

HERSTORY

**Collection of historical female
figures in Italy, Serbia,
Denmark, Czechia and Bosnia
and Herzegovina**



HERstory



**Co-funded by
the European Union**



“Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.”



Introduction



Beyond Borders from Italy, together with Club for Youth Empowerment 018 from Serbia, Dream Colours from Czech Republic, Obojena Klapa from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Danish Youth Team from Denmark implements the project “HERstory” by utilizing creative methods and art, specifically murals in raising awareness and visibility of significant female figures thus promoting importance of gender equality in partner countries.

Overall aim: To increase visibility of women through art.

Specific objectives:

- 1) To develop tools for promotion of historical female figures coming from participating countries in the form of collection;
- 2) To develop a virtual platform for promotion of female figures coming from participating countries;
- 3) To raise the awareness about important female figures coming from 5 countries through artistic expression – murals;
- 4) To network mural artists on the European level. This project offers concrete tools and methods to contribute to raised awareness and bigger visibility of women who shaped societies which we know today.

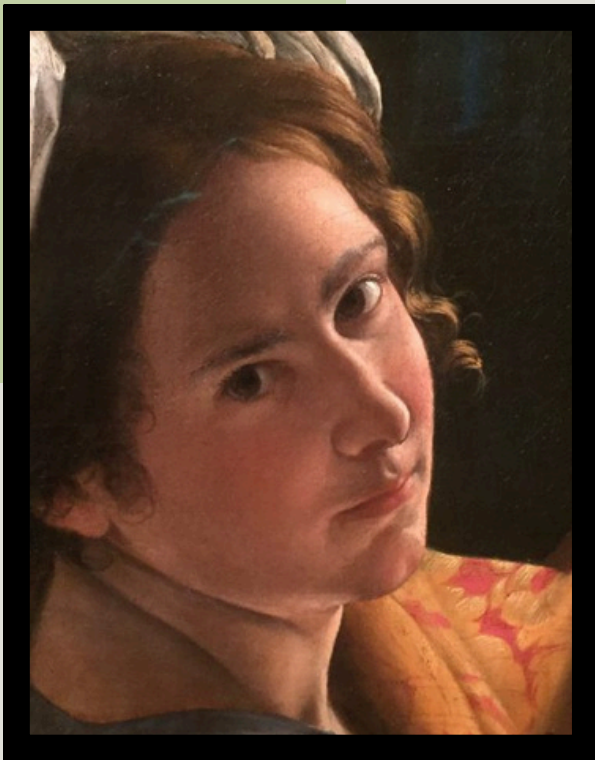
Project is implemented in Italy, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czech Republic and Denmark in the period 01.11.2024 to 31.10.2026 and is co-financed by the EU.

We proudly present HERstory, a collection of inspiring life stories of women from Italy, Serbia, Czechia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Denmark. These remarkable yet often overlooked heroines broke boundaries and contributed significantly to their societies in fields such as education, medicine, architecture, music, and activism. Through this collection, we aim to shine a light on their legacies and ensure their names live on in our collective memory.



Italy





ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652) is a towering figure in the history of art, particularly renowned for her contributions to the Baroque era. Her life story is one of triumph over adversity, as she navigated the challenges of being a female artist in a male-dominated field, ultimately leaving an indelible mark on the art world. Artemisia Gentileschi was born on July 8, 1593, in Rome, the eldest child of Prudenzia Montoni and Orazio Gentileschi, a celebrated painter who was a follower of Caravaggio.

Artemisia's artistic inclinations were evident from a young age, and her father, recognizing her talent, took her under his wing. Orazio Gentileschi was deeply influenced by Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro and naturalism, techniques that he passed on to his daughter. This early training laid the groundwork for Artemisia's distinctive style, which would later set her apart in the artistic community. Artemisia's mother, Prudenzia Montoni, passed away when Artemisia was just 12 years old. This loss profoundly affected Artemisia, but it also strengthened her resolve to pursue her artistic passions. By the age of 15, she had already created a significant work, *Susanna and the Elders* (1610), which demonstrated her precocious talent and her ability to infuse her paintings with psychological depth and narrative tension. This early work already hinted at the themes of female strength and resilience that would become hallmarks of her oeuvre.

In 1611, Artemisia's life took a dark turn when she was raped by Agostino Tassi, a painter who was collaborating with her father. The subsequent trial in 1612 was a brutal affair, during which Artemisia was subjected to invasive gynecological examinations and torture using thumb screws to verify her testimony. Despite the trauma, Artemisia's steadfastness during the trial led to Tassi's conviction, although his sentence was never carried out. This experience had a profound impact on Artemisia's life and art, infusing her work with a visceral intensity and a focus on themes of justice, retribution, and female empowerment.

Paintings like *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1612–1613) exemplify this shift in Artemisia's artistic focus. The work depicts the biblical heroine Judith decapitating the Assyrian general Holofernes, a powerful and graphic portrayal of female agency and vengeance. The painting's emotional intensity and technical brilliance established Artemisia as a formidable artist in her own right, capable of tackling complex and provocative subjects with unparalleled skill. Following the trial, Artemisia married Pietro Antonio di Vincenzo Stiattesi, a Florentine artist, and moved to Florence in 1614. This relocation marked a turning point in her career, as she became the first woman admitted to the prestigious "Accademia delle Arti del Disegno".



ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI

This achievement granted her access to important commissions and the opportunity to cultivate relationships with influential patrons, including Cosimo II de' Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany.

Under the patronage of the Medici court, Artemisia produced some of her most celebrated works, including *Judith and Her Maidservant* (1625).

This painting, which depicts Judith and her maidservant fleeing with the head of Holofernes, showcases Artemisia's mastery of composition and her ability to convey narrative drama through the interplay of light and shadow. Her Florentine period was marked by prolific output and growing recognition, despite the personal challenges she faced, including marital strife and financial struggles.

Artemisia's time in Florence also saw her forge intellectual alliances with prominent figures of the day, including Galileo Galilei. Their correspondence reveals a shared interest in optics and observational precision, which may have influenced Artemisia's meticulous attention to anatomical detail and spatial composition in her paintings. This intellectual exchange underscores Artemisia's commitment to artistic innovation and her desire to push the boundaries of her craft.

By 1630, Artemisia had settled in Naples, a vibrant artistic hub that offered her new opportunities for growth and recognition. Her workshop in Naples attracted commissions from across Europe, including *The Birth of St. John the Baptist* (1635), which was created for King Philip IV of Spain. Artemisia's ability to secure such prestigious commissions is a testament to her artistic prowess and her strategic navigation of the patronage system.

In 1638, Artemisia joined her father in London at the court of Charles I, where she contributed to the ceiling paintings in the Queen's House in Greenwich. Her work in London further solidified her reputation as a leading Baroque painter, and she continued to produce works of exceptional quality and emotional depth. Her final decades in Naples were marked by a continued exploration of the themes that had defined her career, including female strength, resilience, and agency.

Artemisia Gentileschi died around 1652, leaving behind a legacy that would languish in obscurity for centuries before being rediscovered and celebrated in the 20th century. For much of art history, Artemisia's narrative was reduced to her victimhood, with her artistic achievements receiving less attention.



ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI

Today, Artemisia's works are celebrated for their enduring relevance and their ability to inspire contemporary discourse on gender, power, and artistic innovation. Her life and work embody a radical intersection of personal resilience and artistic brilliance, redefining Baroque aesthetics and laying the groundwork for feminist critiques of the canon. As her oeuvre continues to inspire exhibitions and scholarly debate, Artemisia's legacy serves as a testament to the transformative power of art in challenging societal norms.

Future research may further unravel the nuances of Artemisia's collaborations and the global reach of her influence, ensuring her place in the pantheon of art history's most revolutionary figures. Her ability to transmute trauma into transcendent art not only redefined Baroque aesthetics but also paved the way for future generations of artists to explore themes of gender, power, and resilience in their own work. Artemisia Gentileschi's enduring legacy is a testament to the power of art to challenge, inspire, and transform our understanding of the world.

Fun / Interesting Facts:

1) She was initiated into painting by her father - Artemisia was born in Rome on July 8, 1593 to the painter Orazio Gentileschi and his wife Prudenzia. After her mother died when she was 12, Artemisia began to accompany her father to his studio, and brushes, canvases and colors became her greatest passion. The chances of a career in art for a 17th-century woman were almost non-existent, especially if - like Artemisia - they did not come from an aristocratic family. The obvious difficulties, however, did not discourage her or Orazio, who began teaching her the mixture of pigments, the making of brushes, the application of color. Over the years, Artemisia refined her technique by copying the lithographs of the great artists of that time. Caravaggio was certainly her most important point of reference: his style greatly influenced the work of her father (whom he knew personally) and consequently hers. Although Orazio was particularly enlightened and open-minded, he never allowed Artemisia to refine her art outside the small studio walls. Difficulties and restrictions aside, she gradually began to collaborate with her father by putting her hand in his works, until she made "Susanna and the Elders", her first canvas, at only 17 years old.



ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI

2) She won the case against her rapist, Agostino Tassi - Despite being prevented from leaving home, Artemisia had the opportunity to meet renowned painters of the time thanks to visits from her father's friends. A regular visitor to the family studio was Agostino Tassi, a well known landscape painter with a checkered reputation. One day, Tassi took advantage of the absence of his friend and raped Artemisia, after many failed attempts to seduce her.

She depicted powerful and independent heroines - a revolutionary approach at a time when even the strongest female figures in the Bible were represented in a key of weakness or submission. A quick comparison between Caravaggio's Judith and Holofernes and Gentileschi's is enough to understand this: Caravaggio's Judith has an intimidated look, frightened by the sight of the blood, as if the woman was not slaughtering Holofernes by her will but saw her hand do it. The Judith of Artemisia, on the other hand, is an alter-ego of the painter, and perpetrates the murder against Holofernes / Tassi in a conscious way: her eyes do not run away, she is strong, determined and aware of her act. Of the 60 paintings that are attributed to her with certainty, 40 represent female figures: from Mary Magdalene to St. Catherine, from Esther to Judith. Artemisia Gentileschi has not only transfigured the pain of rape: she has also given women a voice and claimed their position in history and art.

5) Her works were only rediscovered in the 20th century - Artemisia shares the fate of many other female artists. Like Frida Kahlo, Margaret Keane or Joan Mitchell, her work took a long time to be really appreciated. In her case we are not talking about years or decades, but about centuries: her talent was totally forgotten in the 18th and 19th centuries, only to be fully rediscovered in the 20th century. It was thanks to a 1916 article by the art historian Roberto Longhi that Artemisia's work finally found a place in the history of art: the piece generated a growing interest in the painter, which culminated with a series of exhibitions at the level international in the '70s-80s. Today, Gentileschi's artworks often sell for far above their estimates, such as Lucretia, which sold in November 2019 for \$6.1 million, a record for the artist, and six times its high estimate.



BEBE VIO

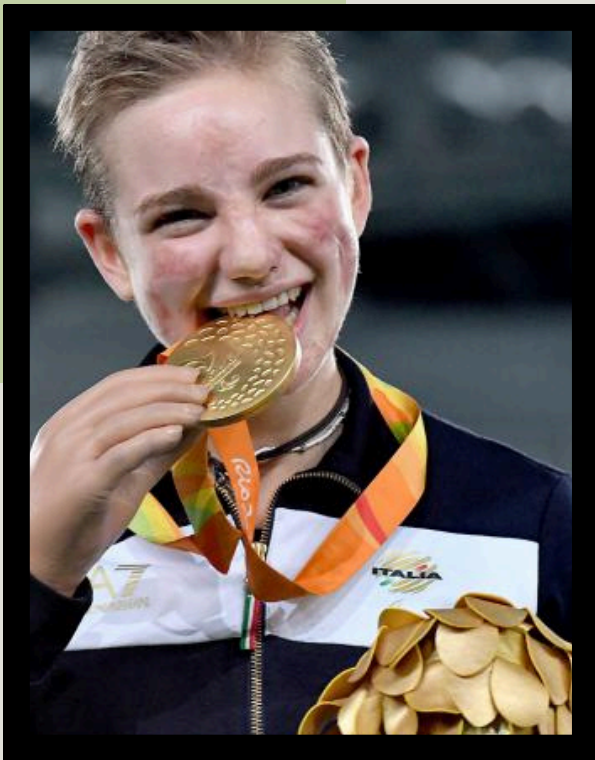
Beatrice “Bebe” Vio’s story is an athletic triumph as well as a fundamental shift in how disability, innovation, and resilience intersect in the 21st century. She has transformed Paralympic sport, influenced the design of prosthetic technology, and reshaped cultural narratives surrounding disability. From surviving a life-threatening illness to becoming a champion fencer, Bebe’s journey is a testament to the power of determination, community support, and technological progress.

But beyond her personal victories, her greatest impact may lie in how she has redefined what it means to be an athlete with a disability—shifting the conversation from limitation to opportunity and from sympathy to respect.

Born in Venice in 1997, Bebe grew up in a family that valued problem-solving and civic responsibility. Her father, Ruggero, was an engineer specializing in naval architecture, while her mother, Teresa, worked in social services. This background—rooted in both technical ingenuity and a commitment to helping others—would later prove instrumental in shaping Bebe’s approach to overcoming the greatest challenge of her life. As a child, she was energetic and fearless, passionate about sports, particularly fencing, which she took up at the age of five.

At age 11, everything changed. A sudden case of meningococcal sepsis led to a devastating medical crisis, requiring the amputation of all four limbs to save her life. The weeks and months that followed were marked by unimaginable pain and adjustment, but rather than being defined by what she had lost, Bebe focused on what was still possible. From the beginning, she expressed a single, unwavering goal: she wanted to return to fencing. That ambition would drive her own recovery and a wave of technological innovation and institutional change. Bebe’s return to fencing was not an individual effort but a collaboration between doctors, engineers, and designers who worked together to develop a new kind of prosthetic that would allow her to compete. Unlike traditional prosthetic limbs designed for basic mobility, Bebe’s fencing arms had to be highly specialized, capable of fine motor control and rapid adjustments. Over 18 months, a team including the INAIL Prosthetic Center and robotics firm COMAU developed a titanium forearm prosthesis featuring:

- Dynamic tension control, allowing her to adjust grip strength from 5N to 20N using micro-contractions in her shoulder muscles.
- Modular attachment points, enabling quick weapon changes between foil, épée, and sabre.
- Biofeedback sensors, providing real-time haptic feedback on blade position and angle.



BEBE VIO

This collaboration wasn't just about getting Bebe back on the piste—it set new standards for adaptive sports prosthetics. The innovations developed for her were later studied by institutions such as MIT's Biomechatronics Lab, influencing broader applications in prosthetic design.

Bebe's success on the fencing strip quickly turned her into a public figure, but she wasn't interested in personal glory.

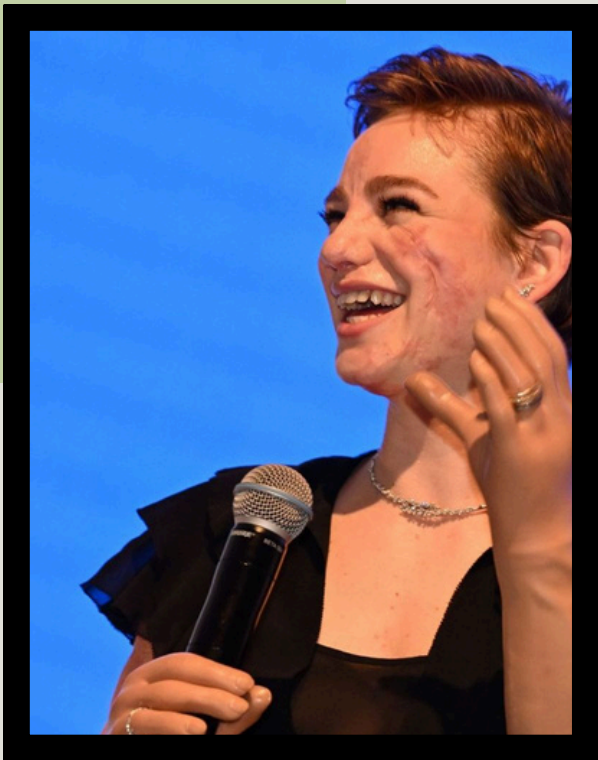
She wanted to change the system so that other young athletes with disabilities could have the same opportunities. In 2009, she and her family founded Art4sport Onlus, an organization dedicated to supporting children with disabilities through sports. The nonprofit works on three primary fronts:

1. Affordable prosthetic development – Collaborating with European universities to produce high-performance prosthetics at a fraction of the usual cost. A typical myoelectric limb can cost upwards of €50,000, but Art4sport has developed models priced under €1,500, making them accessible to a far greater number of young athletes.
2. Talent identification – Using innovative scouting methods, including reaction-time assessments through Nintendo Switch-based games and proprioceptive testing, to find promising young competitors.
3. Cross-sport integration – Pioneering mixed-ability tournaments where athletes with and without disabilities compete together, using motion-capture scoring technology to level the playing field. This model was showcased at the 2023 SportAccord Convention in Milan and is being considered for broader adoption in international fencing competitions.

One of Bebe's most profound impacts has been in changing the way people talk about disability. Through her TEDx talks and media appearances, she has challenged ableist language and reframed narratives around adaptive sports. In a 2022 speech at the European Parliament, she criticized the phrase "overcoming disability," arguing that it implies an inherent deficiency:

"My chair isn't a limitation—it's my Formula 1 cockpit. When you say 'despite the wheelchair,' you reduce my sport to tragedy. Say 'with' the chair, and suddenly we're talking about engineering, strategy, and skill."

Her advocacy contributed to UNESCO's Global Disability Discourse Guidelines, released in 2024, which now mandate the use of "with disability" phrasing in all official communications. The numbers speak for themselves. Since Bebe emerged as an international star, participation in wheelchair fencing has skyrocketed:



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Metric	2010 (Pre-Vio)	2024 (Post-Vio)
Italian Wheelchair Fencers	87	1,124
Female Participation	12%	43%
Youth Registration (U18)	9	577
International Medal Count	2 (Bronze)	29 (14 Gold)

Her influence has also led to changes in competition rules, including:

- Equipment standards – The International Paralympic Committee now requires blades to have an oscillation of less than 0.5° during a lunge, ensuring safety and consistency.
- Classification revisions – Pre-bout neuroprosthetic calibration checks were introduced to prevent unfair advantages based on varying levels of prosthetic responsiveness.
- Broadcast innovations – The introduction of 360° camera rigs for Paralympic fencing finals, enhancing the visibility of wheelchair maneuvering techniques.



BEBE VIO

Bebe's impact extends far beyond athletics. She has influenced industries ranging from fashion to gaming, with Ubisoft incorporating an adaptive-tech "Operator Vio" character into *Rainbow Six Siege*, and Moncler integrating her prosthetic designs into avant-garde winter wear. In the culinary world, Michelin-starred chef Massimo Bottura even designed a dish inspired by adaptive utensil prototypes developed through her advocacy.

On the legislative front, Italian Law 178/2022, also known as Bebe's Law, mandates that all Olympic-standard gyms in Italy must include wheelchair fencing facilities. The EU Directive 2025/CE now requires that 5% of sports R&D funding be allocated to adaptive technology, and UNICEF has incorporated her playground design concepts into its Accessible Play Initiative, benefiting children in 37 countries. Bebe is not done innovating. In collaboration with ETH Zürich, she is helping to develop neuroprosthetic learning algorithms that:

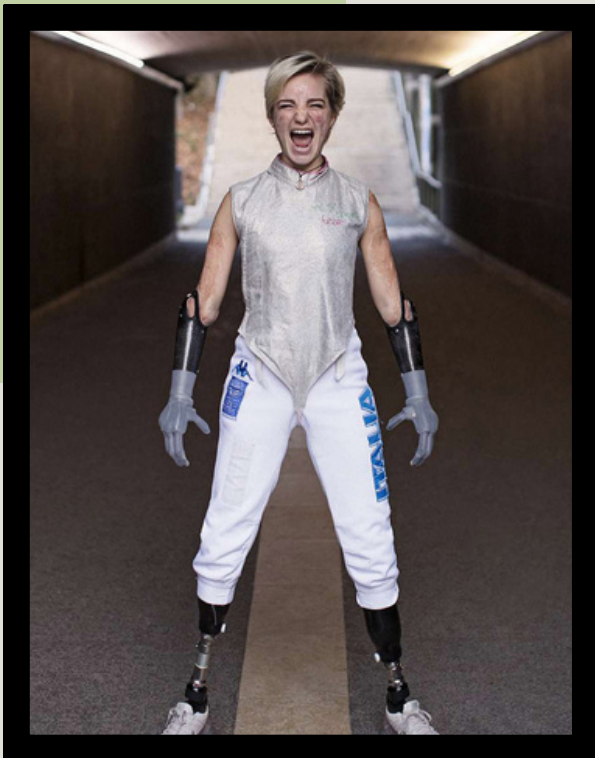
1. Analyze an opponent's historical bout data pre-match.
2. Adjust grip responsiveness based on real-time movement analysis.
3. Use reinforcement learning to modify fencing strategies mid-bout.

Her impact extends into psychology as well. The Vio Methodology, detailed in *The Lancet Psychiatry* (2023), offers a structured approach to post-amputation trauma recovery, emphasizing humor, goal-setting, and kinesthetic visualization. Clinical trials suggest it accelerates psychological recovery by 41% compared to traditional CBT models.

At this point of her story, we can state that Bebe Vio is more than a champion fencer—she is an architect of systemic change. Through technological advancements, policy advocacy, and cultural transformation, she has built a world where disability is not a barrier but a competitive advantage. Perhaps her most profound legacy is that future generations of athletes will no longer see her story as exceptional, but as the new standard for what is possible.

Fun facts:

1) Born Beatrice Maria Adelaide Marzia Vio Grandis, she earned the moniker "Bebe" as a toddler struggling to pronounce her full first name—a linguistic shortcut that became her global identity. Friends and family still use "Beatrice" during formal occasions, but she embraces the nickname as a symbol of approachability: "Bebe sounds like a friend you'd grab gelato with, not some untouchable champion".



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2) Those who've shared a conversation with Bebe note her penchant for Gen-Z vernacular, peppering sentences with phrases like: "Che figata!" ("That's so cool!"), "Sto sbattendo!" ("I'm killing it!"), "Mega-strafigo!" ("Super awesome!")

3) During a 2016 Tokyo press conference, she disarmed journalists by critiquing a translator's formal rendition of her speech: "Nah, dude, I totally said 'This sucks' first!"—prompting laughter and viral memeification.

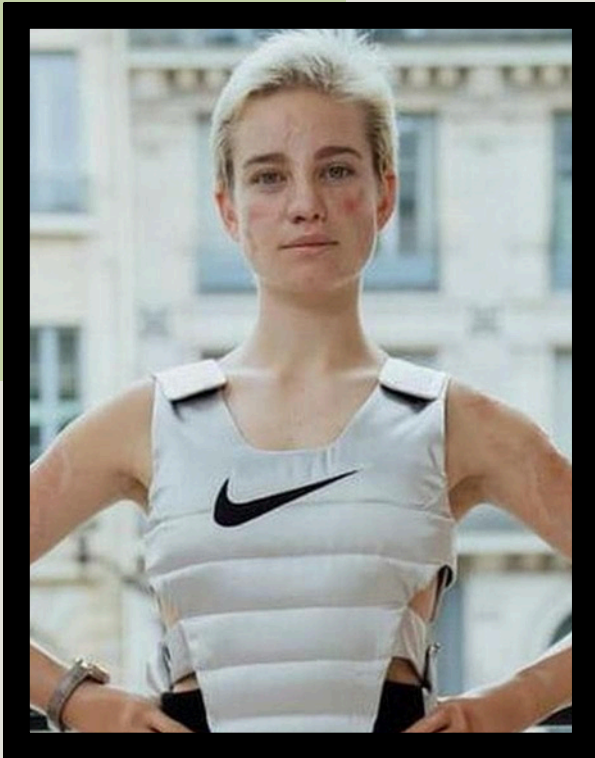
4) Despite her athletic commitments, Bebe maintains active involvement with Scouts d'Europa, organizing wilderness expeditions for disabled youth. Her 2022 "No Trails Off Limits" initiative equipped Italian scout bases with adaptive climbing walls and terrain-readable GPS devices. Participants recount her leading nighttime orienteering sessions using headlamp-equipped prosthetics.

5) A self-professed pasta fanatic, Bebe credits her sister's carbonara as her pre-competition ritual meal. During the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics, she smuggled guanciale past customs, later hosting an impromptu cooking demo for teammates using a specialized prosthetic spatula. "Gold medals are great, but perfect pecorino texture? That's immortality", she quipped to reporters.

6) Early in her career, Bebe unsettled airport security by labeling her equipment case "Dead Bodies"—a dark-humored nod to her detached limbs. She later collaborated with Disney+ on a 2023 mockumentary "The Prosthetic Heist", depicting her sneaking prototype arms into fashion shows.

7) Hidden beneath her competition sleeve lies a tattoo reading "Se sembra impossibile, allora si può fare" ("If it seems impossible, then it can be done")—her mantra inked during a 2015 team dare. The phrase later inspired a limited-edition Dior lipstick line bearing the slogan, with proceeds funding art4sport.

8) As co-host of Italy's 2022 Eurovision broadcast, Bebe opened the show with a fencing duel against pop star Mahmood, their foils sparking pyrotechnic effects. Behind the scenes, she insisted on performing without a stylist: "If I'm sweaty under the lights, that's realness".



BEBE VIO

9) Bebe's 2024 Met Gala appearance broke protocol when she arrived wearing a Moncler gown with detachable sleeves, revealing her prosthetics mid-event. "Fashion shouldn't just adapt to bodies—it should celebrate how bodies adapt", she declared while trending globally in #BebeBaresAll.

10) Pixar fans might recognize Bebe as Violetta in Incredibles 2's Italian dub—a wheelchair-bound strategist role she ad-libbed to include fencing terminology. The English version later incorporated her improvisations, marking rare cross-dubbing synergy.

11) As a meningitis survivor, Bebe spearheaded Italy's #VaxLikeBebe campaign, memeing her experience into viral content. One TikTok shows her dancing with syringe props to "Vaccine (I'm Gonna Be)"—a Beatles parody amassing 14M views.



MARGHERITA HACK

Lady of the stars. Margherita Hack (1922-2013) stands as one of Italy's most influential scientific figures of the 20th century, revolutionizing astrophysics research while democratizing access to cosmic knowledge through her unparalleled science communication efforts. Over her seven-decade career, Hack transformed the Trieste Astronomical Observatory into a global research hub, published foundational works on stellar spectroscopy, and became Italy's foremost public intellectual advocating for empirical reasoning.

This analysis explores her multifaceted legacy through five dimensions: her trailblazing biography, enduring scientific contributions, societal impact beyond academia, lesser-known personal facets, and specific examples of her pioneering astronomical research.

Born in Florence on June 12, 1922, she grew up in an intellectually stimulating environment shaped by her father Roberto Hack, a Swiss-Italian accountant, and her mother Maria Luisa Poggetti, a miniaturist painter at the Uffizi Gallery. Her childhood fascination with nature's phenomena foreshadowed her future career, though few could have predicted the societal barriers she would shatter.

Defying gender norms of fascist-era Italy, Hack excelled athletically as a teenager, becoming a regional champion in high jump (1.40m) and long jump (4.75m) during the 1938-1940 National University Games. These competitions, organized under Mussolini's regime ("Littorali della Cultura"), ironically became her first platform for demonstrating equality in performance. Her athletic discipline later informed her scientific methodology, noting: "Precision in measurement matters as much in star spectra as in landing a jump".

World War II disrupted her formal education at Florence's Liceo Classico "Galileo Galilei", but Hack persevered through independent study. In 1945, she earned a physics degree from the University of Florence with a thesis on Cepheid variable stars under astronomer Giorgio Abetti, scoring 101/110 despite wartime observational challenges. Her thesis data came from the Arcetri Observatory's 30cm telescope, often collected during air raid blackouts - an experience that honed her ability to maximize limited observational windows.

Hack's 1944 marriage to childhood friend Aldo De Rosa provided stability as she navigated postwar Italy's male-dominated academic landscape. Her breakthrough came in 1964 when she became the first Italian woman appointed director of an astronomical observatory (Trieste), a position she held until 1987.



MARGHERITA HACK

Under her leadership, the institution evolved from a regional facility into an international research powerhouse through strategic initiatives:

- **Instrumentation upgrades:** Secured Italy's first electronic photometer (1965) and spectrographs capable of UV spectroscopy
- **Global collaborations:** Established partnerships with NASA, ESA, and major universities including Berkeley and Princeton
- **Educational reforms:** Founded Trieste's Department of Astronomy (1985), integrating theoretical and observational training

Her administrative philosophy emphasized egalitarianism - she abolished hierarchical address forms, insisting colleagues use "Margherita" regardless of rank. This approach fostered collaborative environments where junior researchers could challenge senior scientists' hypotheses.

Hack's atheism and criticism of Catholic Church interference in scientific education made her a polarizing public figure. She articulated her worldview in *Perché sono vegetariana* (Why I'm Vegetarian), connecting animal rights advocacy to cosmological perspectives: "If life exists elsewhere, we've no right to assume superiority here". Her materialist philosophy rejected spiritual afterlife concepts, asserting consciousness arises from neural processes.

Despite declining heart health, Hack maintained an intensive public engagement schedule until her 2013 passing at 91. She refused life-extending surgery, stating: "I've measured stellar lifetimes; mine seems adequately filled". Her husband Aldo followed in 2014, their shared library of 18,000 volumes donated to Trieste's civic collections.

Hack's research fundamentally shaped modern stellar classification systems through spectroscopic innovations. Her 1959 *Stellar Spectroscopy* treatise with Otto Struve remains essential reading, introducing quantitative analysis techniques for determining stellar temperatures and compositions. Key breakthroughs include:

- **Cepheid variable analysis:** Early work on FF Aquilae established methodologies for using these "cosmic yardsticks" in distance measurement
- **Be star characterization:** Identified cyclical emission-line variations in ζ Tauri, advancing understanding of circumstellar environments
- **UV astronomy pioneering:** Leveraged space telescopes like IUE to study stellar winds in O/B stars, revealing mass-loss mechanisms



MARGHERITA HACK

Hack's Trieste tenure (1964-1992) redefined Italy's role in global astronomy through infrastructure development, by securing Italy's participation in ESA's TD-1 satellite (1972), and establishing regional collaborations with developing nations through IAEA partnerships.

Another relevant aspect is related to the educational innovations, because she designed Europe's first integrated astrophysics curriculum combining theoretical physics with observational training; and mentored generations of astronomers.

When it comes to the cultural impact, she contributed making Trieste's facilities accessible to public tours decades before "science outreach" became institutionalized; and she hosted international colloquia attracting Nobel laureates.

Hack recognized that 20th-century astrophysics' complexity risked alienating lay audiences. Her communication strategy combined three elements:

1. Analogical reasoning: Explained cosmic phenomena through everyday metaphors (e.g., comparing stellar nucleosynthesis to "cosmic cooking")
2. Media ubiquity: Regular RAI television appearances demystified black holes, dark matter, and exoplanets for millions
3. Political advocacy: Lobbied for increased research funding, testifying before Parliament that "a telescope's cost equals three fighter jets; its discoveries outlast any war"

Her 1982 *L'amica delle stelle* (Friend of the Stars) sold over 500,000 copies, unprecedented for Italian science literature. Critics initially dismissed her approach as sensationalist, but Hack defended it: "If we can't make pulsars fascinating, we've failed as educators".

Hack's materialist worldview informed progressive stances on a strong education reform, for which she campaigned against Catholic doctrine in science curricula, advocating evolution-only biology textbooks. Another distinctive trait of hers was the protection of the animals' rights, that Hack supported by promoting legislation banning cosmetic animal testing, citing cephalopod intelligence studies. Last but not least, she made herself an advocate of euthanasia rights, drawing parallels to stellar lifecycles: "Stars expire when fuel depletes; humans deserve similar dignity".



MARGHERITA HACK

Lesser-known facets and anecdotes

Beyond her jumping accolades, Hack maintained lifelong fitness through:

- Daily 5km runs until age 70
- Competitive swimming in the Adriatic Sea
- Organizing observatory staff basketball games
- Also, colleagues recalled her editing research papers between swim laps at Trieste's public pool.

- She was a bibliomaniac, owning Europe's largest private astronomy library (18,000+ volumes), catalogued via handwritten index cards
- She had a nocturnal working schedule (10PM-4AM), claiming "stars dislike daytime observers"
- She had specific coffee rituals, brewing espresso using a 19th-century Neapolitan flip pot, insisting proper crema enhanced data analysis
- While believing extraterrestrial life probable, Hack dismissed UFO sightings as "optical illusions or wishful thinking". Her 1995 debate with UFOlogist Roberto Pinotti drew 3,000 attendees, where she demonstrated how atmospheric refraction could distort Venus into "flying saucers".

1. Stellar Spectroscopy Innovations

Hack's collaborative work with Otto Struve produced three enduring methodologies:

Technique	Application	Impact
Balmer Jump Analysis	Determining stellar temperatures	Enabled classification of O/B stars ⁴
Emission Line Profiling	Studying Be star circumstellar disks	Revealed rotational velocity thresholds for disk formation ⁴
UV Line Strength Metrics	Analyzing stellar winds	Quantified mass loss rates in Wolf-Rayet stars ⁴





MARIA MONTESSORI

Feminist. Pioneer. Icon. Maria Montessori was an Italian physician, educator and innovator that paved the way to breaking barriers in education and learning methods, reshaping how we think about learning and child development. As a scientist, she introduced an educational approach that continues to influence classrooms worldwide. Her Montessori Method, rooted in respect for children's natural curiosity, emphasizes hands-on learning, independence, and carefully designed environments tailored to their developmental needs.

She entered the world on August 31, 1870, in the provincial town of Chiaravalle, Italy. Her father, Alessandro Montessori, served as a financial manager for a state-operated industry, while her mother, Renilde Stoppani, was a well-educated advocate for women's literacy, originating from an education-centric family, and possessed a remarkable education and a passion for reading—an uncommon trait among Italian women of her era. Maria inherited this thirst for knowledge, delving into various fields of study before crafting the educational methodology that now bears her name.

Maria initially had aspirations to become an engineer. When she graduated secondary school, she became determined to enter medical school and become a doctor. Despite her parents' encouragement to enter teaching, and societal expectations that limited women's access to higher education, Maria wanted to study the male-dominated field of medicine and she pursued her passion for science. After initially being refused, with the endorsement of Pope Leo XIII, Maria was eventually given entry to the University of Rome in 1890, becoming one of the first women in medical school in Italy and one of Italy's first female physicians, earning her medical degree in 1896. This was groundbreaking at the time, as women were rarely admitted into medical programs.

Soon after her medical career began, Maria became involved in the Women's Rights movement. She became known for her high levels of competency in treating patients, but also for the respect she showed to patients from all social classes. In 1897, Maria joined a research programme at the psychiatric clinic of the University of Rome, as a volunteer. This work initiated a deep interest in the needs of children with learning disabilities. In particular, the work of two early 19th century Frenchmen, Jean-Marc Itard and Edouard Séguin, his student. Maria was appointed as co-director of a new institution called the Orthophrenic School. In 1898 Maria gave birth to Mario, following her relationship with Giuseppe Montesano, her codirector at the school.



MARIA MONTESSORI

At the age of twenty-eight Maria began advocating her controversial theory that the lack of support for mentally and developmentally disabled children was the cause of their delinquency. The notion of social reform became a strong theme throughout her life, whether it was for gender roles, or advocacy for children.

In 1901 Maria began her own studies of educational philosophy and anthropology, lecturing and teaching students.

From 1904-1908 she was a lecturer at the Pedagogic School of the University of Rome. This period saw a rapid development of Rome, but the speculative nature of the market led to bankruptcies and ghetto districts. One such area was San Lorenzo district, where its children were left to run amok at home as their parents worked. In an attempt to provide the children with activities during the day to fend off the destruction of property, Maria was offered the opportunity to introduce her materials and practice to neurotypical children. There, in 1907, she opened the first Casa dei Bambini (Children's House) bringing some of the educational materials she had developed at the Orthophrenic School.

Maria put many different activities and other materials into the children's environment but kept only those that engaged them. What she came to realise was that children who were placed in an environment where activities were designed to support their natural development had the power to educate themselves. By 1909 Maria gave her first training course in her new approach to around 100 students. Her notes from this period provided the material for her first book published that same year in Italy, appearing in translation in the United States in 1912 as *The Montessori Method*, and later translated into 20 languages.

A period of great expansion in the Montessori approach now followed. Montessori societies, training programmes and schools sprang to life all over the world, and a period of travel with public speaking and lecturing occupied Maria, much of it in America, but also in the UK and throughout Europe.

Maria lived in Spain from 1917, and was joined by Mario and his wife Helen Christy, where they raised their 4 children Mario Jr, Rolando, Marilena and Renilde. In 1929, mother and son established the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) to perpetuate her work.

MARIA MONTESSORI



The rise of fascism in Europe substantially impacted the progress of the Montessori movement. By 1933 the Nazis had closed all the Montessori schools in Germany, with Mussolini doing the same in Italy. Fleeing the Spanish civil war in 1936, Maria and Mario travelled to England, then to the Netherlands where they stayed with the family of Ada Pierson, who would later become Mario's second wife.

A three-month lecture tour of India in 1939 turned to a seven year stay when the outbreak of war had Mario interned and Maria put under house arrest, detained as Italian citizens by the British government. In India, Maria began the development of her approach to support the 6-12 child through “Cosmic Education”. For ages 12–18, Montessori’s method emphasized real-world application. In the Indian-era schools, students managed small businesses, conducted ecological studies, and engaged in debates—an approach that modern project-based learning continues to embrace. Her 70th birthday request to free Mario was granted and together they trained over a thousand Indian teachers.

In 1946 they returned to the Netherlands and the following year she addressed UNESCO on the theme “Education and Peace”. Her last public engagement was the 9th International Montessori Congress in London in 1951. Maria Montessori passed away at age 81 on 6th May 1952 in the Netherlands, bequeathing the legacy of her work to her son Mario.

Despite facing internment by the British from 1939 to 1946 due to her Italian nationality, she continued her work, training over 1,000 Indian teachers and further developing her educational philosophy.

Maria Montessori passed away in 1952 in the Netherlands, but her legacy lives on through the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI), which she co-founded with her son Mario in 1929.

The Montessori method: philosophy and principles - Montessori’s educational philosophy is based on four key principles:

- 1. Sensitive periods** – Critical developmental windows when children are naturally inclined to learn specific skills, such as language, movement, or order.
- 2. Prepared environment** – Classrooms designed with accessible materials that foster independence and self-directed exploration.



MARIA MONTESSORI

3. Auto-education – The belief that children learn best when they guide their own education through curiosity and discovery.

4. Role of the teacher – Instead of being a traditional instructor, the teacher acts as a guide, carefully observing and facilitating learning without direct interference.

Her 1912 book, “The Montessori Method”, outlined these principles and emphasized the idea of “following the child” rather than imposing rigid curricula. This philosophy continues to shape progressive education worldwide.

Fast forward to today, and there are over 20,000 Montessori schools across the globe, spanning early childhood to high school programs. AMI ensures that Montessori’s principles remain intact, while organizations like the American Montessori Society (AMS) adapt her method to contemporary educational needs. Notably, several influential figures—including Google’s Larry Page and Sergey Brin, Amazon’s Jeff Bezos, and Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez—were Montessori-educated, highlighting the method’s potential for fostering innovation and independent thinking.

Montessori’s early work with children with disabilities paved the way for more inclusive education. Many of her sensory-based materials, such as sound cylinders and colour tablets, are now standard tools used to support children with autism and learning differences. Her individualized approach mirrors modern special education frameworks like Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

On the other way, Montessori viewed education as a tool for societal transformation. She was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize three times (1949–1951) for her belief that fostering children’s full potential could prevent future conflicts. In India, she incorporated spiritual and ecological teachings into her curriculum, reinforcing the idea that education should nurture both intellect and character.

Fascinating facts about Maria Montessori:

- She was one of the first female doctors in Italy, and achieved the distinction of being the first woman from the University of Rome to earn her doctorate and emerged as one of Italy's pioneering female doctors, obtaining her degree in July 1896.



MARIA MONTESSORI

- Many don't know but she was the first person establishing the first Montessori school to help stop vandalism among young people living in the streets.
- She wrote a medical thesis on childhood delinquency - considered too radical for its time - which anticipated her lifelong challenge to traditional education norms.

- In 1914, she collaborated with Helen Keller, exchanging insights on sensory learning for children with disabilities. One year after, at the San Francisco World's Fair, Maria Montessori showcased a classroom where children worked independently, winning two gold medals and capturing the attention of American educators.
- Because of her role and advancements in education and children development, Maria Montessori received three consecutive nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize (1949, 1950, and 1951).

Montessori in action: classroom tools and practices. A typical day in Casa dei Bambini (1907):

- 9:00 AM – Practical life activities like buttoning clothes and preparing food.
- 10:00 AM – Sensorial exploration using materials like geometric insets and sound cylinders.
- 11:30 AM – Grace and courtesy lessons during shared meals.
- Afternoon – Outdoor activities, music, and artistic expression.

Signature Montessori materials

- Moveable alphabet – A set of wooden letters that allow children to experiment with spelling before they can physically write.
- Binomial cube – A puzzle that introduces algebraic concepts in a hands-on way.
- Sandpaper globe – A tactile tool for teaching geography by differentiating land and water surfaces.



MARIA MONTESSORI

Her contributions extend far beyond early childhood education. Her emphasis on independence, respect, and hands-on learning continues to shape modern pedagogy. Studies validate her insights—recent research suggests Montessori students demonstrate enhanced creativity, resilience, and problem-solving skills. Yet challenges remain, including accessibility and debates on how Montessori education aligns with standardized testing. Looking ahead, integrating Montessori principles with technology and personalized learning innovations could ensure her philosophy remains relevant in the 21st century. What's clear is that Montessori's core belief—that education should empower children to reach their full potential—remains as powerful as ever.



NILDE IOTTI

The Lady of the Republic. Leonilde (known to all as Nilde) Iotti was born in Reggio Emilia on April 10, 1920. Her father, a railway switchman and activist in the socialist labour movement, was later persecuted during the fascist regime due to his trade union activities. Despite their dire financial situation, he enrolled his young daughter at the Catholic University of Milan because, as Nilde often recalled, quoting his words: "It is better to be with the priests than with the fascists."

"For years, I wore my father's turned-out coat," Iotti declared in interviews, reminiscing about her youth, the poverty, and the many sacrifices her parents made to ensure she could study and "become someone." Orphaned of her father in 1934, Nilde was able to continue her studies because her mother, at a time when fascist law confined women to the domestic sphere, began working.

Whilst attending the Faculty of Literature at the Catholic University of Milan, Nilde underwent an ideological transformation that distanced her from Catholic faith, which she considered absolutist and intolerant. "To belief, because it was absurd, I rationally said no."

With Italy's entry into World War II, Nilde, inspired by her father's exemplary life lesson, joined the Italian Communist Party (PCI). From 1943 onwards, she distinguished herself as a courier, one of the most significant and dangerous roles undertaken by women during the Resistance. Through these couriers, partisans wove the intricate political networks that led to Italy's liberation from Nazi-fascist occupation. Her commitment among the partisans in her hometown led to her appointment, at just over twenty years old, as the leader of the Women's Defense Groups (GDD), an extremely active organization in the Liberation War.

The first of these groups was established in Milan in November 1943 by prominent figures from parties that had joined the National Liberation Committee after the armistice, while the Germans besieged the countryside and cities of northern Italy, carrying out brutal roundups of civilians engaged in the anti-fascist struggle. The Women's Defense and Assistance Groups for the Freedom Fighters, originating in Milan, spread across all occupied Italian territories, aiming to mobilize women of all ages and social conditions through a widespread and clandestine organization to address the needs arising from the intensification of the war. These female operational groups played a crucial role during the Resistance by collecting clothing, medicine, and food for the partisans, transmitting messages, safeguarding contact lists, preparing safe houses, distributing leaflets and pamphlets, and even transporting weapons.



NILDE IOTTI

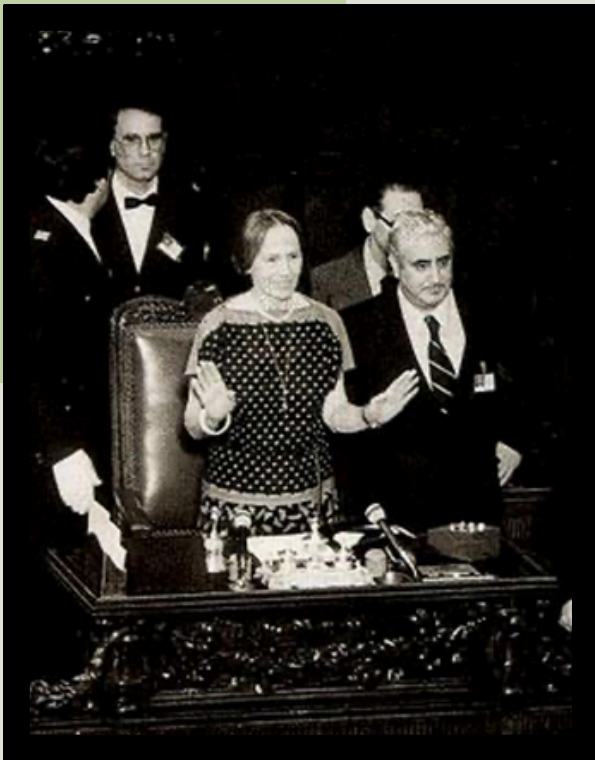
As mentioned, from 1943 onwards, Nilde Iotti took on one of the most emblematic yet riskiest roles within the GDD: that of a courier. Victoria de Grazia, in her book "How Fascism Ruled Women," defines the courier as "the heroine of the Resistance: a messenger and a trusted figure, she is the true wild card of the partisan war."

As the leader of the GDD in Reggio Emilia, Nilde embodied the civil and political consciousness that women, after centuries of exclusion from public life and twenty years of fascist dictatorship, began to express only during the war. Indeed, studies on the Italian Resistance highlight the crucial role played by the Women's Defense Groups in promoting female emancipation. After the referendum of June 2, 1946, in which Italian women exercised their right to vote for the first time and were politically recognized as full citizens, as emphasized by historian Miriam Mafai, the 26-year-old Nilde Iotti was elected to Parliament.

"Sturdy, tall, with her hair down over her shoulders, and a strong desire to learn how to be a deputy," as described by her spokesperson at the Chamber of Deputies, G. Frasca Polara, Nilde met Palmiro Togliatti, the charismatic leader of the PCI, in an elevator at Montecitorio.

This encounter led to a romantic relationship that endured all opposition, especially within the Party, as Togliatti was already married with a child and was 53 years old at the time.

Initially as a simple deputy and later as a member of the Constituent Assembly, Nilde demonstrated a keen political talent through her institutional sensitivity and knowledge. She herself described her time in the Constituent Assembly as "the greatest political school I have ever had the opportunity to attend, even throughout my political career." Nilde was also part of the Commission of 75, tasked with drafting the republican Constitution to be submitted for the Assembly's approval. The 556 members of the Constituent Assembly, representing the Italian people, convened for the first time on June 25, 1946, to elect the Provisional Head of State (Enrico De Nicola was elected) and to designate the 75 representatives responsible for drafting the new Constitution. After approximately six months of work, the Commission submitted its constitutional draft to the Assembly, which throughout most of 1947 debated, integrated, and modified it article by article.



NILDE IOTTI

On December 22, 1947, the final text of the Constitution was approved by an overwhelming majority and, once promulgated by the Provisional Head of State, came into effect on January 1, 1948. The role Nilde played in the Constituent Assembly, advocating for women's and family rights, deeply influenced her uninterrupted 53-year parliamentary career, which she pursued with rigor, dedication, and humility.

Her 1946 report on the Family, as a member of the Commission of 75, remains remarkably relevant today. In it, Iotti called for overcoming the obsolete Albertine Statute with a new constitutional charter that would address family rights, which had been entirely ignored by the previous legal framework and disregarded throughout the 20 years of the fascist regime. She urged the Assembly to legislate on family law, emphasizing that "the Constituent Assembly must include in the new Constitutional Charter the affirmation of the rights of individuals, as members of a family or as those wishing to establish one, with special attention and protection from the State."

One of the pivotal aspects of this report was the status of women: "One spouse, the woman, was and still is bound by backward conditions that place her in a state of inferiority, making family life a burden rather than a source of joy and personal development. Since women have now been granted full political equality, with both active and passive voting rights, it follows that they must also be freed from their state of inferiority in all areas of social life and restored to a legal position that does not undermine their dignity as citizens."

Considering that by the eve of World War II, historical feminism had been eradicated along with all political parties and freedoms (of thought, press, organization, etc.), and that Mussolini's social policies dictated that "work was not a goal for women but merely a stage of their lives, to be resolved as soon as possible by returning to the home," Iotti's report was a bold and forward-thinking effort toward democratic renewal.

A particular focus was placed on women's emancipation through work; thus, the new Constitution had to guarantee the right to work "without gender discrimination." Another key issue she studied and fought for throughout her career was the dissolution of marriage, arguing against enshrining the principle of indissolubility in the Constitution, considering it a matter for civil legislation.



NILDE IOTTI

Over half a century within republican institutions, Nilde championed family law reform (1975), the referendum on divorce (1974), and the law on abortion (1978). From 1979 to 1992, she served as President of the Chamber of Deputies, demonstrating remarkable balance, mediation, and wisdom. In 1993, she chaired the Parliamentary Commission for Institutional Reforms, and in 1997, she was elected Vice President of the Council of Europe.

On November 18, 1999, Nilde requested her resignation from Parliament due to health reasons. Few days later, on December 4, 1999, she quietly took her final bow.



Serbia



Eva Haljecka Petković

Eva Haljecka Petković was a pioneer in medicine in the Balkans. She was a physician, the first female gynecologist in the Balkans, the first head of the Department for Maternity and Women's Diseases in Niš, an advocate for the rights of female doctors, and the first woman to perform a cesarean section in Serbia.

General Biographical Information

Eva was born in 1870 in Congress Poland, near the border with the Russian Empire. Eva's mother died during childbirth, so she was raised and educated by her father, Marko Haljecki, a civil engineer. Due to the nature of her father's work, Eva often traveled and moved with him.

She completed her primary education in Odessa and her secondary education in Kyiv. She studied medicine at the Universities of Bern and Zurich, graduating in 1891. She specialized in gynecology in Vienna under the mentorship of the renowned Professor Friedrich Sauer.

After completing her studies, she joined her father, who was working on the construction of river ports and planning the Danube riverbank near Belgrade.

In Belgrade, she married Kosta Petković, a Doctor of Law, with whom she had a daughter, Vera. They soon divorced.

Eva was one of the most active members of the Serbian Medical Society in Belgrade and Niš.

For her dedication and work in the field of medicine, she was decorated with the Royal Order of St. Sava, Fifth Class (1913), the Cross of Mercy for caring for the sick and wounded during and after the war (1914), and the Royal Order of St. Sava, Fourth Class (1915).

She passed away in 1947 and was buried at the New Cemetery in Belgrade.

Career

Dr. Eva Haljecka began her career in 1892 as an assistant physician at the General State Hospital in Belgrade. In 1905, she transferred to the Department of Gynecology and Midwifery at the same institution. In 1909, she was appointed as a secondary physician at the Niš District Hospital, where she served as acting head during the Balkan Wars and World War I, even during the Bulgarian occupation.



Eva Haljecka Petković

She also worked in cholera barracks, tending to patients whom the Anglo-Serbian Hospital in Niš refused to admit. After the war, she became an assistant physician at the Department for Maternity and Women's Diseases and, in 1920, was promoted to head of the department, where she remained until her retirement in 1924.

She participated in the First Congress of Physicians and Naturalists of the Kingdom of Serbia in 1904 in Belgrade, where she was elected a member of the organizing committee. At the First Yugoslav Meeting on Operative Medicine in Belgrade in 1911, she presented her paper "Sectio Cesarea."

She was the first woman in the Balkans to perform a cesarean section (1910), the first female gynecologist, and the first head of a women's department in Niš, laying the foundations for the future gynecological-obstetrics clinic.

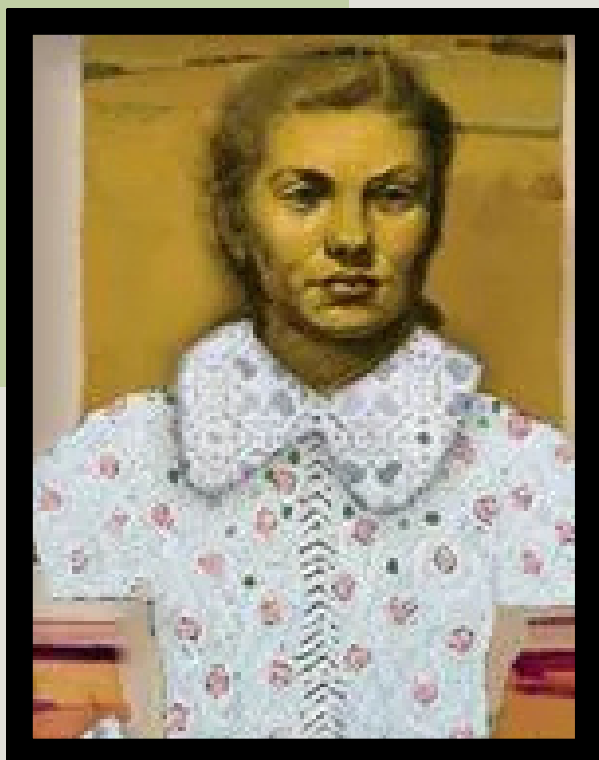
Legacy

Dr. Haljecka Petković was the first female gynecologist in the Balkans and the first woman to perform a cesarean section in Serbia in 1910. She was also the first head of the Department for Maternity and Women's Diseases in Niš. Her fight for gender equality in the medical profession left a profound mark on the history of Serbian medicine.

Interesting Facts

- During World War I, she was captured by Bulgarian forces but returned to her position in Niš after the war.
- She actively advocated for women's rights, submitting a protest to the National Assembly of Serbia in 1908, demanding equal rights for female doctors:

"Let us move on to us, the female doctors. The State demands from us exactly the same qualifications as from our male colleagues, yet assigns us an extremely narrow scope of work. In Serbia, we women doctors can only serve as assistant physicians in hospitals, with a salary of 125 dinars, from beginning to end. The State, however, used us, the female doctors, placing and still placing us in assistant roles, exploiting our labor even though it was evident over many years that we are fully capable of independent work." — Eva Haljecka Petković



Anastasija Nasta Dimitrijević

Anastasija Nasta Dimitrijević was a pioneer of education in Niš. She was the first female teacher in Niš, the founder of the first co-educational school for boys and girls, and one of the first advocates for the education of girls at a time when it was not socially accepted.

General Biographical Information

She was born around 1816 in Prizren. As a child, she suffered paralysis of her left arm and leg but remained steadfast in dedicating her life to education. She moved to Niš, where she vowed never to marry and devoted herself to teaching. Known as the “daskal girl,” she dressed semi-masculinely, which was unconventional for the time.

Spiridon Jovanović introduced her to teaching, and she worked alongside Atanasije Petrović to promote education in Niš. She became the first teacher at a co-educational school opened in 1845 at the site of today's Cathedral Church. The tradition of this school is carried on by the "Učitelj Tasa" Primary School in Niš.

Several years before the liberation of Niš, due to old age and loss of hearing, she retired. Upon the proposal of Minister of Education Stojan Novaković, the National Assembly and Prince Milan Obrenović granted her an annual pension of 300 dinars.

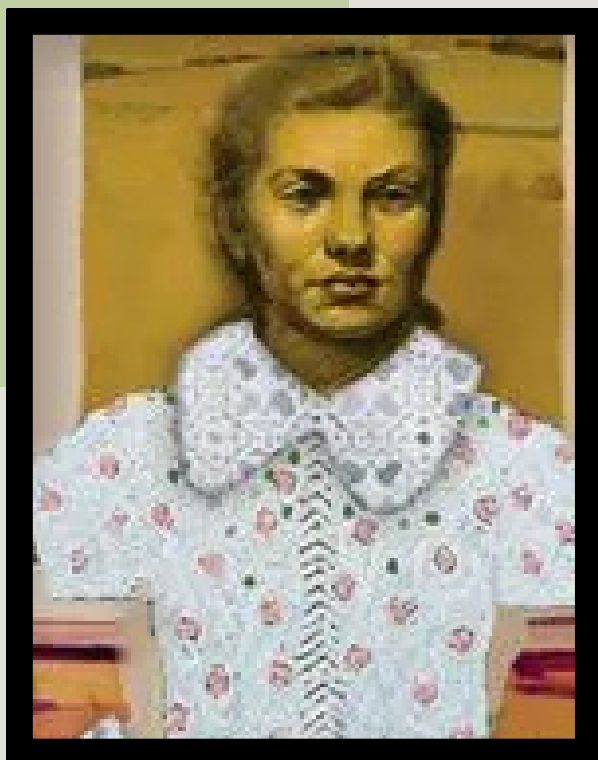
She died in 1886 in Niš, at the age of seventy.

Career

Anastasija Nasta Dimitrijević worked in Niš for a total of 40 years — 15 years as a private teacher and 25 years as a municipal teacher. She was the first to systematically educate girls in Niš, at a time when even in free Serbia, girls' education was highly underdeveloped.

Following the enactment of the first general education law in 1844 and the "Organization of Girls' Schools" decree in 1846, Nasta actively contributed to educating girls, teaching them literacy and handicrafts.

Her school often had over 100 students, and thanks to her efforts, literacy among women in Niš, although still low, began to increase — by 1879, there were only 73 literate women among over 12,000 inhabitants.



Anastasija Nasta Dimitrijević

Legacy

Anastasija Nasta Dimitrijević left a significant mark as the first female teacher and one of the founders of girls' education in Niš. Her work laid the foundations for the city's modern educational system.

Today, there is a proposal for an award for the best teacher to bear her name, and her story is passed down to students at the "Učitelj Tasa" Primary School.

Interesting Facts

- Born around 1816, she suffered paralysis of her left arm and leg, yet she never married and chose a life of education over conventional expectations. Her semi-masculine attire—quite bold for her era—attested to her quiet defiance of social norms.
- She remained committed to her teaching vocation throughout her life, despite extremely difficult working conditions and lack of official recognition.
- Known for her unconventional appearance and determination to educate generations of children despite her physical disability.
- In 1845, she opened the first co-educational school in Niš.
- Anastasija devoted 40 years to teaching—15 as a private tutor and 25 as a municipal educator—at a time when female professionals were rare and often marginalized.
- Shortly before her death, due to poverty and deteriorating health, she requested and received financial aid from the state. Only thanks to advocacy from the Minister of Education, Stojan Novaković, did the National Assembly grant her an annual pension of 300 dinars—a small but meaningful acknowledgment of her contributions.
- Long before girls' education was standard, Anastasija systematically taught literacy and handicrafts to girls in Niš. While national literacy rates remained low, her work planted seeds of change—by 1879, female literacy in Niš had begun to emerge.



Vera Jašarević

Vera Jašarević was a pioneer among Romani women artists in Niš. She was a violinist, a member of the first Niš Symphony Orchestra, and an inspiration for generations of women pursuing music. Born in Niš in 1922, Vera Jašarević emerged as one of the first Roma women instrumentalists in the area. She forged her career performing in local orchestras, cafés, and ensembles—sometimes alongside her sister, Refija, a pianist and clavier player history.

General Biographical Information

Born in 1922 in Niš, Vera displayed exceptional musical talent from an early age. During her career, she frequently traveled abroad for engagements but always returned to Niš, where she remained until her retirement in 1978.

Her versatile musical talent and courage earned her a prominent place in the city's musical ensembles. She was part of the rich tradition of Romani orchestras in Niš, known for their dominant string sections and a repertoire ranging from folk to classical music. Her sister, Rrefija Jašarević, was a distinguished pianist.

Vera was recognized multiple times for her contributions to music and is remembered as one of Niš's leading female artists of her time.

Career

Vera Jašarević built her career in various musical ensembles, performing at cafés, theaters, and public events. In 1960, she joined the first Niš Symphony Orchestra, where she served as the deputy leader of the second violins.

Her ability to perform both folk and classical music earned her widespread respect among her colleagues and audiences. Despite challenging conditions for women, especially Romani women, in professional music circles, Vera broke through barriers and paved the way for future generations.

Legacy

Vera Jašarević remains remembered as a symbol of artistic devotion and resistance against prejudice. Her memory is preserved through initiatives such as the "Niš Women for Remembrance" project by the Zadrugarice Association. Her life story was also portrayed in the documentary "The Smile of the Niš Violinist" aired by Radio Television of Serbia.



Vera Jašarević

Her love for music lived on through her grandson, Josip Hartl, the famous drummer of the renowned Niš rock band Kerber.

Cultural Impact

- Her musical presence exemplified the intersection of Roma artistry, female talent, and formal musical institutions—a rare position at the time.
- Vera and her sister's performances were part of a broader Roma contribution to the evolving urban and folk music scene in Yugoslavia

Interesting Facts

- Alongside her sister Rrefija, Vera was one of the few women performing in pre-war Romani orchestras in Niš.
- Her name lives on through projects dedicated to preserving the memory of prominent women from Niš.
- She served as an inspiration for many Romani women who later pursued careers in music, art, and culture.
- Her story was featured in the "They Broke Boundaries" series, highlighting the lives of forgotten women who shaped Serbian culture.
- Though she frequently traveled abroad for performances, Vera always came back to her hometown of Niš, where she played music until retiring in 1978 as the deputy leader of the second violins in the first Niš Symphony Orchestra.



Hristina Bošković

Hristina Bošković was a pioneer in education and women's rights advocacy in Niš. She was a teacher, educator, women's rights activist, and one of the most active members of women's organizations in Niš.

General Biographical Information

Born in 1864 in Aleksinac, after completing her primary education, Hristina moved to Belgrade, where she graduated from the Higher Women's School and passed the teaching examination. Upon completing her education, she moved to Niš and began working as a kindergarten teacher and schoolteacher. From 1889, she worked at the Babeta Netović Educational Institute.

Throughout her life, Hristina remained committed to advocating for women's education and gender equality. Her public activities included engagement in numerous social, humanitarian, and educational organizations.

She passed away in 1956 in Niš.

Career

Upon her arrival in Niš, Hristina became involved with the Women's Branch Society, where she worked for twenty years and contributed significantly to the education of young girls through her work at the Women's Vocational School, where she taught all subjects for free for 25 years.

She was a member of numerous organizations, including:

- Red Cross Society of the Morava Banovina
- Regional Board of the Adriatic Guard
- Women's Association "Serbian Mother"
- Yugoslav Teachers' Association
- Women's Christian Movement
- Youth Temperance Alliance
- "Madame Princess Ljubica" Committee



Hristina Bošković

She also edited the children's magazine Slavuj ("Nightingale") and managed the Women's Workers' School.

Her advocacy for women's rights was particularly notable in 1889, when she gave a speech on Saint Sava's Day emphasizing the need for girls' education, influenced by the ideas of Svetozar Marković and John Stuart Mill. She emphasized the importance of equal education for women at a time when schools for boys and girls were strictly segregated.

In November 1939, she participated in a major gathering of the Women's Movement in Niš, where she passionately advocated for women's rights to education, property, and political representation:

"What have we done that half of humanity is condemned to eternal minority? I am seventy years old and still considered a child of ten or twelve. If we women can perform the hardest labor and complete the most demanding studies, why can we not manage what we create? No one loves peace as much as women do, and no one hates war like mothers do."

Legacy

Hristina Bošković is remembered as one of the first women in Niš to publicly advocate for gender equality in education and society. Her dedication to women's education and her long-standing humanitarian efforts have left a lasting mark on the educational and social history of Niš.

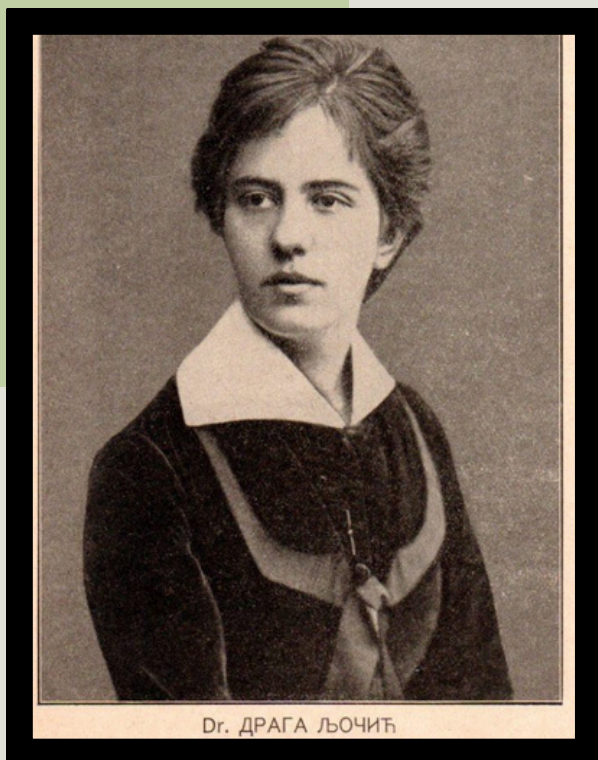
Interesting Facts

- She taught free classes for 25 years at the Women's Vocational School.
- She was the editor of the children's magazine Slavuj.
- Her advocacy for women's rights was influenced by early socialist thinkers and linked to the activities of the then-banned Communist Party of Yugoslavia.

Awards and Recognitions

For her work and dedication, Hristina Bošković was awarded:

- The Red Cross Medal and Order
- The Cross of Mercy for her care of the wounded and sick during the Balkan Wars
- The Order of St. Sava, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Class



Draga Ljochić

Draga Ljochić was the first Serbian female physician, a feminist, and a suffragette, and one of the most prominent advocates for women's rights in Serbia. Her struggle for professional equality, social justice, and political rights for women left a deep mark on Serbian society.

General Biographical Information

She was born on February 22, 1855, in Šabac, as the fifth daughter of merchant Dima and Marija Ljokić. Her family was of Aromanian descent, having migrated to Šabac from Macedonia around 1820.

She completed her primary education in her hometown and graduated from the Higher Women's School in Belgrade.

After finishing the Lyceum, in 1872, she became the first Serbian woman to enroll in a medical faculty — at the University of Zurich — a rare accomplishment for women at that time and a groundbreaking achievement at a time when women's access to higher education was extremely limited in Europe.

While studying in Zurich, she encountered Russian female students and nihilists, whose ideas about social justice and women's emancipation profoundly influenced her political and social beliefs.

She died on November 5, 1926, in Belgrade and was buried at the New Cemetery.

Career

When the Serbian–Turkish war broke out in 1876, Draga Ljochić left her studies to join the Serbian army as a nurse. For her extraordinary bravery at the Battle of Šumatovac, she was awarded the rank of lieutenant, making her one of the very first female officers in the Serbian army.

After the war, she returned to Zurich and graduated in 1879 with a dissertation titled *A Contribution to the Operative Therapy of Uterine Fibromyomas*, becoming the first female physician in Serbia.

Upon returning to Serbia, she faced significant obstacles in securing employment in the state sector. The Ministry of the Interior persistently refused to recognize her diploma until Queen Natalija personally intervened. Only after her professional competence was positively evaluated was she allowed to open a private practice.



Draga Ljočić

In 1881, she was employed at the General State Hospital in Belgrade as an assistant physician. However, she was denied equal rights with her male colleagues — she received a lower salary, had no rights to promotion, nor to a pension.

Her professional contribution was particularly notable during the Serbian–Bulgarian War (1885), when she served as the sole physician in three Belgrade hospitals.

Fight for Equality

Draga Ljočić worked tirelessly for the professional equality of men and women in medicine. In 1889, she filed a request with the Ministry of the Interior for equal rights but met with strong resistance.

The arguments of the officials at the time reflected deep-rooted misogyny:

"A woman, by her very nature, must lean on a stronger man."

Despite the setbacks, she continued her fight, appealing even to King Milan and the State Council. Nevertheless, in 1889, she received a dismissal from state service. Afterward, she ran a successful private medical practice, treating poor children — especially girls — free of charge. After decades of struggle, by the end of 1924, she finally secured the right to a pension.

War Service

During the Serbian–Bulgarian War, the Balkan Wars, and World War I, she served as a physician on equal footing with her male colleagues.

She was particularly distinguished during the Balkan Wars, working in the Civilian and Poor Population Clinic and at Nikola Spasić Hospital.

Philanthropy

Draga Ljočić was a great humanitarian. In 1904, she founded the Maternal Association for the Care of Abandoned Children and became its first president.

Despite public criticism claiming that such associations "encouraged immorality," she successfully secured a home for abandoned children and financial support from the Belgrade Municipality.



Draga Ljočić

She was also one of the founders of the Association of Women Physicians of Belgrade in 1919, which worked toward the establishment of a hospital for women and children. Although she did not live to see its opening, the hospital began operating in 1929, named after Scottish doctor Elsie Inglis. A committed feminist and socialist, she co-founded the Serbian National Women's Alliance (1906) and advocated for women's suffrage—presenting a petition for voting parity in 1911.

Writing and Educational Work

She translated *Raising Young Children* by Dr. Maria Manaseina from Russian, aiming to educate mothers on proper child-rearing practices.

She wrote articles in the fields of gynecology and pediatrics and served as an assistant editor of the *Serbian Archive for General Medicine*.

Political Engagement

Draga Ljočić was one of the first feminists and suffragettes in Serbia.

She was a co-founder of the Serbian National Women's Alliance in 1906 and publicly advocated for women's suffrage.

At the Alliance's Second General Assembly in 1911, she supported the initiative to petition for universal suffrage for both men and women.

Private Life

She was married to Raša Milošević, one of the founders of the People's Radical Party. She kept her maiden name — a remarkable precedent for Serbian society at the time. They had five children. Her daughter Radmila followed her mother's example and graduated from medical school in Zurich. Draga was known for living in a building located where the Hotel Moskva stands today. In conservative 19th-century Serbia, Draga was famous for wearing a men's hat and keeping her last name after marriage—both radical acts at the time. These choices symbolized her refusal to conform to patriarchal expectations and made her instantly recognizable in Belgrade.

Draga Ljočić was more than Serbia's first female physician—she was a courageous feminist, military medic, philanthropist, and tireless advocate for professional equality. Her journey from studying in Zurich to confronting institutional prejudice in Serbia exemplifies extraordinary determination. Her activism, professional milestones, and legacy of care for women and children cement her position as a transformative figure in both medical and civic history.



Jelisaveta Načić

Jelisaveta Načić was the first female architect in Serbia and the first woman to serve as the City Architect of Belgrade. Her work and life stand as a testament to the extraordinary courage, determination, and talent of a woman who pushed the boundaries of a patriarchal society at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

General Biographical Information

She was born in 1878 in Belgrade, the thirteenth child in a distinguished and wealthy merchant family.

At a time when only seven percent of women in Serbia were literate, Jelisaveta managed to complete her education and became a pioneer in a profession dominated exclusively by men.

Although her family did not support her ambitions, Jelisaveta was determined. She spent her entire dowry to fund her education.

Career

After graduating from secondary school, she enrolled at the Technical Faculty of the Great School in Belgrade, becoming the only woman in the first generation of students at the Department of Architecture. She graduated among the top of her class, despite numerous societal prejudices and obstacles.

At just 22 years old, she was employed as a technical draftsman in the Ministry of Construction. After passing the state examination in 1902, she began working as the City Architect in the Engineering-Architectural Department of the Belgrade Municipality.

Early in her career, she achieved notable success by winning third place in the competition for the design of the church in Topola.

Major Projects

Little Kalemegdan

Her first significant engagement was in the landscaping of Little Kalemegdan, according to the project of renowned architect Dimitrije T. Leko. She designed a Baroque-style decorative staircase made of green stone, which still adorns Kalemegdan near the French Embassy



Jelisaveta Načić

King Peter I Elementary School

At only 27 years old, she designed one of the most modern school buildings of her time — King Peter I Elementary School in Belgrade.

The school was equipped with electric lighting, heating, restrooms, an assembly hall, and a gymnasium — features characteristic of the most advanced educational institutions of that era. Today, the school is protected under UNESCO heritage.

Hospital for Tuberculosis Patients

She designed the first specialized hospital for tuberculosis patients in Western Vračar, featuring spacious sun terraces, which was a highly progressive solution for the time. Unfortunately, the building was destroyed during World War I.

Industrial Facilities

She also designed the first circular kiln for brick production in Prokop, as well as other industrial structures, demonstrating her wide-ranging architectural expertise.

Sacred Architecture

Following her success in the competition for the church in Topola, she designed the foundations for the Church of Saint Alexander Nevsky at the corner of Cara Dušana and Francuska Streets in Belgrade. Due to wartime and political changes, the church's construction continued based on altered projects by other architects, but Jelisaveta's contribution remains historically significant. The only religious building fully realized according to her project was the small memorial church in Štimlje, Kosovo, built in 1920 and restored after damage in 2004.

Residential and Social Architecture

In 1911, the Belgrade Municipality constructed the first planned workers' housing based on her designs in what was then Đura Đaković Street. The building, with a simple façade and functional layout, still stands today as a testament to her ability to combine practicality with aesthetic simplicity.



Jelisaveta Načić

Political Circumstances and Persecution

During World War I, Jelisaaveta erected a triumphal arch on Terazije in honor of Serbian soldiers, bearing the inscription: "Not all Serbs have been liberated."

This patriotic gesture enraged the Austro-Hungarian authorities, and in 1916 she was deported to the Nezsider internment camp (in modern-day Hungary).

There she met her future husband, intellectual and revolutionary Luka Lukai

Private Life

After the war, they lived briefly in Belgrade with their daughter Lucia, then moved to Shkodër and Dubrovnik. Jelisaaveta withdrew from active architectural practice and fully devoted herself to her family, supporting her husband's political activities. Although she never returned to her profession, she maintained a deep love for Belgrade throughout her life and often expressed longing for her hometown.

Legacy

Almost all of her architectural works were created in Belgrade. Today, there is a street named after her in the municipality of Stari Grad. Her projects — schools, hospitals, residential buildings, and religious structures — remain enduring evidence of her exceptional talent and pioneering spirit.

Interesting facts

- With no financial support from her family for her education, Jelisaaveta courageously used her entire dowry to study architecture—a bold and unconventional choice that broke deeply ingrained societal expectations.
- At an age when most young women of her time were still confined to domestic realms, Jelisaaveta not only entered but graduated from the Faculty of Engineering in Belgrade—becoming its first female graduate and paving the way for future generations of women in technical fields.
- One of her earliest and most beloved projects is the charming Little Staircase in Kalemegdan Park (Mali Stepenište), completed in 1903. It's one of those urban treasures you might walk by every day—unaware it was designed by a pioneering woman architect.
- Her professional life as an architect lasted only about 16 years, cut short by World War I and her internment in a camp. Yet in that short time, she left an impressive architectural legacy.



Denmark



Sidsel Andersdatter

Sidsel Andersdatter (ca. 1679–1729) was born in Aske, Halløe Parish in Skåne to a farming family. At the age of 20, she gave birth to an illegitimate child, who died shortly after being left in her parents' care. Due to the social stigma surrounding unwed motherhood, Sidsel moved to Copenhagen, where she found work as a wet nurse. She later became engaged to a soldier, Niels Gram, with whom she had a daughter named Lene. However, Gram's death in war shattered her hopes for a stable family life.

Left alone once more, Sidsel returned to domestic work in Copenhagen. Over time, she began living independently—an unusual and socially disapproved choice for a woman in the early 18th century. Her life took a dramatic turn when she met Bodil Marie Christensdatter, a woman pregnant out of wedlock. Sidsel helped her through childbirth and then undertook an extraordinary deception: she assumed a male identity, "Andres Simonsen Aschenberg," married Bodil Marie in 1715, and helped raise the child.

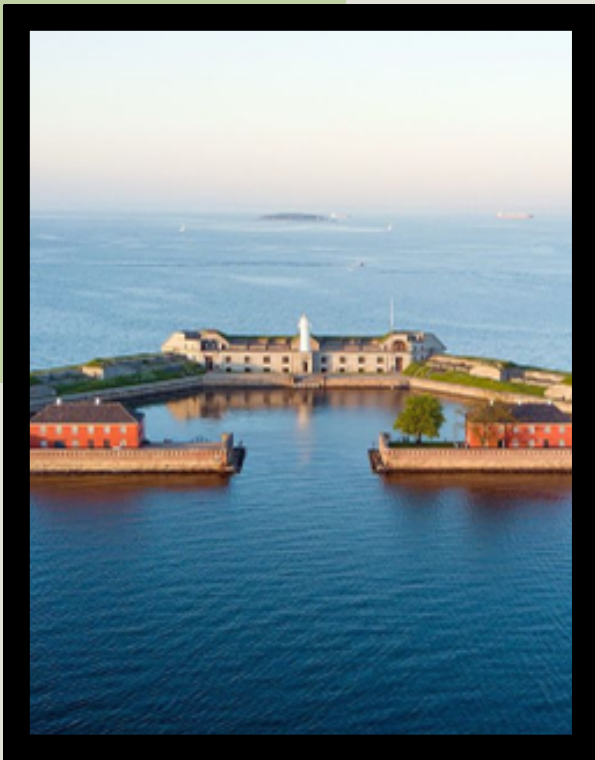
As Andres, Sidsel served as a ship's cook in the Danish navy during the Great Northern War (1715–1719), taking part in several major naval engagements. After the war, she secured a respected position as head cook at the naval battery Trekroner. For 14 years, she lived and worked as a man, maintaining the appearance of a conventional marriage and fulfilling her duties as a contributing member of society.

Eventually, her relationship with Bodil Marie deteriorated. Sidsel left her post, spent time back in Skåne, and returned to Copenhagen. In 1728, her true identity was exposed by Jens Christensen Giese, likely due to a personal dispute. She was arrested, examined, and revealed to be biologically female. Though no specific laws prohibited cross-dressing, the court focused on religious and moral violations—especially the discovery of a urination device, which was viewed with suspicion.

On March 7, 1729, she was sentenced to two years in the Spinning House (a women's forced labor institution) and public penance in church. After her sentencing, no further records of her life exist.

Legacy

Sidsel Andersdatter's life stands as a remarkable example of resilience and complexity in navigating early 18th-century gender roles and class structures. Her decision to assume a male identity was not only a survival strategy but also demonstrated her ability to form meaningful relationships and function within male-dominated institutions, such as the Danish navy.



Sidsel Andersdatter

Despite being punished for violating gender and religious norms, Sidsel succeeded in living and working as a man for over a decade, gaining professional respect and carving out a place for herself in a rigidly hierarchical society. Her story represents a rare, documented case of gender nonconformity in early modern Europe and invites deeper reflection on how society regulated identity, labor, and personal relationships.

Furthermore, her case illustrates how legal systems could selectively enforce or obscure the truth based on social status and respectability—evident in the lenient treatment of Bodil Marie after she remarried into a socially accepted position. Today, Sidsel Andersdatter is remembered as a symbol of ingenuity, bravery, and the complexities of lived identity in a restrictive era.

Impact on the Field

The rediscovery of Sidsel Andersdatter's case has significantly influenced the academic understanding of gender, identity, and survival strategies in 18th-century Denmark. Legal records uncovered in the Danish National Archives show that Sidsel was not unique—at least four other Danish women from the same period also disguised themselves as men to escape poverty and social constraints.

Historian and archivist Tyge Krogh, who brought these cases to light, emphasizes that while such incidents were rarely recorded, they likely represent only a small portion of a wider, undocumented reality. His research, published in *Historisk Tidsskrift* as "Kvinder i mandsklæder" ("Women in Men's Clothes"), positions Denmark within a broader Northern European phenomenon. Comparable cases have been documented in Holland (around 100), England (30–40), and Sweden (approximately 20).

This scholarship has opened new avenues in Danish historiography by identifying gender disguise as a form of resistance and self-determination among marginalized women. It challenges long-held assumptions about gender conformity in early modern Europe and highlights the need for further investigation into lives that defied official norms yet remained largely invisible in historical narratives.

Fun facts

1. She wore pants—literally and symbolically. At a time when women were legally and socially restricted to dresses and domestic roles, Sidsel wore men's clothing, cut her hair short, and even carried a silver sword—a bold and dangerous move in 18th-century Denmark.



Sidsel Andersdatter

2) She was officially listed as a father.

While living under the name "Andres Simonsen Aschenberg," she was legally recorded as both the father of a child and the husband of Bodil Marie Christensdatter. In the eyes of the law—until her exposure—she was a man.

3) She joined the navy—and survived.

Sidsel, as “Andres,” served as a ship’s cook during the Great Northern War, participating in real naval battles between 1715 and 1719. She later held a respected position as head cook at the Trekroner naval battery.

4) She fooled everyone for 14 years. Sidsel successfully lived and worked as a man for over a decade and a half, not only blending in but earning trust and respect from those around her. Her deception was only uncovered after a personal fallout and tip-off from an acquaintance.

5) There was no law against what she did. Sidsel wasn't convicted of a specific crime like fraud or theft—her punishment came from religious and moral condemnation, reflecting society’s discomfort with blurred gender roles.

6) She’s not alone. Similar cases were found across Northern Europe, but Sidsel is one of the first documented in Denmark. Her story now helps connect Danish history to broader patterns of gender disguise and survival across Europe.

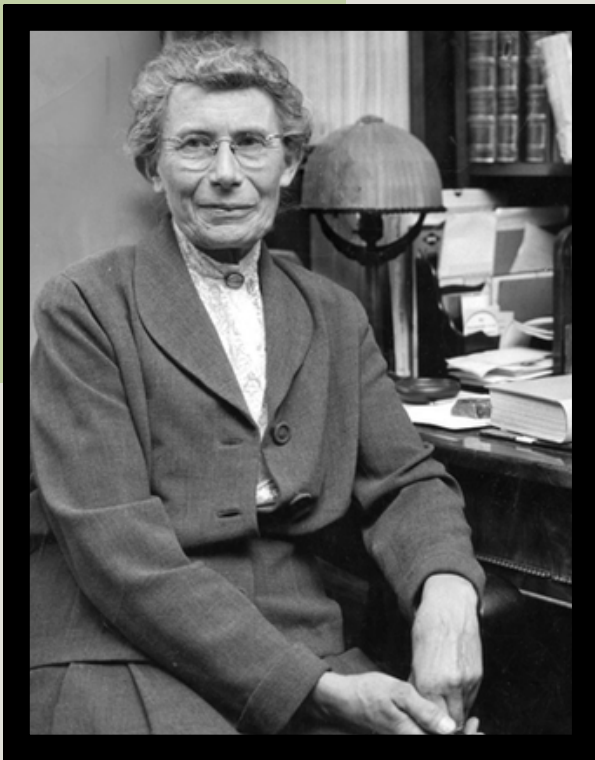
Her Work

While there are no known physical artifacts or creative works directly produced by Sidsel Andersdatter herself, her life and actions represent significant contributions in several key areas:

1. Military service: Sidsel worked as a ship’s cook in the Danish navy during the Great Northern War (1715–1719), participating in naval battles and later serving as head cook at the Trekroner naval battery. This role showcased her ability to succeed in traditionally male and demanding environments.

2. Domestic and caregiving roles: She took on various domestic jobs, including working as a tailor’s apprentice and stable hand, and notably helped Bodil Marie Christensdatter conceal an out-of-wedlock pregnancy and raise a child while living under the male identity “Andres Simonsen Aschenberg.” This complex caregiving role challenged social norms and expectations of gender and family.

3. Legacy in literature and scholarship: Though Sidsel did not author any works herself, her remarkable story has been the subject of historical research and publications, most notably by archivist Tyge Krogh, who uncovered her trial documents and wrote the article “Kvinder i mandsklæder” (“Women in Men’s Clothes”) in *Historisk Tidsskrift*. This scholarship has been crucial in bringing her life—and those of other gender-nonconforming women in 18th-century Denmark—to wider attention and academic discussion.



Inge Lehmann

Inge Lehmann (1888–1993) was a Danish seismologist born in Copenhagen. She was the daughter of Alfred Lehmann, a psychology professor, and Ida Tørsleff. Lehmann attended progressive schools that treated girls and boys equally and pursued mathematics at the University of Copenhagen starting in 1907. She studied briefly at Newnham College, Cambridge, but returned due to fatigue.

After working as an actuarial assistant, she completed her cand.mag. in mathematics in 1920 and later a magister scientiarum (master's degree) in seismology in 1928.

Lehmann worked at the Royal Danish Geodetic Institute, where she managed seismic stations in Denmark and Greenland and focused on earthquake epicenter location and seismic wave travel times. She never married and devoted her long life entirely to science, passing away at age 104.

Legacy

Inge Lehmann is best known for discovering Earth's inner core in 1936 by analyzing seismic wave data. Two key Earth boundaries are named after her: the Lehmann discontinuity between the inner and outer core (~5,100 km deep) and another in the upper mantle (~200 km deep). Despite initial resistance, her theory was later confirmed and became fundamental in geophysics.

She cofounded the Danish Geophysical Society and was recognized internationally with numerous honors, including the William Bowie Medal (1971) and the Medal of the Seismological Society of America (1977). The American Geophysical Union established the Inge Lehmann Medal in her honor in 1995 to celebrate outstanding contributions to Earth's interior studies.

Lehmann also left a symbolic legacy as a pioneering woman in a male-dominated field, famously noting the challenges she faced competing with "incompetent men."

Impact on the field

Lehmann's work revolutionized our understanding of Earth's internal structure by proposing a solid inner core within a liquid outer core. Her 1936 paper challenged the then-accepted notion of a fully liquid core and laid the foundation for modern seismology and geophysics.



Inge Lehmann

By improving methods to analyze seismic waves and their interactions with Earth's layers, Lehmann advanced techniques used to locate earthquake epicenters and study the planet's composition. Her collaboration with other geophysicists, such as Beno Gutenberg, helped identify seismic velocity changes in Earth's mantle.

Her research continues to influence geophysics, as reflected by the prestigious Inge Lehmann Medal, awarded to researchers furthering knowledge about Earth's mantle and core.

Fun facts

- 1. She competed against “incompetent men”.** Lehmann once said she had to compete with many “incompetent men in vain,” highlighting the gender biases she faced throughout her scientific career.
- 2. She lived to 104 years old.** Lehmann dedicated her entire life to science, living an extraordinary 104 years and contributing to her field well into old age.
- 3. A beetle species was named after her.** In 2015, a beetle species — *Globicornis (Hadrotoma) ingelehmannae* — was named in her honor, cementing her legacy in the scientific world.
- 4. She earned international recognition.** Lehmann was awarded honorary doctorates and gained international respect, particularly recognized by Columbia University's Lamont Geological Observatory.

Examples of her work

- **Discovery of Earth's Inner Core (1936):** Lehmann analyzed seismic wave data from earthquakes, particularly one in New Zealand (1929), and proposed a three-layer Earth model with a solid inner core.
- **Lehmann Discontinuity:** She identified two seismic boundaries, one between the inner and outer core (~5,100 km deep) and one in the upper mantle (~200 km deep).
- **Seismic Station Management:** Led the establishment and operation of Denmark's first seismic stations in Copenhagen and Greenland.
- **Research Collaboration:** Worked with Beno Gutenberg on the upper mantle velocity discontinuity.



Gerda Wegener

Gerda Marie Fredrikke Wegener (née Gottlieb) was born on March 15, 1886, in Hammelev, Denmark, into a conservative Lutheran family with Huguenot ancestry. She was the only surviving child of four siblings. Encouraged by her passion for art from a young age, she moved to Copenhagen to attend the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. In 1904, she married fellow art student Einar Wegener, who later transitioned and became known as Lili Elbe, one of the first people to undergo gender confirmation surgery.

The couple moved to Paris in 1912, where Gerda developed her signature style and gained acclaim. After Lili Elbe's death in 1931, Gerda remarried briefly, lived in Morocco, then returned to Denmark in 1938, where she died on July 28, 1940, at the age of 54, living in relative obscurity.

Legacy

Gerda Wegener is remembered as a groundbreaking artist who challenged early 20th-century gender norms and representations of women. Her work has gained renewed attention and admiration, especially following the 2015 film *The Danish Girl*, which brought her story to a global audience. In Denmark, institutions like the ARKEN Museum for Moderne Kunst have placed her prominently in art history with major exhibitions. Wegener's legacy is tied not only to her technical skill and distinctive Art Deco style but also to her role as a pioneer in queer and feminist art.

Impact on the Field

Wegener's art was revolutionary for its time, portraying women with confidence, eroticism, and power, often flipping the traditional "male gaze" by depicting her female subjects with admiration and agency. Her work challenged gender and sexual identity norms by including slender men and, most notably, her transgender partner Lili Elbe as her muse and model. She blended styles from Renaissance-inspired portraits to Art Nouveau and later Art Deco, creating illustrations that crossed the boundaries of fashion, eroticism, and social commentary. Her success at the 1925 World's Fair, where she won two gold medals and a bronze, demonstrated her influence in the Parisian art scene.

Fun Facts

1. She hid Lili's identity to protect her. Because of strict social norms, Gerda introduced Lili Elbe as Einar's "cousin" when she appeared in women's clothes, blending affection with discretion and navigating the complex social landscape of the time.



Gerda Wegener

2. She created bold “Lesbian Erotica” long before it was accepted. Gerda’s art pushed boundaries by celebrating gender fluidity and queer desire decades before these subjects were widely discussed, making her a true pioneer of progressive themes in art.

3. She was a leading fashion illustrator. Wegener’s work appeared in top magazines like Vogue and La Vie Parisienne, establishing her as a prominent figure in the glamorous Parisian art and fashion scene.

4. She won Major Awards at the 1925 Paris World’s Fair. Gerda’s talent earned her two gold medals and a bronze at the prestigious international event, cementing her reputation as a top artist of her generation.

5. Her later years were marked by financial struggles. After Lili’s death, Gerda struggled financially and survived by painting hand-decorated postcards, showing her resilience and commitment to art even in hardship.

6. Her life inspired the film The Danish Girl. The 2015 movie brought global attention to Gerda’s revolutionary art and extraordinary love story, introducing her to new audiences around the world.

Examples of Her Work

Wegener’s portfolio includes elegant, confident portraits of women often engaged in artistic and theatrical pursuits, painted in Renaissance, Art Nouveau, and Art Deco styles. Notable works feature her muse Lili Elbe in glamorous dresses and wigs, embodying seductive power. She also created erotic illustrations, glass mosaics, and fashion illustrations for major Parisian magazines. Her pieces were exhibited at the Salon des Humoristes, Salon des Indépendants, and the Salon d’Automne, with celebrated works from the 1925 World’s Fair earning top honors.



Karen Blixen

Karen Blixen, born Karen Christentze Dinesen on April 17, 1885, at Rungstedlund in Denmark, came from a wealthy and culturally engaged family. Her father, Wilhelm Dinesen, was a writer and military officer who died by suicide when Karen was ten, a loss that deeply affected her. She was strongly influenced by her maternal relatives, the Westenholz family, who were Unitarians and emphasized personal responsibility and moral values—ideas that subtly appear in her later writings.

She showed early artistic talent and studied art at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts between 1903 and 1906. She debuted as a writer in 1907 under the pseudonym "Osceola."

In 1914, she married her half-cousin Baron Bror von Blixen-Finecke and moved to Kenya, where they ran a coffee farm. The marriage ended in 1925, partly due to Bror's infidelities and financial mismanagement. During her time in Africa, she fell deeply in love with Denys Finch Hatton, an English aristocrat and pilot, whose sudden death in a plane crash in 1931 marked the end of her African years. The farm also failed financially, forcing her return to Denmark the same year. She lived at Rungstedlund for the rest of her life and died there in 1962.

Legacy

Karen Blixen is widely regarded as one of Denmark's most important authors and one of its most internationally recognized literary voices. Her works have been translated into multiple languages and studied globally. She was nominated several times for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Her legacy also lives on through Rungstedlund, now a museum dedicated to her life and work. In 2024, she was honored with a sculpture in Copenhagen by artist Rikke Raben.

Her impact was further cemented by film adaptations, most notably "Out of Africa" (1985), which won seven Oscars and was based on her autobiographical book *Den afrikanske farm*. Another film, *Babette's Feast* (1987), was based on one of her short stories and also won international acclaim.



Karen Blixen

Impact on the Field

Karen Blixen broke with the social realism and psychological trends of her time, creating a distinctive style rich in storytelling, myth, and existential themes. She wrote in English and later translated her works into Danish, often under the pseudonym Isak Dinesen.

Her stories question identity, fate, and human resilience. She explored topics like gender roles, the loss of sensuality, and the struggle against bourgeois norms.

But just as significant was her influence on the portrayal of Africa in Western literature. Blixen's years in Kenya (1914–1931) formed the heart of her most famous work, *Out of Africa* (1937). Through her eyes, readers encountered a romantic, almost mythical vision of colonial East Africa—a place of beauty, grandeur, and emotional depth.

She often cast herself as a mystic and storyteller, cultivating a persona that added a mythical dimension to her work. Many of her works are philosophical, asking deep existential questions without offering clear answers, inviting the reader into reflection.

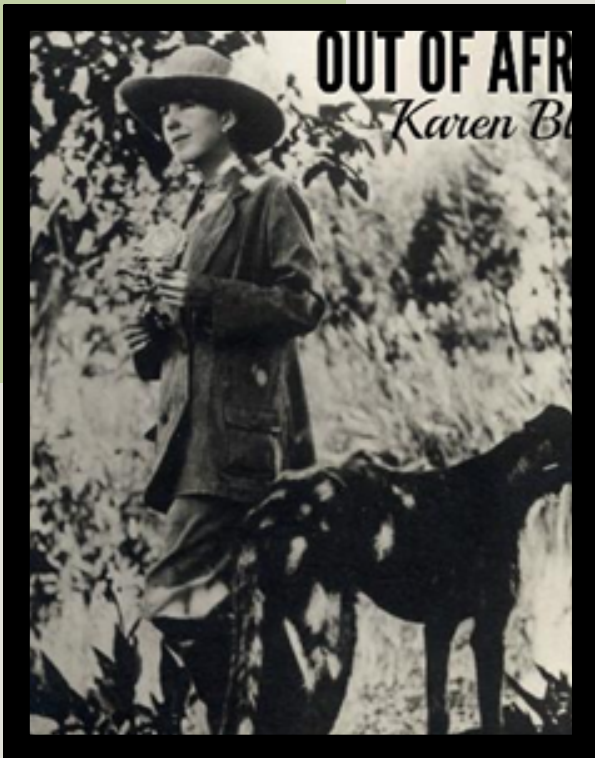
Fun Facts

1. She performed herself like a character. Karen Blixen consciously crafted her public image—she dressed in long gowns, smoked cigarettes from a holder, and spoke in a dramatic, almost theatrical tone. She described herself as a “storyteller-witch” and loved the mystique she created around herself.

2. She wrote in English first — then translated herself. Even though Danish was her mother tongue, Blixen wrote her major works first in English, then translated them into Danish herself. She believed writing in a foreign language gave her more artistic freedom.

3. Syphilis treatment destroyed her health. She was treated for syphilis with mercury and arsenic, which were standard at the time—and highly toxic. This treatment severely damaged her body, especially her digestive system, and left her in chronic pain for most of her life.

4. She ate almost nothing for the last 30 years of her life. Due to the effects of the syphilis treatments, Karen Blixen could barely eat. For decades, she lived on small amounts of oysters, champagne, and grapes—a diet as strange and elegant as she was.



Karen Blixen

5. She fell in love with a man who refused to marry her. Her great love, Denys Finch Hatton, refused to marry her, preferring a nomadic bachelor life. Still, she adored him. After he died in a plane crash in 1931, she kept his memory alive as a central figure in her writing—and her mythology.

6. She went on safari with african tribesmen and aristocrats. In Kenya, she lived a double life: one day hunting with British aristocrats, the next sitting around campfires with Somali and Kikuyu tribesmen who told her traditional stories—some of which influenced her own writing.

7. She was a Nobel Prize contender—but never won. Blixen was nominated several times for the Nobel Prize in Literature, and many expected her to win. But she never did, possibly because of her aristocratic and non-political style in an era of realism and protest literature.

8. Meryl Streep portrayed her in a film—which she would have hated. *Out of Africa* (1985) made Blixen world-famous posthumously. But many biographers believe she would have disliked the romanticized portrayal of herself, which stripped away her mystical persona and made her seem sentimental.

9. She once said: “All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story”. This quote reflects her entire worldview. For Blixen, storytelling was survival—a way to transform tragedy, loss, and loneliness into something meaningful and beautiful.

Examples of her work

Karen Blixen's literary debut came with *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934), written in English and later translated into Danish as *Syv fantastiske fortællinger*. These stories, marked by gothic atmosphere and philosophical depth, established her as a major literary figure. Her most celebrated work followed in 1937—*Out of Africa*, a memoir of her years on a coffee farm in Kenya. Its lyrical tone and haunting reflections on colonial life made it a classic, later adapted into the Oscar-winning film starring Meryl Streep. During World War II, Blixen wrote *Winter's Tales* (*Vinter-Eventyr*, 1942), a beloved collection among Danish readers. One standout story, *The Dreaming Child*, blends realism and poetic symbolism. In 1944, under the pseudonym Pierre Andrézel, she published *The Angelic Avengers* (*Gengældelsens veje*), an allegorical novel written during the German occupation, offering a veiled critique of oppression. Her later works took on more spiritual and reflective tones. *Last Tales* (*Sidste fortællinger*, 1957) gathered stories meditating on mortality and the role of the artist. In 1952, she wrote *Babette's Feast*, a poignant tale of generosity and transformation through art, later adapted into an acclaimed Danish film. Her final book, *Shadows on the Grass* (*Skygger på græsset*, 1960), revisited her African years



Karen Jeppe

Karen Jeppe was born on July 1, 1876, in Gylling, Denmark. Raised in a middle-class family with a strong educational background, she was profoundly influenced by her Grundtvigian Christian upbringing, which emphasized humanity and compassion. In 1903, after being deeply moved by a lecture on the plight of Armenians under Ottoman rule, she joined the German Orient Mission in Urfa (now Şanlıurfa, Turkey) to teach orphaned Armenian children.

Fluent in six languages, she quickly became the head of the orphanage, demonstrating exceptional organizational skills and dedication to her mission. During World War I, she remained in Urfa, providing shelter and aid to Armenians fleeing persecution. In 1918, she returned to Denmark for a brief respite but resumed her humanitarian work in 1921, this time in Aleppo, Syria, where she worked under the League of Nations to rescue Armenian women and children from enslavement. She passed away on July 7, 1935, in Aleppo, Syria, at the age of 59.

Legacy

Karen Jeppe is celebrated as a national hero in Armenia and is affectionately known as the "Danish Mother of Armenians." Her unwavering commitment to the Armenian people during their darkest hours has left an indelible mark on history. In recognition of her efforts, she was posthumously awarded the Royal Medal of Merit in Gold in 1927. Her legacy lives on through the establishment of six Armenian farming colonies in Syria, which continue to support the descendants of those she helped. Additionally, the Karen Jeppe College in Aleppo stands as a testament to her dedication to education and the Armenian community.

Impact on the Field

Karen Jeppe's work transcended traditional missionary efforts; she was a pioneering humanitarian and advocate for women's rights. Through her role as a League of Nations commissioner, she facilitated the liberation of approximately 2,000 Armenian women and children from forced marriages and slavery. Her initiatives in Aleppo included establishing orphanages, schools, and vocational training centers, empowering women and children to rebuild their lives. Her efforts in creating sustainable communities through agricultural colonies provided a foundation for the displaced Armenian population to thrive in the post-genocide era.



Karen Jeppe

Fun Facts

1. She was fluent in six languages.

Karen Jeppe quickly mastered Armenian, Turkish, and Arabic upon arriving in Urfa, in addition to Danish, German, and French. Her linguistic ability helped her build deep trust with local communities and navigate complex political landscapes.

2. She hid refugees in her own home. During the Armenian genocide, Jeppe risked her life by sheltering over twenty Armenian refugees—including her foster son Misak and his wife—inside her house on the outskirts of Urfa, knowing discovery could mean execution for all.

3. She helped found six farming colonies. In the aftermath of the genocide, Jeppe played a crucial role in establishing six agricultural settlements for Armenian widows and children near Aleppo. These colonies became self-sustaining havens for displaced families.

4. She was known as "The mother of Armenians". Among Armenians in Syria and beyond, Karen Jeppe became a beloved figure, remembered as a national heroine. Her compassion and determination earned her a revered nickname that lives on to this day.

5. A college was named in her honor. In 1946, the Armenian community in Aleppo established the Karen Jeppe Armenian College, an educational institution still bearing her name and continuing her mission of support through learning.

Examples of Her Work

Karen Jeppe's humanitarian efforts were multifaceted and impactful. In Urfa, she not only taught orphaned Armenian children but also organized workshops and agricultural training, fostering self-sufficiency among the community. During the Armenian Genocide, she provided shelter to refugees, including hiding them in her home to protect them from deportation. In Aleppo, she established orphanages and schools, and through her position with the League of Nations, she facilitated the rescue of 2,000 women and children from enslavement. Her collaboration with local Bedouin leaders enabled the establishment of Armenian farming colonies, providing displaced families with land and a means to rebuild their lives.



Czech Republic





Eliška Junková, icon of women's car racing

Eliška Junková, née Alžběta Pospíšilová, was born on 16 November 1900 in Olomouc and died on 5 January 1994 in Prague. She was not only one of the first women to make a name for herself in motor racing, but also one of the most successful female racers to rival the best male racers of her generation.

From a young age, Eliška had an interest in technology and automobiles, which was quite unusual for a woman in the early 20th century. However, after her marriage to engineer and car racer Čeněk Junk, her interest quickly turned into a professional passion. The experienced racer trusted Eliška from the start, and suggested she sit by his side as a navigator - and they won a gold medal in their first race together. A year later, Eliška was racing on her own in a car built by French designer Ettore Bugatti - and immediately won the top prize. The enthusiastic racer was not deterred by discriminating criticism that winning car races should not belong to a woman, the positive and celebratory reactions clearly overwhelmed the negative and limiting stereotypes. From then on, she won race after race and her fame grew.

The peak of her career came in the second half of the 1920s. In 1928, she became the first woman to finish the famous Targa Florio race in Sicily - one of the world's toughest road races. In competition with experienced male drivers, she led the race in her class, and despite complications such as having to stop with a smoking engine and run into a stream to get water for the radiator, she finished fifth overall, stunning the motoring world. Her technical skill, courage and endurance earned her significant international respect.

However, at the height of her professional career, Eliška Junková's career came to an abrupt end when her husband tragically died the following year during his participation in the German Grand Prix. Although she never returned to racing, she continued to promote motoring and encourage women in technical fields. She was also involved in the construction of the Masaryk Circuit in Brno, which was also driven by Enzo Ferrari. She recalled her passion in the book *My Memory is a Bugatti*, which documents not only her life but also the development of motoring in the interwar period.



Marie Tumlířová , pioneer of Czech science and women's emancipation

Marie Tumlířová, née Kuklová, was born on 9 June 1889 in Hradec Králové as one of six children. Although her father, the lawyer JUDr. Matěj Kukla, discouraged her from a “male” profession and imagined a more stereotypical female role for his daughter, Marie asserted herself and became the first woman in the Czech lands and the first woman in Central Europe to receive a doctorate in technical sciences.

She received this title in 1921 after graduating in agricultural engineering from the Czech Technical University in Prague and then taking the rigorous examination at Charles University. Her rigorous thesis, entitled Numerical ratios of the blood cells of the domestic chicken, was professionally recognised and contributed to the development of scientific knowledge in the field of agriculture.

During her studies she met Bohuslav Tumlíř, also an agricultural engineer, whom she later married and together they took care of a large number of farm animals. However, that was hardly her only occupation. She spent six days a week as a commissioner at the Ministry of Education and National Awareness. In the meantime, she also managed to contribute to the Technology in the Home column of Woman and Home (Žena a domov) magazine, where she advised housewives on how to deal with farmstead, so they could have time for self-education and culture. She also actively promoted the electrification of villages.

Tumlířová was very active in the field of women's emancipation and social issues. She was a member of several women's associations, including the Association of University-Educated Women, where she became president in 1925. In the association she negotiated, in cooperation with a foreign organization of the same name, scholarships and valuable foreign experience for gifted female students without sufficient support, so that they would have a better chance of obtaining employment than men, who were still favored. In 1934, she was elected to the National Assembly as a member of the Agrarian Party, where she focused on rural issues, agriculture and the status of women. As the war approached, women began to lose their hard-won jobs as their positions became available to men evicted from the Sudetenland. Married women in the civil service lost their jobs and so did Marie Tumlířová. So she went to the family farm, where she devoted herself to her beloved animals.



Marie Tumlířová , pioneer of Czech science and women's emancipation

In 1948, however, with the advent of the communist regime, collectivisation of agriculture was promoted and private farmers became enemies of the state. Marie, her husband and children therefore decided to emigrate and head into the dark night forest towards the border. After overcoming all obstacles, the family settled in Paris and later in Switzerland.

Even abroad, however, Marie did not slack off. She wrote for expatriate magazines, worked in exile organisations and prepared her own programme for Radio Free Europe. She was such a strong critic of the communist regime that a Czech agent was sent abroad to kidnap her, but without success. Marie fought for human rights until her death in 1973.



SANY, graffitiwriter, filmmaker, women's and human rights activist

Sany was born in 1986 in Prague. Inspired by the traditional "New York School" graffiti lettering style, she began writing her name "Sany" in 2002. She is now a well-known figure in the global street art scene and a member of two international all-women graffiti crews, "PUFF" and "PMS." Sany has traveled the world, leaving her art in cities such as New York City, Rio de Janeiro, Cape Town, Amman, Sydney, Bangkok, Moscow or Mexico City

As an artist, Sany focuses on supporting women and minorities and advocating their rights. Through her work, she creates a platform for these groups to share their voices. Her art often incorporates elements of activism that highlight issues such as gender inequality, violence, and stereotypes. These projects aim to build stronger communities and promote mutual solidarity. However, she is open to pursuing more commercial projects if they align with her artistic vision and respect her work as an artist. For example, in 2018, she became the face and designer of the global graffiti campaign "Hidden Classic" for Reebok and Montana Cans. The campaign was shot in West Hollywood alongside numerous superstars, including Ariana Grande and Gigi Hadid.

Sany's work also includes filmmaking. Her documentary film "Girl Power" from 2016 captured the global emancipation of women in graffiti, becoming part of graffiti history and inspiring women worldwide to pursue their dreams. Currently, she is working on two other film projects. Sany also organizes various events and teaches graffiti and street art classes globally.

Despite the challenges of having a young daughter at home, she is still active and continues to prove that regardless of gender or where you come from, one can achieve their dreams if they want to. While she still travels for work, Sany is currently based in Prague and Berlin.



Vítězslava Kaprálová, the first Czech conductor and composer

Vítězslava Kaprálová was a Czech composer and conductor whose short life left a lasting mark on Czech and European music of the 20th century. She was born on 24 January 1915 in Brno into a musical family - her father was the composer Václav Kaprál, her mother was a teacher and singer. From an early age she showed exceptional musical talent, and at the age of nine she surprised her parents when she composed her first song.

Despite her background in a musical family, her father disapproved of her studying music composition as a woman.

Together with her mother, however, she pushed through the study of music.

Vítězslava was admitted to the Brno and then Prague Conservatoire. In September 1930 she became the first woman to study music composition and conducting in Czechoslovakia. Her unprecedented success even attracted the attention of the media. A few years later, she was conducting her most successful composition, the Military Symphony, before President Edvard Beneš. However, she first had to convince the master musicians of the Czech Philharmonic to work with her. The orchestra had never before been conducted by a woman, let alone one barely twenty years old. The music, however, was spectacular, as was the performance of a twenty-year-old female conductor in front of a hundred-headed orchestra.

She soon enjoyed the same acclaim in Paris and London, where, under her direction, the Military Symphony, performed by the famous BBC Orchestra, stunned discerning juries and audiences around the world. During this time she studied in Paris with Bohuslav Martinů, but international success was quickly overshadowed by the arrival of the Nazis in Czechoslovakia, which made it impossible for her to return home. During the difficult period when she had to adjust to life abroad, she met her future husband, the writer Jiří Mucha, who, like her, was unable to return to his homeland.

Her husband enlisted in the Foreign Legion and not long afterwards Vítězslava again developed her lung problems. There was no time for the planned operation in Paris due to the arrival of the Nazi troops. Her husband Jiří quickly took her to Montpellier, where they were to go into hiding together, but after a difficult journey, Vítězslava died at the age of only 25. To this day, however, she remains the best known and most performed Czech composer.



Bosnia and Herzegovina





Mica Todorović: Let the Paintings Speak

A girl sits on a swing, one hand resting on her chest, the other seemingly holding on. Her breasts are small, hips firm and solid, legs strong, with feet disappearing into tangled shrubbery... legs that don't yet seem ready for the swing's flight. Her face is round, calm, serene, with delicate and gentle features. Her hair is blonde, perhaps reddish. A cat is on the apple tree, playful, tensely poised on a severed branch; beside the girl's legs is a white dove looking at her curiously.

Some fish-like shape floats near the girl, puzzling us... one apple is "caught" mid-fall, a few lie on the ground. All rendered in earthy, muted tones, everything blending into everything else. You think of Matisse, or early Renaissance masters, yet the painting remains enigmatic. You lean on the symbolism of the cat (independence, femininity), the white dove (innocence), the apple (Eve), but things don't get much clearer. Meanings slip away, what remains is the gentle flow of color, warmth of tone and expression, a sense of intimacy and fairytale charm. This is "The Swing" by Mica Todorović. A painting that will captivate, confuse, and ultimately exhilarate you—if you're lucky enough to ever see it.

Independence of the creative spirit. Consistency. Non-belonging. Renunciation. These are some associations I have with Mica Todorović, arguably the most renowned and respected visual artist of Bosnia and Herzegovina. She is one of the rare artists in our history to whom this society has at least partially—though by no means sufficiently—repaid its debt. Unlike many other female artists who fared much worse in gaining public recognition (Adela Behr Vukić, Lujza Kuzmić Mijić, Iva Despić Simonović, Rajka Merćep...), Mica at least has a street named after her in Sarajevo, albeit a tucked-away but beautiful one. You can also see her face, thanks to a bust in front of the Academy of Fine Arts.

Mica Todorović was the first in so many things that it became impossible for Bosnia and Herzegovina's memory—typically dismissive of women's legacies—to ignore her. She pushed into spaces where women scarcely had access, documented, founded institutions, taught. And most importantly: she created. Always with complete independence, self-sufficiency, distance, within a niche she carved for herself and guarded fiercely.

She was an original figure, a strong and firm personality. She rarely spoke about herself and avoided cameras. If we had to pick one of her statements as her motto, let it be the one she reportedly told curious journalists year after year, possibly with mild irritation: "Let my paintings speak for me."

So, let's listen to them.



Mica Todorović: Let the Paintings Speak

Born as Mileva^[1] in Sarajevo in 1897, she came from the family of a district prefect, or as it was then said, a K. und K. (Imperial and Royal) official—Petar Pera Todorović. Her father had moved to Sarajevo from Pančevo and married Jelka from the old Bosnian Savić family. They were well-off, and there is evidence that visual art was highly valued in her family; in one interview, Mica mentioned

her father's school friendship with the painter Uroš Predić, which partly explains why her parents didn't oppose her decision to study art at a time when that was very unusual for a young woman. It seems her family supported her artistic ambitions—a crucial factor in that era.

At the time, the artistic life in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia revolved around three centers: Zagreb, Belgrade, and Ljubljana. European avant-garde influences were strongly felt, especially in Zagreb, which Mica eventually chose. There was a weariness with the old, a surge of energy from the new—both in the visual arts and other fields, and the revolutionary impulse was growing stronger. We know little about Mica's childhood, except her own testimony that she drew well from an early age and that she once vacillated between her two loves: literature and painting. But it is well documented how important Roman Petrović was to her—probably the first to notice her talent and encourage her to pursue further study. Returning from studies in Budapest, Krakow, and Zagreb, full of the latest impressions from European art, Roman gave Mica the push she needed—perhaps during a chance encounter on a Sarajevo street. Let's picture it: two young artists in passionate, hours-long conversation, perhaps poring over Kandinsky's "Concerning the Spiritual in Art" in its original German^[1]. Or a brief street encounter—perhaps a slightly arrogant young artist encouraging the timid, one-year-younger girl...

And a decisive sentence: "Well then, become a painter!"^[2]

At the time Mica chose her path, painting was gaining momentum even in Sarajevo. "The euphoria of the post-war years, accompanied by many exhibitions and fueled by artists returning to the country, a few collectors, and art lovers, would soon fade with the withdrawal of foreign capital from war-exhausted Bosnia."^[1] Still, the new was happening elsewhere. Surrealism, Dadaism, and Zenitism offered a visual poetics of resistance to traditional views of art, dominant canons, and bourgeois institutions.



Mica Todorović: Let the Paintings Speak

“Avant-garde movements in Yugoslavia were international in orientation and based on interdisciplinary language and almost revolutionary behavior. Young artists advocated redefining cultural and artistic, political, scientific, and technological progress.”^[1]

She began her studies in 1920 at the Higher School of Arts and Crafts, soon to be renamed the Academy of Fine Arts. She studied under Ferdo Kovačević, Bela Čikoš, and most extensively under the art historian, outstanding artist, and dedicated pedagogue Ljubo Babić.^[2]

He had the greatest influence on her: “Once he gave us a still life to paint and explained what we should see. As he spoke, I noted what I saw, because my vision was different. When I told him that, he said: ‘Paint as you see it. That’s all that matters.’”

At the Academy, she studied portrait, nude, and still life, mastering craft, sense of order and harmony, disciplined application of rules. “In the final certificate dated June 30, 1926, Ljubo Babić wrote: ‘Excellent in work. Great diligence and talented mastery of painting tasks. Serious drawing preparation shows that Miss Mica Todorović has all the conditions for independent artistic work.’”^[1]

^[1]In the only surviving photo from her student days, we see a young woman with a cloche hat and a checkered coat, dressed in the flâneur fashion of the 1920s. Strip away the era’s fashion—the loud pattern, oversized hat—and what remains is her serious expression and piercing gaze from under her bangs, revealing the determination and diligence of a girl eager to learn, to succeed—to be taken seriously. No trace of provincial uncertainty. Just pure focus. In Ivan Tabaković’s portrait from 1923, we see a similar figure—burdened by fads of time, but retaining the same sharp gaze and authoritative expression, plus restless hands in her lap, perhaps more from impatience than insecurity? However, the “Self-Portrait” (1929/30) shows a confident artist in angular lines, strict male shirt, and a bold bob haircut—an almost androgynous embodiment of the so-called “New Woman”, a self-aware artist who presents herself as such.^[1]

Painting for Mica wasn’t just about learning and mastering rules—it was also a space for exploration, experimentation, and finding her own voice. A crucial part of that process were her classmates—all major Yugoslav artists, among whom she was the only woman: Krsto Hegedušić, Ivan Tabaković, Oton Postružnik, Leo Junek, Kamilo Ružička, Omer Mujadžić, and others. She was closest with the first three.



Mica Todorović: Let the Paintings Speak

The group regularly met at the Esplanade Hotel in Zagreb to debate modern art's direction and purpose. One of the most important questions was the extent to which art and artists should be socially engaged. Though Mica eagerly participated, she avoided politics —“because she found it deathly boring,” as Azra Begić put it.

In one class photo, she sits at the center, legs crossed, relaxed and smiling. She was clearly respected in that group, and her being the only woman wasn't an issue—at least not in that safe space.

The Esplanade group formed the “Zemlja” (Earth) artists' association in 1929—the first of its kind in Croatia. Mica declined Krsto Hegedušić's invitation to join. This marked the emergence of her independent spirit that wouldn't commit to programs or groups in art. Some art historians call this “passivity” or a “participant-observer” position, but it was a conscious distancing that shaped her individualism—and perhaps contributed to her somewhat marginal place in art history. Still, she shared many values with Zemlja: art should serve society, critique injustice, fight against imported styles, dilettantism, and art for art's sake (*l'art pour l'art*). Inspired by local traditions and folklore, Zemlja advocated for democratizing art.^[1]

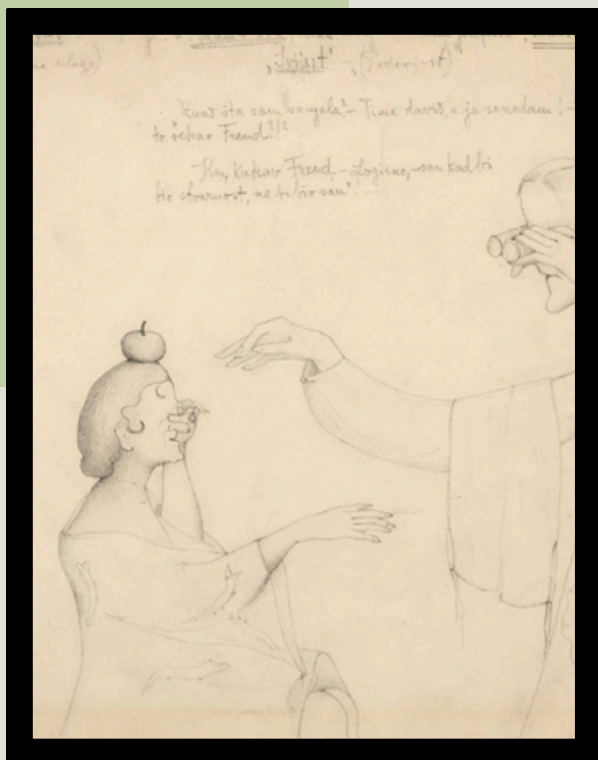
Architect Drago Ibler writes in the Zemlja manifesto:

“One must live the life of one's time. One must create in the spirit of one's time. Contemporary life is imbued with social ideas, and questions of the collective are dominant. The artist cannot resist the will of the new society and stand outside the collective. Because art is an expression of one's view of the world. Because art and life are one.”^[2]

Among the important influences was certainly social literature, led by Miroslav Krleža, who himself wrote relevant literary criticism and whose authority in the general artistic field was crucial for young creators. Thanks perhaps precisely to Krleža, among others, the greatest influence on the Zemlja group was exerted by the German painter, graphic artist, and cartoonist Georg Grosz, whose texts were reproduced in politically progressive publications. This influence was solidified through the collective exhibition “German Contemporary Art” (Zagreb and Belgrade, 1931), followed by Grosz's solo exhibition (1932, Zagreb), as well as solo and group exhibitions in Zagreb where works by Frans Masereel and Käthe Kollwitz—artists with similar poetic and ethical aspirations—could also be seen.



Mica Todorović: Let the Paintings Speak



The Zemlja members also resisted “foreign courses,” meaning traditional artistic tendencies, which they saw as reflections of “imperialist art.” Instead, they sought inspiration in local tradition and folk art, which was reflected in a kind of primitivist expression. This approach fit perfectly with the idea of liberating art from the shackles of elitism and democratizing it so that ideas of social transformation could flow freely to the broadest layers of society.

Yet, in modern retrospectives, Mica is nearly erased from Zemlja’s history. Although she exhibited with them in Ljubljana in 1930, she is omitted from retrospectives and publications.^[1] Ivana Udovičič noted: “She witnessed the most important events in contemporary visual art, but her passive, observer-participant position resulted in her never having a clearly defined role in them.” Her name thus stays in the margins, appearing only in footnotes. Her contact with major players in socially engaged art is now framed as “private,” although they clearly exchanged significant ideas.^[2]

This erasure of women’s contributions is no surprise. Still, the relationship between Mica and Zemlja is now being reevaluated.^[3] For example, she often referenced Hegedušič’s visit to Paris and his horror at seeing WWI amputees—that memory moved her deeply and shaped several of her drawings.

From this period comes her cycle of 16 drawings made between 1929 and 1933—socially engaged, grotesque caricatures very much in Zemlja’s and George Grosz’s style. She first exhibited them as a guest at the 1930 Zemlja exhibition in Ljubljana. (“I wasn’t a member, but my friends—Hegedušič, Tabaković, Junek—practically forced me to exhibit,” she told one journalist.)^[4]

The drawings, in pencil on paper, are stripped down, relying on line and volume. Political or not, these were deeply political works. Caricatures like the president of the animal protection society feasting on meat, or Berta Mondenka awkwardly playing with a long pearl necklace, expose the hypocrisy of bourgeois life. Some feature mythological themes (Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve, Mystic), or sharp critiques of society, like Philistines, Hero Before and After Use—combining visuals with textual irony.

“Adam and Eve”, as she put it: “he feminized, she like an asp.” A proto-feminist take on gender relations, subtly engaging with Freud’s ideas. The woman, with an apple on her head, covers her eyes with one hand and reaches out with the other. The man, upright, holds binoculars and reaches toward her. She’s “the woman-dragon”—mythologized and exoticized—while he, “Professor Present,” tries to analyze her.



Mica Todorović: Let the Paintings Speak

Art historians agree these grotesques—or “tricks”, as one exhibit cleverly called them—are a unique episode in her work. She would not return to this kind of political critique. But they remain fascinating, especially today when art is again seen as a critical, emancipatory force. Ironically, this cycle was long hidden from the public. Azra Begić, in the 1980 retrospective catalog, noted they were shown again in October 1936 in Sarajevo’s National Theatre foyer.^[1]

If we set aside the grotesques, Todorović did not paint for seven years. “I just didn’t paint. I don’t know why. I only drew—grotesques attracted me then. They were my personal commentary; each one served a specific metaphor.” Perhaps she was disentangling accumulated -isms to find her own voice. Sanita Vujković noted a tension between realism (typical of Zemlja) and intimate, romantic timelessness—visible in “The Swing” and works like *Nude with Pitcher*, *Waitress*, *Susanna and the Elder*. In addition to the *Zemlja* exhibition in Ljubljana, Mica’s works were shown in an exhibition of Yugoslav painting and sculpture in England, organized by Milan Ćurčin, editor of *Nova Evropa*. Her work received special praise that carries symbolic weight today. English critic Ernest Collings, in a letter to Ćurčin, included photographs and impressions from the exhibition, especially highlighting how much he liked “Todorović’s masterful drawing *Girl Sitting*”: “Send my regards to Meštrović and, if possible, tell Todorović I enjoy his work.”^[1] That Collings assumed the artist was male says a lot about the norms and understanding of art at the time—despite avant-garde upheavals, the art world remained thoroughly patriarchal.

When she returned to Sarajevo in 1932, Mica found a budding cultural scene fueled by new ideological and aesthetic trends. Her old friend Roman Petrović was active, along with a dynamic group of young artists like Vojo Dimitrijević, Ismet Mujezinović, and Danijel Ozmo. However, Sarajevo lacked a developed art scene, with few institutions or exhibition spaces apart from the National Museum’s hall and the National Theatre foyer. It was a cultural periphery.

Mica joined the few collective exhibitions and supported young artists and intellectuals influenced by progressive, often Marxist ideas. Many had studied abroad and now tried to apply what they had learned to a city still reeling from WWI, economic crisis, and provincial conservatism. One initiative was the formation of Collegium Artisticum, an interdisciplinary collective of painters, musicians, dancers, actors, critics, architects, engineers, and art lovers. Combining leftist ideals, avant-garde methods, and folk art, it soon became Sarajevo’s cultural powerhouse.



Mica Todorović: Let the Paintings Speak

Again, history repeated itself—although Mica supported and exhibited with Collegium Artisticum, she never became an official member. This mirrors her earlier pattern of voluntary distance, shaping her individuality and possibly contributing to her marginalization. For several years after graduation, she didn't paint at all. Instead, she focused on grotesques—perhaps a preparatory phase for more profound dives into motifs later.

During this time, she also published a valuable essay, “A Glimpse at Bosnia and Painting” (1939), in which she re-discovers the region that shaped her through the painter's eye:

"Artistically diverse, never banal, it first attracted foreign painters, then us," she writes. "True art must reflect the land, life, nature, and circumstances—and Bosnia, despite its immense artistic diversity, remains largely unpainted. Poverty here is accepted as fate; the poor are humble, without protest. Roofs are black and damp, roads muddy, with skinny cats and thoughtful people dragging along. Dark hills eternally covered in mist and clouds. Then rain and humidity. That's Bosnia—one and only. In sunshine, it briefly turns into a shimmering image of light, radiance, and color, especially in early spring. Dark corners vanish, replaced by a vibrating landscape where the air shimmers with lightness."

Despite the bleakness of reality—which her brush and pencil continued to document with realism—Mica chose to see light and color, brilliance and ease, foreseeing a future for a country that “is not a land of painting's past but of its future—wild and gentle at once.”^[1]

When she finally returned to painting, she focused on intimate themes: still lifes, landscapes, figures, and what Azra Begić called “interior-external hybrids,” where outside light penetrates inside, blurring boundaries. Especially moving are portraits like *Gypsy Girl* (1938/40), *Young Man* (1938/39), *Bosnian Girl* (1940), and *Bosnian Girl – Nude* (1940/41). Having weathered the turbulence of -isms and self-discovery in her twenties, Mica now painted authentically, guided solely by her creative instinct. She was drawn to the oppressed, the discarded—often finding inspiration in children from a nearby Roma settlement.

Had her female figures been able to speak, they would undoubtedly testify that Mica's brush freed them from the male gaze, from objectification. They are authentic female visions, rendered in a unique blend of sober realism and gentle impressionism—natural, unidealized. Critics observed:



Mica Todorović: Let the Paintings Speak

"A striking and unambiguous visual demystification of the body replaced earlier idealized images, which were composed and arranged to showcase the dominant presence of the nude female form. In Mica's paintings, the women are direct, without odes or pathos. What dominates is not their nudity, but the life within and the personality she so masterfully captured."^[1]

World War II disrupted Mica Todorović's artistic work in the most brutal way. She provided shelter to resistance fighters in her Sarajevo home, including prominent revolutionaries Avdo Humo and Svetozar Vukmanović Tempo. In 1942, she was arrested and sent first to Stara Gradiška concentration camp, then to camps in Germany and Austria. According to Dragana Tomašević, she testified that it was a neighbor who reported her to the Ustaše "as a Serb woman." At the time of her arrest, she was working on illustrations for Goethe's *Faust*.^[1] Thanks to her resourcefulness and knowledge of German, she was transferred to a labor camp in Germany, from which she eventually escaped to Belgrade, where she remained until the war's end.

After the liberation in 1945, she responded to the call of the State Commission for War Crimes to document the final victims of Ustaše terror—bodies floating in the Sava and Danube rivers. The result was the harrowing drawing cycle "The Last Victims of Jasenovac and Gradiška", in which she applied her full artistic skill to a deeply anti-war and humanitarian mission. She was the only artist to respond to the commission's call.

With a few swift strokes, she sketched contorted, tortured, mutilated bodies—faces fixed in death, recording the horror of fascism with devastating restraint. "Her torn lines, the bloated bodies, skeletons without flesh, fish-eaten corpses, hollow heads without eyes—this is the true face of fascism, deformed by the hand of a great witness."^[1] It is impossible to fathom her emotional state, having endured her own trauma, while watching boatmen pull corpses from the water. Still, she suppressed personal horror with professional detachment. Later, she published the essay "Through Prisons and Camps", ending her wartime story with dignity and truth. She never capitalized on her suffering, never used it for political gain. As Azra Begić recalled, she dismissed it all as "ordinary hardships."

After that—only light remained for Mica Todorović.



Mica Todorović: Let the Paintings Speak

After the war, Mica returned to Sarajevo and engaged in the sweeping postwar renewal of society. The fervent spirit of Yugoslav reconstruction revived cultural life even in Sarajevo's periphery. Her colleagues returned from the front—Vojo Dimitrijević, Ismet Mujezinović—and key initiatives were launched by prewar doyens like Roman Petrović.

This was a time of institution-building: the founding of the Association of Fine Artists of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ULUBiH) and the State School for Painting and Applied Arts in Sarajevo (today's High School of Applied Arts).

A true pioneer, Mica became one of ten founding members of ULUBiH, and one of the first visual arts educators in Bosnia and Herzegovina. "In our School of Painting and Applied Arts (...) we have such raw material that it will depend only on our abilities whether those immensely rich natural talents are developed," she said in an interview for "Nova žena", expressing the importance of her new teaching role. In the immediate postwar years, art faced strict demands: it was to re-educate the public in the spirit of socialism. Subject matter was restricted: struggle, youth work actions, rebuilding the country, heroic figures—what is now called socialist realism, portraying the idealized male and female workers with utopian gleams in their eyes. Mica never expressed resistance to this new era and its (yet another) ideological and stylistic revolution—after all, she had long resisted previous pressures to make art serve anything. Her first postwar works focused on the theme of labor, especially women workers, such as the cover illustration for the AFŽ (Women's Antifascist Front) magazine *Nova žena* (issue 19, 1946). The bodies are strong, maternal, tree-like—straining with the effort of postwar reconstruction. Yet her exploration beyond schools, movements, and ideologies never stopped. It emerged again once the grip of socialist realism began to loosen in the early 1950s. In fact, given her prewar and wartime merits, some say those ideological demands may never have fully applied to her. One art historian claimed that during the peak of socialist realism, Mica Todorović could paint whatever she wanted.^[1] Evidence? In 1949, she was the first to exhibit a female nude, stepping far from the worker's body tensed in effort. Apart from her wartime documentation for the War Crimes Commission, her postwar works contain no war, no bloodshed—but archival notes still mention a Party remark: "Of Western European formalist direction, but we are re-educating her!"^[2]



Mica Todorović: Let the Paintings Speak

Over time, the human figure gradually disappeared from her canvases, replaced by objects and landscapes—reflections of everyday beauty: the intimacy of a studio interior, empty cafés, urban and natural landscapes. Some of her early postwar canvases opened up again to vibrant color, airy and playful, even in works like *Ruin* (1945), overtaken by nature and gently testifying to human destruction, or the urban solitude of *Spring in Babić's Garden* (1948), shimmering under generous sunlight.

"Theme? What is a theme in painting? That's for literature, maybe for graphic art—but in painting, I can't stand storytelling. My paintings are my feelings—they come from my eye. I like a certain color—and there's the painting!"^[1]

This was her refrain in interview after interview. She seemed bored by standard journalistic questions and preferred to leave words to critics, theorists, or the occasional colleague able to articulate her work with inspiration.

One such colleague, Ismet Mujezinović, insightfully noted how central color—especially yellow—was to her vision: "It seems that, somewhere in her early youth, she swore to tame yellow—that unruly, mischievous little devil from the noble family of colors. And indeed, Mica succeeded like no one before her: in her works, yellow radiates effectively, though you can still sense the wiry temperament of the tamed beast."

Not everyone admired her apolitical introspection. Critic Nihad Agić observed: "It has long been noted—by critics and parts of the public—that the painting nurtured by this artist belongs mostly to the past, that it stands apart or merely on the margins of the historical current of art (...) The cult of the intimate and naively wistful, the monotony of interior settings, natural moods with their bright or somber chords—these are the elements from which this self-satisfied, exalted painting is built. In short: art without broader (and deeper!) communication with the world and contemporaneity." Yet even he confessed at the end that her paintings were hard to part with—"like anything that touches us deeply."^[2]

Mica Todorović had long drawn creative energy from travel. Her first trip to Italy after graduation enchanted her with the Florentine early Renaissance and shaped her early work. A later trip to Paris in 1962, during her mature years, opened another crucial phase in her art. The sketchbook she made there continued to inspire her canvases until her death. Her preferred technique became a combination of oil and pastel in varying proportions. Her earlier painting *Venice* (1959) marked the start of her so-called "white phase," in which she explored Dubrovnik, Počitelj, and the old neighborhoods of Sarajevo.



Mica Todorović: Let the Paintings Speak

In these cityscapes, the human figure recedes—if present at all, it becomes a blurred patch of color, nearly indistinguishable within the city's rich ecosystem. Walls and domes breathe color, reflections flicker from windows and shopfronts, outlines dissolve in a festival of light.

"Her opus still rests on counterpoint, intertwining two fundamental melodies: one gently lyrical, which critics routinely labeled 'feminine,' and another—surprisingly strong, sometimes raw, dramatic—not through external events (thematic layer), but through the tension within the plastic elements of the painting," wrote Azra Begić, pointing out the laziness of critics who relied on gendered readings in the absence of more refined understanding of her lyricism.

The 1970s brought Mica full public recognition. In 1975, she was elected to the Academy of Sciences and Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the Department of Literature and Arts, and in 1978, became a corresponding member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. She received nearly every major Yugoslav award: the Sixth of April Award of Sarajevo, the 27 July Award of BiH, the Banja Luka Salon Award, the ZAVNOBiH Award, the AVNOJ Award, the Order of Merit for the People with a Golden Star, and the Order of Labor with a Red Banner.

Yet she was never one to chase laurels. It was noted that she remained productive into old age, painting until her final breath.

The great 1980 retrospective curated by Azra Begić crowned her decades-long career and shaped how we see and remember Mica Todorović, one of the longest-lived and most respected artists of her time. Begić also played a part in Mica's final trick: unwilling to accept that she was born in the 19th century, Mica forced Begić to record her birth year as 1900 in the exhibition catalog instead of 1897—thus giving herself the last word in how her legacy would be remembered: as a woman and artist of the 20th century.



Mica Todorović: Let the Paintings Speak

Mica Todorović died in 1981. An unfinished painting remained on her easel, according to those close to her. She left behind an opus of 300 paintings and 100 drawings—a permanent contribution to the visual art of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Her legacy is one of stubborn independence, rejection of fads and collectives, authentic aesthetic exploration, and lifelong devotion to art as a calling. Whether as defiant avant-gardist, meditative witness of wartime horror, quiet observer of life, dedicated teacher, seeker of the perfect yellow hue—or something else altogether—the multifaceted Mica Todorović remains an indispensable milestone in Bosnian and Yugoslav art history.



Mira Jurić: In the Heart of Matter

The story of Mira Jurić is not just the story of a life dedicated to science, scientific discovery and progress, the founding of the institutions, and support for talent. It is also, along with all the above, a kind of litmus test for revealing the weaknesses of institutional memory in the states formed after the breakup of Yugoslavia – especially Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The closed nature of scientific communities, the weak interest in preserving institutional heritage, frequent historical changes, within which new political elites routinely erase and marginalize their predecessors, and, not least, the systemic and traditional suppression of women's contributions to science^[1] – these are just some of the reasons why the name Mira Jurić evokes only mild association among experts and zero recognition among laypeople. Saying this is logical and understandable because Bosnia and Herzegovina is not exactly a scientific power is a rather lazy line of thought – all the more so considering that Mira Jurić built her career when the country of her birth was part of Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia itself, of course, is not a scientific heavyweight either, but it was still relevant and important in the field of global science – far more so than any of its successor states today. Still, even then, like in any other country, it did not have an equal share of men and women in the natural sciences – although it must be admitted that it had progressed further down that path than some European democracies.

It probably also tells us something about the profound degradation of the intellectual relationship to the world today – a degradation that does not merely mean that a layperson in the natural sciences is unable to grasp its discoveries, which is to be expected in a field of such complexity such as particle physics. No, this points to something else entirely - our inability to appreciate achievements that are not revolutionary and do not bring a paradigm shift, but represent a cumulative contribution to knowledge or, figuratively speaking, add a missing piece to the puzzle, thereby contributing to the further advancement of the discipline. Today's media context cultivates a bias for flashy and groundbreaking discoveries, which are quite rare, leaving a lot of patient and arduous scientific work in the shadows.



Mira Jurić: In the Heart of Matter

But the fact that, as a society, we are more interested in conspiracy theories than in scientific understanding of the world does not mean that the name of Mira Jurić – experimental physicist, researcher at the Vinča Institute, professor and head at the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics in Belgrade, and one of the founders of physics as a science in this region – should be left in oblivion. This text is a modest contribution to that effort, which belongs to future generations.

It is telling that we cannot even be certain about the year of birth of Mira Jurić. Some sources mention 1916, while others say 1912.^[1] In the very few biographical notes that can be found about her, there is an empty space between her year of birth and the information that she completed high school in Zagreb, which a curious researcher can fill in only with imagination. The former vizier town immortalized in the famous chronicle by Nobel laureate Ivo Andrić had completely lost its administrative significance by that time, and during the Great War, when the heroine of our story was born, it remained in the relative safety of the deep hinterland, far from any direct war activity. However, the “exceptional geostrategic position”^[2] of Travnik may have spared it from direct war operations, but not from hunger, disease, or drought. Even though we know nothing about Mira’s earliest childhood, we would not be mistaken in assuming it was difficult, as evidenced by the fact that she would seek her secondary education at a Zagreb high school. It is not unlikely that the entire family moved to Zagreb in search of better economic opportunities. Still, although Mira continued to list Travnik, Bosnia and Herzegovina, as her place of birth throughout her life, nothing is known today about that period of her life; the connection to her homeland remains to be discovered by future researchers.

After graduating from the State and Girls' Real Gymnasium in Zagreb, Mira enrolled in the study of physics and mathematics at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb, which she completed in 1940, at the dawn of another world war. According to school records, we know that she completed the fourth grade with “excellent” and the other grades with “very good” marks, and that from the sixth grade (1931/32), she started using the name Ratimira^[3]. Apart from this scarce information, it is already necessary at this point to invoke a 'refrain' that will likely repeat throughout this text: not much is known about her youth in Zagreb or her student days. We can stretch our imagination and picture a student from the Bosnian provinces showing natural talent and intelligence, but also, perhaps, an awakening of a rebellious spirit and a search for own identity.



Mira Jurić: In the Heart of Matter

We do not know whether Ratimira was her baptismal name or a teenage impulse for uniqueness, given that Mira was by far the most common name in her school – in her class alone, there were four other Miras (which certainly says something about the naming culture for girls born during the war, but perhaps also about the specific humor of our heroine). But all of that is beyond the actual documents available.

However, if you flip through the old Yugoslav books, now of interest only to specialized historians, one can glean some insights about Mira from her student days. In the book “Women of Croatia in the National Liberation War,” a footnote states that before the war, Mira Jurić was “the president of the Junior section of university-educated women.” This refers to the Yugoslav branch of the International Federation of University Women (IFUW), founded in 1918 by Dean Virginia Gildersleeve (Barnard College, USA) and Professors Caroline Spurgeon (University of London) and Rose Sidgwick (University of Birmingham), aiming to promote “pacifism and cross-border cooperation.”^[1] The Yugoslav chapter was an excellent example of women’s organizing in the interwar period. The association protected “the professional interests of women, advocated for women’s advancement in the workforce, and demanded changes in civil law.”^[2] Most importantly, they shared feminist views and advocated for women’s suffrage. The Junior section was formed somewhat later to allow participation by students who had not yet graduated and it, too, was exceptionally socially active. In the book *Women of Croatia in the National Liberation War* we also find information that she was one of the prominent members of the Society for the Education of Women,^[3] which existed in Zagreb from 1937, and expanded its activities in 1940 and 1941 under the Communist Party of Yugoslavia directive. The Society was officially disbanded at the beginning of the occupation, but its illegal work continued in smaller groups, eventually forming the basis for the establishment of the Initiative Committee of the Antifascist Front of Women of Croatia (AFŽ) in 1941. Not much is known (again!) about Mira Jurić’s concrete engagement in these positions, but it is clear that, alongside cultural and educational work, the Society’s focus was on antifascist values. One does not need to be overly imaginative to conclude that this was the seed of Mira Jurić’s deeply transformative engagement, which would have enormous significance in the scientific community some decades later.



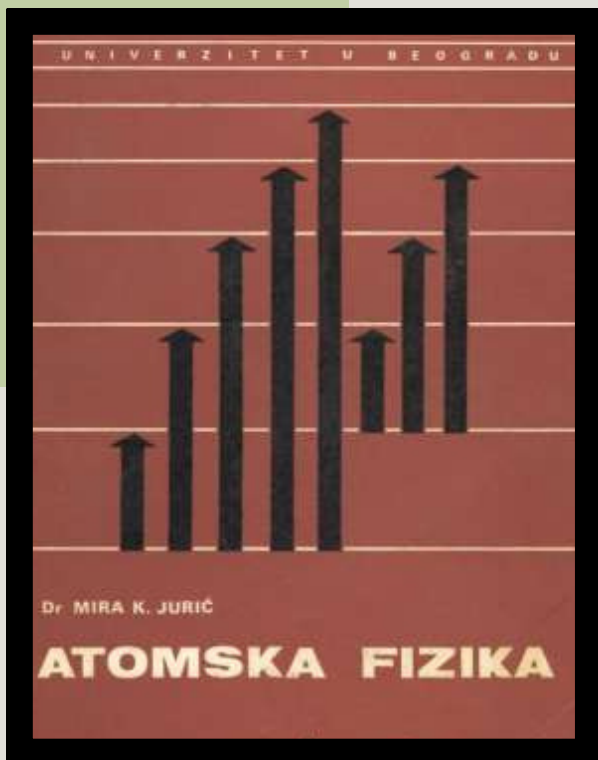
Mira Jurić: In the Heart of Matter

The fact that Mira Jurić was involved in the work of these groups indicates that she was eager to contribute to society as an antifascist and feminist intellectual years before the outbreak of the Second World War.

It is therefore no surprise that in 1942 she joined the Partisan movement, initially taking part in civilian medical activities, and the following year, as an instructor of ZAVNOH^[1], went to work in the Regional National Liberation Committee for Dalmatia (most likely active in Šibenik at the AFŽ committee, where she was in charge of organizing medical courses,^[2] but also mentioned in connection to the village of Preodac near Bosansko Grahovo^[3]).

Let us dwell a bit more on the period of the National Liberation War, which was undoubtedly an interesting chapter in Mira Jurić's life. In educational records, we find her in 1942 in Drežnica. A bit later, according to an article published in the Borba newspaper in 1943, she is located in Lika, specifically in the town of Otočac, where the First Partisan Gymnasium was established. In an interview for Borba, Vice Zaninović^[4], the first director of that wartime school, lists Mira Jurić among the teaching staff. The school, described by the inspired journalist as "an inseparable part of the people's revolution," opened in June 1943 with the goal of conducting "educational work based on the libertarian ideas and goals of the people's revolution." It employed "a well-selected partisan staff": "Teachers could not be just anyone, as they had to influence the youth and pass on partisan ideas in a region just vacated by the Italians, cleansed of Ustasha and Chetniks. The people hesitated to send their children to such a school. That is why some had to leave their units and take on teaching roles in the school – Marta Korošec Saili, Mira Jurić (...)"^[5] It was a school where the schoolyard was flown over by fighter planes, recesses interrupted by Italian machine-gun fire, but also a school where, in the words of Zaninović, the unusual, hardworking students, mature beyond their years, listened to Vladimir Nazor recite his famous poem titled "Joy." Finally, it was, as education historians proudly point out, the first school to issue diplomas with a red star.

With a bit of imagination, we can see, likely in the background, their natural sciences teacher, Mira Jurić, then in her late twenties or maybe early thirties.



Mira Jurić: In the Heart of Matter

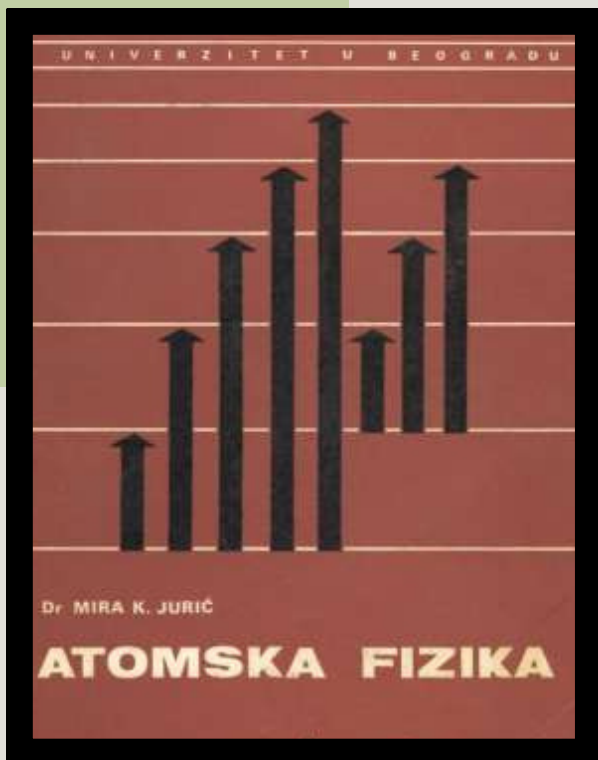
She must've been full of antifascist and partisan ideals, but also unwavering belief that education could save the world, even in the midst of the most destructive war humanity had ever faced. The work was done in harsh material conditions, without pay, passionately and devotedly, sometimes even under the open sky^[1]. The passionate speeches of Party members clearly emphasized that the task of partisan schools was to create the “new man,” but before that could happen, the teacher herself had to become one.

Zaninović writes that it was precisely in that school and similar ones that the foundations of the future school system were laid, to which Mira also contributed – not only as a teacher (as confirmed by a later report to ZAVNOH submitted by Zaninović himself, mentioning her name among the complex tasks of the Department of Education^[1]). Mira Jurić's name also appears in the Education Commission of 1945.

After the war, during which she gained immeasurably valuable teaching and combat experience, Mira Jurić continued building her scientific career by enrolling in postgraduate studies in Saint Petersburg, then Leningrad. Even at that time, she had already identified her primary scientific interests in the micro-world – from atomic and nuclear physics to a field that at the time was still terra incognita: particle physics. She completed her studies in 1948 and, almost immediately upon returning, secured a job as an assistant and researcher at the newly founded Institute for Nuclear Sciences in Vinča. She would spend eight years there (from 1949 to 1957). Professor Dragana Popović, author of the book *Women in Science – From Archimedes to Einstein*, when asked whether Mira's employment was aided by her partisan involvement, answered that Jurić “was certainly an exceptional expert, because Vinča at the

[1] Minutes from the meeting of ZAVNOH leadership at which the organization and current work of individual departments were discussed (22 December 1944). State Antifascist Council for the National Liberation of Croatia – Collection of Documents 1944 (From 10 May to 31 December). Institute for the History of the Workers' Movement of Croatia, Zagreb, 1975. time gathered top talents from all parts of former Yugoslavia.” “People were hired there based on merit; the institute brought together individuals who were, above all, outstanding,” Popović said.

A report from the magazine *Borba*, dating from that period, places Mira among the younger scientific staff at the ‘Boris Kidrič’ Institute (known today as the Vinča Institute).



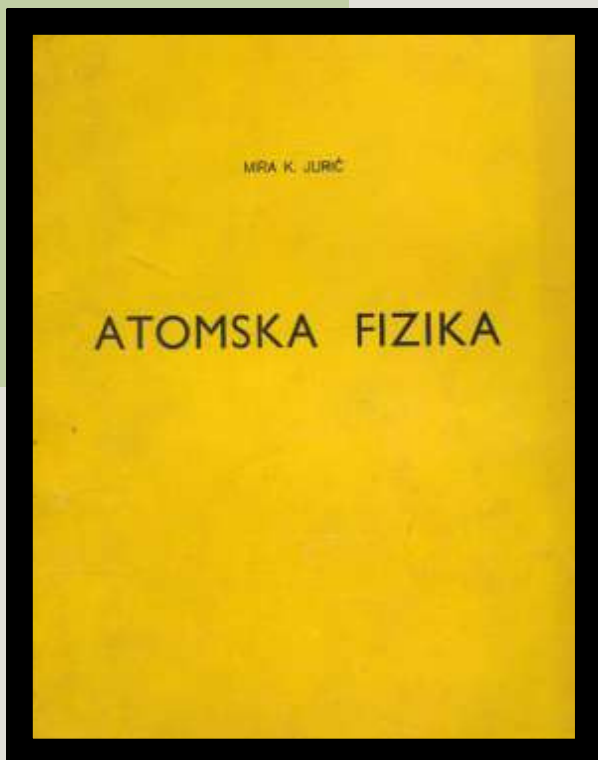
Mira Jurić: In the Heart of Matter

The enthusiastic lead of the article reads: In constant battle with atoms – devices that penetrate the heart of matter, preparations for the production of atomic energy. This was the time of postwar reconstruction and development, when not only Yugoslavia's nuclear hopes came to the fore, but also the zeal of young scientific forces. It was during this time that Dutch scientist Robert Valen was tasked to establish important research laboratories at “Boris Kidrič”.

Mira is shown next to a board on which “an untrained eye can see nothing but lines of varying sizes, directions, and heights, resembling scratches written by an unskilled child’s hand,” the journalist reports. She is credited as an assistant and ‘scientific worker’, explaining to the reporter that almost all particles discovered by science up to that point are traced there, as each leaves a different trail: “those straight lines were made by protons, and those caterpillar-like broken ones – by electrons.”^[1]

Mira Jurić defended her doctoral dissertation in February 1956 at the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics at the University of Belgrade, on the topic “Mechanisms of (d,p) reaction induced by 600 to 1400 keV deterons,”^[2] marking the beginning of her academic ascent. The following year, she established a course in atomic physics at the Department of Physics, while simultaneously developing her university career through teaching and research. She became an assistant at the Physics Institute (founded in 1961) in 1962, and soon after, the head of the High Energy Department at the Institute. This was a time when Yugoslavia began founding major scientific institutes, and physics was being developed “as a Yugoslav idea.”^[3]

The 1960s were a time of hard work in what was then the most exciting field of physics – elementary particle physics. Great funds were poured into scientific research, partly due to Yugoslavia's political aspirations to be “competitive” in nuclear geopolitics, but also due to genuine enthusiasm that nuclear physics could be the key to a better future. High-energy physics was a competitive and prestigious scientific field where major discoveries and paradigm shifts were expected. In 1965, we find Mira Jurić in the key position of leader of the elementary particle group that studied particle collisions and worked closely with CERN, which provided them with nuclear emulsions from detectors and enabled them to analyze collision processes^[4].



Mira Jurić: In the Heart of Matter

The following year, she went on a research visit to the Laboratory for Particle Physics in Strasbourg, marking the beginning of her many international collaborations. From this period date two photographs of Mira Jurić in her middle years, showing her welcoming, with other associates from the Institute of Physics, Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. In both photographs, her face is adorned with a reserved smile, yet visible pride (1961).

The student demonstrations in 1968 did not significantly disrupt scientific work at the Physics Institute; on the contrary, it would turn out that a serious momentum in scientific development occurred. That year, Mira Jurić, together with Smilja Popov, published new results obtained from emulsion analysis. The following year, she and Živojin Todorović made their first major discovery of new particles: “In the analysis of 308 collisions with hyperfragments, obtained by bombarding nuclei in emulsion with K-mesons, 15 unusual events appeared”. Bubnjević and Vidić state that for the microscopists at the Institute of Physics, some of them provoked excitement comparable to the Moon landing — the thrill of every step into the unknown.”^[1]

During the next decade, under Mira Jurić’s leadership, about ten female scientists worked in the prestigious field of high-energy physics at the Institute. During this period, she would add to her already long list of relevant scientific papers her most important one. In 1971, Jurić and her collaborators discovered the nucleus of the hypernucleus ^8He , publishing their findings in the eminent journal Nuclear Physics. The essential novelty was the discovery of an exotic isotope of helium with a nucleus containing “eight” nucleons, where some of the neutrons were replaced by a hyperon particle. It was her crowning achievement, her hypernuclear classic – an authentic contribution to the Standard Model of elementary particles, which remains one of the greatest challenges of modern physics. This would be followed by further research of other hypernuclei, one of which is still cited today (according to InspireHEP, the latest citation was in 2024)^[2]. There are strong indications that research into hypernuclei may have applications in contemporary astrophysics – for example, in the study of neutron stars, which are examples of so-called dense matter, playing a key role in solving the “hyperon puzzle,” one of the greatest enigmas of modern astrophysics. Allow me to romanticize her accomplishments a bit – the legacy of Mira Jurić might stretch from the tiniest particles to the most exotic celestial bodies...



Mira Jurić: In the Heart of Matter

During the 1960s and 1970s, Yugoslav science experienced a great expansion in international cooperation, in which Mira Jurić played a significant role. The research and measurements she conducted with her group could not have been performed without international support, especially at CERN, in which Yugoslavia was involved from the very beginning (as one of the twelve founding countries). Mira Jurić's name appears on the list of organizers for Yugoslavia of the major International School of Elementary Particle Physics.

The school, also known as the “Easter” or “Spring” School, was organized in Herceg Novi in the second half of May 1964 thanks to the cooperation between CERN and the Yugoslav Federal Commission for Nuclear Energy. An article in CERN Courier states that this was the third edition of the international school, whose primary goal was to support young physicists who used nuclear emulsions in their research. After the first two spring meetings, “for the third edition, an invitation came from the Federal Commission for Nuclear Energy of Yugoslavia to hold it in the Nuclear Center in the town of Herceg Novi on the Montenegrin coast. The Commission also generously offered to provide accommodation for a number of lecturers. This kind invitation, sent to the Emulsion Experiment Committee by Dr. Mira Jurić from the University of Belgrade, was accepted and the result was a school jointly organized by CERN and the Federal Commission for Nuclear Energy.”^[1] The school gathered 120 students from 24 countries, and some of the lecturers were key names in elementary particle physics of that time: E.H.S. Burhop, L. Van Hove, J. C. Combe, C. Franzinetti... “The academic quality of the gathering was so high that the most dominant criticism in the evaluation forms was that the surroundings of Herceg Novi were too beautiful, which significantly reduced the participants’ focus.”^[2]

Again, we do not find Mira Jurić in the front rows. In the only photograph from this prestigious gathering, as per good South Slavic custom, mostly the guests – men – are in the foreground. The school, however, was declared such a success that it continued for the next several years, creating, in modern terms, a hub for younger-generation researchers in the field of elementary particle physics, with a focus on work involving nuclear emulsions.

In addition to CERN’s newsletter, praise for the organization and location of the event was published year after year in the newspaper *Za komunizam* (For Communism) of the United Institute for Nuclear Research in Dubna, Soviet Union.



Mira Jurić: In the Heart of Matter

Here is one such example: “For the participants of the school, excursions were organized to the beautiful city of Dubrovnik, as well as to Kotor, Budva, and other towns along the Adriatic coast. We saw many interesting sights and customs in these cities (for example, the carnival parade on Youth Day). Yugoslav comrades spoke enthusiastically about their homeland. (...) We carry only the most beautiful memories of Yugoslavia, of its hardworking people, friendly toward the Soviet people.”

While virtually flipping through these newspapers, I also come across a potentially hidden trace of Mira Jurić from this period of exciting international meetings. In another article from the aforementioned Soviet publication, a certain “Professor Đurić, an energetic woman, communist, former Partisan” is mentioned, with whom the author of the article spoke about partisan battles and mutual acquaintances in Dubna, where the Institute for Nuclear Research is located, and who, after the school, hosted the Soviet delegation at the Vinča^[1] Institute along with another colleague. Whether a transliteration error occurred when translating from Serbo-Croatian to Russian is hard to say, but judging by all the details provided in this brief yet striking portrait - could it not be our heroine?

The High Energy Physics Group led by Jurić would later participate in other international projects such as Batavia – a collaboration of nine laboratories from Europe and Canada (studying high-energy proton and meson interactions (200–400 GeV) with nuclei), the “Relativistic Nuclear Physics” Project (in cooperation with the Institute for Nuclear Research, Dubna, USSR), then the Meteorite and Mineral Research Project (Laboratory for Nuclear Reactions, Dubna, USSR), as well as the Study of Fission and Fragmentation of Heavy Nuclei (SADVI, Strasbourg, France). We can see that in the recognizable non-aligned fashion, fierce geopolitical opponents coexisted here, demonstrating that Jurić, together with her collaborators, actively built bridges of scientific cooperation, without which progress is unimaginable.

Mira Jurić’s scientific career would last until 1978, when she retired, just three years after being appointed full professor. At the University of Belgrade, she held a number of functions: Head of the Department of Physics (1970–71), the first head of the Department of Physical and Meteorological Sciences (1971–73), and President of the Faculty Council (1973–75). After the faculty’s reorganization, she also served as Head of the Department of Atomic Physics. She was the recipient of numerous decorations – the Medal for Bravery, the Order of Brotherhood and Unity, II and III Class, the Order of Labour, II Class, and the Order of Merits for the People, III Class.



Mira Jurić: In the Heart of Matter

Although she was successful both as a lecturer and as a researcher, she was, first and foremost, a researcher, perpetually drawn to the mysterious micro-world, whose secrets humanity was only beginning to understand. She wrote over 60 scientific papers, mostly published in foreign journals, among which are the eminent Nuclear Physics, Physics Letters, Physical Review, etc. She presented at scientific conferences in Paris, Florence, Lund, Munich, Heidelberg, and, of course, in cities of the former Yugoslavia.

She authored the textbook Atomic Physics (Naučna knjiga, Belgrade, 1976), as well as several popular science articles. “High-energy physics is still on the offensive,” wrote Jurić for Galaksija in an article aimed at engaging broader layers of the Yugoslav public in the “wondrous world of the microcosm.”

Since we are tracing her through specialized publications, document collections, scientific databases, old press, and even footnotes, it is very difficult to say what kind of person Mira Jurić was. Dragana Popović describes her as “a very modest and withdrawn person.” “I must say that we, as students, had less contact with her than with other professors. She interacted less with us outside of lectures. But during lectures, she was fair and respectful, as well as during exams. A serious, modest person who did not stand out. And I think that is precisely why there is so little information about her today,” Popović said in an interview, noting that even her former colleagues could not recall many details of her life. Mira simply came to work, worked diligently, treated everyone respectfully, but kept her private life – private. Professor Jelena Krstić described her as an exceptionally kind woman, a beloved professor, but also could not say much more than that.^[1]

“She was a classical lecturer,” said Popović, “but you have to know that this was a time when most professors taught ex cathedra. These were traditional lectures, and I cannot say they were particularly inspirational, but what we knew then – and understood even more later – is that she, so to speak, was a much better researcher than a lecturer. In a research context, she was truly exceptional. In her time, she was well-recognized, and when you look at the journals she published in, you see that those are prestigious physics journals – even today, it’s hard to get published in them. So, her contribution to research was truly significant.”

Dragana Popović’s recollection quite well illustrates the way history remembers Mira Jurić – or rather, her presence in the documents uncovered during this research – always on the list of meritorious individuals, always present and active, but consistently in the background, in the last row.

Mira Jurić: In the Heart of Matter



But perhaps the argument can be 'reversed' and it can be said that it is precisely such people – quiet, diligent, and unassuming – lay foundations and establish structures. Mira Jurić was the founder of important scientific institutions and, in part, the entire educational system of then-Yugoslavia, from the first grade of elementary school to research institutes.

As the spiritus movens of a narrow and specific scientific field that was on the rise during her time, she conducted complex experimental research in a country that was simultaneously delving into the secrets of matter and teaching basic literacy to the broader population. Moreover, Mira Jurić's legacy is marked by her efforts as a pedagogue and a mentor – whether we are speaking of her many years of work at the University or of significant international collaborations in which she opened the doors of the fascinating cosmos of micro-particles to others.^[1]

Her legacy is scientific and educational, but also antifascist and feminist, while her achievements best illustrate the limitations and opportunities for female scientists in Yugoslavia. In a country that prided itself on the high participation (though never full equality) of women in the natural sciences, Mira Jurić exemplifies in many ways what it meant to be a scientist and an engaged intellectual in Yugoslavia: patient and persistent work, good leadership, building bridges of cooperation, but also the modesty and unpretentiousness expected of female scientists at that time. The fact that she is almost completely forgotten in contemporary memory and understanding of the development of natural sciences in Bosnia and Herzegovina (although somewhat more present in Serbia, where she built her career) echoes with irony at a time of widespread advocacy for greater inclusion of women in the so-called STEM fields. However, this is to be expected – her personality and work represent not only her individual achievements, but also, in many ways, the triumphs of Yugoslav science, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the People's Liberation struggle and antifascism, which made possible both civil rights for women and their fascinating social, political, and scientific rise – which only a few decades earlier had been unimaginable. This is precisely a legacy that today's ethnocentric societies make every effort to ignore, following a dreadful idea that history started with them.



Sabaha Čolaković: Shadow of the Resistance

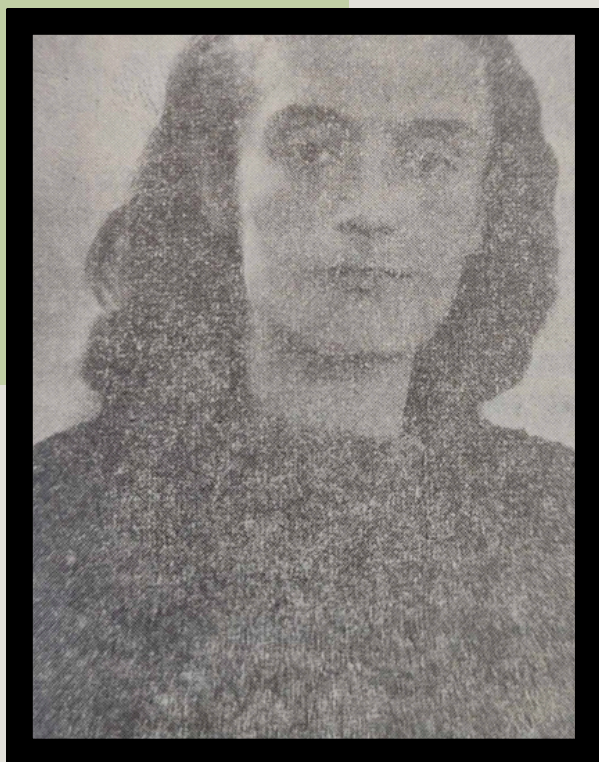
“Wonder-girl”. This is how a woman from Zenica described Sabaha Čolaković in her Facebook comment, under one of the rare articles about the elusive underground activist. Even though the English translation evokes superhero stories (Bosnian version, “čudo djevojka” is more in the vein of fairytales), it’s a strangely fitting description that simply, yet so precisely, captures the personality and work of the underground activist about whom, ironically, we know so little and remember (and appreciate) even less.

The story of Sabaha Čolaković is not only a narrative whose tension rivals the most thrilling spy novels, but also a symbol that perfectly encapsulates the main challenges of the contemporary Bosnian culture of remembrance. First of all, she was a woman, and a young one at that—under thirty when she died—and women’s accomplishments are rarely justly valued. Her work was mostly invisible, behind front lines, in secrecy and shadow, but characterized by exceptional dedication and persistence.

Sabaha was indispensable in the underground communist networks: from distributing propaganda to leadership roles. She organized units and actions, assigned tasks, nominated comrades for functions, and in the end, decided on matters of life and death. After the war, she gave her last atoms of strength to rebuilding the country, especially when it came to the welfare of women and children.

Of course, her ideological legacy is entirely undesirable in the current political moment. More on that later - let’s first outline who she was.

We have few personal details about Sabaha Čolaković, other than that she was born in Sarajevo in 1919, and had a father named Mustafa and an older brother named Rifat. It is therefore impossible to write a comprehensive biography that begins with the year of birth and ends with the year of death. Sabaha belongs to the type of historical figure whose image emerges from a mosaic of memories and testimonies, incidental notes, footnotes... It is also impossible to separate her character from the collective worker and activist struggle, or to understand the significance of her actions without adequate context. The story of Sabaha Čolaković is a thriller, but of the kind that features a wealth of events within a short period, with many side characters illuminating and shading different aspects of her personality, without any useful voiceover.



Sabaha Čolaković: Shadow of the Resistance

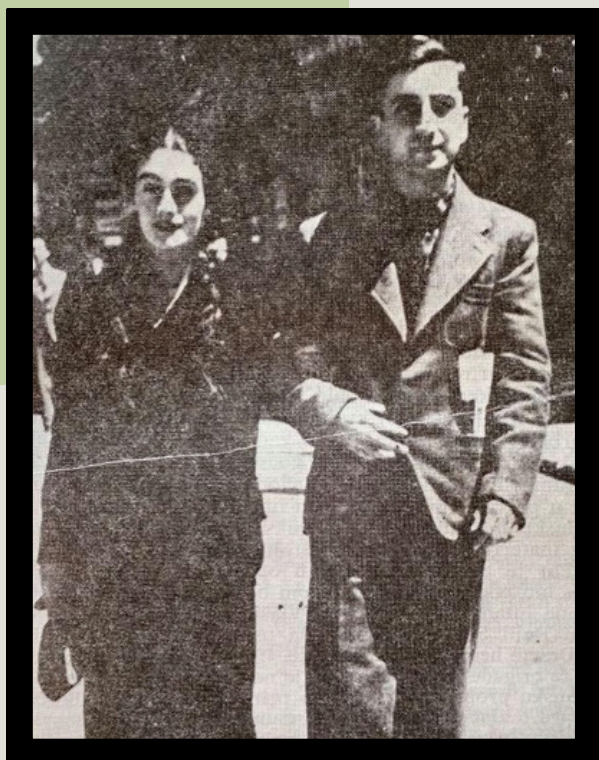
First sprouts of the workers' movement and the beginning of the occupation

The first recorded involvement of Sabaha Čolaković in the history of these lands occurred in 1941, when she became a member of the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (SKOJ), though she had been engaged in related activities even as a high school student. It was a time when the working class was becoming radicalized and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was consolidating.

Zenica was turning into a true workers' town with 12,000 inhabitants, and in 1935, new facilities for the steel plant were being built. As an industrial, workers' town, Zenica was of enormous importance to the workers' movement. The Tetovo neighborhood, from which the Čolaković family originated, experienced significant development in the mid-1930s thanks to expansions of Zenica's steel plant and investments from German capital, primarily the Krupp and Siemens companies. At that time a village, today a city neighborhood, it was one of the first settlements in Bosnia and Herzegovina to receive electricity and electric lighting. Workers' settlements, cultural centers, and reading rooms rapidly developed... A news report from that time conveys the atmosphere: "Special importance is given to enlightening the village. The library and reading room are places where villagers meet and confer. The committee ensured the acquisition of numerous quality books, daily newspapers, and a radio, which the villagers enjoy listening to. For them, the radio, books, and newspapers replaced taverns, so alcohol consumption and gambling have decreased by 80 percent."^[1] Taking all this into account, it is not surprising that the first seeds of the workers' movement emerged precisely in Tetovo.

In 1935, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) was re-established in Zenica, but it did not last more than a year, as already in March–April 1936, the police in several Bosnian towns arrested members—around 70 activists were detained, and 39 brought to trial. Even this brief episode reveals what would become the leitmotif of the National Liberation Movement in Zenica—a dizzying trajectory from utter despair during moments of betrayal and what was then called exposure ("provala"), to infectious enthusiasm and self-sacrificing work, of which our heroine was a synonym.

A turbulent period of workers' struggles and strikes followed, the largest of which occurred in 1937. It was accompanied by violence, and its main outcome was an imprecise collective agreement that enabled exploitation.



Sabaha Čolaković: Shadow of the Resistance

The unity of the workers' movement was obstructed by factionalism within the CPY itself, as well as rival unions. It was clear that the party was dysfunctional, which is why the seasoned activist Todor Vujasinović came to Zenica. He successfully led a reorganization, established ties with surrounding towns, and defined goals and tasks.

"Zenica at that time," writes Ćamil Kazazović, "was one of the strongest industrial centers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the heart of the central Bosnian industrial basin."

Its steel plant and mine were of particular importance to the occupiers and the Ustaše-run NDH^[1]. Moreover, both rail and road routes passed through Zenica, connecting the south and north and linking to the main Belgrade–Zagreb line. Because of this, the occupiers, with the assistance of Ustaše, sought to establish full control over Zenica and ensure uninterrupted exploitation of its industrial potential."^[2]

It was precisely for this reason that CPY leaders sharply reprimanded party members who failed to organize serious resistance to the occupiers through sabotage of industrial facilities. The plan was to destroy the power plant, which would have halted operations in the steel plant and the mine^[1]. However, the sabotage never occurred due to the betrayal of comrade Franjo Ler. The Ustaše had been recruiting him for months before the action. He relayed every detail. It was a betrayal from which the Zenica resistance never fully recovered.

"Release our youth"

In the autumn of 1941, the party organization in Zenica was reestablished. In the phase of preparing for the uprising, we find the name of Sabaha Čolaković, who in that same year, along with Sead Škrgo (later a national hero) and Salih Bešlagić, was accepted into the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. After the arrival of Omer Maslić, the first partisan company was founded in Šušnjara forest, which carried out 13 smaller and larger actions, mostly attacks on railway infrastructure around Zenica.^[2]

The underground members in the city gained renewed motivation. Twenty-two-year-old Sabaha Čolaković and her comrades worked tirelessly on agitation and networking during that time. In his wartime memoir, Vujasinović mentions her name with other politically engaged young women, but he singles her out as a budding activist, "unusually active political worker, not just among women, but in other assignments too".^[3]



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One of the most important events was the large demonstration against the arrest of SKOJ activists, considered by some historians the only civilian protest in occupied Europe. The Ustaše authorities had arrested numerous youth, including members of some prominent families from Zenica, as well as underground activists, which caused widespread outrage.

It was precisely Sabaha's group that mobilized the entire public of Zenica, organizing—I believe it was the first, perhaps even the only civilian protest in occupied Europe. The citizens of Zenica, who were not acting out of ideological reasons but purely human ones, came in front of the Ustaše camp to protest and demand the release of the youth that had been arrested. And what's actually interesting is that they succeeded. The Ustaše were forced to release those people, because they saw that the entire public had turned against them," says Zenica historian Mirza Džananović.^[1] According to him, this is one of the most significant, yet so often forgotten moments in the history of Zenica during the Second World War.

But soon, bad news arrived from the front. The Zenica partisan detachments disbanded in a Chetnik coup led by Golub Mitrović and his associates. To make the shock even greater, Mitrović was a member of the CPY. During the coup, 30 of the best fighters were killed. "The epilogue of this treacherous betrayal was an agreement between the Chetniks and Ustaše in Zenica for joint cooperation and fighting against the partisans."^[2]

The fighters who refused to side with Mitrović joined the Shock Battalion Groups. Most of them were killed.

"If it's possible to cross the Bosna..."

After the Chetnik coup and the withdrawal of the partisan army from the Zenica area, an atmosphere of defeat reigned in the city. From the perspective of party members and underground activists, Zenica must have seemed isolated. For more than half a year, there was no possibility of contact with other partisan units, and other party organizations in nearby towns had already been neutralized. The only faint voice of hope came from the "Free Yugoslavia" radio station. The Tetovo communists, the only remaining NOP group in Zenica, must have listened to the news with anxiety but also hope, patiently waiting for a chance to act. Until that moment, it was necessary to keep the flame of resistance alive during increasingly desperate times.



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However, the fact that the partisan battles were happening elsewhere did not mean they should sit idly. It was of key importance to suppress enemy propaganda, explain and share knowledge from the front, and prevent the mobilization of youth into the “domobran” (Croatian Home Guard) army. During this period, Sabaha Čolaković, along with her brother Rifat and Ivan Rački, distinguished herself as the leader of underground work in Zenica.

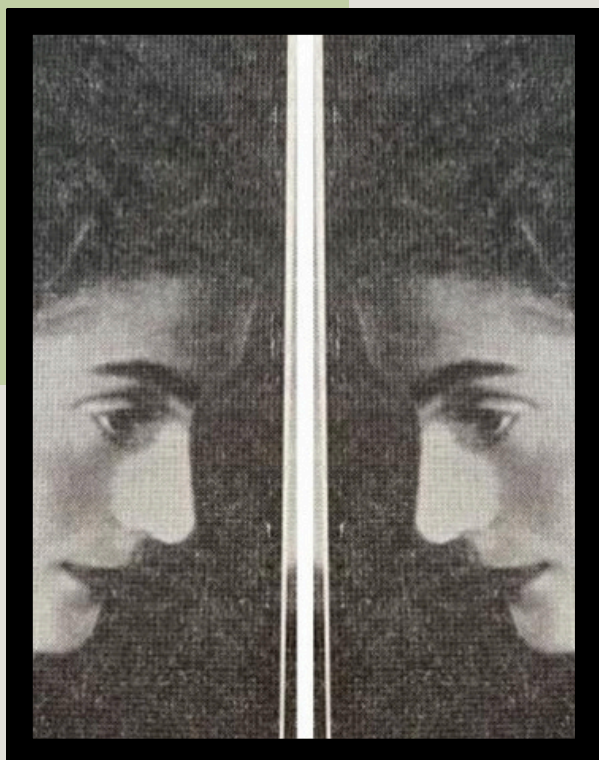
High on her list of priorities was preventing the mobilization of Muslim youth into enemy military formations.

She organized group listening sessions of “Free Yugoslavia,” Moscow and London radio broadcasts, retyped news, and duplicated it at the steel plant, then distributed it to activists. Her “base” was the office of Dr. Bruno Novak, where she held meetings with associates, prepared printed materials and news, and organized assignments. She most often personally distributed and collected the leaflets.

Her underground work was marked by extreme caution. She moved discreetly, under the veil. Activities were precisely organized; she determined who would carry printed materials and where. Caution and careful planning helped her avoid arrest until the very end. She never lost control, not for a moment. The stakes were too high.

However, the Tetovo communists considered their most important task to be the reorganization of armed resistance in Zenica. Sabaha “invested all her abilities” in that task, using rare opportunities to connect with other units of the resistance movement. She succeeded when it was discovered that two partisans were hiding near Zenica. After the battle on Vlašić, Kasim Buljubašić from Travnik and Rasim Ismić from Gradišće found shelter in the homes of Tetovo activists; Rasim was seriously wounded in a Chetnik ambush. In the summer of 1942, after they recovered, communists began visiting them, among them Sabaha. She had already planned everything: who, along with the two of them, would form the new partisan group, who would be the leader, and she secured equipment and weapons... However, no action would be taken until the unit’s numbers were strengthened. Kasim told historians his memories, mentioning that along with two other activists, Sabaha regularly visited them and promised reinforcements in manpower and weapons.

At the time, Sabaha and other communists maintained contact with partisans in Chetnik captivity—Todor Butina and Marko Mišura—who planned to disarm the Chetnik group and join the Tetovo group as soon as an opportunity arose.



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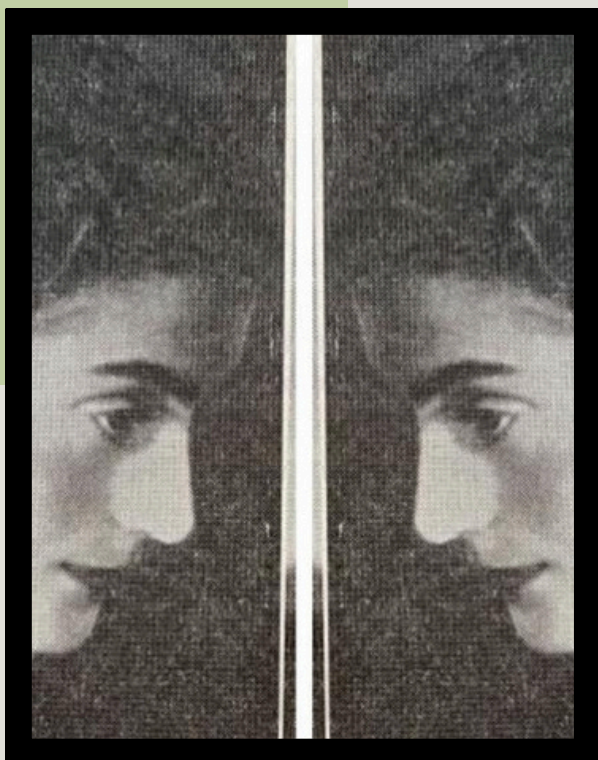
From this period, one letter from Sabaha to Todor Butina has been preserved, in which she informs him about forced mobilization for the German and Home Guard army, and lays out a plan to “liberate” the young men during transport and have them join the partisans:

This plan of mine is indeed boldly conceived, but there is no other way out. We need to meet and consult on whether it's possible for you to carry it out. Until then, I will also consult with the commander. We must thoroughly discuss this matter, because we mustn't act rashly. So, we will definitely meet on Sunday evening. If it's possible for me to cross the Bosna, I will come there; if not, then as before.^[1]

In the letter, she sounds confident, yet still extremely cautious. Her risks were calculated, but never reckless. Evidently, she relied on group structure and collective decision-making, but was willing to “cross the Bosna” to help execute this plan. However, the plan was never realized. Instead, Sabaha and the Tetovo group faced another bitter disappointment. During the months of recovery after the battle in Dračić, Todor stayed in the village of Sviće, and as a Chetnik prisoner, had to avoid any contact with communists under threat of execution. It was never discovered how he was found out—he was likely followed—but when it became clear that Butina was still in contact with communists, he was summoned to the headquarters in the village of Perin Han. There, he was brutally beaten (villagers testified that he couldn't walk and had to be transported in a cart and treated with goat skins), but they did not dare to kill him because of the respect he enjoyed among the people of Zenica.

But Todor did not give up. Just a month later, he re-established contact with Sabaha and the rest of the group and sprang into action. Imagine the scene: at a secret meeting are Todor, Sabaha, and two other underground members. An action is planned: Todor and allies will disarm the Chetnik gendarmerie and then cross the Bosna with the help of the Tetovo group.

However, organizational weaknesses—partly due to the limited resources of the Tetovo group in extremely unfavorable conditions—undermined the success of this action as well. Todor and comrades successfully disarmed the Chetniks but failed to cross the Bosna because gendarmes killed the fighters who were their connection.



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They decided to try again the next day, but one of the “comrades” betrayed them, fleeing under the cover of night and alerting the Chetnik headquarters. The next night, they were ambushed—Butina was killed, some escaped, and others were arrested. The Chetniks immediately called their Ustaše allies to show them the body of the slain communist, and among his belongings, they found Sabaha’s letter.

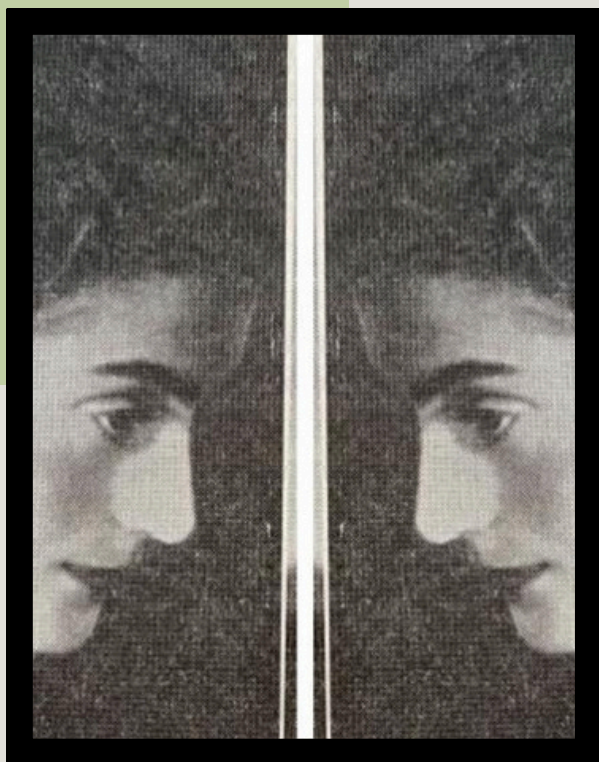
Soon after, Rasim Ismić was also killed, and his group was broken up in the village of Gradišće. The attack was led by Ustaše forces. This marked the end of the Tetovo group’s efforts to revive the Zenica partisan detachment during this period. Shortly after, the Chetniks captured the remaining members of the group. Chetnik commander Golub Mitrović once invited the Ustaše to “boast.” The bodies were photographed. The Chetnik commander didn’t receive the decoration he expected.

Sabaha did not give up. The entire group was deeply affected by these developments; they mourned the fallen comrades, but there was no room for hesitation or retreat. With so many losses and such high stakes, the underground fighters had to continue. Once again, she led with determination, enduring all the trials without complaint. She went to Tetovo and Gradišće, regularly communicated with the youth from the steel plant and the mine. At this time, she was practically the leader of underground work in the city. She moved alone, in the shadows, under the cover of night, always cautious, yet always counting on the protection of her comrades. Not even her frail physical condition, weakened by a lung disease, could stop her. We do not know exactly what illness she had—one of the more likely assumptions is tuberculosis—but there is testimony of a fragile girl who overcame all obstacles with incredible strength of will.

Restoration of contact, continuation of work

Sabaha knew better times would come—and they did. In late autumn, the Supreme Headquarters of the People’s Liberation Army decided to intensify the offensive in the valleys of the Una, Bosna, and Sava rivers. Positive developments in western Bosnia brought a glimmer of hope to the communists in Zenica. They immediately intensified their activities.

The offensives in the Bosna and Lašva valleys began in December 1942. The First Dalmatian and the First Montenegrin Brigades launched surprise actions that caught the enemy off guard. They captured the railway stations Vranduk and Nemila, destroyed the tracks



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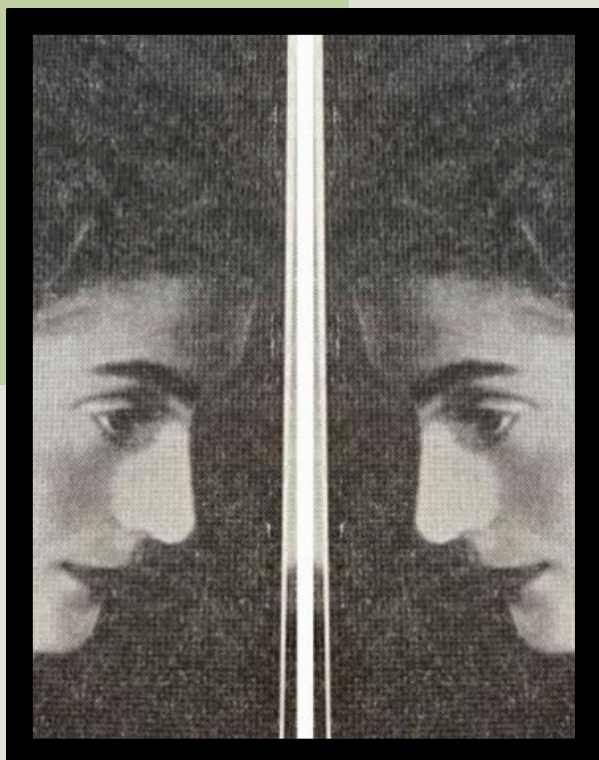
The leaders of the First Dalmatian Brigade made contact with the Tetovo communists, even though they did not know anyone in Zenica. They sent letters via worker activists at the steel plant, not knowing if they would reach the right people. They received a reply containing detailed information about the number and distribution of enemy forces.

The next day, a meeting was organized between representatives of the First Dalmatian Brigade and the Tetovo communists. However, this long-awaited first contact with partisan forces did not go joyfully. The partisan comrades did not spare the underground members; they openly told them that their work had become “insular,” that their activity had not been “broad and mass-based” enough, and that they had failed to organize workers to join the fight. Their work was labeled as “sectarian and passive.”

The result of the meeting was a leaflet calling on the workers of Zenica to sabotage factory facilities and join the partisans. The communists also received a copy of “Borba” that included the proclamation of the first session of AVNOJ. The material needed to be reproduced and distributed as widely as possible among the citizens of Zenica. This task was handled by Sabaha herself. Everything pointed to a renewed uprising and the resumption of the fight, but there was too little time—the military situation grew more complicated and the army had to move on. It was recorded that the Tetovo group tried to make contact with the First Dalmatian Brigade once more. It was Sabaha’s initiative to send a courier over Vlašić, through deep snow and without a road, to deliver important intelligence and supplies for writing and medical aid... One courier succeeded, receiving a partisan pass and several copies of “Borba.” Halil Selimović also brought a brochure about the crimes in Jasenovac, which was likely the first time such crimes became known in these parts. The other courier had to return with the task unfinished. But there was simply too little time for what mattered most—the restart of the armed uprising. When, in the second half of January 1943, the army returned near Zenica, the Tetovo group no longer existed.

“They searched all of Zenica looking for her...”

By the end of January 1943, more than 500 people had been arrested: from those previously associated with the National Liberation anti-fascist movement to everyone who was “suspicious.”



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They were placed in the detention camp at the Zenica prison. From there, they were either deported to Jasenovac or taken out for execution. Some were hanged along the railway tracks to serve as a warning to locals.

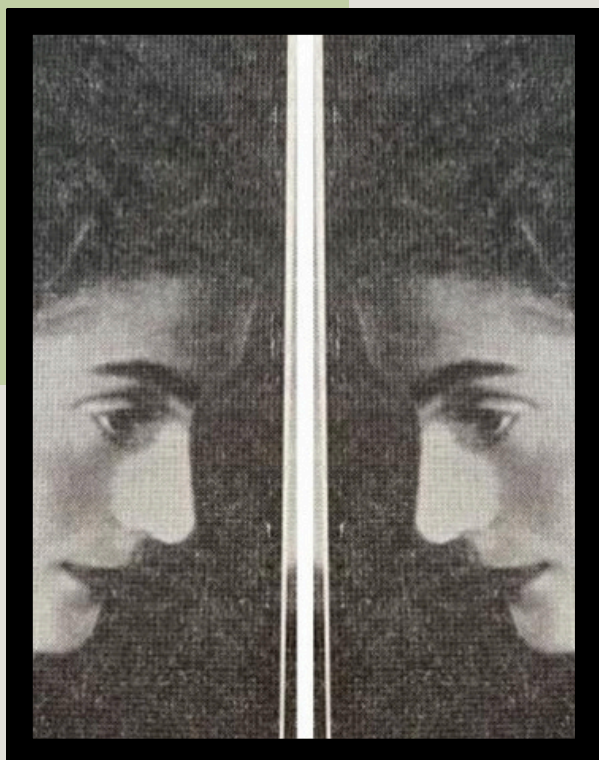
Of course, the communists were the first, including members of the Tetovo group. Nearly all members of the Tetovo organization were arrested, including Sabaha's brother, Rifat Čolaković.

Sabaha, along with a few other group members, managed to hide. With the help of Derva Praskić and Fatima Isaković, she passed the Ustaše guard at the wooden bridge into the Bilimišće neighborhood, where she hid. "The Germans and Ustaše searched all of Zenica looking for her," writes Kazazović. A reward was offered for whoever found or captured her.

After the arrests, the Germans conducted interrogations. Rifat Čolaković and the other Tetovo and Gradišće members were immediately separated from the rest of the detainees. Prisoners were taken one by one into a separate room. They were subjected to the worst forms of torture to extract information about partisan fighters and other collaborators.

Here, Oto Cipra enters the story. This German from Plzeň moved to Zenica in 1913, where he worked as head accountant at the Mine and Power Plant. As soon as the occupation began, he made himself available to the German command as a translator. According to historians, Cipra was one of the leading members of the secret services in Zenica, the architect of most operations that dismantled party organizations, leading to the deaths and arrests of many of Sabaha's comrades. In the prison, during interrogations, Cipra was in charge of translating questions and answers, and he often abused his role as intermediary by misinterpreting, often, whether a person would be tortured depended on him. His misconduct was exposed by one of the prisoners who knew German. He found a way to warn comrades on the outside. Cipra immediately became the target of Sabaha Čolaković's latest action.

While his sister was devising a plan to assassinate the Ustaše translator, Rifat—if the legend that circulated for years in Tetovo is to be believed—showed equal cunning in prison. He decided to "comply" with the German officers who were demanding a list in exchange for freedom. Rifat gave them names of Ustaše members, agents, collaborators, and citizens with "pro-Ustaša sympathies," and the uninformed German officers—who were stationed not in Zenica but in Sarajevo—immediately ordered the arrest of all the listed individuals.



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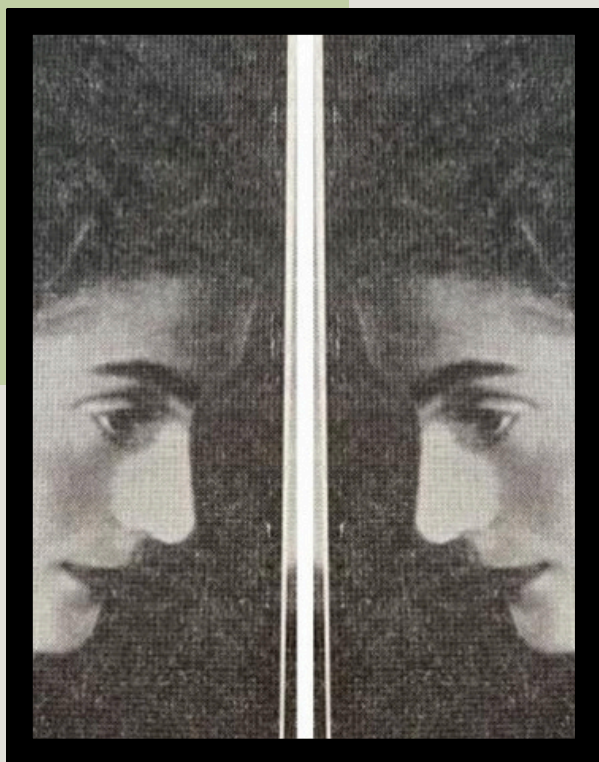
This caused serious confusion, even conflict with the local Ustaše authorities. It was said that even several well-known Ustaše were brought to the prison. Only after a series of phone calls to Sarajevo and Travnik was Rifat's trick unraveled. He and his collaborators were executed the next day. One of the prisoners, who had been ordered to dig graves for the executions, left the following testimony:

"They gave us shovels and pickaxes and ordered us to dig (...) It was a very harsh winter and deep snow, so the digging was slow. The ground was hard and frozen, and our hands were freezing. Because of that, the guards hurried us and beat us with rifle butts." The next morning, they watched the execution through the window. Only then did they understand the meaning of their actions.

To carry out her most daring plan so far, Sabaha found a way to contact prisoners Omer Porobić and Dževad Glamočanin. The two had been arrested in 1942 and sentenced by the Ustaše summary court. In the Zenica prison, they were given long prison terms, but managed to escape in November 1942 and joined the Zenica Chetnik detachment, which they—according to Ćamil Kazazović—"saw as a chance to stay alive and eventually cross over to the partisans," which they did during the summer of the same year. Omer and Dževad accepted Sabaha's plan to assassinate the notorious Cipra. Sabaha was well aware of his movements—she knew that as a translator, he participated in negotiations with the Chetniks, and even which tavern he frequented. It didn't take long before the swollen Bosna River washed out the body of Oto Cipra. A report by the Ustaše station chief from Travnik stated that "Oto Cipra, an employee of the Zenica prison, was slaughtered and hacked, then thrown into the Bosna River." Omer and Dževad later died in battle.

After this last action, Sabaha went fully underground. By that time, her illness had progressed, and she was advised to rest. She spent two months in Bilimišće, and then returned home and hid in a dugout her father, Mustafa Čolaković, had excavated. Mustafa "no longer trusted other people. He brought Sabaha home, dug a trench in the kitchen and covered it with a cupboard."^[1] From available sources, it can be concluded that she spent at least several months underground, as it is known that in the summer of 1943, she left Zenica under a veil,

[1] Avdić, S. My Factory, Zenica, IK Vrijeme, 2013.



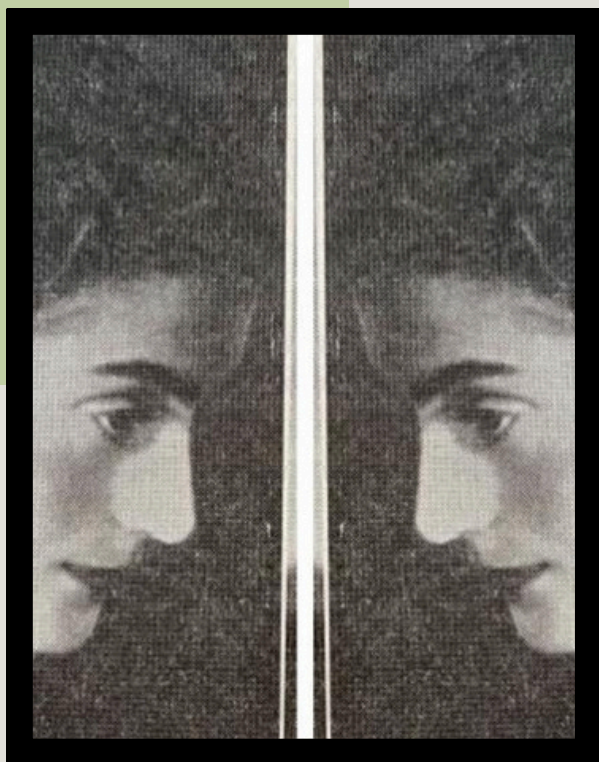
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She crossed into the free territory between Bugojno and Gornji Vakuf, controlled by the Visoko-Zenica partisan detachment. She immediately received new assignments from the local command in Gornji Vakuf, where she worked with activists of the Antifascist Women's Front and on other tasks.

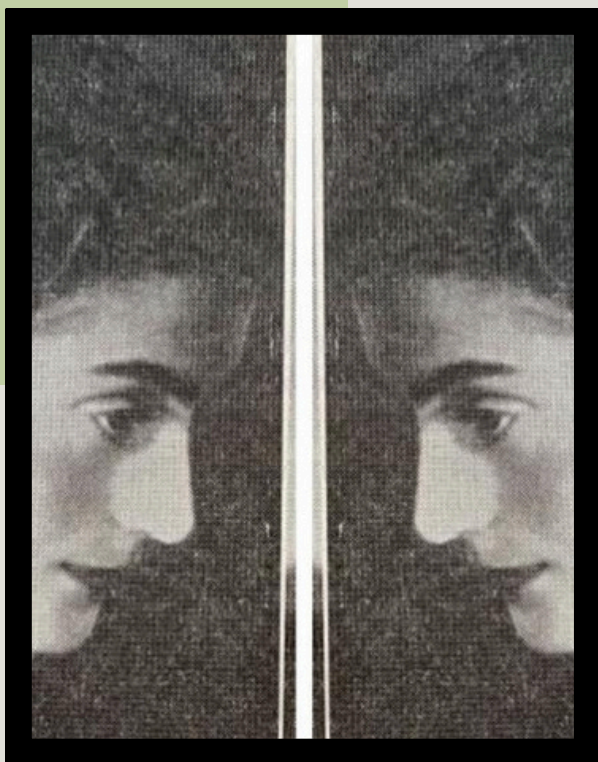
From the perspective of Ustaše and German services, it must have seemed that Sabaha was everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

Omnipresent yet invisible. Long after she escaped from Zenica, the authorities continued to search for her. In September 1943, a "partisan courier"—a disguised Ustaše agent—appeared at the steel plant, trying to learn about underground activity. People from Zenica remember that he was especially interested in Sabaha Čolaković.

After the liberation, the District Committee of the CPY for Sarajevo assigned Sabaha to the Visoko Committee, specifically to work in the town of Breza, where she worked with women within the AFŽ. Knowing how much effort she put into her underground work, one can, without much imagination, picture how enthusiastically she embraced the organization of postwar reconstruction.

From the valuable documentation of the AFŽ, we see that she was responsible for all organizational aspects of women's activism. While still in Visoko, she submitted a report to the Main Board of the AFŽ that clearly shows her energy and critical spirit. "There were many women who didn't even know what the word antifascism meant," she reported, vividly illustrating the state of women's lives at the end of the war. In another report, Sabaha demonstrates sharp insight and openness to criticism; she notes that "there are more peasant women than intellectuals among the activists," but also openly criticizes the "disruptive women," those who obstruct their efforts. "They work in an organized way, especially to deepen religious and national hatred," she says with a touch of irony. She is particularly angry at those who sabotage the effort to reconcile "Muslim and Croat women," warning that 'special conferences' must be held carefully, so as not to give ammunition to the phrase 'you talk to us about brotherhood and unity, yet you make distinctions yourselves.'"

At the same meeting, one of the comrades concluded after Sabaha's thorough report: "The Visoko organization has so far shown the best results, so the experience and initiative of this organization should serve as an example and be transferred to other districts."^[1]



She was buried there.

Sabaha Čolaković: Shadow of the Resistance

Sabaha was also the delegate of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the First Congress of Yugoslav Antifascist Women. Intelligent, energetic, sharp-minded. There is no doubt she was destined for a bright future.

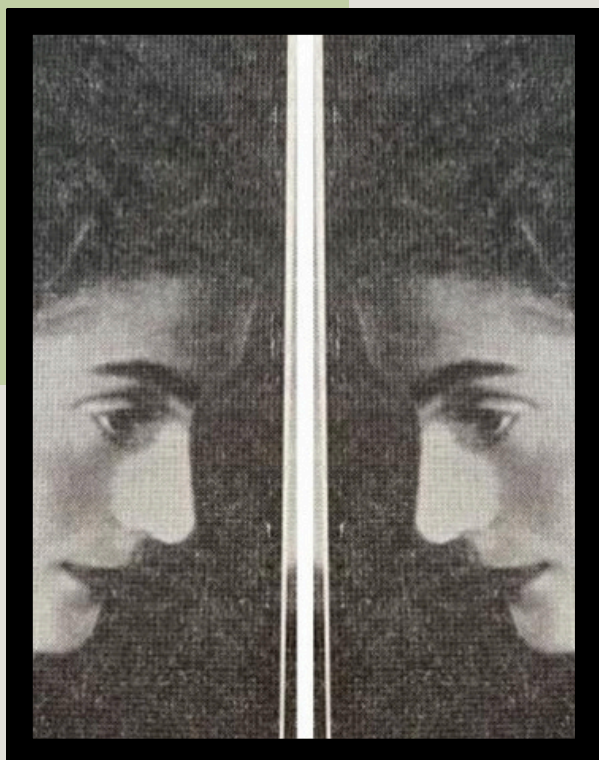
Unfortunately, in the free country she dreamed of and fought so hard for, she lived only two more years. The severe lung disease she had battled for years triumphed over her unyielding will, youth, and spirit.

Revolutionary under the veil

Few things are as symbolic of the role of women in the National Liberation War and underground work as a veiled woman who, under the folds of her covering, carries communist propaganda leaflets, secret messages, medicine for fighters, or even weapons. The zar, vala, or burka—the opaque veil traditionally worn by Muslim women in this region until the end of the Second World War, and by some even afterward—is an important symbol of the emancipation of Bosnian-Herzegovinian women: what enabled underground work, later became, for female activists, a symbol of backward perceptions of women's place in society. As such, mass unveiling actions were organized at meetings of the largest women's organization in Yugoslavia—the AFŽ. In the words of partisan Zaga Umičević Mala: "Under the burka and veil, symbols of centuries-long oppression of women, we carried out the tasks of the Party with the goal of complete liberation of humankind."^[1]

Many historians have emphasized the role of women during the occupation as crucial, precisely because the Ustaše occupying authorities underestimated local societies as conservative regarding the position of women. Because of this, women were able to do much in organizing, agitating, and networking, as they could move freely around towns.

"Why did Sabaha effectively become the leader of the underground movement in Zenica? Precisely because she was a woman. It was somewhat easier for women to walk through the city because the secret services didn't really believe women had the capacity to do anything. While her comrades, who were mostly men, had to operate in deep secrecy and with limited movement—because they practically couldn't do anything—her very gender identity was an advantage at that moment. According to the information we have, she used the zar to move around the city and carry information and everything else that was needed to revive the underground movement in Zenica."^[2]

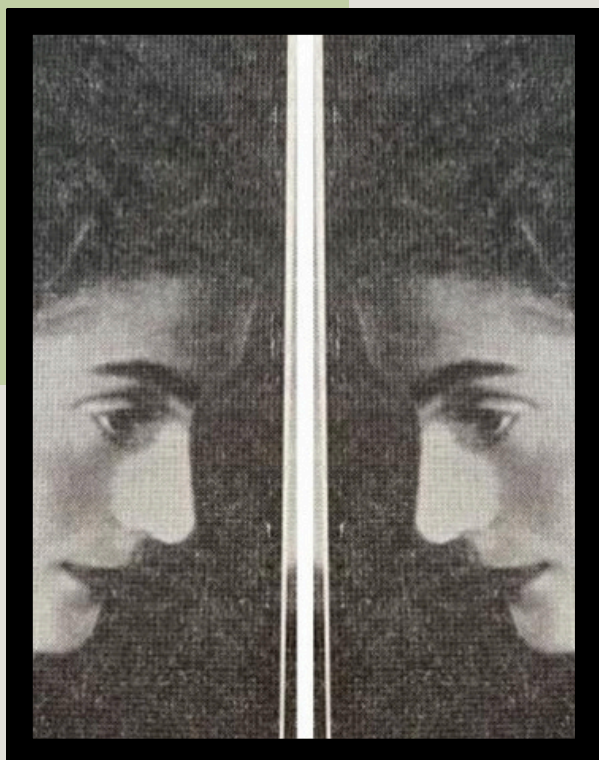


Sabaha Čolaković: Shadow of the Resistance

The history of women's participation in the labor and partisan movement is a complex tapestry that reveals the centuries-old patriarchal structure—and its, at least temporary, collapse during the antifascist struggle and post-war reconstruction. Women's participation in the fight and in underground work was encouraged and supported, and they showed that without them, the struggle would have been unimaginable, and victory perhaps unattainable.

Many books have been written about the importance of the partisan woman's role in Yugoslavia, but in academic fields, this research subject is only just beginning to unravel. Sabaha Čolaković, however, does not quite fit that ideal, mostly because she was never declared a national heroine, a title reserved for fighters, commanders, and political workers who distinguished themselves with heroism and sacrifice during the National Liberation War. The title was typically awarded posthumously, which somewhat “disqualified” Sabaha, since she did not die in direct combat, but—bureaucratically put—from “natural causes.” The recognition granted to her by society was quite minimal—a kindergarten in Breza, the town where she died, bore her name, and older citizens of Breza recall that her grave, with a minimalist monument, was nearby.

The memory of the unrecognized heroine then faded, only to be somewhat revived by Zenica historian Ćamil Kazazović in the 1980s, and more recently, thanks to artists such as Selvedin Avdić, author of the book *My Factory*, in which a chapter is dedicated to the story of Sabaha, Rifat, and Oto, as well as theater director Selma Spahić, who in her stage adaptation of the same book, gave special attention to Sabaha. This revitalization of memory of the elusive underground activist comes after decades of careful erasure of nearly every trace of the Yugoslav legacy from public space in Bosnian-Herzegovinian cities. Remembering antifascist Yugoslav heroes—and especially heroines like Sabaha—is entirely “optional”, sometime even undesirable in societies that seek to be ethnically pure, and base their histories preferably in the recent past. Patriarchal bias in history adds another layer to this problem. In words of Spahić: “The entire textbook history of humankind glorifies male warrior heroism. Women, at best, are given secondary roles. Especially in the recently revised textbooks (...), they are cast primarily as victims — submissive observers, keepers of the home, mothers, and loyal wives. This passivity ascribed to women is deeply irritating. Women — those not present on the battlefield — entirely took over the functioning of society, both in rural and urban settings, through their active engagement and their much-questioned physical strength”.^[1]



Sabaha Čolaković: Shadow of the Resistance

This is most evident in the naming of institutions and streets, which in Bosnia and Herzegovina are unusually often named after prominent individuals. Nowhere is the regime change and revisionist attitude toward the past more evident than in the naming of public spaces, which has much in common with animalistic territorial marking. There are not many female names to begin with, and if they belonged to the undesirable Yugoslav legacy, they almost always disappeared.

This is why many NGOs from time to time request a name change to reflect the achievements of women; one such initiative mentions the heroine of this story, referencing her “committed and selfless fight for freedom of citizens of Zenica.”^[1] However, in Zenica, too, schools named after female partisans and SKOJ members were renamed in accordance with new “values.” The former School of the Dietrich Sisters—Jewish students who were active in the underground movement and killed in the Jasenovac camp—is now named after writer Miroslav Krleža; the sisters are left with a small and unremarkable street, and the monument has been moved to another location.^[2] The Medical School “Desanka Todić”, also named after a female partisan, is now simply called the Medical School. All of this is part of the same trend that also affected the public commemoration of Sabaha Čolaković. The kindergarten in Breza is now called “Umihana Čuvidina,” which tells us what kind of female ideal postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina prefers: not a combative and emancipated activist or partisan, but a gentle poetess from the times of Ottoman Bosnia, whose only preserved poem is unsigned, and whose works mostly remained anonymous. The fact that Čuvidina, another woman from the past whose work indeed deserves recognition, replaces another woman’s name in public space speaks volumes on how superficially nationalist culture of memory treats women’s heritage.

Let us conclude on a question, then: why shouldn’t our cities remember both Sabaha and Umihana?



Vera Obrenović Delibašić: Doubly Erased

*This morning, joy sweeps down the
roads full of battle cries. Like a wave
when it rises
they cheer, pass proudly and powerfully
into a better life, our new women!*

— Vera Obrenović Delibašić, “Women
Pass By”

The story of Vera Obrenović Delibašić is a story of resilience, survival, and disappointment, not always in equal measure, and not necessarily in that order. One might also add forgetting, which is the result of marginalization during her life and neglect of memory after her death.

This Yugoslav writer, musician, translator, lecturer and archivist—in short, a cultural worker—left her mark on Sarajevo in several ways, and the city has given her little in return. In fact, her memory is largely obscured by the complex historical and social changes during and after her lifetime. One could say she has been doubly erased—once during her life, the second time after death. Her work and life today represent a gap in the literary and cultural history of a city, a gap that reflects political ruptures and cultural breakdowns that, undoubtedly, consume women’s lives first. Having said that, it must also be noted that biographies such as hers rarely fit contemporary Bosnian-Herzegovinian cultural narratives, often cut and tailored by the scissors of nationalism. Her example is not only an excellent illustration of what—and how—is lost in the nationalist cleansing of the literary canon, but also of how our literary and cultural history is impoverished by rejecting knowledge that does not align with the current ideological goals.

Because of all this, we should not begin with dates and facts, but with achievements. Who have we forgotten? The first female novelist of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Before Vera Obrenović Delibašić, no woman had published a novel. In communities that value their history, that fact alone would secure her place in the literary canon, even if her work were of only mediocre aesthetic merit. Which, it must be said, it is not.

In rare studies that do cover her books, Vera Obrenović Delibašić is often labeled ‘a writer of the Revolution’. And indeed, if anything defined her work, it was the Yugoslav people’s liberation struggle. Vera authored twelve thematically diverse books, spanning from poems and short stories to dramas, novels and biographies.



Vera Obrenović Delibašić: Doubly Erased

“A burning heart and trembling hand”

Vera Obrenović was born in 1906 in Livno into a family of teachers. A large family—seven sisters and one brother—and frequent relocations, typical of the teaching profession at the time. Livno in her earliest childhood, then Bosanski Šamac, Kostajnica, and finally Sarajevo, which marked her youth; these constant changes of residence seemed to foreshadow similar wanderings in her future life.

However, the life of the Obrenović family was not made difficult only by relocations and the fact that there were ‘many mouths to feed’. No, Vera Obrenović grew up and developed as a person in a particular historical period of upheavals and turbulences that shook the Balkans and Bosnia as much as the entire world. One must keep in mind that Vera was born a few years before the Annexation Crisis, and that during World War I, she was a little girl; great historical upheavals accompanied her life from beginning to end.

We do not have many testimonies about what Vera was like as a child. The author of these lines does not know whether she was a pampered and protected youngest child, or an older one, who in those days almost always took on adult responsibilities, or perhaps the “middle” child, left to her own resourcefulness and adaptability. It is also questionable how much our modern understanding of family actually shapes our perceptions, as historically interesting times rarely produce typical family structures. What is certain, however, is that the times were difficult and that teacher families mostly lived in poverty. From her earliest days, she grew up in a family of progressive views, which—despite poverty and lack of roots—fostered in their children a love for learning, education, and the arts. Her father Pavle Obrenović held anti-fascist and Yugoslav views. The fact that he was a teacher of Gavrilo Princip, the young man whose assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was the spark for the beginning of World War I, brought even more hardships to the family. In the context of the Austro-Hungarian persecution of the Serbian population, Pavle and his wife, Vera’s mother, were often interrogated and subjected to police questioning. Pavle died while Vera was still young and left a large family in serious financial trouble. The family lost a legal case over the father’s share of the inheritance, which forced Vera’s mother, also a teacher, to accept house and office cleaning jobs in addition to her already poorly paid teaching job. We don’t know much, but we certainly know that it was not a carefree childhood. Those familiar with the circumstances say that Vera’s family could not afford more than two meals a day.



Vera Obrenović Delibašić: Doubly Erased

Upon arriving in Sarajevo, Vera completed Teacher's College and an eight-year music school. In the absence of contemporary sources, with some stretch of imagination, we might imagine her as a teenager, a typical representative of the so-called progressive international Yugoslav communist youth. The ideas of Marxism and socialism, even early feminism, began to circulate among Yugoslav youth just as among young people in Europe.

Constant poverty made her, perhaps, more mature than her years, forcing her to take responsibility and start working and supporting her large family by giving school tutoring and private violin lessons. She was inspired by ideas of social justice and equality and discovered and nurtured a love for literature. A poetess, but not exactly a dreamer with her head in the clouds, but rather as a determined young woman moving decisively on her path, who saw art as her mission and inescapable destiny. Let's picture her, for example, carrying her manuscripts to the post office to send them to eminent literary magazines after carefully rewriting and editing them night after night. Or practicing her violin in between tutoring sessions, tired, overworked, but determined to improve. Perhaps here she most resembles her early poems—dreamy, yet rooted in the pain and suffering of the people of this country, in their longing and fears.

In 1927, Vera is twenty-one, her love for music and literature intertwined with a passion for a better life and a more just world. Soon, her first poetry collection, *Restlessness of Youth*, was published in 1927. That same year she secures her first employment with the Sarajevo Philharmonic as the first violinist and marries writer and professor of French literature Mihajlo Delibašić. Within a year, she already has a baby in her arms—a son named Predrag. A few years later, she graduates from music school and gets a job at the Higher Teacher's School as a teacher of music culture and art. Life seems to be getting better. She is a young hope of Bosnian-Herzegovinian poetry; critic Borivoje Jevtić will describe her collection *Restlessness of Youth* as a book written by a "burning heart and trembling hand," while the author will be called "the most original among poets writing in Bosnia at this moment," one who is "not lacking in sincerity even when she strays" and who "knows how to find her own accent for her inner mood." Another review, from one of the most respected writers of the time, Hamza Humo, writes how every one of her poems is "thirsty... for life and pained by its fleetingness,"; for Humo, the woman appears "closest and most natural when singing of love."



Vera Obrenović Delibašić: Doubly Erased

“In her, we love the gentle and tender sensitivity, which we men would crudely trample and thus feel prouder and stronger.”^[1] It is quite clear that the critics of that time read her through a gendered lens, that they read her, and some even dismissed her, as “feminine,” which in those days was not exactly a compliment.

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Vera Obrenović Delibašić: Doubly Erased

Apart from her, there would be only one other woman—Milica Miron. She soon after published her second poetry collection, simply titled *Poems* (1930). She writes in the ekavian dialect, in the manner of progressive writers of the time who voluntarily switched from their native ijekavian to ekavian, or from Cyrillic to Latin script, in the effort to create a unified Yugoslav cultural space, and continues advancing her craft in a constant dialogue with her contemporaries.

Her dedication to emancipation, especially the emancipation of the female subject through revolution, is connected to her personal experience, but in a somewhat unexpected way. Vera Obrenović-Delibašić was not born in a village and did not face the traditional constraints of women's lives as a peasant woman might. Her background was not "working class" or "proletarian" in the classical sense—coming from a teaching position, it carried a certain status. What was not acknowledged was the fact that a teacher's life was modest—perhaps not completely destitute like the proletariat, but certainly lacking many "bourgeois" traits. "Precisely because she did not come from utter poverty, because she wasn't a 'classic revolutionary profile,' she was often mocked and marginalized, even within the partisan and communist circles."^[1] Her days within the Sarajevo Group of Writers and other cultural circles of the time were surely marked by personal struggles and tensions. Becoming aware of her own privilege in a context where the majority of the population was uneducated—and thus, as well as for other deep reasons, disadvantaged—along with the constant, painful search for her own authorial voice, must have been a difficult process. From this period dates an interesting literary critique of Vera's poetry, noted by Mevlida Đuvić. This review by Hasan Kikić, a leftist writer and engaged intellectual, notes that her poetry was "feminine, non-social, without higher pretensions or qualities," which, according to Đuvić, confirms that a female poetic sensibility could not resonate loudly in the context of the interwar culture preoccupied with questions of Nation and Gender.^[2]

But history once again intervened in the life of Vera Obrenović Delibašić. The monarchist authorities of the Kingdom of SHS did not tolerate communist views, and Obrenović was dismissed in 1932, after only one year of work, from the Higher Teacher's School. Since 1930, she had belonged, as she herself wrote in a biographical note, to the "people's workers' movement, and since 1932 worked illegally under the leadership of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia."



Vera Obrenović Delibašić: Doubly Erased

Considering the clashes with the authorities faced by both her father and her husband—who before their marriage had been arrested in 1921, after the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was banned in 1920, and imprisoned in Glavnjača and Stara Tvrđava prisons with several other communists—it is clear that Vera's fate cannot be thought of outside of political subversiveness.

Her views are, however, not yet evident in her poems, still very much concerned by the fleeting moods and innermost emotions, thematically mostly focused on love and longing. A lovely example is a poem *The Wicked Moonlight*: Don't wait for me, mother— / My sheep have scattered, and the lambs are lost... / Moonlight fell upon the blooming meadow / And tangled in the bush my flowing hair; — / That's why I didn't come all night, mother! — / The cruel moonlight / Entwined my hair / And scattered the flock!^[1]

Among the partisans

Vera continued to write and publish, mostly poetry and occasionally essays, in nearly all major literary publications between the two world wars, while simultaneously working at the private Railway Boarding School in Ilidža. Her third poetry collection was published in 1940 by the Sarajevo chapter of SPKD Prosvjeta. But the normal course of life was (again!) interrupted by Yugoslavia's capitulation to the Axis powers. Mihajlo fled to Bijeljina, where he was offered a teaching post at a high school, while Vera took her twelve-year-old son Predrag and sought refuge in the village of Batkovica near Višegrad, where they stayed "with progressive peasants." They had to report daily to the Ustaša gendarmerie. Yet Vera did not waste time. She sensed the growing people's revolt; what books, theory, literature, and passionate leftist discussions with colleagues had once foreshadowed was now coming true. She actively joined the preparation for the people's uprising against the occupiers, gathering weapons, preparing for battle, organizing local youth, spreading ideas—which was not easy in a region that leaned more toward Chetnik and nationalist ideas than to communist ones.^[2] It was necessary to explain why it was important to join the partisans and to imagine what comes after victory—what kind of state do we want to build? Perhaps it can be said that only here does Vera truly mature into an engaged intellectual, on the ground, not among books and benches, but in direct contact with the people.



Vera Obrenović Delibašić: Doubly Erased

I imagine Vera fleeing during deportation to a concentration camp and crossing the Drina on her own after entrusting her son to a railway worker, reaching the territory controlled by the partisans. How much suffering and renunciation, and how much determination and belief in victory were needed to survive that hopeless wartime period? On liberated territory, her son and husband would join her, and in Užice she became a member of the Partisan Art Unit “Dimitrije Tucović.”

During the war, she actively participated in the cultural front, editing the newspaper of the Montenegrin Antifascist Front of Women (AFŽ) *Naša žena* (“Our Woman”). Little testimonies remained of her during wartime, however, on the margins of the publications that record the triumphs and losses of partisans, we find her reading her poetry to the peasants. Partisan memoirs note that famous partisan fighter, Mitra Mitrović, invited Vera to liberated Požega, where she had a public reading. “Because of her human kindness and warmth, she was well received everywhere, which is why activists often took her to assemblies to read her poems.”^[1]

In addition to poetry, the testimony to her revolutionary optimism is the novel that she wrote during this period, which would remain her lasting and most important mark in the history of Bosnian-Herzegovinian literature. That is the novel *Through No Man’s Land*, published after the liberation in two parts (1948 and 1950), thematically dedicated precisely to no man’s land, the tri-border region of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro where she spent much of the war. We likely won’t be wrong in saying this was the novel of her life—not so much in an autobiographical sense, though those elements are probably present and strong^[2]—but in the sense that through this literary obsession, she fully committed her creative life to Yugoslav and anti-fascist ideals. That she saw this book as her most important work is likely confirmed by the fact that she returned to it and published a shortened version in 1971 under the title *Višnja* from *No Man’s Land*, this time focusing on the second important heroine of the story.

Today, the novel *Through No Man’s Land* does not work to the tastes of a contemporary readership. Written in a chronicle manner, with an epic scope, today it might appear overly detailed and drawn out in its effort to offer a faithful depiction of social events and (partly) of the psychological struggles of its characters. In fact, it counts among the most extensive works within the topic of the national liberation war of Yugoslavia.^[3]



Vera Obrenović Delibašić: Doubly Erased

However, “lyrical landscape often occurs as an interlude in her epic narration”^[1]; documentarist and realist sequences, as well as ideological polemic, are regularly interrupted with picturesque descriptions of nature and brief sketches of psychological states of the main character.

Stylistically, this novel can most precisely be classified as socialist realism, a rather rigid and genre-strict literary movement that considered aesthetics inferior to political and social realities, and emphasized the social-pedagogical function of literature through which socialist ideals should be imprinted on the readership. In its most rigid interpretations, social realism required that literature must never divulge the ruling ideology, which rather soon created a long-lasting and complex polemic in Yugoslavia on what is the ultimate role of literature in a society. But for a time, it was a prestige literary movement, spawning a series of (usually) novels that focused on the character of a self-sacrificing, idealized revolutionary, whose all efforts are fixated on the utopian communist ideal.

What makes Vera’s novel, indeed a first novel published by a woman from Bosnia and Herzegovina, special is that she wrote the entire narrative from a female perspective, a rarity in the entire Yugoslav literary production at the time. The fact alone that we can witness woman’s view of the people’s liberation struggle, emancipation, and revolutionary transformation of Yugoslavia gives this text, however imperfect, an astute value in literary history of the region. By focusing on the coy “bourgeois” Olga, a pianist who marries an older man and tries to fulfill societal expectations in everything she does, Vera writes her a story of a budding communist whose attitudes shift as her life takes an unprecedented path - from refuge to the fight, and from fight to the forefront of the new society. “Through No Man’s Land” is, first and foremost, a coming-of-age tale of maturation into a new woman.

Historical records testify that the novel was widely borrowed from the libraries, and there are indications that the print run was sold out. It was truly a cultural event of the time.

Like her heroine, Vera returned to Sarajevo after the liberation of Yugoslavia and began a new life with her family in an apartment at Obala Kulina bana 9, in the center of Sarajevo.



Vera Obrenović Delibašić: Doubly Erased

Her wartime merits made her an influential social and cultural worker in the new state. This new role meant Vera was to take active participation in the building of institutional capacities in the cultural sphere and women's rights: she became a member of the Secretariat of the Main Board of the AFŽ for Bosnia and Herzegovina, of the AFŽ Central Committee Plenum for Yugoslavia, the Press Bureau of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and co-founder of the Association of Writers of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1945.

She was involved in adult education, later received a long-term editorial job—as editor-in-chief of the AFŽ magazine *New Woman*, then editor-in-chief of the illustrated magazine *Vidik* published by the Executive Front of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Beyond the victory narrative

As a writer, Vera was extremely productive during the reconstruction and rebuilding of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The books she published during this phase of her life were diverse. Poems came out in 1946, children's poetry collections *We Glean Across the Fields* and *From the Homeland Soil* in 1952, and she even ventured into drama and screenwriting, albeit with less success^[1]. However, the short story collection *Dawns Over the Mahalas* (1955) would define this period of her life. These stories are about women, from a woman's perspective, and approach the recently ended war in a somewhat different way. Her focus moves away from the triumphant revolutionary and explores a panorama of women's characters and destinies transformed by the revolution, showcasing different phases of emancipation, not shying away from the depiction of conservative women, fascist collaborators, disappointed partisans, mothers scraping to feed and clothe their families in the post-war scarcity... Vera is now interested in the lives of women that don't reflect "the monumental plan of historical victory, revolutionary enthusiasm and prosperity", women who "bear the experience of misfortune, disorientation, and loss". Đuvić notes how this "makes this prose distinctive within the contexts of collectivist socialist-realist literature, in the sense of revealing un-symbolized positions of individuality."^[2]

But to understand why this book defines her forties, let's return to the historically turbulent period for Yugoslavia, which dramatically reflected on Vera's life as well.



Vera Obrenović Delibašić: Doubly Erased

The postwar reconstruction period was especially difficult for Vera due to health problems she faced—actually, consequences of wartime hardships and poor living conditions, which led first to abdominal typhus, then a viral recurrence of inflammation of the brain membranes and visual fields in both eyes, leaving her nearly blind for several years. Still, she continued working until she was granted a disability pension in 1950 in Sarajevo, and her vision gradually returned only after several years and a series of complex surgical procedures.

Alongside poor health that prevented her from fully engaging in her vocation and actively participating in building the society she had so long dreamed of, a special shock for Vera was the arrest of her son Predrag.

Predrag was imprisoned first in Glavnjača prison in Belgrade (in an ironic twist of fate, the same prison where his father had been years earlier), and then transferred to the infamous Goli Otok camp, where political prisoners were sent as punishment. According to his own testimony in the book *Almost Forgotten History: Memories of the Early Days of Yugoslav Film*, Predrag ended up on Goli Otok due to a trivial personal conflict with his professor at the Film School in Belgrade. Predrag's denouncer was Professor Vjekoslav Afrić, director of the first postwar Yugoslav film *Slavica*. In his book, Delibašić writes that Afrić complained about several students, accusing them of "undermining his leadership authority [...] mentioning student names in a negative context [...] accusing them and claiming their 'guilt' had political overtones."^[1] That was enough for Predrag to receive a very harsh punishment, reserved for the most dangerous, politically subversive elements.

Predrag was, in a way, like members of his family in previous decades, a victim of dramatic historical shifts that sometimes led to disproportionate authoritarian practices by the authorities. Such was the infamous Informbiro Resolution. At that time, Yugoslavia was undergoing profound political changes, and Tito's famous "no" to Stalin, which earned the country political autonomy and laid the foundation for independent foreign policy and later economic development, also meant that many Yugoslavs—even those who had wholeheartedly fought for the state—would come under regime scrutiny, and their loyalty would be tested by the strictest standards. This meant that no one was considered entirely innocent, and the son of the literary couple Obrenović-Delibašić was also judged as such by the police apparatus. His Goli Otok episode lasted 18 months, during which his parents appealed to all their contacts, and it is likely that Vera's acquaintance with Milovan Đilas was key.



Vera Obrenović Delibašić: Doubly Erased

After Predrag's release from prison "through intervention from 'the highest place'", the family promptly moved to Belgrade. Predrag enrolled in directing studies at the Academy of Theater Arts (today the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade), and the family lived in Francuska Street in Belgrade, once again in the city center, while their Sarajevo apartment was taken by the director of the Jugopetrol factory.

In his book, Predrag Delibašić writes that he was "seen off" to freedom by Vojo Biljanović, assistant to the head of state security under Aleksandar Ranković, with the words: "But know that it's not over. For you or your mother."^[1]

Vera's life thus "unfolded" over several months—retirement, surgeries, the arrest and then release of Predrag, and then a swift move to Belgrade. We do not know how she coped with the arrest and the long wait, the months filled with fighting for her son's freedom. We do not know how she "swallowed" the disappointment in the state she had fought for, nor what effect such stress had on Predrag's father. We also don't know if she loved Belgrade and her new surroundings, Francuska Street, and walks to the Hotel Moskva. But we do know, at least according to Predrag's testimony, that she never returned to Sarajevo, although in 1955 her short story collection *Dawns Over the Mahalas* was published there, in which we can read her new thematic obsessions—above all, motherhood.

A brilliant example that we can now, in hindsight, read as a literary transposition of personal maternal anxiety is certainly the story *Night over Mahala*, in which we follow Sarajevo Jewess Dona Albahari, whose characterization is entirely woven from maternal trembling for her "strayed" children. The children, Sidik and Đusta, are, of course, partisan underground fighters, while it is implied that her husband, Šabotaj, was killed in Ustaša persecutions. Dona hides in the home of neighbor Beglerbegovička, whose son Tufik is also an underground fighter, in a barn full of unseasoned hay, and she perishes in a horrific, almost phantasmagoric scene during Ustaša raid, with the name of her youngest son Haim on her lips. This harrowing testimony of a time when "a human head became cheaper than a chicken's"^[1] brings no happy ending for a heroine, which is a significant departure from the genre framework in which revolutionary literature must celebrate exclusively the narrative of victory. It's hard not to read here the echo of Vera's most intimate thoughts after the collapse of her own family harmony, which rested on (socialist) ideals of diligent work and sacrifice, and was brutally broken by political violence.



Vera Obrenović Delibašić: Doubly Erased

“She was never given a second chance”

After Predrag’s Goli otok episode, Vera slowly withdraws from public life. However, she remained an active participant in social and cultural reconstruction in the decades that followed.

She recovered from illness, continued to write and publish, tried new forms like drama and screenwriting, deepened her interest in children’s literature, and found employment in Montenegro, at the Historical Institute in Cetinje, where she worked as an archivist and researcher—collector of historiographical material. This position brought a certain degree of social prestige (literary historians record that she was assigned a driver and a personal assistant), while also allowing her to continue writing, as evidenced by the books *From the Cradle to Sutjeska* (1961) and *Višnja from No Man’s Land* (1971). The novel *Through No Man’s Land* was reprinted by Sarajevo’s *Oslobođenje* in 1987, cementing her importance in the literature of the National Liberation War (NOB). However, it is clear that her literature and activism gradually became less valued over the years—Yugoslav literature underwent a profound transformation, and the old poetic frameworks, such as socialist realism, were no longer relevant. Thus, very little of her writing was published, and what she managed to put out, was based on existing material and documentary works that remained within the bounds of regime-approved content. Therefore, what perhaps best symbolizes this new chapter of her life’s story, is the novelized biography of Sava Kovačević Mizara, the famous partisan commander, which was published in Podgorica. Instead of engaging with contemporary political and social realities—about which she surely had much to say—Vera chose to sail into the glorious past, recording what she considered important for the future generations.

Today we speak of her erasure from the canon of literary history, but perhaps the words marginalization and forgetting are more appropriate. In the book *Women Documented*, we find an entry about her stating that her “legacy and engagement were literally erased from all official overviews of Yugoslav and Bosnia-Herzegovinian literature after the end of the war conflict, with the intention to present that revolutionary and engaged literature was men’s job.”^[1]



Vera Obrenović Delibašić: Doubly Erased

In the same book, we find a moving account by Yugoslav writer Svetlana Slapšak about her: “However, while many former representatives of socialist realism successfully survived, some of them by immediately offering services with success, some after long years of silence and suffering, often faced with new difficulties, Vera Obrenović-Delibašić was never given a second chance.”

Not everyone will agree with this statement; for example, Zlatan Tunjić^[1] points out that Vera was already marginalized as a writer during her lifetime, which he attributes to a combination of life circumstances, while the forgetting of her name after 1992 he considers systemic. The fact that she withdrew from public engagement after her son’s arrest, Tunjić explains as her inability to navigate the turbulent political moment, her unwillingness to compromise and seek consensus: “No matter how turbulent it was, it was a key moment in our history,” he concludes, referring to the Informbiro Resolution. “To be a revolutionary means to offer support even in not-so-good moments. Moments as these may or may not lead to positive outcomes. But from this perspective, you cannot know what those positive outcomes would be. You have to be able to act in the moment, to know what you’re doing, and that’s not for everyone,” Tunjić states.

But today it hardly matters whether Vera and Mihajlo, as devoted and later disappointed revolutionaries, were lost in the new times or not. Today, it is painfully clear why the memory of Vera Obrenović-Delibašić is absent from literary-historical, ethnically pure textbooks after the wars of the 1990s, when the shared cultural space was partitioned and officially dismantled. As an antifascist, a writer of the revolution who wholeheartedly believed in the supremacy of socialism and the Yugoslav idea, she undoubtedly became “undesirable,” which had less to do with her gender and more with her ideological beliefs. If we look at the other end of the political spectrum—the left, the feminist side—it too sought its role models elsewhere, certainly not in socialist realism, particularly in its earliest phase, which by the next decade was already deemed an outdated literary style. With this in mind, it’s possible to claim that Vera Obrenović-Delibašić was doubly erased, during her life and after her death.

Vera Obrenović-Delibašić died in Belgrade in 1992. We will never know how she felt as she witnessed the slow disintegration of all the ideals in which she believed.



Vera Obrenović Delibašić: Doubly Erased

But what we are certainly witnessing today is a renewal of activist, but also academic interest in the period in which she lived and worked, as well as in the forms of shared life and practice in which she believed. After decades-long silence, an exhibition in 2015 in the Museum of Literature and Drama in Sarajevo, an institution that guards her legacy, revived her memory.

Fortunately, contemporary historians and researchers have a fine sense for different perspectives, and the female perspective is certainly something they always keep in mind; new studies by literary historians, concerning Vera, among other writers of her time, are almost ready to be published.^[1] Recently, popular feminist publications, such as illustrated book *Women of Bosnia and Herzegovina*^[2] and *100 Women – 100 Streets Named After Women*^[3], include her as a person whose life and work are unjustly forgotten, and feminist literary critics, acutely aware of the marginalization of woman writers, are starting to explore the predecessors, women who paved the way. The husk of silence surrounding the memory of Vera Obrenović Delibašić has been broken, and with it, one hopes, the long-overdue recognition of her accomplishments has begun.



Vesna Ljubić: The Sidelined Pioneer of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Film and Radio

In women's history, pioneers hold a special place—those women who were the first in a particular field or who singularly stood out through their achievements or discoveries. The works of pioneers, whatever their domain, almost invariably hold a privileged place in women's history and are impossible to bypass in the male-centered official histories precisely because they were the first at something.

Even when their feats, for example artistic ones, do not meet certain standards or are average, they remain recorded as breakthroughs of women in a particular area and retain what we call historical value.

Once we recognize this fact—essentially a well-established commonplace of cultural memory—the case of Vesna Ljubić, a film, television, and radio director and screenwriter, and the first woman in Bosnia and Herzegovina to direct a feature-length film, appears all the more unusual. This film author, with a modest oeuvre, truly deserves to be counted among the pioneers of cinematic art in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but not only because she was the first. Her oeuvre, rich in genres and formats (short films, feature, documentary, television), unquestionably ranks among the artistic peaks of Yugoslav and Bosnian-Herzegovinian cinematography. She is the recipient of numerous prestigious film awards, but almost exclusively at international festivals. Although primarily a film artist—director and screenwriter—she built her long career in radio, creating works that are yet to attract researchers' attention. She directed and edited hundreds of programs and radio dramas, saved archival material and even the complete dramatic program of the public broadcaster. Her entire professional life was characterized by deep faith in art and culture and their power to transform consciousness. Excluding pirated copies, which are characterized by both temporariness and poor quality, Vesna Ljubić's films not available on digital platforms; at best, if you're lucky and if you even watch television, you might stumble upon one of her films on rerun programs of public television stations. They are publicly screened very rarely, usually as part of special screenings for which a suitable occasion is typically sought.

It is a bitter irony that contemporary Bosnian-Herzegovinian cinema is widely regarded as a field where female directors and screenwriters—such as Jasmila Žbanić, Aida Begić, Elma Tataragić, and others—form an essential and celebrated creative force, while the memory of the pioneer who paved the way has been almost entirely forgotten.



Vesna Ljubić: The Sidelined Pioneer of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Film and Radio

Brief biographical information about Vesna Ljubić, which can be easily found, says roughly the following. She was born on May 25, 1938, in Prnjavor. She graduated from the Department of Comparative Literature at the Faculty of Philosophy in Sarajevo, then completed film directing studies at the renowned Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome. Her early works include the first film *Putovanje* (The Journey) and the diploma film *Smrt se otplaćuje živěći* (Death is Paid for by Living, 1972).

Notably, during her student days, she worked as an assistant to Federico Fellini. Little is known about this episode of her life, as she rarely spoke about it. According to her colleague Miralem Ovčina, she occasionally mentioned “Fellini’s way of working with actors—his particular method of pushing them, sometimes even a bit harshly, out of their comfort zones, urging them to shed their egos and acting habits, and to build the character with him from scratch, just as the maestro envisioned, in a way that best suited his cinematic vision.” Contemporary film researchers emphasize that her work was certainly influenced by the great mentor Fellini, but Ovčina notes how she was never his epigone: “It’s likely that, “standing on the shoulders of a giant” like Fellini and working within the gravity of his poetics, she adopted certain aspects of his artistic expression—which many have rightly pointed out. But to me, Vesna was a strong and self-aware creative force who (...) remained authentic and forged her own distinctive path. She found a poetics of her own, one that blends raw, elemental life with poetic, mythical, and symbolic elements—both in film and across all the different artistic forms she engaged with.”^[1]

Upon returning to Bosnia and Herzegovina, she was employed at RTV Sarajevo and spent her entire working life in television and radio, primarily on the Drama Program, where she directed and edited various programs and radio dramas. Her role continued after postwar transformations of this media house.^[2] But more on Vesna’s lifelong romance with the radio medium will be said later.

Soon after her studies, she began making films. In 1971, she filmed the documentary *Halil Tikveša* about the famous Bosnian-Herzegovinian artist, and immediately after that, the feature TV film *Simha*, based on a story by Isak Samokovlija. Here, two important traits of her creativity are already visible—love for visual art and literature, as well as interest in the life of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Jewish community.



Vesna Ljubić: The Sidelined Pioneer of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Film and Radio

This was followed by *Prkosna delta* (Defiant Delta) in 1980, the film that brought her the title of “the first Bosnian female director of feature-length films,” and then her probably best-known film *Posljednji skretničar uzanog kolosijeka* (The Last Switchman of the Narrow Gauge Railway, 1986).

The short film *Iluzionisti* (The Illusionists, 1991), first created as a radio document, she filmed on the eve of the war.

Although the war briefly interrupted her career, which until then was on an upward trajectory, it did not stop her creativity, because even during the war she worked on the film *Ecce Homo* (1994), which brought her excellent reviews and international recognition. After the war Ljubić had a creative pause, transitioning slowly into documentary rather than feature form. She realised documentaries *Sveti prah Indije* (The Holy Dust of India, 1999), and the brilliant *Adio kerida* (Adieu Kerida 2002), a love letter to Sarajevo’s Sephardic Jews and their timeless music. Vesna Ljubić also made the film *Bosanska rapsodija na rubu znanosti* (Bosnian Rhapsody on the Edge of Science, 2011), satirically addressing the famous visit of the Moroccan “healer” Meki Torabi to Sarajevo. Yes, she accomplished all that, but who she was, really? In the words of her friend Dubravka Zrnčić-Kulenović: “When we talk about Vesna, I immediately think of her persistence on the one hand and passion on the other, but also of a gentleness and warmth she possessed. She believed in what she can and wants, and she fought herself to ensure that what she created reaches the viewers, and that she stands very firmly behind her work. Her passion, but also incredible imagination, always had a foundation in spirituality. As if every plant that grows and every person she met has its own soul, its purpose of existence and encounter with her.”^[1]

Also, according to Ovčina, a versatile artist: “Dedicated, highly competent, inspiring, and demanding, both as an editor and a collaborator. I had the impression that she lived her artistic calling intensely, twenty-four hours a day, and that even that sometimes didn’t feel like enough for her. Her large and diverse body of work stands as testament to this.” Vesna Ljubić died in Sarajevo in 2021, from complications caused by Covid-19. Behind her remains a genre-rich film, television, and radio oeuvre, hundreds of radio shows and dramas she edited and created, scripts that never reached production, and a generation of radio workers she taught all she knew. After her death, no Sarajevo film festival held a retrospective or even a screening to honor her. And about that—something later. Let us now look at the themes this unjustly forgotten film author dealt with.



Vesna Ljubić: The Sidelined Pioneer of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Film and Radio

Defiant peripheries

Her reserved nature, and even more so, a systemic unwillingness to embrace a creator who belonged to no one but herself are among the deepest reasons we know so little today about the films of Vesna Ljubić. As mentioned earlier, they can be viewed very rarely, except if you have the stomach for piracy^[1].

[1] Films by Vesna Ljubić *Simha*, *Defiant Delta*, *The Last Switchman of the Narrow Gauge Railway*, and *Adio kerida* are available in pirated version on Youtube.

From what is available, we can conclude that Vesna Ljubić in her artistic quests was especially interested in marginal stories, unusual phenomena, eccentric characters with untold stories. Both thematically and in terms of film language and aesthetics, she resisted expectations:

“Ljubić does not follow the two dominant cinematic trends of the former Yugoslavia: the avant-garde movement known as the Black Wave, which produces political, polemical films, nor the mainstream practice of partisan or other conformist film,” writes director Rada Šešić, who started her career, among other things, as assistant director on *The Switchman*.

Vesna's first feature film *Defiant Delta* stands as the finest example of this conscious nonconformity. An unnamed village in the Neretva delta is the victim of two scourges—natural and human. Annual floods destroy the valuable work of villagers and take lives, but so do armies that periodically raze what has been built, each time in a new uniform, with different epaulets. The film's chronotope is indefinite, almost like in a fairy tale, although some spatial and temporal markers are recognizably local; it acts as a condensed allegory of the Balkan wars and colonizations, whose cycle of destruction and renewal never ceases.

The film focuses on the character Ivana, a visionary who tries to save the village with her bold idea of a tunnel that'll lead the village to the sea and prevent further floods. But explosives needed to achieve that can only be obtained by approaching soldiers. Ivana will, however, do whatever it takes. Ljubić gently portrays the tightly knit village community, protectively inclined towards the unusual girl whose only companion is a goat. Unfortunately, their care will be enough to save Ivana, too bold and radical for the environment in which she grew up in.



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Long lyrical shots of boats floating on water in a rhapsody of light, old Herzegovinian songs intertwined with a dreamy soundtrack (composed by the famous Vangelis), the epic daring of the young heroine—all this makes the film quite unusual for the era in which it appeared, yet perfectly contemporary as an allegory of the Balkan provinces ravaged equally by cruel nature and even crueler colonial armies.

The Last Switchman of the Narrow Gauge Railway also depicts a community doomed to extinction, but this time in the very recognizable context of Yugoslav socialism. The very fact that it deals with the final closure of the narrow-gauge railway, which was a pledge of modernization and industrialization of Yugoslavia, clearly testifies that the author here, unlike in Delta, wanted to offer a more precise, even somewhat satirical, picture of the Bosnian province and to tie it more strongly with current socio-political movements. A subtle critique of Yugoslav ideology of progress, which implies inevitable and therefore necessarily cruel technological advancement, is intertwined here with a gallery of eccentric characters of railway workers and their families. Particularly interesting are the diverse female characters: the “station housewife,” the woman of the impossible name Japanolija, permanently disdainful of the primitiveness and backwardness of villagers, the exhibitionist Klara, granddaughter of the station builder Rudolf von Messner, Stana, a would-be tavern singer who escapes from abusers by marrying a harmless railway worker, and others.

The downfall of the provincial railway station, already distant from the life that always happens elsewhere, is portrayed with tenderness and sympathy for all that is transient and vulnerable, doomed to disappear. Technological progress, which will transform the country, meant the end of life as these people knew it, and, ultimately, the termination of the community they built despite all their differences. The film only discreetly hints at the later consequences of such socio-technological shifts: entire ways of life were lost with the closing of narrow-gauge railways that meant a vital link to larger towns for many peasants, consequently forcing them to move to towns, then to urban centers. The fact that Ljubić manages to interweave a deadly serious story with warmth and subtle irony only testifies to the mastery of her cinematic storytelling.



Vesna Ljubić: The Sidelined Pioneer of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Film and Radio

Lamija Milišić is primarily interested in spatial construction in a series of Ljubić's films and notes how the director shows a "tendency toward characters without a home passing through transitional spaces,"^[1] and the transitional spaces themselves such as the village in the Neretva delta which begins life anew every season, as well as the space of the narrow-gauge railway station, transient by its roadside identity.

This tells us probably the most important connection of all these mutually very different films—a love for the all things transient, fragile, but never ephemeral. This impression can easily be extended to *Adio kerida*, a film about searching for lost ancestors and a community that was also historically cruelly "transitional" in these lands, and whose inevitable decay the film, itself an art form of "stopped time," strives to immortalize. But more on *Adio Kerida* later.

A similar impulse is also obvious in some of Ljubić's radio programs, few of which are available online. The radio documentary *Hasanaginica*, co-signed with Miralem Ovčina, leads us through adaptations and screen adaptations of the famous South Slavic folk ballad. Although it cites all the well-known authors who dramatized it—Šantić, Ogrizović, Isaković, Alispahić—most attention is devoted to the amateur theater in Livno, since that town was recognized as the place that best, or perhaps with the most love, kept the memory of that ballad alive. Interviews with elderly actors who still know their lines verbatim vividly testify to how lovingly and gently Vesna Ljubić treated fragile and transient cultural phenomena, those in which the life of a community is best reflected.

Moreover, Vesna Ljubić was never interested in urban stories; the terrain where she filmed her most convincing works is precisely the Bosnian (or Herzegovinian) province, whether an unnamed village in the Neretva delta or the roadside station "Brezovi dani," or provincial cultural phenomena such as amateur theaters or folk "healers" in *Bosanska rapsodija*. Even when dealing with an urban story, Ljubić chooses a minority community whose fate is disappearance or dispersion (Sarajevo Sephardim in the films *Simha* and *Adio kerida*)—all in an effort to preserve these authentic, unusual forms of life from devastation.

During and after the war, Ljubić increasingly showed a preference for documentary film. But before we address the film *Adio kerida*, in which, as Zrnčić-Kulenović says, much of Vesna Ljubić herself is present, let us say something about the documentary that perhaps resonated the loudest abroad—*Ecce Homo: Behold the Man*.



Vesna Ljubić: The Sidelined Pioneer of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Film and Radio

A fictional kind of truth

This short documentary film from 1994 is officially described as “not political, but rather a personal reflection on death”. Ljubić chose not to leave besieged Sarajevo, despite having had several opportunities to do so.

She stayed to work, to protect the artifacts of Bosnian-Herzegovinian culture from destruction, to breathe life into the radio, which at the time was the one of the rare cultural outlets for Sarajevans, and, of course, to film—constantly under the threat of snipers and shelling.

“I always felt like a citizen of the world, at home everywhere. But when the siege of Sarajevo started, I felt I had to share the fate of my city and its people,” she said when asked about her decision.^[1] Instead of leaving, she decided to defy the aggression through art. She filmed everyday life during the siege of Sarajevo from spring 1992 almost until the end of 1994, without voiceover commentary, only through bare images and a soundtrack that crosses the sounds of prayers of all four monotheistic religions present in this city with the cawing of crows. Ljubić shows us funerals on improvised carts, ruins, a burned tram, destroyed apartments. She testifies how she collected nettles under shelling, talks about her deteriorating health due to prolonged hunger, recounted how she went through the Tunnel of Hope at the moment it was hit by a grenade: “People behind pushed me to run forward at that very moment to catch a pause between bombardments, and I ran over all those dead bodies not knowing if the blood on me was theirs or mine.”

The most moving moment of the film is the scene of the tombstone of Danica Ljubić, the director’s mother, where we also see her. However, Ljubić refuses the position of martyr. “I am no martyr and don’t make me into one. Everyone there went through the same things,” she told Gordana Crnković. That’s precisely the spirit of this film document—its harsh realism is there to testify and record, not to judge, argue, or even mourn. It just says: here is a human, and by doing so it reclaims the image of war which sensationalist Western media turned into a morbid attraction. “Human dying is an intimate thing, and yet cameras all over Sarajevo peered into people’s guts and blood, denying them the privacy of death; making out of it an almost pornographic spectacle,” says the director.^[2]



Vesna Ljubić: The Sidelined Pioneer of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Film and Radio

Ecce Homo was shown at twenty world festivals, including the Venice Film Festival and the famous IDFA Amsterdam, where it was the first Bosnian-Herzegovinian film ever shown. After her death, it was publicly shown only once, and not in Sarajevo but in Trieste.

Ljubić sharpened and perfected her documentary expression further in the television documentary *Adio Kerida* (2002), produced for Television Sarajevo. The film is named after a well-known Sephardic song whose title translates as “Farewell, Beloved,” and follows a young man from Seattle, Peter Lippman, who seeks his long-lost ancestor, a Sarajevo Jew, an Ashkenazi who married a Sephardic woman and fully adopted her culture. He carries an old yellowed photo and a family tale about a man who loved to sing old Sephardic romances. Lippman’s search leads him to the homes of Sarajevo Jews. His curious naivety inspires them to show him their family albums, speak Ladino, the Sephardic language, demonstrate customs, and, naturally, sing songs - a perfect little trick to document and immortalize the life of a culture in retreat. Namely, the fate of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Jews is well known—they found refuge in then Ottoman Bosnia after persecution in Spain, which was, at the time, a somewhat more inclusive society. However, most of them perished in the Holocaust, which, under the command of the fascist puppet regime, the Independent State of Croatia, was carried out with particular zeal and brutality.

Although the story is burdened by history, one would say it demands documentary and factuality, Ljubić playfully and lightly avoids conventional documentary conventions, skillfully mixing in fictional elements. As Crnković notes^[1], both Lippman and his ancestor are real people, but the director used a clever device, presenting the connection between the two as real, although completely fictional, to gain something that is much more intimate and touching than a stereotypical dialogue between the documentarian and his subjects. It is not immediately apparent that this is a “mockumentary” unless one digs deeper; the author justified her choice, Crnković writes, by considering it a useful “stylistic device” to delve deeper into the very subject—the life of the Sephardim. Be that as it may, the final result justifies this little “deception,” because we got an incredibly poetic, at times comic, but always touchingly humane film, whose final scene, a complete surrender to fiction, some would say even magical realism, testifies to the life of a community retreating before the cruelty of history.



Vesna Ljubić: The Sidelined Pioneer of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Film and Radio

Magical frequencies

We already said that Vesna Ljubić earned her pension at Radio Television of Bosnia and Herzegovina. For her, radio was more than a job: it was a refuge. Her colleagues testify best to this, especially those to whom she opened the wonderful world of radio, inspiring in them a creative spirit and professionalism.

“It gave her the possibility to work, explore, without pressure from the industry, complicated processes, or working with large teams. When she returned to radio after filming *The Switchman*, she was broken. It was too much effort for her. Vesna was a talented woman who struggled to cope with poor organization and the macho film world; she found it difficult to manage everything required to make a film at the time. Radio offered intimacy, the possibility to work more simply but no less convincingly,” said Miralem Ovčina, her longtime collaborator, in an interview for Abraš radio after her death.

Ovčina recalled a wartime memory that perfectly illustrates what kind of person Vesna Ljubić was and how much radio as a medium meant to her: “During the war, the radio editorial office was devastated. Vojka Đikić^[2] and Vesna Ljubić came to the Grey House then, people were scattered to other editorial offices, holes were patched, and all sorts of things were done to keep the program going. Already in 1993, it was time to restart the drama program. If Vojka and Vesna decided that, there was no chance it wouldn’t be done! Soon we started recording radio novels, docudramas, dramas... all thanks to the persistence of these two magnificent women.”

Dubravka Zrnčić-Kulenović recalled Vesna Ljubić’s efforts to save recordings of radio dramas that were endangered during wartime. “At that first meeting, she told me something the public perhaps does not know—that she fought throughout the war to preserve tape recordings on which radio dramas and programs that she considered top-notch were recorded, but which represented the trace of a time that, unfortunately, was slowly disappearing during the war. That fight to preserve them went so far that she even came into conflict with colleagues, because at that time, of course, there were no new tapes and some had to be sacrificed. She immediately suggested to me that, before we even started collaborating, we should meet and start listening to all the tapes she had managed to save.



Vesna Ljubić: The Sidelined Pioneer of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Film and Radio

However, that does not explain the fact that one of her war and several postwar films are even harder to find in public screenings, television reruns, or digital platforms. Some Sarajevo artists who spent the siege period in the city and continued to work practically built serious careers based on their “war merits”. The mere fact that *Ecce homo* had to be screened/rerun in distant Trieste instead of her native Sarajevo speaks volumes.

We must also consider the fact that the director herself avoided belonging to any artistic ‘clans’ or interest groups. Dubravka Zrnčić-Kulenović put it best: “She was an artist who created in her silences and thrived wonderfully within them.” Or in the words of Miralem Ovčina: “She was a beautiful and intelligent woman who, from the start, on these lands implied that she’ll have many more problems (...) She consciously avoided the film world, wisely guarded her space.” But from a feminist perspective, we understand that her modesty and unobtrusiveness, although perhaps part of her personality, certainly could not not be, in part, a reaction to the perpetually divided, ‘clan-like’ world of art and film, both in the former and current state, a swamp in which careerists and mediocrities ‘swim’ best. “I can’t even imagine how many obstacles, prejudices, and disdain she faced on that path. She was never mentioned at the Sarajevo Film Academy (...) I never had the honor to work with Vesna, but I am endlessly grateful to her for enabling us women to step on the path she paved in the patriarchal world of film,” wrote contemporary Bosnian director Jasmila Žbanić in her in memoriam Facebook post, confirming that even the academic establishment bears some responsibility for neglecting Vesna Ljubić’s heritage.

Of course, we cannot avoid the fact from the beginning of this text: history too easily overlooks women’s works, which undoubtedly happened in the case of the heroine of this text. Bosnian-Herzegovinian cinematography, whether films made before or after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, was largely macho, favoring directors as well as “male” themes and approaches.

Nebojša Jovanović wrote about the characteristic “gender war in which men clash, driven by primal, wild impulses, and women who embody civilization and modernity.”^[1]



Vesna Ljubić: The Sidelined Pioneer of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Film and Radio

Although she was never declarative about it, Ljubić approached this motif very polemically, primarily by creating a gallery of diverse female characters, reversing the so-called male gaze (Laura Mulvey^[1]), both in the character of Klara from *Skretničar* and Ivana from *Delta*, who reject sexual objectification even when completely naked in the frame. Moreover, her Ivana is the driving force of the plot, a dreamer and innovator working for the good of the community.

It is not unimaginable that her subtle, by today's standards even shy, resistance to toxic film tropes, precisely because it was such, diverged too much from the film mainstream to be properly valued. Finally, her films advocated the ideal of solidarity of immediate human community—which is completely uninteresting to today's film taste, not to mention the commercialization of film taste—which also contributes to marginalization. However, these are films of timeless quality, indeed very potent for contemporary feminist, postcolonial, and even ecocritical readings, since they bring a very original view of natural destruction and technological progress.

At the very end, let us also say that Vesna Ljubić's work is endangered even on the lowest level—materially. This means that the original film reels of her two feature films are currently unavailable to the institution holding the rights to them, i.e., it is currently impossible to talk about their digitization. A detailed review is given by Vuković, but here the rather complicated situation can be summarized, without pointing fingers, as follows. Films made in Yugoslavia underwent various post-production stages in different cities, mostly Belgrade or Zagreb, which had the necessary technology. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, however, the originals remained only in the Yugoslav Film Archive (Belgrade), while the other materials remained “scattered” between Yugoslav cities. The rights holder, the Sarajevo Film Center, does not possess the originals, and it seems unlikely that, without significant financial investment it will be able to obtain them. Furthermore, the Bosnian-Herzegovinian archive suffered serious devastation during and after the war, due to which existing tapes were damaged by moisture and mold. Although there are indications that the films of the first Bosnian female director will be prioritized for digitization, no concrete plans exist yet.

Let this text, apart from the necessary reminder of a great and unjustly forgotten artist, be an appeal that urgent measures are taken to preserve her work, because otherwise, damage could be irreversible.



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