White City: A Photographer’s Retrospective on the 1984 Sarajevo Winter Olympics

The 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo are for a few people a distant memory, but for most, it is only something that has been mentioned in passing on television or in a book. However, for John Jurisic, who photographed many of the events at the 1984 Winter Games, the memories are alive and as fresh as if they had happened yesterday. On February 27, the International and Area Studies Library, and the Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center hosted Mr. Jurisic, who spoke of his experiences as a young man in the former Yugoslavia and the path that led him to the 1984 Sarajevo Winter Olympics.

Mr. Jurisic’s journey to the Olympics began in the 1960s when he went to University as a young man to study music. To continue with his music studies, Mr. Jurisic needed a trumpet, but unfortunately, he did not have the money to purchase a new—or even used—one, as he noted that “a good instrument cost as much as an Opel” in those days. As a result, he went to Paris for a while with some friends “from the old country” to try and earn some money. He only planned on staying for the summer, but ended up making “good money” and stayed for over three years. It was during this period that he was offered a position playing soccer for a Canadian league and, accepting the offer, moved to Canada. This excursion would be short-lived though, as he returned a year later to his hometown of Banja Luka right before an earthquake hit the region. With his home destroyed, he lived in a tent for a while and then returned to Paris. While in Paris, he again received another offer from the Canadian league—this time offering even more money to play.

Traveling once again to Canada, he quickly realized the difference between promises and reality, and quit the league for good. He then moved to Chicago, found employment as a construction worker, and remained in this profession until retirement.

During this period, Mr. Jurisic devoted time to his real passion—photography, which he loved because it is “a moment in somebody’s life and in time,” and nobody else has that picture. His passion for photography and love of sports evolved into taking pictures of sporting events in Europe early on. After moving to Chicago, he went to photography school for three years and, after completion, became a freelance photographer. During the later part of the 1970s, he started contributing photographs to papers in Europe, which is what eventually led him to Sarajevo in 1984. Mr. Jurisic noted the flight to Sarajevo took 25 hours and that the airport was a “beehive” of activity. Due to this activity prior to the start of the Olympics, he “realized that this was a big thing.” After getting his press pass, he took time to visit the venues and the athletes’ village. What struck him the most was the lack of snow, as the streets had been cleared of all snow—the only snow was in the mountains. Mr. Jurisic laughed when he noted that the games were being called “the picnic games” since everyone had to go to the mountains for snow.

Fortunately, the night before the opening ceremony, the snow came. So much snow, in fact, that the Yugoslavian People’s Army had to be brought in to help clear it! Everybody pitched in to ready the city, and Mr. Jurisic said that this action demonstrated “the resilience of the people of Sarajevo to keep the games going.” He also noted the personal sacrifice of all Yugoslavians, who took a 20% pay cut to build the facilities and pay for the games at a cost of $600 million. As a result,
the 1984 Sarajevo games belonged to everyone. He noted more importantly that athletes of all countries were there, as the previous two games had been boycotted by either the West or the East. During the games, Mr. Jurisic spent time on top of the mountain taking pictures of the ski jumping competition. During this event, over 70,000 people were at the base of the jump, which had never before been seen. Mr. Jurisic said that because of the large amount of people, he had to wait four hours for the return bus since the road off the mountain was jammed with cars.

Mr. Jurisic spent time discussing highlights of the games, as well as some history. He noted that Sarajevo was nominated as a host city in April 1978 after the first round of voting. The “winter fairy tale” witnessed several incredible events such as the figure skating pair of Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean of England, who were the first pair to ever get a 6.0 score. During these games, the U.S. Alpine team won five medals, and the “darling of the game,” Katarina Witt of East Germany, won her first gold medal. Mr. Jurisic took great pride in discussing downhill skier Jure Franko, who fell while skiing right in front of him, and noted that Franko became a hero because he said he was a better person because of the fall. At each of these events, an average of 20,000 people attended. In addition, musicians from all over Yugoslavia were there to play for the medal ceremonies.

Unforeseen at the time—and unimaginable—Sarajevo erupted in civil war eight years later. During this time, 130,000 people were killed, 200,000 wounded and over two million were expelled from the country. The city of Sarajevo itself was under siege for 44 months, which Mr. Jurisic noted was the longest siege of a modern capital city. Fast forward to today—the Olympic venues are crumbling and riddled with bullet holes, which serve as a reminder of how quickly things change. While smiling, Mr. Jurisic noted that the 1984 Winter Olympics are still a source of pride in Sarajevo. Each year, the anniversary of the games is celebrated. The nickname of “White City”—which was given to Sarajevo by an Austrian journalist during the games—is still around today, and lives on in the heart and soul of people such as John Jurisic.

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