

Bohumil Stepan's Family Album of Oddities: Design Observer

Rick Poyner / Essays



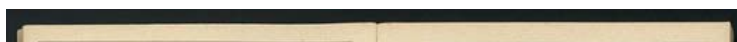
Familienalbum by Bohumil Štěpán, published by Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1971

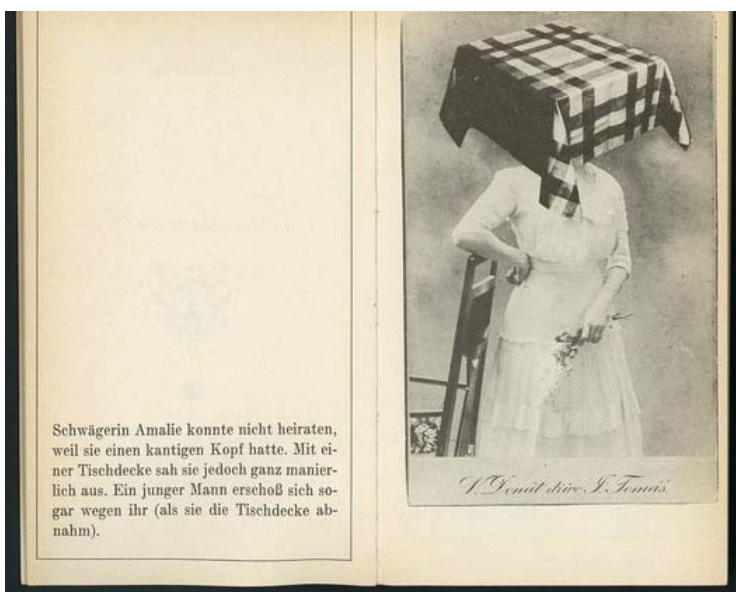
Cover design: Celestino Piatti. Collage by Štěpán

In my [previous post](#) about Bohumil Štěpán's *Galerie*, I mentioned another book, *Familienalbum* (Family Album), which he published in 1971 after leaving Czechoslovakia and settling in Germany. This small, inexpensive, long-out-of-print paperback is simpler in conception and layout, though every bit as curious as the erotic world of *Galerie*. *Familienalbum* makes new use of several of the earlier book's collages, such as the woman with a tablecloth for a head, who turns out to belong to a series of surreally equipped and irreverently modified personages, mostly based on old portrait postcards. In the blunt language of the day, the publisher's blurb describes these differently abled family members — the uncle with a bandaged foot in place of a head, the aunt who rolls about on a single wheel — as “more than strange,” “abnormal” and “monstrous.”

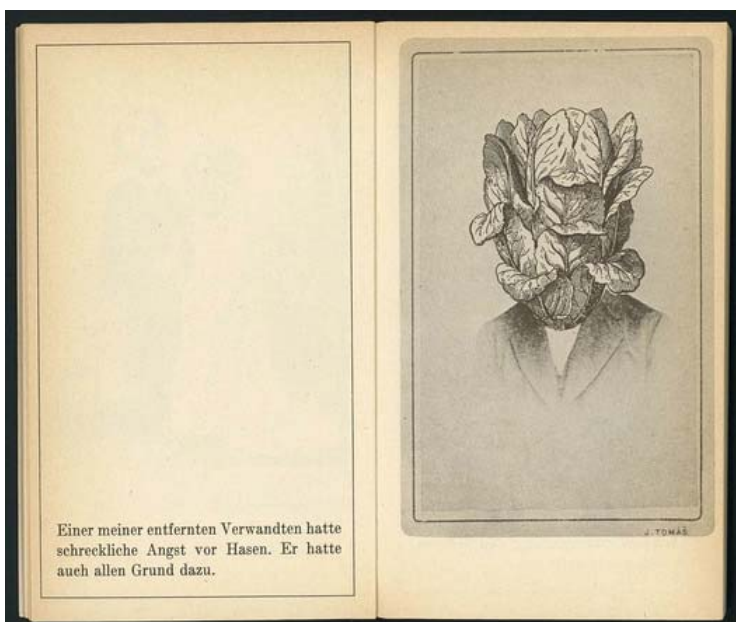
As seen below, all the collages are placed on the right, with a brief text by Štěpán in German on the left; the translations here provide a sense of their flavor. One might wonder why the images require any verbal support. Surely they would be weirder and more provocative, as in *Galerie*, without the narrative details? Štěpán appears to have sold the collages as freestanding art works, so there is good reason to believe that he would have regarded each miniature image as self-sufficient. But the captions, while not exactly punch lines or jokes, are pleasingly caustic, and the collection holds together on its own terms, located somewhere between an artist's book and a publication destined for the “humor” section of the bookstore. An additional sense of its context can be gained from the list at the back of other titles published by [Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag](#). *Familienalbum* is in the same format as a series devoted to cartoons, including volumes by [J.J. Grandville](#), [Gerard Hoffnung](#) and [Charles \(Addams Family\) Addams](#), as well as a set of [drawings by Štěpán](#).

The printing in *Familienalbum* could inevitably be better, though it's acceptable for a low-cost edition. The pocketbook size and the cover design by [Celestino Piatti](#), with controlled modernist type set against the quietly haunting vision of the butterfly-eared child, serve the mood well. This is a paperback oddity to shelve alongside works of literary strangeness and Surrealism, such as Raymond Roussel's *Locus Solus*, Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, or (back in Štěpán's homeland) Vítězslav Nezval's [Valerie and her Week of Wonders](#).

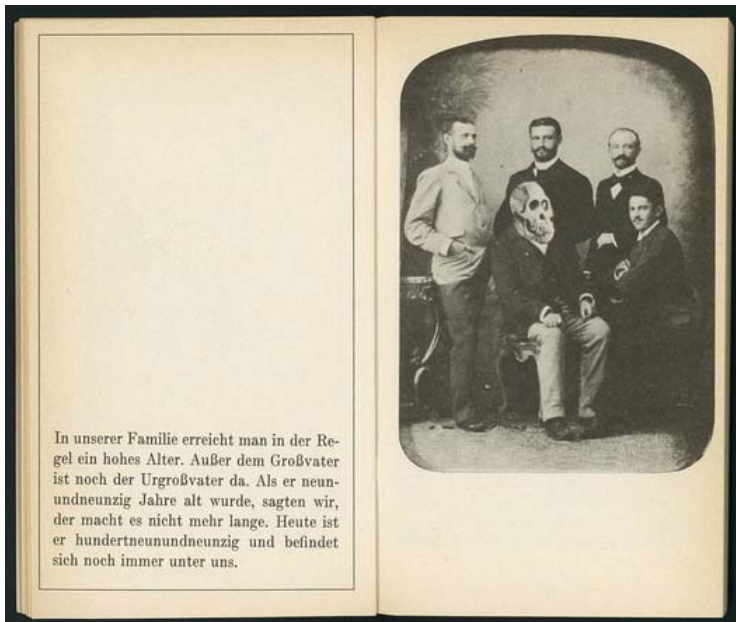




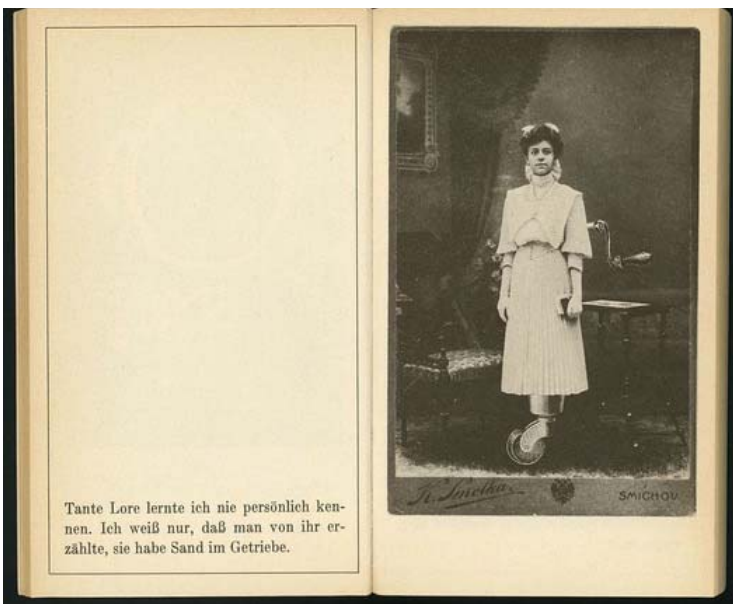
“Sister Amalie could not marry because she had a square head. But with a tablecloth she looked very respectable. A young man even shot himself because of her (when she removed the tablecloth).”



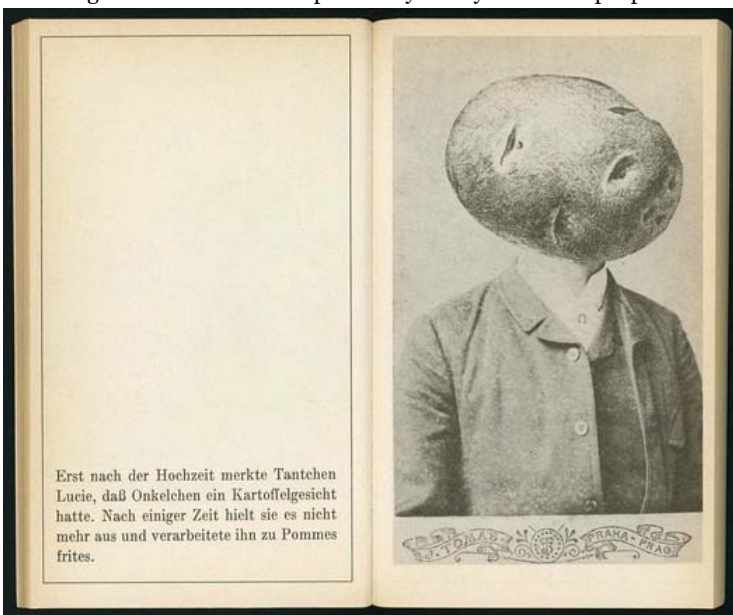
“One of my distant relatives was terrified of rabbits. He had every reason to be.”



“In our family, we usually reach an advanced age. Besides grandfather, great grandfather is still around. When he was 99 years old, we said he wouldn't be around much longer. Today he is 199 and still with us.”

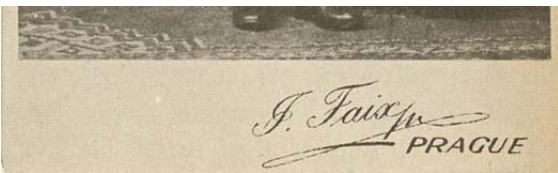


“I never got to know Aunt Lore personally. I only know that people said she had grit in the gearbox.”



“Only after the wedding did Aunt Lucie notice that dear uncle had a potato face. After a while, she couldn't stand it any more and used him for French fries.”

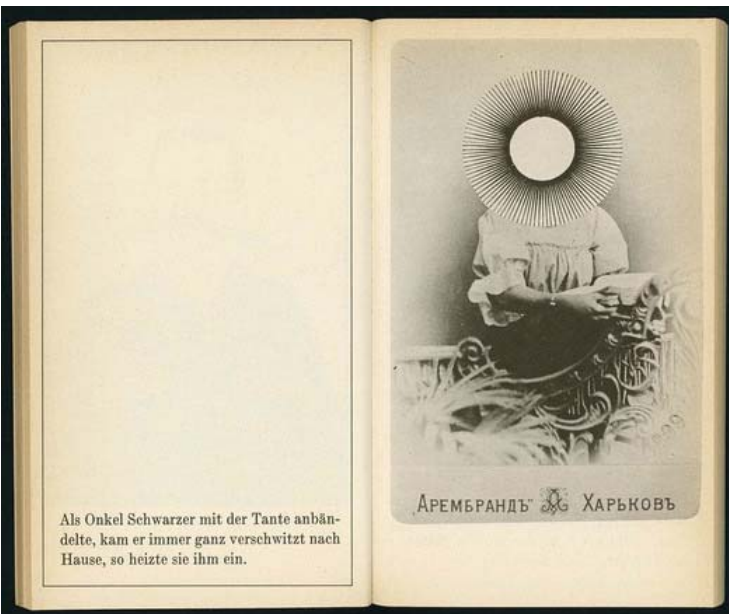




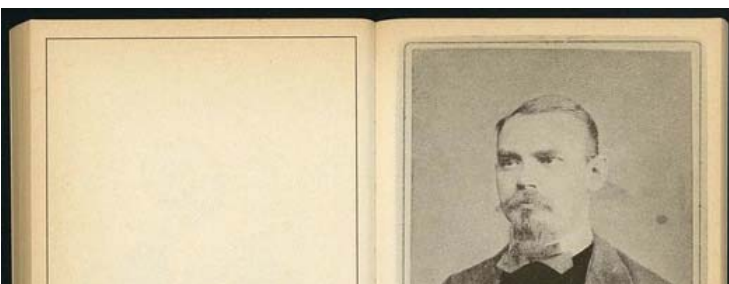
“Relatives in Prague had a child prodigy. He aroused general attention, not however because of his artistry, but because of his appearance.”



“My Uncle Siegfried was a well-known personality. But although everyone knew him, no one knew him when he put his shoes on.”



“When Uncle Schwarzer flirted with Aunt, he always came home all sweaty, she made him so warm.”

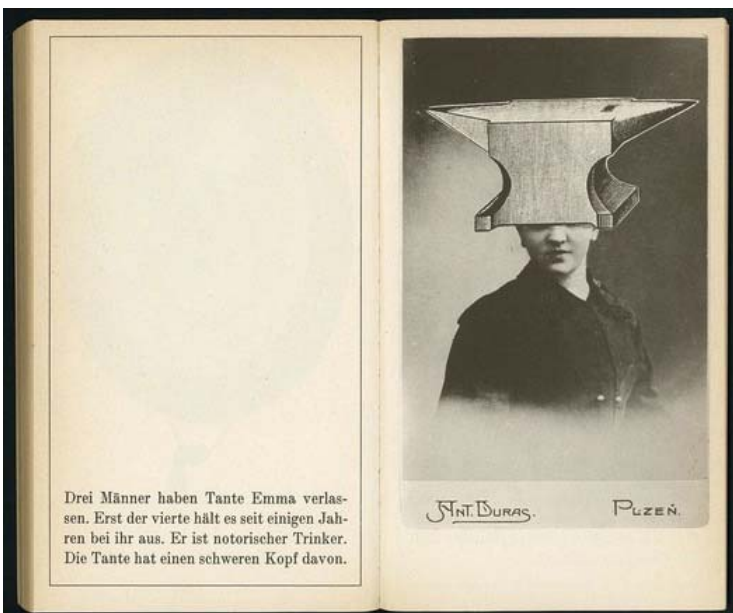




“Uncle Holzinger was already getting on a bit, and so all the relatives were surprised when they learned he was expecting a baby.”



“Aunt Helene and her spouse were extremely frugal and never indulged themselves. They shared the only toothbrush, the only shoelace and a single glove. Thanks to that, in old age they bought an apartment building.”



“Three men have left Aunt Emma. Only the fourth one could stand her for a few years. He is a notorious drinker. She has a heavy head because of it.”

See also:

[Bohumil Štěpán's Gallery of Erotic Humor](#)

[Surrealism in the Pre-School Years](#)