bresson sent a letter to Schmidt congratulating him for the portraits of “Hommes de science.”

In 1983 his son Arthur was born.

From 1983 to 1989 Schmidt photographed in France, Poland, Spain and Belgium.

In 1986 Schmidt began to study music (his childhood dream) and learning to play the traverse flute. Two years later, while walking near the Paris Conservatory of Music, he noticed a poster advertising a seminar of Phenomenology of Music given by the Sergiu Celibidache, one of the greatest – if not the greatest – orchestra conductors of the XX century. Memories of Celibidache’s concert in Caracas came back to him and he immediately enrolled in the seminar. He studied a Phenomenology of Music with Celibidache in Cluny and Paris from 1988 to 1990. Celibidache confirmed to him that music without the spiritual dimension is only a series of sound effects. Inspired by Celibidache, Schmidt created his own Phenomenology of the Image, which he started to teach. He constantly developed it and refined it as a didactic tool.

In 1994 the Parisian Editions Cercle d’art published an album titled “Marian Schmidt” with 81 of his photographs and an introduction by Edouard Boubat.

In his introduction to Schmidt's book, Boubat describes their first encounter:

"The photographer invents a lost moment. Long ago, we could have founded a 'society of the moment'. I bet that Marian Schmidt would be part of it. It has been a few years now since the first time I met him in the Musée Carnavalet where I was exhibiting my photographs of Paris. I told him: "you are one of us".

During the Parisian period, Schmidt often visited Poland on photographic and family trips.

The year 1997 was another turning point in his life. Schmidt and his wife decided to leave France and settle in Warsaw with their son, Arthur. Schmidt taught photography at the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznań and in ZPAF (the Union of Polish Photographers) in Warsaw.

In 2000, he founded and began to direct the Warsaw School of Photography and Graphic Design where he taught expressive photography, phenomenology of the image and transcendence in art.

During the same year his third book "Unusual Conversations with Father Jan Twardowski" (an outstanding Polish poet), was published in Warsaw.

Schmidt also taught photography at the National Film School in Łódź, where in 2002 he obtained the degree of Habilitated Doctor in the field of Cinema and the specialty of Fine Art Photography.

Around 2009 he started writing a book on photography, which includes his phenomenology of the image.

In 2017, Schmidt co-published his fourth book in collaboration with the History Meeting House: "Inside Poland - Marian Schmidt Photographs". The book was published alongside a photography exhibition of over a hundred of Schmidt's photographs of Poland, which he began taking in 1974. This was Marian Schmidt's last exhibition.

Marian Schmidt died in Krakow, on the 7th of March 2018 due to complications from heart surgery.

From 1969 to the present, Marian Schmidt has travelled extensively covering four continents and nearly fifty countries taking photographs.

He has had over sixty prestigious photographic exhibitions, including those in New York, Paris, London, Tokyo, Berlin, Zurich, Dublin, Charleroi, Dresden, Fort-de-France, Warsaw, Kraków, Poznań, Gdańsk ... His photographs can be found in Paris in the collections of the National Library, the Library of Contemporary History and Kodak-Pathé as well as in the Belgian Photography Museum in Charleroi, the Folkwang Museum in Essen, the National Museum in Gdańsk, the National Stary Theater in Krakow, the History Meeting House in Warsaw and in numerous private collections all over the world.

Contrary to his scientific education, where intellectual concentration and exceptional associations of ideas are essential, Schmidt preferred to photograph creating a mental vacuum devoid of all unnecessary thoughts. Such a state of mind avoids interferences with the photographer's sensitivity, intuition and reflexes. It not only allows the photographer to enter a new dimension, different from everyday reality, but also reduces inhibitions and facilitates a relation of trust with unknown people to be photographed. For Schmidt, the non-mental approach is not instantaneous. It requires a psychological preparation that may last from a few hours to several days. Without such a process, he preferred not to take photographs.

--

The text featured in "Biography" uses fragments of the book "Inside Poland - Marian Schmidt Photographs" published by the History Meeting House in Poland in 2017.