

Portrait of the Company Photographer

[TOBI TONTIC]

I hear the screeching brakes from my living room couch, soon followed by the all too predictable thunk of a heavy package dropped on the front porch. Inside is another set of vintage lenses of many makes and models, each attachable to a different type of outmoded implement. For the last ten years, packages like these have appeared at my home as my father rekindled his lost love for photography—specifically, the artfully un-editable and indelibly expensive form of film photography. Soon there will be test shoots and lens repairs, an inevitable photo trip, and the attendant transformation of our downstairs bathroom into a developer's laboratory.

You might ask "To what do we owe this rapid change in my father's character?" from a simple salaryman to an avid amateur artist. However, it is not so much a what as a when—his early years growing up in a little-known corner of Europe—and the man he shared his time with, who together bring this piece of my father to me. Milorad Jojic, perhaps the greatest photographer Bosnia ever knew and internationally recognized for his eye for detail. A family man of few friends, but a wide-ranging traveler, who sought success in all he did. My great grandfather, the one they called "Brko." To find him, we must travel back some 50 years or so to the quiet and orderly city of Sarajevo, situated comfortably between Italy and Hungary. A nice enough place, if you were willing to look past the occasional cloud of smog, the pigeons underfoot, and the communist dictatorship.

Yugoslavia was a nation deliberately assembled, comprised of several cultures and religions not famous for their neighborly hospitality. Their union was not meant to be and likely never would come about if the right pressures were not applied. But the consecutive occurrence of two worldwide conflicts has a way of making nations rethink their place in the world, and the 'Slavs decided it was time to present a united front. Adopting a modified version of Lenin's principles, the

six nations of Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro, and Macedonia were unified by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and held together by the charisma of Josip Broz Tito.¹

From its very start, Yugoslavia was a nation of two goals: to redistribute the resources of the six states to elevate the whole, and to maintain social cohesion in the process. The first objective was accomplished through the delegation of tasks. Northern Serbia turned into farmland, the Croatian coastline drew in tourists, and Montenegro took charge of transportation. Historical researchers working for Planning Perspectives wrote that, all told, “[O]ne-fifth of the GDP was on average spent on investment. The structure of investments in different sectors ... [reflecting] the goal of equilibrating the ‘productive forces’ of unevenly developed regions...”² Nowhere was this more obvious than in the industrial and housing sector; the one type of development which was hugely popular across all regions. Josip Broz Tito transformed once-rural areas into organized blocks of shiny new apartments, each one powered and plumbed by newly developed infrastructure from companies such as ENERGOINVEST.³

In one of these boxy buildings, a model citizen of the new republic, and employee of the aforementioned company, rides down an elevator that is hardly more than a metal box on a rope, but which seems to him an improvement over taking the stairs. Once outside, he readies his trusty Hasselblad, placing its lens cap in the pocket of his freshly ironed suit jacket. He peers through the viewfinder, testing the focus as he passes the regular sights. A couple of pigeons scatter as a cyclist passes. A *ćevapčići* vendor unlocks his restaurant, coming in early to bake the pita fresh. And, above his head, half a dozen old ladies hang their laundry to dry from private balconies.

Satisfied that everything is in working order, the photographer sets his mind to the day’s travels. Today, his work involves inspecting the thermal power plant being set up in a low-lying valley. Documenting the equipment there could require athletic maneuvering and possibly even rock-climbing equipment. Venturing down into the depths may not be the safest task, but the work of a photographer is rarely easy. In those days, the perception of the profession was strangely two-sided. Sometimes the man behind the camera was seen as the astute and technical observer, almost scientific in his precision. At others, he was a “...daredevil adventurer, a hunter of images,” as Stephen Bottomore put it, in the *Journal of Film History*.⁴ Mr. Jojic certainly preferred the former but sometimes his duties required him to play the latter—a small price to pay to help reshape his country.

1 Tijana Dabović, “Pursuit of Integration in the Former Yugoslavia’s Planning,” *Planning Perspectives*, vol. 34, no. 2, (2019) pp. 217-18. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/02665433.2017.1393628.

2 Dabović, “Pursuit of Integration in the Former Yugoslavia’s Planning,” 218.

3 Dabović, “Pursuit of Integration in the Former Yugoslavia’s Planning,” 219

4 Stephen Bottomore, “Introduction: Behind the Camera,” *Film History*, vol. 24, no. 3, (2012), pp. 256. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/filmhistory.24.3.255.

But these were not the dangers he found most concerning. Upon his return, this film would need developing, a delicate process that involved numerous health and safety risks, such as “inflammation and burning of the eyes, respiratory conditions, nasal discharge, dermatitis, ... asthma...” and more, according to Lindgreen, in the *PSA Journal*.⁵ Luckily, his position as the manager of a development lab granted him all the ventilation and equipment necessary to remain relatively safe from the fumes. However, he would still need to perform the development very carefully to avoid ruining his hard work. He had, of course, successfully developed dozens of photoshoots – so many, the other employees called him “Meister,” a master of the craft—but that never quieted the voice in the back of his mind that kept him on point. Little did this industrious artist suspect that within his lifetime it would be much more than a roll of film on the line. It would take a few more decades to arrive, but disaster was looming, and it would put an end to all their high-minded efforts in national enrichment.

Josip Broz Tito died in 1981. He took his leave at an inopportune time, as Yugoslavia was in an economic downturn due to decades of attempts to mix capitalist and communist strategies. The country was supposed to abide by a core plan put forth by the best minds of the central government, but when individual union members disagreed with the plans their deviations were largely tolerated. This laissez-faire approach inevitably led to uneven development, favoring places like Serbia and Croatia, who had been powerful before the unification, which in turn helped reignite old resentments.⁶

All this, along with numerous building projects contracted by private citizens, most of which weren’t even up to code. According to a survey conducted in the 1970s, “73 cities showed that illegal housing accounted for one-half of the total private construction.”⁷ I confess to not fully understanding the system myself, only as testament to its contradictory nature. One can only guess what it must’ve been like trying to navigate this development dogpile as a company like ENERGOINVEST, its workers taking long hours attempting to keep things afloat, nervously waiting to see if the government’s latest course correction would be the one to topple the business. In these last years, their former visions of a futuristic homeland must have seemed very far away.

With their leader gone and the government proving incapable of resolving rising inequalities, or even presenting a coherent strategy, the strong national identities of the regions begin to reassert themselves, their previous constraint pushing them forward, like an uncompressed spring. By the early 1990s, violence broke out across the country as the ethnic groups retreated within themselves and chased away their former allies.

5 Lindgren, “Playing it safe in the darkroom.” *PSA Journal*, vol. 57, no. 12, (1991), 22. Gale Academic OneFile, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A11810635/AONE?u=crys82357&sid=AONE&xid=b2bb8ec1.

6 Dabović, “Pursuit of Integration in the Former Yugoslavia’s Planning,” 222, 227, 234.

7 Dabović, “Pursuit of Integration in the Former Yugoslavia’s Planning,” 226-227

So far, this seems like a straightforward start to a Civil War, but historians present a more complex view, pointing out that “Such domestic competing nationalisms were not unique to Yugoslavia. The dissolution of Yugoslavia had much more to do with the political intrusions of the Western powers...”⁸ To be specific, it was America and Germany who were too hasty in recognizing the secessionists as independent entities, far more so than they would have been in, say, Asia. These actions are especially frustrating because the conflict was none of their concern, with diplomats becoming involved only by “situational factors, personal idiosyncrasies, inexperience, and misperceived domestic pressures.”⁹ There is a genuine possibility the chaos and bloodshed that erupted in the wake of these visits could have been avoided, or at least greatly reduced if only the diplomats had kept cooler heads.

But the violence did come. Friendships were broken by centuries-old feuds, religious minorities were driven away or forced into hiding, and those who could either fled or hunkered down. And so, it came to pass, in an apartment, sitting under a mountain’s shadow, an old man was lost in thought. Despite the occasional gunfire or distant booming of an explosive, his family was safe in their home, outside the firing range of those who would besiege them. This was fortunate, at least. The thought of anything happening to them was almost too much.

Everything seemed beyond him now. Politics had reduced his perfectionism to nothing, and the years sat heavily on his back. He looked upon his cabinet of hard-earned awards and felt some solace that this part of his work had ended well. He finally put down the camera after his stroke in 1980, not out of medical necessity, but simply because he felt that he had collected enough of the world in his viewfinder. It was a job completed and a job well done.

Those days, thinking of cameras always brought thoughts of his grandson. Before he left for America, Stevan insisted he know the tricks of The Meister’s trade and Brko had no choice but to oblige, rolling the film one final time to show him how it was done. As another boom sounded in the distance, a faint smile curved the old man’s mustache. To think of the young man, barely 18 and already making his own life on another continent, safe and away from all these troubles. Milorad had every confidence in him and silently wished him well, idly wondering what sort of pictures he was taking.

8 Raju Thomas, “Self-Determination and International Recognition Policy: AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION OF WHY YUGOSLAVIA DISINTEGRATED.” *World Affairs*, vol. 160, no. 1, (1997), 17. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20672506.

9 Raju Thomas, “Self-Determination and International Recognition Policy,” 18.