

JIŘÍ HORNÍČEK / 7. 7. 2025

‘Amateurs, Make Yourselves Heard!’ About the History of the Prague Pathé Club and the 9.5 mm Film Stock

The idea of making filmmaking accessible to the general public was appealing to the pioneers of film ever since its invention. However, before filmmaking found its place as a creative leisure activity, it was necessary to create favourable conditions for the cinematograph to secure its future success in the field of public entertainment. Achieving this goal meant, among other things, agreeing on a unification of technical parameters of film stock – its width, aspect ratio, shape and number of perforations enabling the film stock to move through a camera or a projector. This long-term process which included escalated business wars often ending with lawsuits culminated in 1908-1909 when the most influential businessmen in the industry agreed that the film stock used in the developing film industry will be 35 mm wide with 4:3 aspect ratio and Edison’s aperture.^[1]

In the first two decades of the 20th century, people interested in amateur film used either professional 35 mm devices modified for easier operation or could choose from a variety of cameras designed specifically for amateur filmmakers which were characterised by film stock of various widths but always narrower than the 35 mm professional standard. It was this diversity and difference of individual systems developed specifically for amateurs that prevented them from penetrating the market, not to mention the fact that their inventors usually lacked the support of a strong economic and commercial-distribution background.

A turning point in the development of amateur filmmaking came in the early 1920s when two big companies, until then operating mainly in the professional sphere, independently introduced new systems with complete technical design. First, in 1922, French film concern Pathé Frères and its part Pathé Cinema focusing on selling amateur filmmaking equipment introduced a small projector with a simple construction named aptly Pathé-Baby and 9.5 mm film stock with an unusual central perforation.^[2]

The extraordinary response this home projector received from customers motivated the management to speed up the development of a camera of the same name which was introduced at the end of the following year. Almost at the same time, American company Kodak came up with a solution based on 16 mm film stock with classic perforated edges. From the very beginning, the manufacturer offered a complete set of filmmaking equipment including a camera and projector. Thanks to the low degree of complexity of their user-friendly systems, availability of technical service and extensive distribution network, each company gradually managed to build a large clientele which, due to the relatively high initial price, consisted mainly of members of wealthier classes.

Amateur Filmmakers Unite

‘How many 9 mm enthusiasts gave up filmmaking immediately! How many people didn’t even dare to try their luck in this field! The enthusiasm was there, the relatively low costs didn’t discourage them so why the impatience? Let’s be honest! It was the lack of Czech professional literature, magazines, but mainly lack of friends experienced enough with amateur filmmaking that they could give out useful advice.’^[3]

In the first years of Pathé-Baby’s existence, the device was bought by film enthusiasts, most of which focused on recording family events, using the experience they had previously gained while working with photography. With the increasing number of owners of the same equipment and growing creative ambitions, the demand for sharing knowledge in the field of working with film form and practical skills of technical nature naturally grew. The way to intensive sharing of this knowledge led through the establishment of amateur film clubs which included the education of their members as of their main goals in their statutes. The shift in amateur filmmaking from

purely individual to collective activities represented a general trend that appeared in almost all economically prosperous countries of Europe at the turn of the 1920s and the 1930s and after some time, it was followed by the establishment of national associations.^[4] In Czechoslovakia, this tendency began to materialise in 1932. At first, on September 21, the Provincial Authority in Brno approved the existence of the local Amateur Cinema Club (renamed to Moravian-Silesian Amateur Cinema Club in 1937)^[5] and about a month later, on October 27, 1932, the Provincial Authority in Prague approved the application of PATHÉ CLUB whose official name included a more specific and descriptive wording – Association of Amateur Cinematographers Working with 9.5 mm Film (hereinafter Pathé Club).^[6]

It was the abovementioned name specification which played a crucial part in the following years of the club's existence. While the Brno amateurs could use all main narrow formats available at that time (9.5 mm, 16 mm and 8 mm), members of the Pathé Club limited their activities exclusively to one type of material. This decision was further underlined by the selection of the name of the first Czech specialised magazine – *Pathé-revue*, published thanks to joint efforts of the members from November 1932 to the end of 1935. The reason for the sympathy of some of Prague amateur filmmakers for the French company brand lies in their connection to the Foto-kino Pop shop and the Cinéma company which was appointed the general representative of Pathé Cinéma in Czechoslovakia. Karel Pop, the key figure involved in the management and operation of both abovementioned companies, combined the passion of a practicing amateur filmmaker and the foresight of a skilled businessman who correctly predicted the future rise in popularity of amateur filmmaking and therefore actively supported the growing interest in this attractive leisure activity. Before the club was founded (starting around November 1931), Karel Pop provided the premises of his shop with a small screening room for regular meetings of a group of fifteen to twenty amateur film enthusiasts.^[7] He reached out to other supporters of Czechoslovak cinema a couple of months later, in March, with the successful participation of Cinéma at the Prague Sample Fairs, where his company participated in an extensive presentation titled Film and Photography in the Hands of Amateurs as a part of the International Film Exhibition. In June 1932, Cinéma organised a public screening of professional and amateur 9.5 mm films in the hall of the Prague Medical House.

Creative liberty was always considered the most important value in any amateur activity, so it's no wonder that a part of the amateur community looked down on Pathé Club with dismissive irony and contemptuously referred to it as a company club.^[8] If we look in individual issues of *Pathé-revue*, even an uninitiated reader notices regular columns promoting the activities of Cinéma, mainly the rental of professional titles on 9.5 mm copies for home screening (9.5 mm Pathé Archive; News from the Pathé Rental) and sale of Pathé amateur equipment (Pathé News). A closer look, however, reveals that these articles usually comprised about a fifth of the content. The rest of *Pathé-revue* was thematically focused on general problems of filmmaking, specific projects, club activities at home and abroad (Life in Clubs), interesting facts from professional fields (Across the Film World) and reader's questions (Answers). Although Cinéma financially supported the magazine, its pages also included advertisements for products made by other companies (Eumig, Paillard-Bolex, Suchánek Brno, etc.) which certainly represented a welcome source of income for the club.

It is clear that in case of the magazine, the line between its commercial usage and the undeniable positive influence on the development of amateur filmmaking in Czechoslovakia was rather blurred. With regards to the Pathé Club, a similarly unclear situation was its case especially in the crucial period before and after its establishment characterised by material support from Cinéma, later redeemed by the founders' inclination to accept the exclusive position of the used format. During that time, club members actively organised travelling lectures which promoted the club's activities with the aim of initiating the establishment of new branches and acquiring new people interested in filmmaking, but at the same time, the lectures also promoted the company. After all, Karel Pop himself made popularisation journeys accompanied by screenings. But unlike others, Pop, as a self-employed person, he had to obtain a special permit to do that. As the internal structure of Pathé Club gradually formed during the first year of its existence and the rules of operation in the premises of its new headquarters were introduced, a gradual process of the club's emancipation took place, in which technically skilled personalities asserted themselves, forming the shape of the recently established club as its committee members.

Pathé Club as a Pioneer

‘In 1933 (sic!) at a fair in the Industrial Palace at the old exhibition grounds, I met a thirty-eight-year-old bearded gentleman and his younger friend, a chemist: they were the Architect Vincenc Beer and Čeněk Zahradníček. They both joined the club. Unlike us, they also copied the film, using the Viennese copy machine Herlango. At that time, we struggled with floating emulsion during inversion, we decided to abandon inversion and also got ourselves a Viennese copy machine.’^[9] This is how after almost forty years one of the five founders of Pathé Club, who signed the club statutes sent along with registration application to the Provincial Authority in Prague on October 8, 1932, remembered the time around its establishment. As for the time, the words of Robert Miloš Procházka need to be taken with a grain of salt – the situation he described took place a year earlier, and Vincenc Beer, born on January 19, 1893, certainly wasn’t 38 years old at the time. In contrast, Procházka’s description of the sequence of specific events enriched with interesting details seems more credible, after all, the signatures of the two mentioned gentlemen are also present on the statutes document. But the establishment of the association itself wasn’t that easy. The founding meeting of the future club was held already in June 1932, but for unspecified reasons, it didn’t achieve its goal. Another four months had passed before it reconvened on October 13 when the establishment of the club was finally confirmed.^[10] The correspondence communication of the club with the authorities was taken over by Ing. Gustav Vejšický (born 1881) perhaps because he himself was the ministerial union council and was by far the oldest of the founding members. The extent of respect for his person and the role he played during the creation of the club can be deduced from the fact that his membership card had the number one.^[11] However, there is no information about Vejšický’s practical film activities present in the period press, nor had he collaborated on any films. A similar situation applied to the last of the five signatories – Ing. Miloš Bergman, who studied business at the time Pathé Club was established and who became an employee of the National Bank in 1934.^[12]

The reasons and goals of the club’s establishment are summarised in two parts at the beginning of its statutes. The first includes a rather vague formulation about fostering and spreading amateur filmmaking which is discussed in detail in the following parts of the document. The second part focuses entirely on the club’s film archive which was supposed to collect visually and historically remarkable films both

from Pathé Club members and other filmmakers. The expansion of the archive was also ensured by the conditions of active membership as each member had to contribute with at least one film per year. The statutes were drafted in the early days of amateur filmmaking which would justify the provision that in the event of the club's dissolution, its assets, including the archive, would go to the Union of Czechoslovak Amateur Photographic Clubs in Prague. The reason for choosing an institution outside of film was not only its long existence and the resulting promise of stability, but also very frequent personal connections between amateur photography and film as evidenced for instance by the presence of renowned photographer Přemysl Koblíček in the Pathé Club management.

Fostering and spreading amateur filmmaking was supposed to be carried out through systematic education in the form of practical courses, theoretical lectures and self-education with the help of expert literature from the club's library. An important means of spreading awareness of amateur film were presentations for the public including popularising lectures and screenings of club films. The public screenings soon became an integral part of the promotion and in addition to Prague, were held in other cities throughout Bohemia and Moravia. Among the goals of the planned activities was also founding new branches of Pathé Club and establishing cooperation with other amateur entities abroad. With these entities, the club exchanged honorary memberships and films which offered a valuable comparison of foreign filmmaking just like the participation in international competitions of amateur films. The first foreign success of a Czech amateur filmmaker is often associated with the film *Sunny Youth* (Slunné mládí) which won the fourth place in a competition organised by a German publishing house in 1932.^[13] Its author Vincenc Beer was one of the key figures of amateur film in interwar Czechoslovakia. As the first chairman of Pathé Club, he demonstrated his organisation skills during the difficult period of search for a permanent seat which the Club eventually found in Smíchov, on Holečkova street. The leased space was adapted according to Beer's design with a functional layout of individual rooms and opened at the end of 1933. Beer passed on his extensive experience with photochemical processes gained at first while pursuing photography and later, from the mid-1920s, while working with small format film, to novice colleagues as part of the practical courses he led. He also played a significant role in bringing Czech filmmakers closer to international events, culminating with a worldwide

competition starting in 1931. The participating films submitted by amateur clubs and national associations competed individually in several categories and were also parts of national collections which were also awarded. Due to the efforts of Chairman Vincenc Beer supported by the Pathé Club management, chiefly by R. M. Procházka, Czechoslovak amateur film production was presented at the third edition of this competition held in December 1933 in Paris. Despite the call to participate regularly appearing on the pages *Pathé-revue*, many amateur filmmakers didn't show interest in the international confrontation. In the end, only two titles were sent to Paris, both with natural themes – Beer's film *Prague from Winter to Spring* (Praha ze zimy do jara) and *River* (Řeka) by the Maxa brothers. Both 9.5 mm films won second places in various categories and in the competition of national collections they shared the third place with USA behind the second France and the victorious Japan. In the following years, Pathé Club functioned as a representative of the Czechoslovak amateur scene in communication with foreign countries. Under its leadership, national showcases were organised, the results of which served as a basis for the selection of films for the international competition. At its two following editions, held in Barcelona (1934) and Berlin (1936), Czech amateur films were also represented, mainly thanks to duo Vladimír Šmejkal – Čeněk Zahradníček. The nominations of the avant-garde film – *The Atom of Eternity* (Atom věčnosti), *Hands on Tuesday* (Ruce v úterý) and *A Soldier's Story* (Příběh vojáka) – meant a symbolic step outside of the borders of Pathé Club and the 9.5 mm format, as only Zahradníček was a member of the club and all successful titles were shot on 16 mm film. Another case of deviation from the Club's coordinates were the activities of Karel Kresl who, in addition to water sports films with the logo of the parent association at the beginning, as a part of trio Kresl-Vlk-Zelený filmed socially critical documentary for the Film-foto group belonging to the cultural-educational organisation Left Front, see for instance *Through Prague in Spring 1934* (Napříč Prahou na jaře 1934). Both very successful and original attempts at creative self-realisation signalled that some amateur filmmakers considered the rules of the club too restrictive – the most striking example was the connection with the Franch company brand and the ignoring of other small formats including the newly introduced 8 mm film.

Membership Crisis

At the beginning of 1935, the ongoing tension resulted in a very curious situation. On 14th March, half of the committee newly elected in the middle of February resigned and a numerous group of members led by prominent figures (Zdeněk Plesinger, Stanislav Olmer, Čestmír Krystlík and others) followed them.^[14] The dissatisfied former members formed a new Prague club named Czech Film Amateur Club (Český klub kinoamatérů, hereinafter ČKK). From the very beginning, ČKK was a strong competitor to Pathé Club, drawing on the experience from its predecessor during various activities. A big advantage was the club's magazine *Czechoslovak Film Amateur* (Československý kinoamatér) which became an important means of communication with fellow filmmakers. As *Pathé-revue* ceased to exist at the end of 1935, its former authors, who stayed in Pathé Club, moved to a new magazine titled *Amateur Film* (Amatérská kinematografie) which the publisher called 'a magazine for all amateur filmmakers.' It's true that the relations between Pathé Club and ČKK were mostly respectful but cold, readers who were familiar with the situation could decipher the sting of sarcasm hidden behind factual politeness in occasional articles. It was nevertheless clear that Pathé Club had lost its exceptional position among Czechoslovak amateur filmmakers. One of the things that stood out among the activities of other clubs in the late 1930s were regular screenings of foreign films organised mainly by R. M. Procházka thanks to his friendly contacts with prominent foreign filmmakers and officials – he had for instance a very good personal and professional relationship with filmmaker and editor of French magazine *Ciné amateur* Pierre Boyer.

With regards to the described crisis, it seems that the then management of Pathé Club reacted to the exodus of its members in 1935 rather clumsily and with a great delay. The first visible changes were made at the beginning of 1937 and included renaming of the association to the First Club of Film Amateurs Prague (První klub kinoamatérů Praha) and changes in the statutes allowing the members to work with all narrow formats. This step needs to be seen in a broader context of the events of the time both in Czechoslovak and foreign amateur filmmaking. In May 1937, the Union of Film Amateur Clubs in Czechoslovakia (Svaz klubů kinoamaterů v ČSR) was founded. Despite personal antipathies, representatives of all local associations agreed to join and elected Vincenc Beer as the first chairman of this new unifying representative organisation. This transferred part of Beer's and Procházka's international activities

from the club level to the association level. The association also found a new partner, international institution UNICA (Union International du Cinéma d'Amateur), uniting national associations of amateur filmmakers from all over the world.

Before this new cooperation could fully develop, contacts between amateurs were severed by the Second World War. Even in the difficult conditions of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Czech amateurs tried to carry on with their association activities – the last national competition organised by it took place in 1943. As archival documents indicate, the First Club of Film Amateurs Prague got into a tight spot and in 1941 was forced to move to the Unitatia Palace in Karlova street. In the same year, its activities officially ceased^[15] although many members remained active after the war.

Although Pathé Club, or rather the First Club of Film Amateurs Prague existed for almost 10 years, if we consider the first meetings of film enthusiasts in 1931 as its beginnings, it made a significant contribution to the history of Czechoslovak / Czech amateur filmmaking. Thanks to the club, interwar Czechoslovakia became a part of the international amateur film movement developing rapidly at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s. Thanks to the films made by (not only) Pathé Club, we have the opportunity to get to know amateur filmmakers through their work created during their free time spent together. Whatever they themselves thought about their filmmaking years later: 'I don't see any special value in the films I have at home. But in my life, I have written many articles about film and given many lectures. From today's perspective, however, it wasn't work but rather play. I played to make a nice life for myself. And if I nevertheless contributed to the reader or listener having a pleasant feeling for a while, excellent. But perhaps I would have aroused this feeling in them even if I had written or lectured about something else.'^[16]

Notes:

^[1] John Belton, The Origins of 35mm Film as a Standard. *SMPTE Journal* 99, August 1990, s. 657.

^[2] It should be mentioned that Pathé Frères already attempted to take over private space with its system Pathé Kok from 1912 based on 28 mm film. The difficulty of the

operation, the projector's weight and low projection screen light intensity mean that 10 years later, Pathé Kok was replaced by a different 'home cinema' system.

[3] OLSO, Amatéri, ozvete se!. *Pathé-revue* 2, 1933, no. 1, p. 2.

[4] Gilles Ollivier, Histoire des images, histoire des sociétés: l'exemple du cinéma d'amateur. 1895, *revue d'histoire du cinéma*, 1994, no. 17, pp. 121–122.

[5] Miloš Henkrich, *Jindřich Suchánek. The First Czechoslovak Production of Equipment for Amateur Filmmaking in Brno*, Bachelor's thesis, Faculty of Arts of the Masaryk University, Brno 2013, p. 37, 70.

[6] Statutes of the Paté Club in Prague. The City of Prague Archive, Federal Cadastre, sign. XIV/1137, k. 647.

[7] ČAKOV, Pathé klub Praha „ve svém“. *Pathé-revue* 2, 1933, no. 6, p. 81.

[8] This cautious approach to Pathé Club acquired another dimension in the post-war Communist era by emphasising the self-interested motives of a private entrepreneur helping to establish it.

Miroslav Matěna, Jak začínal amatérský film u nás. *Filmovým objektivem* 8, 1968, no. 10, pp. 182–184.

[9] -ak, Včera a dnes. Vzpomíná Miroslav (sic!) Procházka. *Amatérský film* 3, 1971, no. 10, p. 208.

[10] Život v klubech. Zakončení ustavující valné hromady pražského Pathé klubu. *Pathé-revue* 1, 1932, no. 1, p. 14.

[11] List of Members. Pathé klub Praha 1935. National Technical Museum, fund Arch. Vincenc Beer

[12] Miloš Bergmann. Certificate of good conduct issued by the Police Headquarters in Prague on February 9, 1934. National Archive, Police Directorate Prague II – general record office, sign. B 1444/6, k. 4675.

[13] Miroslav Matěna, Jak začínal amatérský film u nás. *Filmovým objektivem* 8, 1968, no. 11, p. 204. – In Czechoslovakia, *Sunny Youth* was screened as *Children in Film*

(Děti ve filmu).

[14] Letter of Pathé Club Prague to the Police Directorate in Prague from March 18, 1935. City of Prague Archive, Federal Cadastre, sign. XIV/1137, k. 647.

[15] Record from July 18, 1951. Central National Committee of the City of Prague. Department of Internal Affairs and Security. City of Prague Archive. Federal Cadastre, sign. XIV/1137, k. 647. [16] – ak, Včera a dnes. Vzpomíná Miroslav (sic!) Procházka. *Amatérský film* 3, 1971, no. 10, p. 209.