

U iščekivanju
Mario Ilić

In Expectation

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This work is a 120–page photo publication dealing with the eternal human question of transience.

By directly entering into the classically known photo part, it succeeds to obtain a feeling, how it must be, in an unfamiliar and very private living situation.

The textual narrative in the second part of the publication gives the viewer a feeling regarding my very private and personal thoughts about encounters with old people in the home, also recall to my childhood post-war memories, fear of losing family members and relation to death which I find inevitable in my generation.

As an objective analysis of the work, Meinhard Rauchensteiner rounded off this work with five chapters of text.

Recently I have been confronted with the question if I love who I am and the things that I do. For the first time in a while I encountered the question and the idea of myself, so I started thinking who I really am and how true the thoughts I have about myself are.



When I was searching for the topic for my diploma paper at the University of Applied Arts Vienna in the second half of 2018, I was going for something where you can go without calling anybody, announcing yourself, organizing or arranging meetings. I have never really liked to depend on anybody and I like working on my own. I wanted to find a situation where life takes place without my intervention. I wanted to find a place where I could come by at any time of the day and, luckily, I was able to find it: home for elderly people, situated only a few minutes away from the place where I live; just across the street in fact. This is the home for elderly people everyone in Tuzla, my hometown, knows about. I have passed it by millions of times but have never had anything to deal with it. I have never managed to see the interior and I didn't know anybody who lived there so my first visit to the home was shocking. It was shocking because after many years since the death of my father's mother, I felt the smell of old age and elderly, immobile people again. Namely, this stale air was sealed deep down in my first childhood memories. My grandma had been confined to bed for almost 15 years before she died and, as a kid, I would get inside her room where she lived with my grandfather and I was just completely horrified by the smell of the room. I associated the smell of that room with the smell of old skin when my grandma wanted to kiss me, the smell of food leftovers and stench of diapers as well. It was something I didn't feel for a long time after my dad's mother passed away.

My dad and I came to the home and got on the 4th of eight floors where I luckily met one of the closest people from the home – Ćazim, or, as he likes to be called, Sheriff. He is a man who is in a wheelchair, immovable but very sensible and calm. He is in his late 80s. When I met him, I immediately knew what I had to do when I come again. I came with no camera on that day because I hadn't talked with anybody about taking photographs and my diploma paper. Moreover, I didn't want to ruin any possible connection to the people who live there.



The construction building of the public institution »Pensioners' Home« Tuzla commenced in the late 1970s. It was opened in the summer of 1980, on July 27th.

In the first decade of its existence, until the 1990s, the Home was well known not only for its primary activity, which was accommodation and care for the people of third phase of life, but it was well known as a hotel and catering facility in the city of Tuzla as well. In fact, the Pensioners' Home was registered as a B category hotel and won a number of awards and recognitions in the field of hotel business, tourism and catering for its work. In the restaurant, café and banquet hall of the Home, unforgettable New Year's Eve celebrations, weddings, graduations, dance matinees, as well as the performances of famous ex-Yugoslav singers and music bands were organized. Besides this, during this period, sport teams were also accommodated in the Pensioners House, both during their preparations and matches.

In 1992, the aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina started. During the war, the Home provided a shelter not only to the elderly but also to the refugees, displaced persons, complete families from the areas of Podrinje, Brčko and Bijeljina. Since it served as war shelter in that period, the Home was shelled nine times by the aggressor. However, by the end of the war, the Home was slowly returning to its primary activity which was provision of the service for the people in third life phase.



Monografije Tuzle – Miroslav Hlubna 1983

Few days after I started taking photographs in the home, on the 2nd floor, between the dark hallways where I tried to capture photographs of people who were standing in front of their rooms and chatting with each other, I saw a face of a man I had known from before. I saw a face of my mother's cousin, Ivo, who had a cancer and an operation. All of a sudden, I felt like a knife pierced into my stomach and had no idea how I should behave because I didn't see it coming that I would bump into somebody who I already had known in the home and especially not a close relative. In that moment I didn't know what to do and I didn't have enough strength to keep photographing so I just gently lowered my camera until I moved away after a very short and superficial conversation during which Ivo appeared to be disappointed and somewhat mad. I guess it was because of his whole situation, what had happened to him and where he ended up. I saw him a few more times in the hallways of the home, as well as in the restaurant but I never had enough courage to ask him for a photograph.



Some days I would just go to the home for the elderly and even though I had my camera with me, it was truly impossible for me to start shooting pictures. It didn't matter if they had seen me before in the home, they would still look at me as I was a tourist attraction to them, especially with the thought that I was at least 60 years younger than an average service user of the home. Sometimes I would sit alone for hours or play dominos or cards with them. Few times I tried playing chess but nobody except one person would play with me because I was far from their level which was making them nervous and I actually supported that because I didn't want to directly affect anybody's mood.

On one occasion a spinster told me a joke in which a young man and his girlfriend were about to get married but the girl was a little bit mean. The young lady asked him if he had any old furniture in the house, and if so, he should get rid of it as soon as possible before she moved into his house. Of course, the young man didn't think of it that way, when the girl was alluding if he had an old mother or father with which she didn't want to be bothered with. As this old lady told this joke, I felt how people in the home for elderly and elderly people in general feel unwanted and neglected even though their families and children tell them to stay with them as much as they want to and that they belong together. None of them feels accepted and desirable at that age and that's why they escape to the home and count their last days. They say they don't need a lot and often they do it by thinking for themselves how they're letting other people live their lives and that their time has passed and they do not have anything else to do.



Whenever I asked them to tell me something about themselves, I was constantly getting similar answers and it was never about them and what I wanted them to tell me: about something interesting they had done in the past. It was always about their children, grandchildren, about death of their partner and coming to the home for elderly. They would also tell me the names of the grandchildren and where they live in Europe, when the next time of their visit to Bosnia would be and when they would come to see their grandma or grandpa.

When coming to the elderly home, I usually started talking to the people I knew from the previous visit. They were often sitting together and I usually knew one person which started bragging that I was their grandson or that they were my aunt or uncle and they called me to visit them in the room for a glass of juice. With time passing by I started feeling much closer and closer to the people I photographed and I felt I was getting more of their attention and they cared about me and also compared me with their grandchildren. I often stayed quite longer in the home so they started asking me things like: »How will you get home?, Are you hungry?, Do your parents know that you're here?« and they also asked me if I would be scared of going home when it was getting dark.

Some of them were so kind. For instance, as time passed by, I really bonded with an elderly lady called Ljuba who gave me a bar of chocolate every time I visited the home. She did not let me leave the place without a bar of chocolate, chewing gums or anything she had at that moment in her drawer.



Few times I just came in to the home for elderly and sat in the entrance hall and observed what was happening because I simply didn't have the strength to go up to one of the floors and interact with anybody because I was already exhausted from continuous visits and from explanations I had to give about who I was and explanations what I was doing there and if the photographs were going to end up on the local television. They would get bit disappointed when I said it was for a school project and it was not going directly to the media. I guess the television is, along with the newspaper, the only mass media they follow. Memory of the people finding themselves in the third phase of life is not the brightest. I would often introduce myself to the same people in a few days of time with the same story of who I was which was a bit uncomfortable for me in the beginning but with time I managed to get used to it.

When I finished my first visit with taking photographs at the home and came back to Vienna last year, I started thinking more and more about the people I had met and recalled everything that had happened. I often found myself thinking about whether someone I met fell, or whether someone ended up in the hospital due to illness or even died.

I would find myself thinking if they needed something, if they liked the food which had been served that day or absolutely hated it. I remember they were telling me the food was not the best they had and that sometimes they would order something cheap from a nearby restaurant so they were calm for the day until the next breakfast.

Few residents of the home which were really older and immobile asked me if I could buy something for them before my next visit, whenever the next visit was. I used to buy stuff like shaving foam or tooth paste. One wish was a bag of tangerines. Sometimes they were so proud that they wouldn't ever tell that they needed something because in the end I was just a regular kid to them.



One of Ćazim's best friends from the home for elderly people was a person named Habib from the room 410. They were accommodated on the same floor but were on different ends of the corridor. Habib could hardly move, like Ćazim, but they would manage to visit each other in these wheelchairs they had and they were determined to spend some time together. I met Habib when Ćazim took me to his room during my first visits to the home. He introduced me to him and tried to explain what I needed to do and why I was there and after that moment I also started visiting Habib because he was very friendly to me. Habib already had had a stroke before I came, so he could hardly speak and his right arm was really weak. He met a woman named Sofija from the 5th floor where only completely immobile people lived, but despite her state, she managed to come to his room every morning before breakfast and made a cup of tea for him. One of the things I realized in the home is that people in third phase of life desperately want to have somebody again and try to connect with somebody.

I often woke up during night deeply concerned and anxious because I didn't have a way to find out if Habib or Ćazim were still alive, but I have to admit I partly didn't want to find out because I was scared. In fact, through the whole process of working on my diploma paper and photographing people in the home for elderly, I came to a conclusion that I was never really closer to death, even though my closeness to death started from my early age of life due to the fact that my parents literally carried me to funerals even though I didn't even know what was happening but I had to go because they didn't have a place to leave me in the post war period so I was going where they were going.

My first encounter with death was in elementary school when the father of one of my closest friends from that period passed away. My friend's dad who encouraged me to do photography and to do the things I want in life at the age of 13. His encouraging words and conversations I had with him meant a lot to me and also, at that period, I was somehow aware of losing a close person through my empathy and I was trying to understand what was going on around me with eternal questions such as: »Where do we go after death? Where do we go after the last phase of our life? Is something else waiting for us? Is there anything else?«.



Returning to Tuzla and visiting the home for elderly people again wasn't the nicest one, but the feelings which started developing inside me and the role of my intuition made sense. I heard Habib had died few days before I came to the home and this event changed my whole perspective on transience of life and increased gratitude for all the moments I had spent with the people who were living in the home. I started thinking about the death of my parents much more, even though that was something I periodically had been thinking about before. However, the thought of my parents' death formed in the back of my head and I couldn't get rid of it no matter how hard I tried not to think about it. I'm not sure if I really like my awareness about life and death. It's often tiring and it doesn't let me live my life to the fullest because it's constantly dragging me into direction I wouldn't like to go.

To me, death is definitely not a sensation. Of course, I wouldn't want to lose somebody, especially a family member or friends, far away from that, but I just think that we in Bosnia and Herzegovina, whether we want it or not, whether we avoid it or not, are, since birth, (especially my generation, i.e. children born in the period of 1992-1995, the so called "war generation") directly under the influence of death and everything that occurred in this period when we were born even though don't actually remember it. The consequences of this period are still felt. Death is all around us and we got so used to it that we camouflage and accept it so well that we don't perceive it as something that can surprise us anymore. Going through the city we are surrounded by monuments to war victims, shrapnel on buildings and constant memories of the killed ones because literally everyone in the city lost a close person.

For example, in the very center of Tuzla, where everyone who lives there passes daily, there is a monument to 71 victims of bombing which occurred on 25th of May, 1995. Few months before I was born, I had to hear from the womb of my mother what she heard from the balcony at 8:55pm. A terrifying explosion from the city center, from the main gathering place for young people, after which terrifying screams followed.

Moreover, I can't choose not to be affected by the thought that my girlfriend's brother got killed by the last grenade fired on Tuzla and that her other brother hanged himself because of all the events that happened in his life, starting with war followed by exile and everything else that occurred at that period.



Ćazim's confession

During my last visit to the home for elderly, I went straight to Ćazim because I had known him from the first day and he was the first person I had met there. Upon entering his room, he wasn't happy at all and wasn't smiling like he used to do. After few minutes of chatting, he admitted to me that his son had died. One of his sons had died and I was the one that had to calm him down! So there we were: a man who is a cripple, in a wheelchair, living in home for elderly people and who spends his day by looking for some sort of entertainment so that his days could pass more quickly and me, Mario Ilić, who came to the home for elderly to do my diploma paper. How can a person after that fact and that kind of conversation with Ćazim leave the building calm, normal and not affected? In the moment of choosing a topic I didn't see something like this coming and that the conversations with people would go in this direction.

It was really hard for me to watch him like that due to my empathy as I always try to imagine myself in the position of the person which I'm talking to even though I wasn't sure if it was harder to look at him or listen to him that day or if it was harder for him to explain to me what had happened and to expect some sort of consolation from my side.

He admitted to me that he would kill himself, but that he couldn't even do that because he was a cripple in the wheelchair with no leg and that the balcony was too high. He told me that it really meant to him a lot that I was visiting him in his late 80s, him who was a cripple. He also added that he was really pleased that he had the chance to meet me and that I was constantly visiting him. To him that was the sign that I had a good soul since I was doing something like that. He was repeating

with tears in his eyes that he was a cripple all the time and that I knew how they treated people like that.

I regularly talked about Bosnia to Ćazim and the situation in which the country is. We talked about politics and poverty. His opinion was that I should never leave the country and keep fighting for it. I think Ćazim never understood or never wanted to hear that I have not been living in Bosnia since 2014, but he was really proud of me because I grew up close to the home for elderly, which is in the city center. He was also proud that there were not many kids like me.

He often asked me about my father since he had met him during my first visit to the home. I think the father role was really important in the family for Ćazim. He was grieving for the loss of his son, but he was also confronting the thought that his grandson was not going to have a father anymore.



In the home for elderly people I got permission to go to the the 2nd, 3rd and 4th floors where a bit more capable elderly people live. The 5th, 6th and 7th floors are reserved for immobile and disabled, for the people who can't eat on their own, have to get their diapers changed, need to be washed by somebody. and everything else which is needed, so my area was limited to the first four floors including the restaurant and living room which anyone from the home could visit.

In the living room I managed to spend some time only in October before the weather got cold because nobody came down to the living room from their rooms and floors due to a constructed wall of the living room which is facing outside and is fully made out of glass and the older people complained that they could feel the cold air blowing whereas I did not feel it.

I spent most of the time walking in corridors or in the lobby that every floor has in front of elevators because when they go down to the restaurant, they have to take the elevators so I could have the interaction I wanted. In the beginning it was really hard for me to establish any sort of contact with the people especially because I had a camera with me and I'm not the most communicative person, nor are they. They often seemed to be frightened and the appearance of a young person in the home was somehow unexpected to them, not to say sudden because the entire day they sit in this lobby space in front of the elevators on these chairs which are made of cooked wood and which are dark red. These chairs sometimes made me anxious. To them chairs are part of the home from the first day and they are used to them, they keep sitting on them throughout the day and just keep looking outside.

On one side, the home has a view at cemetery and on the other side are the highway and a bus stop with bunch of students and high school students waiting for their buses to go home. I sat on the bench at this bus stop and noticed that nobody was looking in the direction of the home. In fact, nobody noticed the home for elderly like it didn't even exist.

I think home for elderly people is an institution that is visited only by people who have to visit it: the people who work there and the people who have to visit their old mom or dad. I have a feeling I was the only one who actually walked around and had conversations with these people because I truly wanted to. I truly wanted to photograph them and work on this topic and I'm sure with time they started to feel that too and that's why they started welcoming me with open arms and with smile on their faces every time I would return again. As I already mentioned, they started calling me their grandson, telling others that they're my aunt or uncle and giving me a candy or something else as a gift. In the home for elderly people I also managed to photograph a catholic mass and the midday prayer of Muslims. Probably the God was the one who they could sometimes rely on more than on their own children.



I would often sit alone on a rainy or cold day on one of the floors for hours without seeing a single person coming out of their room. On such days I would start knocking on the rooms of people I knew and tried to achieve some sort of connection so I could get some photographic material, even though I felt really uncomfortable doing so at the very beginning.

I could never get over the feeling that their body was aching every time they would try to get out of bed or try to sit down in a chair. It seemed like they had a feeling that every bone in their body was hurting due to their age and I didn't have the strength to take their arm and help them get up because I felt that they were so fragile and unstable. When they told me they didn't need help, I felt at ease.

In the beginning, I would maintain a distance and just try to get the photos which I came for, but it's impossible to calculate with people and emotions or at least I couldn't manage that. For every look, for every photograph and every person in the home for elderly in the past few months of my visits there is a certain emotion connected and I'm emotionally attached to every single photograph I made, because I made all of them through a certain feeling which pushed me. I had to feel something first in order to take a photo and the feelings were there because I spent a lot of time just communicating with them.



Zada's story

On the 4th floor I always bumped into a lady which was always sitting alone and I noticed that she seemed a bit scared, so I needed a bit more time to approach and meet her. I found out her name was Zada and I noticed she didn't hear anything after telling her the same sentence repeatedly, but we started a conversation when she all of a sudden asked me if there was any danger she should be aware of and how my parents were doing. She told me a story how she went with her company's driver to Sarajevo one time and they picked up a random person on the street that also had intention of going in the same way. As she was sitting in the back, she saw this stranger taking a knife out of his pocket and putting it in to his socks. She immediately started screaming, telling that she needed to throw up and that the driver should stop. After doing so, she told the driver she would take the first bus home and that she didn't want to continue going with them. The next morning, she read in the newspapers that the driver had been killed and that they had found the car somewhere else. After that day, every time I met her on the 4th floor, she would tell me I should never sit in the same car with strangers and begged me to take care of myself because there was a lot of bad things going on.



One thing I noticed by doing portraits of older people is that they don't have any need to set themselves up for photograph like younger people do. If I saw them sitting or standing in an interesting way, I asked them if I could take a picture and they just continued sitting as they were sitting. Elderly people just don't know how to adjust their face, which side is prettier and there is no fixing up the hair or striking a pose... Their energy is simply moving in one monotonous, unvaried direction which is stagnating and it doesn't get disturbed that easily.

Furthermore, an interesting thing I noticed is that most of the photographs I made in the home have been made from a side. Namely, as they are getting older and less mobile, elderly people's sight shorter and most of them wear glasses. They don't have peripheral vision but they just see directly. Therefore, I had the opportunity to come closer from a side and they wouldn't even know I was there even though I was standing just next to them.



Lurking

All the photos I made in the home are only affected by daylight and ambient light which was my best friend or my worst enemy when I had to adapt to it. The huge windows in the lobbies and the neon lights coming from the hallway ceilings also helped me. I was mostly using wide-angle lens which allowed me to photograph people even though the camera wasn't directed towards the people because they couldn't estimate how wide the shot was and if they were going to be in the picture, which gave me a chance to feel more calm while working. I often felt like a thief who was sneaking in search for some interesting shots. I was also often sneaking behind people until they heard the camera trigger which revealed me.

The main aim in this diploma paper which I wanted to achieve is to spend time in the home for elderly people, to simply pay attention to what was happening there and to try to make a record with my camera without any intervention, i.e. without moving objects, positioning the people, making the light right, etc. I tried to get the rawest moments from the home and to show them in my photographs. I wanted to portray the people who live there and space itself which is inevitable on the photographs and in this whole project.



Another interesting concept I wanted to show is this strange feeling which you can feel in the home. People are born and raised, they finish their schools and establish their families. They buy new apartments and keep moving their entire life forward until the moment they're not capable of living on their own or until their partner passes away. At that moment they come to a conclusion there is no further way. In the institution life takes place in a different way, in a way that they simply wait until the moment they are going to be gone. They wait for the moment when they are not going to be anybody's burden anymore and not even to themselves. This strange feeling is pervasive in the home like a moment just before a storm and I tried to portray this through the photographs. Do our lives in the end transform into a simple waiting game for our last day?

