

Aadu Treufeldt (1874-1956)

ESTONIAN PHOTOGRAPHER

by Peeter Tooming



Figure 1. A. Treufeldt. 'Village Group I,' at Lokuta near Türi. c. 1904. 13.7 x 8.8 cm.

The period 1900-30 is of great interest in the history of Estonian photography, because it was only then that the camera became a familiar implement, the photographer an honoured person in our society and the photograph itself an everyday thing. One could order 'picture boxes' from abroad or buy them at local shops and, as a result of the universal enthusiasm, a great many shopkeepers, teachers and office workers became amateurs, in the towns as well as in the country. They were self-taught from books, or else had attended lessons given by someone who was. In the country, they often played the role of pioneers, because photographers were still rare at the time, and previous visits were not always remembered by the locals. In due course, some of these 'pioneers' became professionals.

Many an Estonian village can be proud of its photographers. A good example is Türi, where, at the beginning of the century, three interesting photographers were active almost simultaneously: Gustav Essenson, Aadu Treufeldt and Avelinius Tönnisson, 'the triumvirate of Türi'. Their position was impregnable because their work was thoroughly professional and versatile. At the turn of the century Türi, about 100 km from Tallinn, the capital, was not a large town; people still knew each other by sight, Essenson and Treufeldt among them. They were then 25 years old, both popular musicians, singers and great party-goers, but also men with more cultural interests than the average villager of that age. Essenson became the first professional photographer in Türi. He built a studio with a glass roof and glass walls in the corner of his garden. His



Figure 2. A. Treufeldt. 'Village Group II,' at Lokuta, near Türi. c. 1904. 13.7×8.8 cm.



Figure 3. A. Treufeldt in his studio, at Pilstvere, near Türi. c. 1904. 13.0×20.4 cm.



Figure 4. A. Treufeldt. 'Japanese Girl and Chinese Boy.' Pogranichnaya, 1908. 11.8 x 7.0 cm.

practical success may have inspired Treufeldt to follow in his footsteps and to become a partner.

In little Türi, two photographers were too many, and both tended to be short of work. Treufeldt began to specialize in services outside the studio. A stocky bearded man who wore a bowler-hat, he appeared at village parties and weddings as the most regular of guests. Being also something of a singer, he was just the man for these occasions and after a drink or two he would begin to take pictures, using all the favourite tricks of his trade. In order to discourage people from staring into the camera, he gave everyone something to do. When there were not sufficient props at hand, Aadu placed himself half-sideways in the photograph and asked everybody to have a chat with him. With bowler hat or without, he appears in many of his own group photographs, which do indeed show a certain dynamic verve. His professional bowler hat gave him access to clients, whether at work or at play, but at that time did not protect him from having to do his share of the village chores. These certainly included threshing, as one of the surviving pictures shows. It may have been in order to escape these labours that he later opened a studio of his own in Pilstvere.

In 1906 he decided to undertake a journey through Russia and got as far as Pogranichnaya on the frontier of China. There, far away from his native land, began the



Figure 5. Treufeldt's assistant. 'In the Far East, 1908; Gottlieb's and Ellermann's Families.' Pogranichnaya, Manchuria. 19.8 x 15.0 cm. Treufeldt himself is second from the right.



Figure 6. A. Treufeldt. 'Local People in Ussuuri,' 1908. 12.4×20.7 cm.

most interesting period for Aadu Treufeldt in the field of photography. While an employee in the local photostudio of R. Gottlieb, he took photographs of Russian railwaymen, Chinese and Japanese villagers, as well as of the countryside around: it is interesting to leaf through the thick album compiled by him, which shows China as seen through the eyes of an Estonian. However, Treufeldt's great wanderlust did not permit him to stay in the little frontier settlement for long; soon he moved on to Harbiin and from there to Vladivostok.

Among the portraits and group photographs taken while in the Far East are two rare prints; they show the moment when the members of a band of robbers called 'hunhuus' had their heads cut off with an axe. We do not know how and in what circumstances a man from Estonia happened to photograph such events in other nations; however, Treufeldt himself wrote the date: 17th June 1909.

Treufeldt returned to Türi in 1909. There he heard that Essenson had moved away to another part of Estonia

Figure 7. A. Treufeldt. 'Threshing,' 1904. Lokuta, 10.5×14.5 cm.





Figure 8. A. Treufeldt. 'The Cutting of the Hunhuuses' Heads.' Near Pogranichnaya, Manchuria, 1909. 8.1×13.6 cm.



Figure 9. Treufeldt's assistant. 'Village Group III', Keita, 1913. 14.5×10.5 cm. Treufeldt himself appears, bowler hatted, on the left.



Figure 10. Treufeldt's assistant.
'Village Group IV', Türi,
1915. Treufeld appears in the
middle. 13.0 x 19.2 cm.



Figure 11. A. Treufeldt.
'Motoring,' Türi, 1915. 8.8 x
13.7 cm. Treufeld is at the
wheel.

and that another photographer, Avelinius Tõnisson, had taken his place. The new man was the son of the well-known calendar compiler Mats Tõnisson. Avelinius was a serious photographer of great diligence and enthusiasm. Though he and Treufeldt were potential rivals, their common devotion to photography brought them together; they became friends. From that time onward, Treufeldt often dropped in at Tõnisson's studio and helped him at work. He also used that studio for taking pictures of his own and, as a result, it is difficult to identify the maker of several surviving photographs. Tõnisson himself specialized in postcards of flowers, as well as town and nature views, and Treufeldt began to take such pictures also. However, he was still looking for greater things; we know that in

1909 he sought a wife through a Berlin matrimonial agency, and in 1915 he was engaged in a job-search correspondence with L. Kustring of Helsinki. Kustring was a fellow-Estonian, and owner of an important studio (Strandberg's) in the years 1914-19. Both these undertakings of Treufeldt's as well as a great many others, remained uncompleted, although he did eventually marry. His good-natured personality and his love of photography are still widely remembered in Türi. Towards the end of his life he lived in Hagudi, a village about 40 km from Tallinn, and he died there in 1956, at the age of 82. Letters and photographs remained in the hands of relatives, including Treufeldt's personal album, from which the present illustrations are taken. •