

Memory in Belgrade

Goran Basaric



Photographing the past in its best light

An essay

Memory in Belgrade
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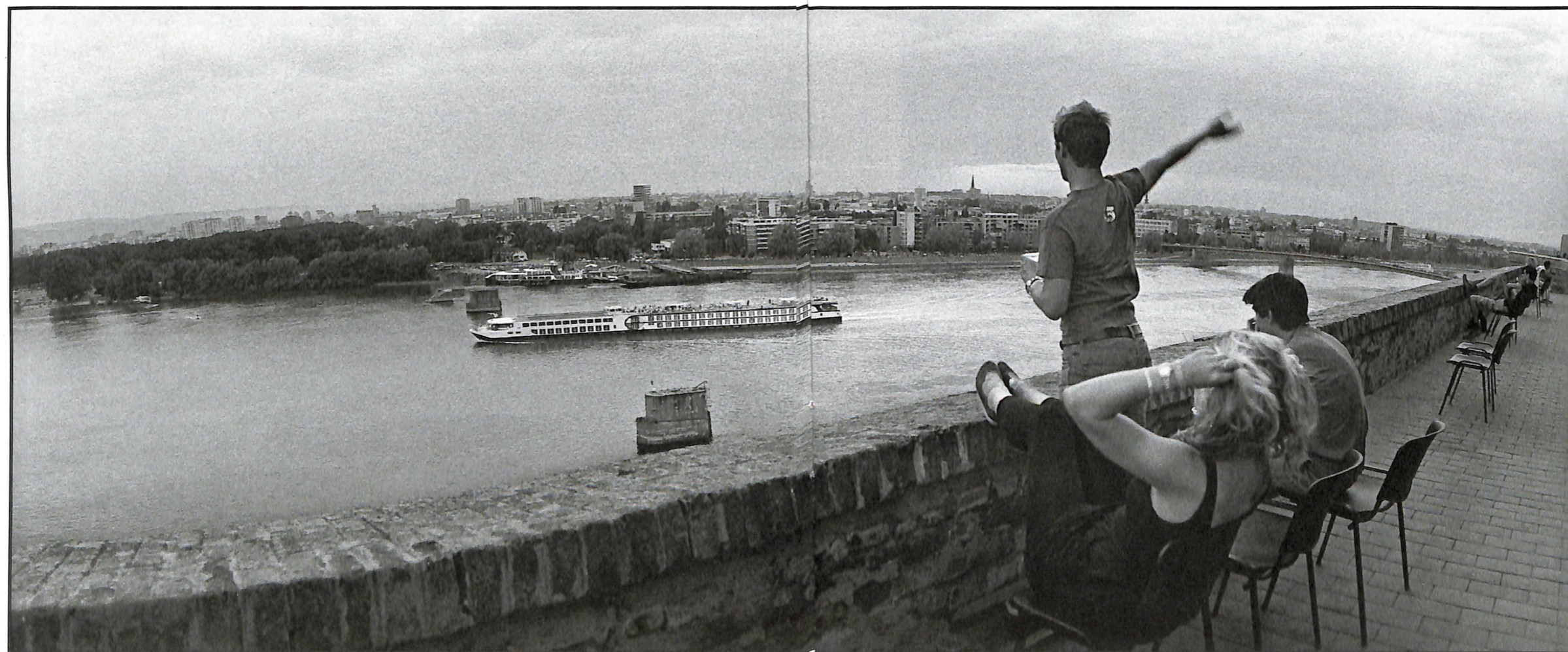
In the summer of 2008, Goran Basaric returned with his camera to the neighbourhoods of Belgrade that he had known in his youth. Since 1994, when he and his wife moved to Canada, he had been photographing the Vancouver cityscape—in particular, the parks and public spaces that their son, Philip, who is now thirteen, came to know as he grew up. A portfolio of these Vancouver photographs was published in Geist 52 in 2004. The images presented here extend Basaric's project into memory places of his own past, in the country once known as Yugoslavia.

My father, Djuro, was born in 1925 in Bosnia. When World War II started in 1941, Croatian fascists burned down the family home. My father joined the anti-fascist Partisans and spent the next four years hiding from the Germans and fighting them in the forests and mountains. After the war he continued in his military career until his retirement.



False Creek, Vancouver, looking north, 2004.

Novi Sad, eighty kilometres north of Belgrade on the Danube. The Petrovaradin Fortress was built by Austro-Hungarians. My friends and I used to make movies in its tunnels and catacombs.





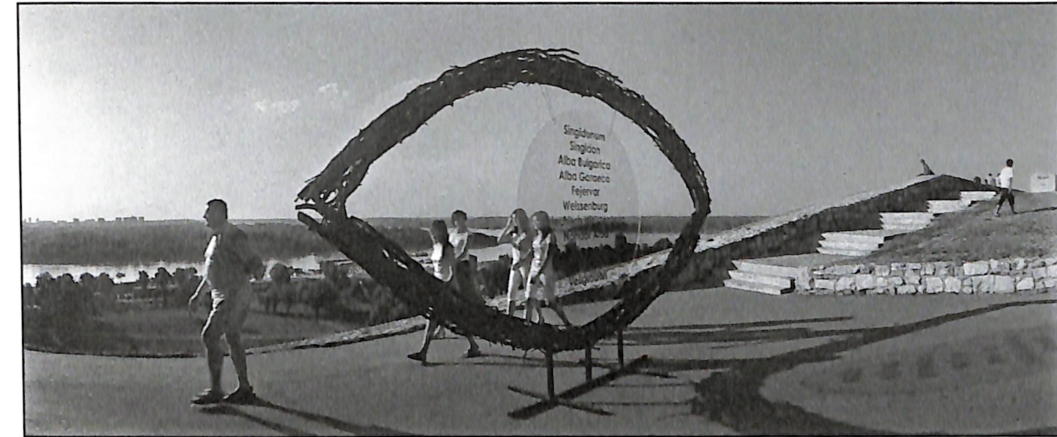
Small business in New Belgrade. During the war in the early 1990s, what with food shortages and the collapse of the market, newsstands began turning into corner stores, skirting trade laws and licensing requirements. They were monuments to the vitality of small entrepreneurship and black-market principles.



Knez Mihajlova Street, the main pedestrian zone of Belgrade. Its neo-classicist architecture was a sign of cultural alignment with western Europe. The first public library, the first school of fine arts, the National Bank and the Serbian Academy of Sciences lined the street, along with the best cafés and restaurants in the city.

My mother, Milica, was born in Kragujevac, an old capital of Serbia and the birthplace of the Yugo automobile. Her father was a skilled toolmaker who worked in a gun factory. In 1941, he and seven thousand other men were taken hostage and shot by German soldiers in reprisal against the Partisans. My mother never got to know her father, and she carried this deep sorrow through the rest of her life. She worked as an administrative clerk in various institutions, and after she married, she devoted her life to our family. My older brother and I have happy memories of our childhood in Belgrade.

In Belgrade these days, everything seems to be new, even when it looks familiar. Streets have been renamed for old kings and commanders; the government has new agencies; new neighbourhoods are bursting with new kids; the city is buzzing with a new language. The old Belgrade used its courtyards to hide from prosperity and modernity during the years of socialism, and to guard small shops where local merchants, locksmiths, barbers and shoemakers were still servicing the old bourgeois. The result was a peculiar symbiosis of the capitalist past and socialist present. When I returned to those courtyards in 2008, hoping to find the old shops, I could see



The Kalemegdan Fortress, now the main city park. The fort, situated at the confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers, was a strategic point for centuries, meeting armies of Celts, Greeks, Romans, Turks, Serbs, Austrians, Hungarians, Germans and anyone else wanting to take over the city.



A bomb shelter in New Belgrade. Every block had its own shelter, and as we grew up we were taught to be an army of defence and to expect nuclear bombs to be dropped by imperialist forces. Today the shelters serve as boardings for political posters and entertainment ads.

that our past had been conquered by the forces of globalization: internet cafés, over-designed foreign banks, MaxMaras and Benettons.

My wide-angle camera, a Soviet-era Horizont with a moving lens, is more suited to photographing large, open spaces like parks and oceans than the density of big cities. The camera needs light and space, and it takes time for the lens to travel from one side of the frame to the other. Urban centres move constantly and quickly and don't wait for me to reframe. In Belgrade I had to be patient with my panoramic camera—I passed hours near riverbanks and in parks waiting for people to enter the scene. Often I would position

my own shadow somewhere in the frame and wait for something to happen.

In 1968, when I was six years old, my family moved to the newly developed district of New Belgrade. When I wasn't in school, I spent my time playing with my friends, building cities of wet sand. New Belgrade was a giant sandbox in those days—high cranes and construction crews were everywhere, building over the swampland. My neighbourhood was called Block 37 and consisted of nothing but huge apartment buildings. There were no corner stores or markets. My elementary school was heralded as the most modern school in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.



Slavia, the biggest and busiest city square in Belgrade. Municipal and provincial governments, architects, artists and activists have struggled to change it into a meaningful, attractive urban space, but nothing has

worked—Slavia Square remains as chaotic today as ever. The taxi driver asked me what was I photographing. “Nothing special,” I said. “Oh, you mean some art?” he replied.



A prime example of the small-business heyday. This enterprise has survived at the corner of Block 44, New Belgrade, since the 1990s.



Billboards around the House of Youth, now under reconstruction. It used to be a centre of student unrest and a home to B92, a legendary independent radio station. B92 broadcast the song “Fight the Power” into the streets to support demonstrators who confronted Milosevic’s police on March 9, 1991.



Block 62, near the neighbourhood where I grew up, as it looks today. When we were kids, my friends and I spent hours at the playground, unattended, playing on the swings and seesaws. Nowadays, mobile amusement parks that look like the Dino-towns of North America move from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, wherever families live.



Airport City in New Belgrade, a modern business centre and the home of foreign-owned corporations. This is where everybody with a university degree wants to work these days, or so it seems.



Middle-European architecture in the Zemun district of Belgrade. I always liked this style better than the modern concrete buildings of New Belgrade, where my family lived.



Inexpensive carnival-style entertainment in Belgrade. Places like this seem to be frequented less by kids and more by parents who need a break and some cheap fun.



The most beautiful view of Belgrade, overlooking the Sava River flowing into the Danube. The building below the walls is a planetarium, converted from an old Turkish bath. Next to it is the Charles VI Gate, built in 1736.



The Speedo swimsuit, no longer seen in North America, remains popular at the beach.



Posters of Radovan Karadzic, leader of the Bosnian Serbs during the recent war. Karadzic was arrested in my old neighbourhood in summer 2008, during my visit

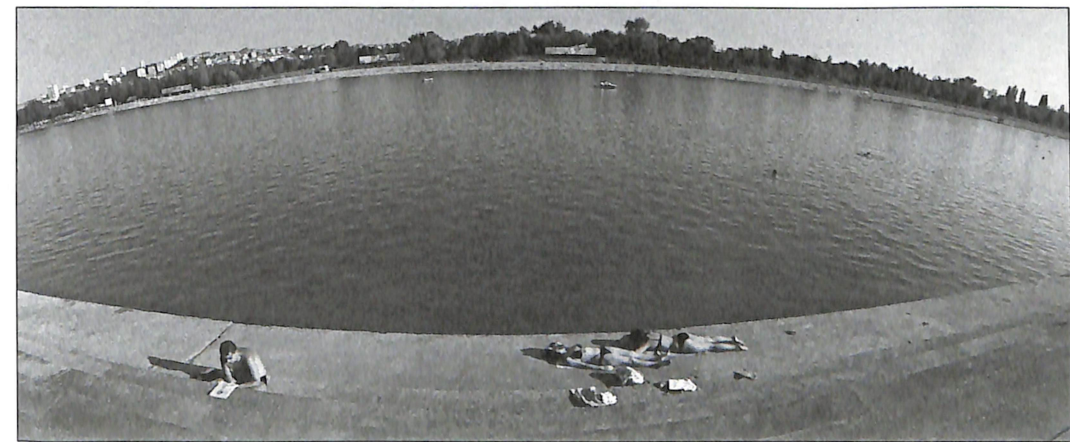
An English princess visited the school, but she wore no crown on her head. When the Highway of Brotherhood and Unity opened, we were sent out to stand along the road for hours, waiting for President Tito to pass by on his way to and from the airport. We waved national flags and sang songs about revolution and brotherhood and unity. I took my first photograph in Block 37 in the fall of 1977.

When I left Belgrade in January 1994, inflation was running at 400,000-billion percent (fifteen digits). The National Bank was printing new banknotes every Monday, and there were no paycheques—only cash, and tons of it. By Friday all that cash was worthless, unless it was exchanged for foreign currency on the black market.

I lived in Belgrade for twenty-five years. I worked and played there, slept there and breathed in its rhythms, studied and later lectured on cinematography at the University of Arts in Belgrade, and I can still slip into the city's patterns when I return for a visit. Everything feels familiar and predictable, even if it is different on the surface.

I have always felt that there is much about Belgrade that everyone could learn to love, if only I could show the city at its best—or, as we would say in Serbia, to show it in its best light. Last summer I returned to Belgrade to photograph and write about the place of my past and of the present as well; to remember and honour the city, and to chase the magical light of early morning and late afternoon.

to Belgrade. The next night his supporters covered the city with posters and banners, once again plunging everyone into grim memories of the civil war.



The beach at Ada Lake, in the centre of Belgrade.

Goran Basaric is a photographer, cinematographer and photojournalist who lives and works in Vancouver. "Memory in Belgrade" is part of a work commissioned with the assistance of Arts Partners for Creative Development. "City Pastoral," part of his Vancouver portfolio, appeared in Geist 52.