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**'Back to Visegrad's' Julie Biro, Antoine Jaccoud on Repairing the Past, Bosnian War Legacy**

By John Hopewell



*Julie Biro*

"Back to Visegrad" opens, appropriately enough, with Miresha, a former student at Eastern Bosnia's Visegrad Primary School, driving through a series of long tunnels hacked into a hillside. Miresha is in many ways still in a psychological tunnel herself. She's about to attend a school reunion of her classmates at the school, whom she hasn't seen in 26 years, after the 1992-95 Bosnian War broke out, separating Muslim and Serbian students seemingly for ever, forcing the former to flee for their lives with their parents.

26 years later, Budimir Zecevic, the school's former headmaster, and Djemila Krsmanovic, Miresha's class teacher's widow, get into Djemila's Zastava car and start a long journey to find the class' often still traumatized students, asking them one by one, if they'd like to meet again. Produced by Elisa Garbar at Lausanne's Louise Productions, with Outside The Box taking all rights to Switzerland, "Back to Visegrad" records those conversations with students then part of the final reunion.

"What's done is done," one student says: You can't change the past. But people can certainly change how they feel about it for the rest of their lives. Zecevic and Krsmanovic's mission is to suggest another past which the students had, however dashed.

Made by two now slightly infirm people who, rather like their Zastava, are not done yet, though slightly battered – she has a pain in the abdomen, he's losing his hearing – their mission is a moving lesson in humanism.

*Variety* interviewed Biro about her first documentary and Jaccoud, a distinguished screenwriter, co-scribe of Ursula Meier ("Sister") and Bettina Oberli ("With the Wind") about his directorial feature debut.

**The students' memories of childhood seem, from their confessions, to be of War. Miresha can't even remember her classmates before that. The reunion is not so much to bury the past, but to re-mould memory by fore-fronting another version, the ex-students young lives before the War, the students' schooldays which for many seem like a lost paradise. Can you comment?**

Biro: It wasn't easy for the ex-students to express their feelings. Some of them were afraid, some refused to come, others were excited, or hesitant. I was moved by their sincerity even in silence. Our intention was not to confront different versions of history or to contribute to the writing of history. We wanted to give the audience a chance to listen to personal memories of this generation who endured the war as children. There are a lot of studies reminding us that Tito's Yugoslavia was not a paradise, which is true. But I understand the children of Visegrad in the late '80s saying that it was when compared to their experiences since 1992.

**The picture which emerged is found in other documentaries at Visions: Youth, here very young, the victims of the ambitions of an older generation. Could you comment?**

Jaccoud: It's true that these kids had no choice but to accept the divisions, hate, fear and violence that infected their country at an age where there is no reason to fear or hate your neighbor, at an age where propaganda and political communication sound so far away. They could not understand it, and it seems they cannot still. That is why they often have the feeling that their childhood was stolen. On the other hand, our film shows two "adults" who try to repair what was destroyed using the form of a simple – but not so easy to organize- class reunion. This side of the story touches me a lot. Nothing obliged them to do it. It's some internal drive from their souls.

Biro: This generation inherits silence. The kids from the War don't talk about the past in order to find some peace. They prefer laughing, singing and telling jokes, good times. As Bojan says in the movie, they are torn between the need to remember and the desire to forget. Nowadays, nothing is taught about the war at school. All that remains are the personal stories of the older generation. A collective narrative is deeply missing in Bosnia as well as in Serbia. Recent history is still a hot topic.

**"Back to Visegrad" marks your feature directorial debut, Antoine. How did you get involved and why decide to direct?**

Jaccoud: I was first asked, as a screenwriter who had worked in the Balkans, by Julie and her producer Elisa Garbar to help to create the story from the elements Julie had already collected. Then Julie suggested that I board for the real adventure, making the film. Having worked in Chile on Stephane Goël's "Islanders," I really enjoyed the exciting, sometimes scary, freedom of shooting a documentary that can't be written or over-planned like a fiction film. On the set, Julie was certainly closer to the characters, primarily because she can understand and speak their language. I stayed a few steps back, the voice of our translator in my ear, thinking of the filmic material we had, and what we would still need to collect, in order to tell this story properly.

**There are lovely scenes of the battered Zastava traveling the Bosnian countryside which seem to emerge organically as metaphors for the characters' journey or feelings. Again, could you comment?**

I hope film analysts and historians will see these scenes as deliberate metaphors. For the tunnel scene that opens the film we took advantage of real-life. On the road from Sarajevo to Visegrad, there are lots of tunnels, some dark and scary. As we'd decided to shoot Mersiha's entire road trip to the school meeting, with the idea that maybe this journey would give us a kind of frame to the story, the editor decided with us to keep these tunnel moments, which are intriguing and somehow threatening at the same time. However, saying we were thinking about metaphors while shooting in these darker than hell tubes would be an exaggeration. With the drones, Julie and I never thought we would use such devices for this film. We had a small crew, and no one had any experience with drones. But one day our driver Ervin Blažević brought one to us, a present he had received, and in just two hours we took these amazing shots you can see in the film. God's point of view on the smallness of these two retired teachers and their quest to gather their pupils? Allegorical use of a common symbol – the bridge- of Bosnian popular culture? We'll leave the meaning open...

**The music which accompanies the journey colors the mood of the film. Could you explain why you chose it and who plays it?**

Budimir Zečević is a wonderful accordionist who also sings with pleasure and conviction. Antoine and I decided we should have accordion in our movie early during shooting. While editing, Antoine heard about Mario Batkovic, a Swiss musician from Bosnia who has lived in Switzerland since the war (1992-1995). Both of us were immediately seduced by his music: it's accordion, but not folkish at all. This is contemporary music, nostalgic, sometimes dark and very expressive. Mario is almost the same age as the ex-students, he knows intimately what this generation went through. Another reason the music fits so well with "Back to Visegrad."

[https://variety.com/2020/film/festivals/back-to-visegrads-julie-biro-antoine-jaccoud-repairing-past-bosnian-war-legacy-1234590788/?utm\\_source=dlvr.it&utm\\_medium=twitter](https://variety.com/2020/film/festivals/back-to-visegrads-julie-biro-antoine-jaccoud-repairing-past-bosnian-war-legacy-1234590788/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter)