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## On the Margins: Jovan Ritopečki's Photographs of Migrant Housing in 1970s Vienna

### Abstract

This article explores the representation of precarious living conditions and societal marginalization of migrants in photographs, as illustrated by a specific series of 30 black and white photo negatives taken by the Yugoslav photo reporter Jovan Ritopečki (1923–1989) on the periphery of Austria's capital, Vienna, in 1973. These portray an accommodation for Yugoslav workers, stored in the photographer's archives and entitled »the House of Horror«. Through the employment of exemplary microanalysis, the article demonstrates how specific photographic meanings are constituted through the intersection of practices, discourses, and modes of use. In this regard, the photographic depiction of migration experiences, the photographer's methods of approaching the subject, as well as the photographs' contexts of transmission are analyzed. Discussions will involve how Ritopečki's photographs convey migrant experiences and to what extent the photographer's biographical background and social positioning as a professional photographer and migrant himself, shaped his approach to the subject. The article demonstrates that analyzing the transnational context of transmission and use of the photographs helps to understand the historic horizons of meaning and expectations displayed in the pictures.

### Keywords

Photography, photo journalism, migrant housing, social marginality, Austria, Yugoslavia, 1970s.

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## Am Rande: Jovan Ritopečki's Fotografien von migrantischen Wohnverhältnissen im Wien der 1970er Jahre

### Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Darstellung prekärer Lebensbedingungen und gesellschaftlicher Marginalisierung von Migrant\*innen in Fotografien. Den Ausgangspunkt bildet eine Serie von 30 Schwarz-Weiß-Negativen, die der jugoslawische Fotoreporter Jovan Ritopečki (1923–1989) in einer Unterkunft für jugoslawische Migrant\*innen an der Peripherie der österreichischen Hauptstadt Wien im Jahr 1973 aufgenommen und in seinem fotografischen Archiv mit dem schriftlichen Hinweis »Haus-des-Schreckens« abgelegt hat. Anhand einer exemplarischen Mikroanalyse soll aufgezeigt werden, wie sich spezifische fotografische Bedeutungen in einem Feld miteinander verwobener Praktiken, Diskurse und Gebrauchsweisen konstituieren. Dafür werden die Darstellung von Migrationserfahrungen im Medium der Fotografie, die konkreten Bildpraxen des Fotografen und die Kontexte der Überlieferung analysiert. Es wird untersucht, wie sich Erfahrungen der gesellschaftlichen Marginalisierung im Bild zeigen und inwiefern die soziale Positioniertheit des Fotografen, der sowohl professioneller Fotograf war als auch selbst über Migrationserfahrung verfügte, seine Herangehensweise an das Thema geprägt haben. Der Beitrag zeigt, dass die Analyse des transnationalen Verbreitungs- und Nutzungskontextes der Fotografien dazu beiträgt, den historischen Deutungs- und Erwartungshorizont zu verstehen, in dem die Bilder wirkten.

### Schlagworte

Fotografie, Fotojournalismus, migrantisches Wohnen, gesellschaftliche Marginalisierung, Österreich, Jugoslawien, 1970er Jahre

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The following article explores a series of 30 black and white photo negatives from the estate of the Yugoslav photo journalist Jovan Ritopečki (1923–1989) and its history of use.<sup>1</sup> The series from 1973 portrays an accommodation for Yugoslav migrants on the outskirts of Vienna, the capital of Austria. It was found preserved in Ritopečki's photographic archive and is entitled »*Rio Grande House of Horror Apartments for Yugoslav Workers Vienna 23 District*«. As the title already suggests, the series addresses poverty, exploitation, and the

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societal marginalization of Yugoslav migrants in Austria in the 1970s. The unique nature of these photos is underlined by the fact that they were taken and archived by a transnationally active press photographer and photo journalist who, from the early 1970s until his death in 1989, uniquely documented the lives and living conditions of Yugoslav migrant workers in Austria.<sup>2</sup>

This case study will be used to explore the potential of photos as a means of providing insight into the experiences of labor migrants and to better understand them in a historical context. Additionally, this analysis aims to investigate how the phenomenon of migration was visually approached based on contemporary political and societal debates. This, in turn, allows us to demonstrate how photography, its usage, and distribution created visual publicity and shaped the perception of migration.

Despite possessing a realistic quality in how they depict their subject matter, photographs do not simply mirror societal realities but should also be understood as media transformations and interpretations of the »real« (Guth 2002, p. 191). Apart from technical components, the interpretative performance of the photographer – i.e., the selection of motif and attitude toward that motif –, the framing of the image and choice of perspective, as well as the interests of potential clients and those depicted, determine the process of taking a picture (Guth 2002, pp. 191 f.; Rose 2007, p. 32; Stumberger 2007, p. 20, 23). Photographs are »made for specific purposes, to project certain meanings, and elicit certain effects« (Edwards 2008, p. 333). At the same time, the meanings contained in photographs cannot be reduced solely to the intentions of their creators. These meanings continually shift, as one image can have multiple effects or be used differently in various contexts. As Christopher Pinney argues, this is also due to photography's indexicality – its quality/ability of realistic depiction – that can always lead to the inclusion of »an inevitable randomness within the image«. He specifies this further as being »a substrate or margin of excess, a subversive code [...] that makes it open and available to other readings and uses« (Pinney 2003, p. 6).

For this reason, transdisciplinary approaches adopted within the field of photography research in the past few decades have been largely concerned with doing more than assessing the meanings attached to images based on visual content. Instead, they seek to examine »how and why photos are

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2 Austrian photo archives mostly contain isolated photographs on »guest work«, lacking context. They depict migrants at railway stations, workplaces, and in poor living conditions. Guest workers are generally not represented as acting subjects with individual voices and histories, but rather, they persist in a state of anonymity. The prevalent portrayal is of male foreign workers, despite data indicating the significant presence of women, particularly Yugoslav women, comprising 20–30% of labor migrants in the 1960s and 70s (Matuschek 1985, p. 174).

made, presented, used, circulated, stored, and reused in particular social and historical contexts and what these practices meant to the people and institutions involved« (Tinkler 2013, p. 79). In the words of Elizabeth Edwards, it is not only important to ask »how images signify« but also »why do photographs as ›things‹ matter for people?« (2012, p. 224). In contrast to the growing interest in the social applications and functions of photography, questions about their materiality as objects and their paths of transmission have become increasingly important (Edwards and Hart 2004; Caraffa 2020) – that is the ›social life of images‹, encompassing their moments of creation up until their archiving, as these continually add new layers of meaning (Schwartz 2020, p. 525). In order to understand what photographs do or have done and the impact they have had, Joanne Schwarz argues that »they need to be linked in multiple and complex ways to the context – historical, physical, documentary – in which they were initially created, circulated, and viewed, and subsequently repurposed and recirculated« (Schwartz 2020, pp. 525 f.).

With these theoretical premises in mind, the present article employs an exemplary microanalysis of Ritopečki's »House of Horror« series in order to demonstrate how specific photographic meaning derives from the intersection of practices, discourses, and modes of use. In this regard, the paper analyzes how the marginalization of migrants in society is depicted in photographs, the photographer's methods of approaching the people/subject he intended to photograph, as well as the photographic path and context of transmission (largely shaped by the photographer).

Several related research questions arise from the examination of these aspects: How did Ritopečki's photographs convey migrant experiences, depicting the precarity of their living situations and incidences of societal marginalization? Which social relationships are inscribed in the photographs? (Hall 2003, p. 75) And going one step further: What sort of influence, if any, did the societal position(s) of the photographer (outwardly, a professional photographer; inwardly, a member of the Yugoslav community in Vienna<sup>3</sup>) have upon his »image conception« (Dogramaci 2018, p. 10)? This is particularly poignant as Ritopečki was a freelance press photographer and »community« documentarist. As such, the goal of this last line of inquiry is ultimately to determine how Ritopečki's positioning not only shaped his approach to photography, but also influenced its usage and meanings.

The first part of this article offers a brief overview of the history of Yugoslav labor migration to Austria and of Jovan Ritopečki's biography. In addi-

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<sup>3</sup> Despite its problematic tendency to homogenize and oversimplify, I use the term »community« in my research project to reflect the organized relationships among Yugoslav migrants in associations and workers' clubs from the late 1960s and early 1970s.

tion to Ritopečki's fields of photographic activity, the research specifically focuses on the political and average perception of guest worker migration around the time the series was created to provide a more accurate contextualization of the prevailing social conditions at the time. The second section of this article is dedicated to a careful reading and viewing of the photographic materials, including not only the images themselves but also their succession within the series. Access to the negatives ensured that this reading is rich in material. Accordingly, my analysis commenced with the raw material, before the photographs were selected, processed, publicized, and edited (by third parties). As such, I sought to begin from the images themselves to gain insight into the photographic practices as well as to trace the historic experiences they depict (Edwards 2016, p. 318). The third part of this article concerns the usage history of the photo series, bridging the aspects of the »history [depicted] in the images« and the »history of the images« (Stumberger 2007, p. 19 [emphasis in original]). The article demonstrates that analyzing the transnational context of transmission and use of the photographs in the media helps to understand the historic horizons of meaning and expectations displayed in the pictures.

## 1 Historical Contexts

### 1.1 Yugoslav Labor Migration to Austria

Yugoslav labor migrants, termed »guest workers«, began to enter Austria en masse in the early 1970s. Here they experienced both inclusion, owing to their status as members of the country's workforce, as well as exclusion. They were disadvantaged and discriminated against (in a legal sense), as their residence in the country was wholly contingent upon their possession of valid work permits (Gächter 2000; Perchinig 2010). Their migration can be attributed to the lack of economic perspectives in their homeland and acute labor shortages, which were then common in Western European countries.

In general, labor migrants were most sought after for positions shunned by domestic workers or viewed as beneath them. Characteristic of such work was a low level of income, uncomfortable or adverse working conditions, shift or piece-rate scheduling, and a high chance of seasonal or cyclical unemployment (Bundesministerium 1985, pp. 72–74; Matuschek 1985, p. 174). Specific branches of employment included leatherworking, textiles, construction, and the service industry (*ibid.*).

The marginalized social status of Yugoslav labor migrants as temporary workers corresponded with their precarious and subjective residence perspectives in Austria, as well as their »place« within Austrian society. Most

focused on returning home to build a better life there after remigration. Insight into the living conditions that labor migrants confronted in Austria can be gained by examining the quality and type of housing they inhabited, either provided for by their employer or privately sourced. Such housing included hostels, temporary dwellings, or substandard apartments; without fixed rents or protection against eviction, the fragility of their residence status was ever apparent.<sup>4</sup> Among memories of migrants belonging to the first generation, the precarious living conditions, especially at the outset of their employment in Austria, are a continual memorial.<sup>5</sup>

The first comprehensive study on the living situation of Yugoslav migrants in Austria, *Gastarbeiter: Leben in zwei Gesellschaften* (1984), was conducted by geographer Elisabeth Lichtenberger. It combined data on Yugoslav migrants in Vienna from two surveys carried out in 1974 and 1981.<sup>6</sup> Lichtenberger's study provides details on the housing conditions and spatial distribution around 1974 in Vienna, including locations along city outskirts, in the vicinity of industrial facilities, informal settlements along the Danube floodplains, suburbs with old building stock, and others (Lichtenberger 1984, p. 229, 232–234). At this time, there was a significant concentration of Yugoslav guest workers in residential buildings from the *Gründerzeit* era<sup>7</sup> of Vienna's inner districts; in many cases, these were later demolished (ibid.). By 1981, some improvements in living conditions could be observed. For instance, Lichtenberger writes: »Mass quarters and slums practically almost disappeared [...] Apartments with serious deficiencies, such as moisture,

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4 Compare to the FRG: Dogramaci 2018, p. 23.

5 Inadequate (uninhabitable) apartments, rent gouging, a lack of privacy owing to overcrowding, and discrimination when searching for housing are only a few examples of conditions mentioned in conversations I had with migrants in Vienna in the frame of the project »Collecting Migration« in 2015 and 2016 (Akkılıç et al. 2016).

6 The Working Group for Economic and Sociological Studies (*Arbeitskreis für ökonomische und soziologische Studien*), established in 1971 by the Austrian social partners, conducted four studies on guest worker employment. Their findings were published in 1973 in the volume *Gastarbeiter: Wirtschaftliche und soziale Herausforderung*. The topic of housing is only briefly addressed in this publication. In 1983, a study commissioned by the Federal Ministry of Social Administration and the Federal Ministry of Science and Research was carried out by the Institute for Advanced Studies in Vienna, focusing on *Ausländische Arbeitskräfte in Österreich*. This study includes an extensive chapter on the housing situation and analyses of interviews with affected individuals (Bundesministerium 1985).

7 *Gründerzeit*-era buildings in Vienna refer to the architectural style prevalent during the period of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and economic growth in the latter half of the 19th century, known as the *Gründerzeit* era. These buildings typically feature ornate facades with decorative elements, such as stucco, bay windows, and elaborate cornices. They are emblematic of the historic urban landscape of Austrian cities. See: <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gr%C3%BCnderzeit>. Accessed: 14.5.2024.

poor lighting and ventilation, location in the basement, and the like, have greatly decreased« (Lichtenberger 1984, p. 293).

The year of the photo series' creation, 1973, coincided with the peak of guest worker employment in Austria and a global economic recession. At this time, Yugoslav migrants constituted the largest group of foreign citizens in Austria. As of 1973, out of 250,000 migrant laborers, 78.5 % were Yugoslav citizens (Matuschek 1985, pp. 172 f.). Public calls for a discussion of the guest worker system and its consequences grew in tenor. Accordingly, political discourse shifted, and labor migration was increasingly viewed as a social problem (Payer 2004, pp. 3 f.), leading to stricter legislation like the 1975 Employment of Foreigners Act (Matuschek 1985, p. 182). Media attention also grew, specifically highlighting problematic living conditions of foreign guest workers.<sup>8</sup> Time and again, the conditions in overcrowded and unhygienic guest worker accommodations made the headlines (Payer 2004, p. 6). Journalists were invited to come along when authorities visited these or when the police raided labor migrants' homes, thereby only further fueling media scandals.<sup>9</sup>

The early 1970s marked a turning point in migration policy not only in Austria but also Yugoslavia. The Yugoslav government adjusted its policies in 1973, emphasizing the »gradual return of labor migrants and their integration into Yugoslav economic life« (Ivanović 2012, p. 40). Simultaneously, Yugoslav media coverage gradually shifted from portraying labor migration as an opportunity, to depicting it as a problem due to growing political disillusionment with the state's migration policies and the massive outflow of Yugoslav labor abroad (Brunnbauer 2019, p. 429). Accompanying the growing negative media coverage were regular reports on the appalling living and working conditions endured by Yugoslav citizens abroad (Brunnbauer 2019, p. 431). In the early summer of 1973, Jovan Ritopečki's photographs depicting the »House of Horror« in Vienna and an accompanying article appeared in *Yu Novosti*, a Yugoslav state-published periodical (see below), further underscoring the challenges faced by Yugoslav citizens abroad.

## 1.2 Photographic Chronicler of the Yugoslav Migration in Austria

Jovan Ritopečki, a Yugoslav migrant himself, extensively documented Yugoslav labor migration in Austria from the early 1970s until his death in 1989.

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<sup>8</sup> For an insight into media reports, see Payer 2004; Bakondy and Winter 2005.

<sup>9</sup> A good example of this was provided by the scandalization of the apartment block in Rueppgasse 37 (Vienna's second district) in September 1974 as a »slum for guest workers«. A number of articles relating to the topic were published in various newspapers and periodicals, including *Die Presse*, *Die Arbeiterzeitung*, *Kurier*, and *Stern*.

His photographic legacy includes pictures of guest worker weddings in Austria at the beginning of the 1970s and the establishment of Yugoslav workers' clubs in the late 1970s and 1980s.<sup>10</sup>

Jovan Ritopečki was born in Deliblato, present-day Vojvodina, an autonomous region of Serbia in 1923. He started his career as a photographer in his homeland during the Second World War. Joining the People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (NOVJ) in 1944, he assumed the role of a war correspondent. Following the end of the war, Ritopečki transitioned into the realm of professional photojournalism, working for various state news agencies.<sup>11</sup>

However, driven by personal considerations, he opted to emigrate to Austria. In 1966, Ritopečki relocated to Vienna, a decision that marked a pivotal juncture in his life's trajectory. He started working first for the Viennese image agency *Votava*, before switching to self-employment in the 1970s. As a freelance photographer, he continued to cover a wide range of topics (from politics to culture and sports) and sold his photographs to (daily) newspapers and magazines in Austria, as well as institutions such as the Federation of Austrian Industries.<sup>12</sup> From the 1970s on, his clients also included media and publications, whose primary audience consisted of Yugoslav labor migrants in Austria, including the aforementioned *Yu Novosti*. Ritopečki worked as a *Yu Novosti* correspondent in Austria, organizing its distribution<sup>13</sup> and publishing both articles and photo reports.

*Yu Novosti*, a biweekly periodical, was created by the Yugoslav Federal Office for Employment Matters (*Savezni biro za poslove zapošljavanja*) to report on events and developments at home to the state's citizens temporarily living abroad, according to the principle of »bring[ing] Yugoslavia to Yugoslavs living abroad« (Bernard 2019, p. 200). Each issue had sections dedicated to Western European countries that were home to sizable communities of Yu-

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<sup>10</sup> After the photographer's death in 1989, his photographic estate passed into the possession of his eldest daughter, Slobodanka Kudlacek Ritopečki, in Vienna. The collection is still (state May 2024) privately held and comprises around 33,000 negatives, around 3,000 analogue photographs, publications (newspapers and magazines) in which Ritopečki's work appeared, as well as invitations to his exhibitions and exhibition posters. The documentation focuses on Ritopečki's work in Austria between 1970 and 1989, with a special focus on Yugoslav »guest work« in Austria.

<sup>11</sup> This included Jugofoto, Tanjug (the state news agency) from 1950 to 1960, and from 1960 until 1966, Politika. Jovan Ritopečki, *Moji kratki biografski podaci na polju fotografije. Mi o Inostranstvu*, July/August 1989, p. 12. See the personal document »Jovan Ritopečki«, unpublished source received by the author from Slobodanka Kudlacek Ritopečki, 19.2.2020.

<sup>12</sup> Such as *Kronen Zeitung*, *Die Presse*, *Express*, *Kurier*, *Volksblatt*, *Stern*, *Bunte Illustrierte* etc. (ibid.).

<sup>13</sup> Sources suggest that Ritopečki oversaw the distribution of *Yu Novosti* in Austria, engaging others to sell it on the street and in places where Yugoslav people would meet. Alternatively, those interested could also subscribe to the magazine.



goslav migrant laborers, offering guidance in everyday matters, legal information, summaries of what daily life in the country was like, and even critical reports on the dark side of migration, i.e., experiences with discrimination. As Sara Bernard argued, these aspects were emphasized not only to make the life of Yugoslavs employed abroad easier but also to provide a forum where they could relate their experiences (ibid.). Magazines like *Yu Novosti* acted as »two-way communication channels«, as Brigitte Le Normand pointed out, not only informing its readers about news on Yugoslavia but also providing them with opportunities to express their own opinions, thus representing migrants as »an integral part of Yugoslav society« (Le Normand 2021, p. 119).

Another of Ritopečki's clients in the 1970s was the newspaper *Naš list* (Our Newspaper), a quarterly periodical prepared by the Federation of Austrian Industries for Yugoslav laborers from 1970 until 1982. For a short period in 1973, Ritopečki also worked for the biweekly periodical *Danas* (Today), which declared itself to be the first independent magazine of its kind made for and by Yugoslav laborers in Austria (printed from 1973–1975).<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, Ritopečki was a member of the Yugoslav Worker's Club *Jedinstvo* (Unity), founded in 1971 in Vienna, and documented the club's activities along with other Yugoslav clubs and institutions in Austria.<sup>15</sup> Ritopečki also sold his photographic work to migrants and designed exhibitions of his work and displayed them at the club, as well as in the broader Yugoslav society of Vienna. He obviously saw himself as documenting his »community« and used his photographs to reinforce internal processes of cohesion that emerged over the course of migration. In a biographic summary appearing in a 1981 community magazine, it was noted that Ritopečki's

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<sup>14</sup> Owing to the lack of source material, it is impossible to determine precisely how *Naš list* and *Danas* were distributed. While *Naš list* was most likely provided at companies and factories by employers, *Danas* appears to have been subscription or street sale only.

<sup>15</sup> As of the early 1970s, a number of organized associations and workers' clubs for Yugoslav migrants began to form in Austria (in part, with the support of the Yugoslav government), as well as in other Western European cities (for more details see: Baković 2014; Ivanović 2012; Le Normand 2021). In Vienna, *Jedinstvo*, which still exists today, served as an important social meeting place when laborers had time off, but also provided them with leisure activities and a support structure. Beyond that *Jedinstvo* helped forge and maintain an important link to the country of origin, arranging celebrations of national holidays and festivities, as well as sport and cultural events according to socialist Yugoslav principles. For the Yugoslav state, these workers' clubs provided a way to communicate directly with their citizens, distribute information, cultural products, and propaganda, and to strengthen their political and ideological loyalty (Le Normand 2021, p. 142).

photography led to the creation of »an archive of the economic migration in Austria«.<sup>16</sup>

To this day, Ritopečki's photographs still circulate among members of the ex-Yugoslav community and form an essential material base for their social belonging and anchoring in Austria (Akkılıç et al. 2016, p. 210). Over the past two decades, his photographs of Yugoslav guest workers have been exhibited to the public, shedding light on this aspect of social history.<sup>17</sup> Seen from a contemporary perspective, Ritopečki's photographs of Yugoslav migrants are captivating not only because of their esthetic qualities but, above all, because the photographer met those he portrayed at eye level, presenting them as self-confident protagonists. Given that migrants were the primary audience for his work, Ritopečki's approach to imagery was shaped by them, as evidenced by the content of his »House of Horror« series.

### 1.3 Traces in the Archive

I first came across the »House of Horror« photographic series during my academic exploration of Ritopečki's photographic estate.<sup>18</sup> The series is divided between two envelopes of negatives dated 1974 and 1975. The different dates might refer to when the other content in the bags were produced. Along with additional information about the other photo series contained within, each bears a slightly different title: »»Rio Grande« House of Horror in Vienna's 23<sup>rd</sup> district – Apartments for Yugoslav laborers« (»Rio Grande« Kuća Užasa u Beču 23. Bez. Stanovi za Jugoslov. Radnike) with 16 pictures as well as »[The] House of Horror [for] Yugoslav laborers [in] Vienna's 23<sup>rd</sup> district« (Kuća Užasa Jugradnici. Wien 23. Bez.) featuring 12. These descriptions both piqued my curiosity and left me at something of a loss. Ultimately, I digitalized the negatives to examine them more closely, which made it clear that both sets of negatives depicted the same place and were taken at the same time. Why was this series divided between two envelopes? And what about their (slightly varying) descriptions? Traces in the archive definitively showed that the

<sup>16</sup> Jovicin Jubilej. In *Glas*, around 1981, Source: <http://gastarbajteri.at/im/107105950479/107459990277/107157354224/107452961861/111106600862/111107053668.html>. Accessed: 10.2.2022.

<sup>17</sup> For example, in 2016, a selection of photographs was displayed as part of the exhibition *Jugo moja Jugo* on the history of Yugoslav labor migration to Western Europe in the Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade, as well as part of the traveling exhibition *Unter fremdem Himmel. Aus dem Leben jugoslawischer GastarbeiterInnen* organized by the Jukus association in Austria; and in 2017 Ritopečki's photographs were displayed in the exhibition *Moving History. Vjyana – Beč – Wien* at Wien Museum.

<sup>18</sup> This research project, *Picturing Migrants Lives. Jovan Ritopečki's Photographic Documentation of Yugoslav Migration in Austria (1970–1989)*, is funded by the Austrian Science Fund (project number T 1083).

photographer had consulted the material on more than one occasion, using individual pictures at various points in time.

Another clue can be found in the photographer's usual manner of archiving his work (place, theme/subject matter, year/date of production), to which these negatives did not quite conform. Instead, the title applied to the series, appearing on the envelope («Rio Grande» House of Horror») indicates a sort of dramatization and mythologization. The phrase »House of Horror« itself suggested that Ritopečki had adopted a socio-critical position vis-à-vis the images. As additional research would uncover, the title »Rio Grande« originated from the building's residents. As can be seen, the short titles encountered in the archive sparked a wide array of questions relating to the concrete historical reference they invoked, as well as whether and how a site of horror was depicted in the photos.

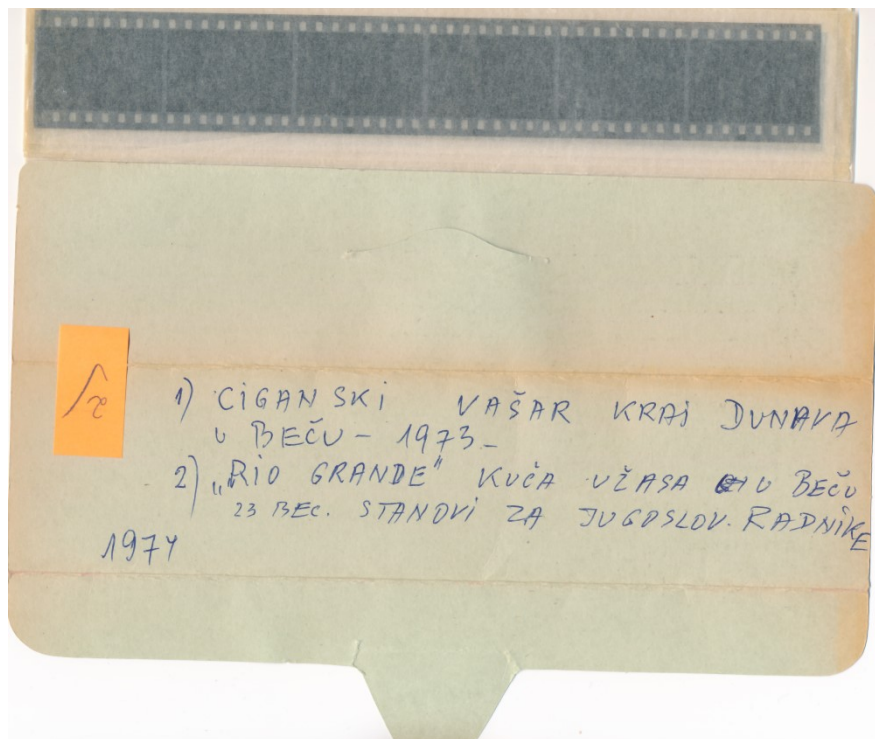


Fig. 1: Envelope with negatives from the «Rio Grande» House of Horror« series. Photograph: Mehmet Emir.

## 2 The Photographic Encounter

The series entails 28 black and white photographs, with the majority depicting interior spaces. The first of these was taken outside with a decrepit and run-down, single-story *Gründerzeit* house in an urban, residential area at the center. Above the house's entrance, which is locked behind a roll-up security grate, a sign reads »Richard Fischer Domestic and Raw Products« (*Richard Fischer Landes u. Rohprodukte*). As historical information consulted afterwards would reveal, the sign pointed to the owner and administrator of the accommodation, who was a trader in agricultural products.



Fig. 2: View of the front building at Josef-Österreicher-Gasse 18 in Vienna's 23<sup>rd</sup> district. Photograph: Jovan Ritopečki, »Rio Grande: House of Horror« series 1973, Lender: Slobodanka Kudlacek Ritopečki.

Thanks to a street sign visible in another picture, I was able to locate the building at Josef-Österreicher-Gasse 18, where it still stands today. In other pictures, Jovan Ritopečki directs his camera toward the individual inhabitants of the building and their surroundings. The order in which they were taken suggests that the people photographed lived in the *Gründerzeit* building he had shot from outside. However, after visiting the location and speaking with its current tenants, as well as consulting historical floorplans, it be-

came clear that the interior shots were taken in annexes in the courtyard behind the house.<sup>19</sup>

Although men and women of different ages inhabited the building, young men appear more frequently in the series, while women are rarely depicted. Some of the inhabitants can be seen in multiple pictures and engaged in different activities. This leads to the conclusion that the photographer was accompanied on his tour through the building by several of its residents.

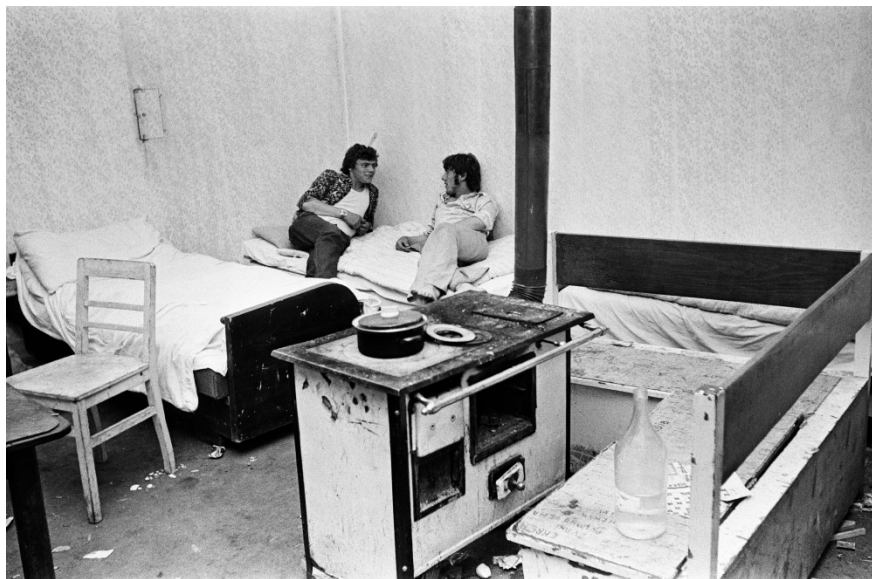


Fig. 3: Two young men laying on a bed at Josef-Österreicher-Gasse 18 in Vienna's 23<sup>rd</sup> district. Photograph: Jovan Ritopečki, »Rio Grande« House of Horror« series 1973, Lender: Slobodanka Kudlacek Ritopečki.

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<sup>19</sup> The author expresses gratitude to Nils Olger for his help in identifying the historical settings as well as for his support in reconstructing the exact sequence of the photographic shots.



Fig. 4: Sleeping area. Photograph: Jovan Ritopečki, »Rio Grande« House of Horror« series 1973, Lender: Slobodanka Kudlacek Ritopečki.



Fig. 5: Group portrait. Photograph: Jovan Ritopečki, »Rio Grande« House of Horror« series 1973, Lender: Slobodanka Kudlacek Ritopečki.



Fig. 6: Three young men sitting around an oven in the middle of a room. Photograph: Jovan Ritopečki, »Rio Grande« House of Horror» series 1973, Lender: Slobodanka Kudlacek Ritopečki.



Fig. 7: Mother and daughter in their private space. Photograph: Jovan Ritopečki, »Rio Grande« House of Horror« series 1973, Lender: Slobodanka Kudlacek Ritopečki.



The people photographed are engaged in daily activities, in conversation, as part of larger groups, or posing individually for the camera. The sequence and content of the pictures in the series suggests that Ritopečki had reached some sort of agreement on how he would pick them and who would be photographed. This conclusion is further supported by some of the subtle strategies discernible in what can be seen in the photographs, such as the repositioning of items or wardrobe changes amongst protagonists. Poses and gestures of individuals as well as in group shots appear, on closer inspection, to have been staged, even though they give the impression of having occurred naturally in the photographer's presence. This means that they were composed in the »classic aftersensation/lived-experience documentary style« (Hall 2003, p. 87). The first three pictures taken indoors exemplify this, showing a man with a radio in a sleeping area.



Fig. 8: Man posing with his radio. Photograph: Jovan Ritopečki, »Rio Grande: House of Horror« series 1973, Lender: Slobodanka Kudlacek Ritopečki.



Fig. 9: Man posing with his radio. Photograph: Jovan Ritopečki, »Rio Grande« House of Horror« series 1973, Lender: Slobodanka Kudlacek Ritopečki.



Fig. 10: Man standing in front of a wardrobe. Photograph: Jovan Ritopečki, »Rio Grande« House of Horror« series 1973, Lender: Slobodanka Kudlacek Ritopečki.

In the first of these, the man sits on a bed and looks at the radio he is holding in his hands (Fig. 8). The second picture is more or less the same but taken from a greater distance and slightly different perspective. We see a room with several beds and wardrobes, all of which are tightly aligned next to one another. The man's pose remains unchanged (Fig. 9). In the third picture, he stands in front of a wardrobe opposite the bed on which he was earlier sitting, holding a simple padlock as if he would lock the radio inside (Fig. 10). By resorting to the averted gaze, a formal composition element, the photographer employs a technique common in early social-documentary photography, suggesting the capture of a natural, organic moment (Solomon-Godeau 2003). This sequence also underscores the radio's significance as a cherished possession, acting as an important communication tool linking labor migrants with their homeland.<sup>20</sup>

One of Jovan Ritopečki's characteristic approaches to photographing Yugoslav migrants in Austria is visible in the series. His photographs can often be regarded as the result of a dialogue between the photographer and the person being photographed: more precisely, his work was not particularly invasive, taken from some distance, and with the express permission of the person to be photographed, marking the photographic act as a »transactional« one (Solomon-Godeau 2003, p. 63). Some of his photographs, such as that of a female inhabitant, seem to reveal that the residents of the house granted the photographer access to their most private and intimate spaces. In this specific case, seen below, the resident stares directly into the camera while pulling back a curtain to air out her sleeping area with a small kitten on it (Fig. 11).

Ritopečki's photographic practices were colored by the language and cultural background he shared with his subjects, as well as their main audience, Yugoslav migrants. The photographer's social position, stretching beyond his embeddedness within the Yugoslav community, fostered a closeness to his subjects, which exerted a significant influence upon the interaction between the photographed and the photographer. Such social proximity, as Darren Newbury argues, bears certain visual and esthetic consequences (Newbury 1999, p. 37), as exemplified in the spatial closeness or distance he assumes to his subjects. In the picture of the woman and the kitten, for example, the camera moves closer to the woman, but she does not flinch or back away.

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<sup>20</sup> On the importance of radio broadcasting as the preferred transnational communication medium for Yugoslav migrants, see Le Normand 2021, pp. 99–115.



Fig. 11: A female resident pulling back a curtain to her sleeping area. Photograph: Jovan Ritopečki, »Rio Grande« House of Horror« series 1973, Lender: Slobodanka Kudlacek Ritopečki.

## 2.1 Evidential Strategies

What can be perceived from the image series, apart from candid scenes of everyday life? Borrowing Abigail Solomon-Godeau's question, wherein does the »reality of what is being represented« come to light? (Solomon-Godeau 2003, p. 59) In his work as a press photographer, Ritopečki regularly visited residences and dormitories, photographing those with whom he crossed paths.<sup>21</sup> These pictures are dominated by two motifs, namely portraits of individuals or shots of jovial groups posing in private rooms. In the discussed examples, we can find similar motifs, with the highly detailed documentation of the extraordinary living situation. The »House of Horror« series provides a variety of material clues that offer insights into the specific conditions prevailing at that accommodation. The sequence of the images shows the photographer working with his camera step-by-step to capture the spatial situation in its entirety. As an example, the first 14 interior shots document

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<sup>21</sup> This is indicated by various series of negatives in Ritopečki's photographic estate from the first half of the 1970s, as well as published photo reports in the newspapers *Yu Novosti*, *Danas*, and *Naš list*.

one room and its inhabitants from different angles and perspectives. The last picture was taken from a markedly higher perspective (Fig. 12), thus offering an overview of the exact setting.



Fig. 12: View of one room with a narrow makeshift hallway created by walls of wooden planks and wardrobes. Photograph: Jovan Ritopečki, »Rio Grande« House of Horror« series 1973, Lender: Slobodanka Kudlacek Ritopečki.

Only thanks to this image was it possible to reconstruct the precise living arrangement depicted in the previous 13 photographs. As such, the individual shots can be viewed as something akin to puzzle pieces, which the photographer synthesized into a complete picture in the last image. Ritopečki appears to have stood on a bunk bed, as can be seen by the frame visible in the lower right-hand corner of the image. Young men are visible in a narrow makeshift hallway created by walls of wooden planks and wardrobes. Along the left edge of the picture, part of a man's face and shoulder, sitting in a separate living area, are visible. Another room, the entrance to which is furthest away from the photographer, seems to be shrouded in darkness as well as part of the head of another person. The image is uncanny, not only because of what it depicts but also by how it is done: the overwhelming tightness, lack of space, and crowded nature of the accommodation are palpable. The scrunched furniture, narrow passageways, and the men, packed into the

tiny rooms, only reinforce this feeling. Extrapolating further, it is fairly simple to recognize how the living conditions compromised and challenged the physical integrity, dignity, and privacy of the residents. This photograph is also unique, as it is the only shot from the series in which the viewer sees the subjects from an elevated, top-down perspective.

The photographer appears to have focused far less on the people, and more on the inhumane living conditions the residents had to endure, laid bare before his eyes and camera lens. There is no indication that Ritopečki paid particular attention to how the people arranged themselves in front of his camera, such as whether they looked at the camera or not (in other words, the staging), as the goal was to capture the nature of the living conditions. As such, the image is far more invasive than the others in the series, transforming the photographed into objects caught by the camera. Following this interpretation of the image, the inhabitants are not only subject to the living conditions, but also the camera's lens. Following this approach, Ritopečki was unable to avoid the dilemma of reproducing an asymmetry between himself and those he was photographing. Only the curious glance of a young man, whose head peeks out from next to a wardrobe in the hallway, staring directly into the lens, counteracts this to a small degree.

All of the above make this image one of the most essential in the series,<sup>22</sup> unmistakably showcasing the precarious existence of the residents in all its facets. This occurs in a social sense, by way of representing the common area of an excluded group within a majority society who lived together in the city's periphery. With regards to the spatial arrangement of the room, its overcrowded state and lack of amenities make clear that the inhabitants would have been unable to pursue a dignified life. The furniture seen in the pictures also leaves an unfavorable impression. The rooms, particularly the floors, are shown to be extremely dirty. The absence of any sort of meaningful design concept, typical of a residential accommodation, is also telling, as there are hardly any walls or doors that would divide one living space from another. Instead, old wardrobes, wooden boards, and white cotton towels serve as improvised lines of demarcation.

Sleeping, communal and cooking areas flow into one another, with simple ovens and hot plates providing the only means to prepare food. Access to running water or bathing facilities is not documented. In this regard, the

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22 This serves to underline the further publication history of the photograph in the periodical *Yu Novosti*. The image had the following caption: »This photograph from the ›Rio Grande‹ room could also serve as Mr. Fischer's personal ID card. Are these souls, crammed into forty centimeters (so much is found between the wardrobes), right to complain?« In other words, the photograph, according to Ritopečki, strongly represents or reflects Mr. Fischer's character, just like an official identification card would.

photographer seems to have consciously distanced himself from contemporary Austrian press photographers for whom snaps of soiled toilets in Vienna's migrant slums were a common motif in the 1970s and 1980s. These were intended to underline and symbolize the appalling sanitary conditions prevailing in such areas, calling into question the dignity of the inhabitants as human beings. Extrapolating, pictures of this kind floated the idea that the residents were unable or unwilling to maintain certain hygienic standards, even if unintended. Taking these factors into consideration, the absence of such motifs in Ritopečki's image series is even more noteworthy.

The clear lack of space, furnishings, and amenities as well as the ethnic segregation conveyed in the series reflect the characteristics that were held to be indicative of discrimination against migrants in Austria in the 1970s and early 1980s. One study, conducted in the early 1980s on the living conditions of Yugoslav and Turkish migrants, noted: »The worse the conditions, the more overfilled the accommodation« (Bundesministerium 1985, p. 100). This was accentuated by another bleak conclusion, namely, that migrants could only secure housing in apartments or facilities that were unattractive to the majority population, i.e., Austrians (Bundesministerium 1985, pp. 281 f.). Counteracting this somewhat, a few traces of attempts to make the living space more comfortable or pleasant are visible in the series. In one of them, a pair of women can be seen sitting on a bed, looking into the camera. A tablecloth and a vase with flowers, as well as a mirror,<sup>23</sup> and towels (or curtains) demonstrate the attempts made to create both some semblance of privacy, as well as livability (Fig. 7).

Whereas the first part of the series documents the space itself, the latter shots are dominated by images of socialization, in one instance, seen among a group of youth (Fig. 6), and in another, among men sitting around a table (Fig. 13).

The sense of community among the individuals in the photographs is not only recognized in these examples based on their physical proximity to one another or joint posing in front of the camera, but also in their body language. The physical, mimic, and gestural actions all appear to be related to or based on those of the others in the group (Pilarczyk 2009, p. 196). Considering the title and the precarious living conditions documented on film, there is a conciliatory, or even cheerful quality to such pictures. As a result, the content is in sharp contrast with part of the series' title, namely, a place of horror.

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<sup>23</sup> In the mirror's reflection, another woman, holding the curtain to the left side, which would have separated the living area, is discernible.



Fig. 13: Group portrait of six men sharing one room. Photograph: Jovan Ritopečki, »Rio Grande« House of Horror« series 1973, Lender: Slobodanka Kudlacek Ritopečki.

The striking title, under which the series was archived, stands at odds with the sober, well-conceived photo report. Instead of sensation, the series' images are meant to evoke sympathy by showing the inhabitants of the building and their precarious living conditions, without questioning or infringing upon their integrity or human dignity. In this approach, Ritopečki aligns with the tradition of social documentary photography from the inter-war period, wherein individuals from impoverished, marginalized, and socially disadvantaged backgrounds were depicted not as exotic subjects, but as dignified individuals (see e.g. Sturmberger 2007). The camera serves as a tool for a factual report, with the photographs serving a similar purpose (see following section). Through them, the photographer's claim of performing social-documentary work is reinforced by raising awareness of social grievances to promote and foster change.

### 3 Contextual Framing and Use: Photographs in the Media

Individual photos from the series appeared in two articles in *Danas* and *Yu Novosti* in June and July of 1973, for which Ritopečki worked at the time. This means that the pictures were taken some time before early summer of 1973.



One photograph appeared in *Danas* on July 1, 1973, as part of an article focusing on Yugoslav migrants as victims of exploitive rental practices in Austria (Fig. 14).<sup>24</sup> The author of the report was not cited; however, we can assume that it was either Ritopečki or the editor, owner, and publisher of the periodical, Vasa Kazimirović. At the time, Ritopečki was associated with the magazine as a freelance journalist and staff member.<sup>25</sup>



Fig. 14: Article *Ministar K. Broda: Stop za stanodavce – izrabljivače* (Minister Broda: Stop for Landlords – Exploiters). *Danas*, 1.7.1973: 2 f.

To illustrate the article, one of the pictures from the series was used, showing three young men in dilapidated living conditions. The photograph was cropped on the upper, lower, and left frames for publication, directing greater attention to the individuals in the room. In the report itself, neither the place nor the individuals photographed are referred to explicitly, and as such, the image serves primarily as an illustration. It is worth noting, however, that the image takes up quite a bit of space in comparison to the body of the text. The image is captioned as follows: »The living situation of Yugoslav

24 *Ministar K. Broda: Stop za stanodavce – izrabljivače*. *Danas*, 1.7.1973: 2 f.

25 Letter from Vasa Kazimirović to Jovan Ritopečki from February 2, 1973. Source: estate of Jovan Ritopečki, archive: Slobodanka Kudlacek Ritopečki/Vienna.

labor migrants is particularly severe in Vienna.« The selection of the specific image motif as the central visualization for the catastrophic living conditions endured by Yugoslav migrants is certainly not an accident. Viewers are instantly able to see not only the combination of sleeping, living, and eating space, but also the tight and precarious area which the (many) inhabitants shared. In the context of discursive embedding, the body language and downward gaze of one of the men in the center of the picture serves only to underline the feeling of dreariness and hopelessness.

A report written by Ritopečki for *Yu Novosti* and released on June 21, 1973, was titled »Rio Grande«. The House of Horror« (*»Rio Grande« Kuća Užasa*) (Fig. 15–17). The author included valuable historical information pertaining to the living conditions of the inhabitants, as well as photographs of the building and other details, all of which provide additional dimensions of meaning.<sup>26</sup>

In terms of style, Ritopečki's article is socio-critical and seems to have been composed to shed light on the poor conditions that confronted the migrants. The article begins by promising the readers in a humanist tradition to lay bare the wrongs currently being suffered by the migrants: »Dear reader, we intend to show you something incomprehensible, and from a humane point of view, unbelievable.« The focus then shifts to a detailed description and documentation of the living conditions of Yugoslav migrants residing in Josef-Österreicher-Gasse in Vienna's 23<sup>rd</sup> district. We learn that the building accommodates around 100 people, how its rooms and floors are arranged, about the available furniture and »amenities«, the monthly rent, and so on. Ritopečki includes comments from most of the residents he photographed. Their descriptions, which represent only a few voices out of the many, make clear that the 28 photographs in the series provide just a glimpse into the prevailing situation. They criticize the landlord and owner of the building by name (Richard Fischer).

Eight images from the series were selected to accompany the article, and all bear lengthy captions, intended to underline the report's documentary nature. Another picture of the Austrian Minister of Social Affairs, Rudolf Häuser, is also shown on the first page of the article, positioned next to the title (Fig. 15). His picture is captioned as follows: »Is he aware of such cases? What does he think of them? Minister of Social Affairs?« The inclusion of this image in combination with the captions identifies the text's target, namely the Austrian government, and indirectly the country itself for the catastrophic living conditions of Yugoslav migrants, calling upon the former to not only accept responsibility for the latter but also take political action. Ever

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26 Jovan Ritopečki, »Rio Grande« Kuća Užasa. *Yu Novosti*, 21.6.1973: 19–21.

since the beginning of the 1970s, this had been a topic of discussion among the mixed Austrian-Yugoslav commission, which regularly hosted meetings attended by representatives of both countries to assess issues arising from the employment of Yugoslav citizens in Austria (Matuschek 1985, p. 189).

**GOTOVO NEVEROVATNO**

Predstavljamo vam nešto neshvatljivo, nešto neverovatno sa ljudske tačke gledišta. To je kuća koju 100 stanara zovu „Rio Grande“ a nalazi se u 23. bečkom bećirku, ulica Joseph Oesterreichergasse broj 18. Adresu preporučujemo i nadležnim za strane radnike u Beču, ali ne samo da ih pokupili i proterali preko granice. Sve je ovo zabeleženo i snimljeno 3. juna 1973. godine, po podne.

## »RIO GRANDE« KUĆA UŽASA



**Prolaz u prostoriji „Rio Grande“.** Često gazda isključuje struju, pa se ljudi u mraku svlače. Teško je da čovek u velikoj prostoriji pronađe svoj vlastiti krevet, a kamoli i ormar



**Zna li za ovakve slučajeve i šta o njima misli?**  
Zavezni ministar za socijalno politiku Hauser

OKO STOTINU naših zemljaka živi u jednoj kući u Joseph Oesterreichergasse 18, u 23. bećirku grada Beča u uslovima najcrnije ljudske i stambene bede. Kad ih je u njihovom „domu“, koji podseća na neki crni logor, posetio reporter Jovan Ritopečki, vrteli su se kao da gaze po žaru:

— Hvala ti zemljak što si došao da vidiš u kakvim uslovima mi živimo, rekao mu je mladi Makedonac, samo pazi da te ne čuje „baba“, izbacice i tebe i nas!

Kad je usmerio svoj blic prema hodnicima prepunim starih ormara, pošto u sobama nema mesta čak ni da se pride krevetima, nego ljudi uveče jedni druge preskaču, reporter je shvatio značenje ove pomena: „Wos mochts doo! Wos mochts doo!“ izletela je odnekuđ vrišteći histerično, ta famozna „baba“ — „kućepaziteljka“ Frau Adamec.

Gledajući u rasklimpane prenatrane krevete, stolove i sto-

lice, reporter je pokazao svoju legitimaciju, što je kod histerične žene izazvalo pravu bujicu krikova:

— Nix Presse, nix Presse! Keine Fotos hier!“ — stegla je ona novinara i glasom kao da se kuća ruši počela da doziva: „Scheff! Scheff!“ Zbunjenog reportera odvukla je prema jednoj sobi blizu ulaza, iz koje je izlazio niko drugi do — „šef“ — kućevlasnik Richard Fischer inače trgovac poljoprivrednim proizvodima. Kad je video beležnicu i fotoparat, pokušao je da ga otme i da nepoželjnog novinara uvuče u sobu u kojoj je sedelo nekoliko njegovih poznanika. Reporter je uspeo nekako da se otrgne i izleti na ulicu. Razjareni „šef“ je pojurio za njim vikući: „Ich bring Dich um!“ (Ubicu te!)

Zatim je ovaj „gazda“ iz predgrađa Beča novinara prečio ubistvom? Šta je htelo da zaštiti upotrebišvili silu? Gospodin Fischer, trgovac poljoprivrednim proizvodima, vlasnik ove kuće

Fig. 15: Article »Rio Grande« Kuća Užasa (»Rio Grande« House of Horror). *Yu Novosti*, 21.6.1973: 19.

u predgrađu Beča! Stotinu stana-  
nara, jugoslovenskih „gastarbaj-  
tera“, odmaraju se pod ora-  
ham u dvorištu te kuće svakog  
popodneva, ne zbog gostoljubi-  
vosti gospodina Fischera, već  
zbog toga što u prenatrpanim  
sobama, magacinima i šupama  
nemaju mesta ni da se okrenu.  
Ovaj „hotelijer“ nakupovao  
je po otpadima izandale dvo-  
spratne vojničke krevete, bolni-  
čke ležajeve, stare ormane,  
šifonjere, rasklimate stolove  
i stolice, pleh furne i šporete  
iz vremena valjda Marije Tere-  
zije.

Napivši svoje ruvinirane pro-  
storije, još dotrajelijim stvarima,  
on već dve godine zloupotreblja-  
va tešku stambenu situaciju ju-  
goslovenskih radnika.

Kad se izade iz krivudavih hod-  
nika punih ormara i uđe u sobe  
u kojima nema mesta da se čov-  
ek okrene, čovek tek onda  
shvati „dobročinstvo“ ovog pod-  
gojenog „gospodina“. Ljudi koje  
on prima na stan dolaze u Au-  
striju kao turisti, na „crno“.  
Izvesno je da to odgovara gospo-  
dinu Fischeru — to mu je ga-  
rancija da niko živi neće ove  
ljudje zaštititi, da ovi neće smeti  
nikome da se požale i da će  
pristati na sve uslove koje on,  
gazda, bude izdiktirao.

U jednoj sobi 4X2 m, po-  
stavljena su tri dupla kreveta,  
mali sto i tri razne stolice i mali

otvoreni rešo za kuvanje! Ostalo  
je tek toliko prostora na be-  
tonskom podu da može da stoji  
jedan čovek. U ovom apartmanu  
provodi svoju mladost šest Ju-  
goslovena: braća Mirko i Pavle  
Kostadinov, Atanas Novoselski,  
Vančo Stamenov i braća Kosta i  
Sotir Mihajlov, svi iz grada  
Vince kod Kočana.

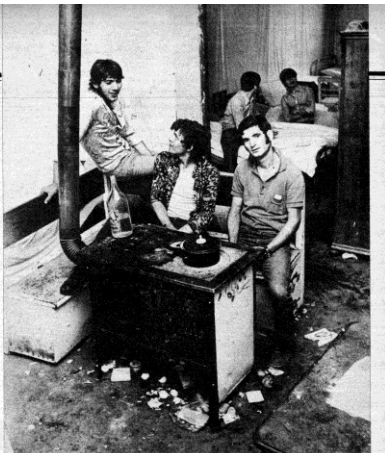
— Verovili ili ne, za ovo  
sopće plaćamo 2.900 šilinga, to  
je oko 230.000 starih dinara.  
Posete su apsolutno zabranjene.  
O novinarima i da ne govorimo.  
Ne daj bože da gazda sazna da  
je ovde svratio novinar! Pre  
neki dan izbacio je nekog Jo-  
vanovića koji je ovde stanovao  
7 meseci, a njegova žena 3 go-  
dine.

Dok je bežao pred razjarenim  
gazdom, reporter se setio ovih  
rečenica. Šta će sad biti sa ovim  
ljudima? Kako će im se Fischer  
osvetiti?

Šta drugo i očekivati od čov-  
eka koji svojim stánarima u-  
kopčava struju samo četiri sata  
dnevno! Od čoveka koji im ne  
da ni dovoljno stolica da sednu.

Njemu ništa ne smeta što u  
istoj sobi stanuju i samci i samice  
i braćni parovi. Da, u sobi 5X5  
u dnu dvorišta, smešteno je šest  
kreveta. Međusobom su odvo-  
jeni nekim krpama nalik na za-  
vese. Pet kreveta bilo je toga  
dana zauzeto.

U jednom krevetu braćni par



Doprinos eventualnoj dokumentaciji protiv bezobzirne stambene i ljudske poniženosti: „Rio Grande“, Joseph Osterreichergasse 18/23, Bečir, Beč 3. juna 1963. popodne



Klara Mesaroš i njena ćerka Francka iz Stare Moravice — Bažka imaju 4 kvadratna metra životnog prostora. Plaćaju 900 šilinga ili 80.000 starih dinara da bi zajedno spavale u istom krevetu u društvu samaca, samice, braćnih parova...



U krevetu je moguće ući samo s jedne strane, preko „table“, uskakanjem — to je stambena „ekonomičnost“ gospodina Fischera.

Fig. 16: Article »Rio Grande« Kuća Užasa (»Rio Grande« House of Horror). Yu Novosti, 21.6.1973: 20.



Šestorica iz sobe 4 x 2. Zar se i to može! Pavle Kostadinov, Sotir Mihajlov, Atanas Novoselski, Kosta Mihajlov, Vančo Stamenov, Mirko Kostadinov (o leva na desno) svi iz Kočana.



Smeju se. Treba im se diviti: „Zavesa“ u sredini, to su vrata koja vode u „bračnu ložnicu“ Milana i Vere Radojković iz Požarevca. Na deset stanovnika ove sobe dotazi samo pet stolica.

## „RIO GRANDE” — KUĆA UŽASA



Pavle Kostadinov iz Vinice kod Kočaba: „Moram da kuvam, da mi ostane neka crkavica“.

Milan i Vera Radojković iz Požarevca. Dušanka Protić sa majkom Vidosavom spava u drugom krevetu. Mesaroš Klara sa sedamnaestogodišnjom kćerkom Francikom iz Bačke Stare Moravice u trećem. Mirjana Manojlović iz Požarevca... Viktorija Jo-

vanović iz Požarevca... U šesti krevetu uselile se uskoro jedan bračni par.

Svi kuvaju na smenu na malom šporetu, tiskajući se uskim prolazima po betonskom podu pri svetlosti koju čini sijalica od 25 vati, ako je gazda nije isključio.

— Neće me ništa čuditi ako zaradimo ovdje tuberkulozu ili neku drugu bolest, kaže zabrinuto Francika Mesaroš.

Strah od bolesti, stisnutost i strah — eto to u ovoj sobi daje gospodin Fischer, a uzima — 4.800 šilinga ili 380.000 dinara!

U trećoj prostoriji, koju stari zovu „Rio Grande“, stanuje tridesetero Jugoslovena. Od ulaznih vrata prolazi se kroz „šparilj“ starih polupanih ormara, zamandaljenim raznovrsnim katančima, između kojih se ulazi u boksove sa gvozdanim krevetima na spratove. Prolazi su široki četrdeset santimetara, a boksovi su izdelfeni običnim das-kama visokim oko 2 metra.

Škiljava sijalica na plafonu samo još pojačava utisak da je ovo nekakav stari magacin. Ne nestaje taj utisak ni kada čovek oseti miris hrane koju svi zajedno spremaju na šporetu bez vrata.

— Šta će biti sa nama kad se gazda vrati sa ulice? To je bio izraz koje je reporter video na licima kada je gužva počela. Zai-

sta, ko će zaštititi ove ljude od beskrupuloznog gospodina Fischera, koji ne samo da im uzima oko 50.000.000 starih dinara godišnje, nego ih još i drži u šahu — zloupotrebljavajući njihovu tešku stambenu situaciju.

Pretnja ubistvom, za gospodina Fischera je verovatno trebalo da bude način da sačuva

tajnu „kako se prave pare“. Hoće li posle ovoga nastaviti po starom? Koliko je gospodina Fischera? To na žalost mi ne znamo, a verovatno ni oni kojima je to dužnost. Inače kako bi takvi opstali.

Tekst i snimci  
Jovan Ritopečki



Ova slika iz prostorije „Rio Grande“, mogla bi da bude i lična kupa gospodina Fischera. Da li ova lica stisnuta na 40 cm prostora koliko ostaje između ormara — dovoljno optužuju?

Fig. 17: Article »Rio Grande« Kuća Užasa (»Rio Grande« House of Horror). *Yu Novosti*, 21.6.1973: 21.

In addition to information about the living conditions and biographies of the residents, including their names and places of birth, Ritopečki also describes how the photographs came to fruition, something uncommon in his other reports in the periodical. He starts by relating how, during his visit, he was confronted by the female caretaker and had his life threatened by the landlord before being physically chased off the premises. For that reason, as he explains, the pictures were created clandestinely, as visits by non-residents were prohibited. According to one of the inhabitants, they feared that the publication of the story would lead to acts of reprisal if the landlord ever found out: »Thank you, compatriot, for coming, to see the conditions we live under here [...]. But, take care, that the ›old hag‹ doesn't hear you, otherwise she'll not only throw you out, but all of us too.«

This information provides new insight into the series, highlighting how the pictures were made under both time constraints and duress. The photographer was aware of his responsibility to the inhabitants, as well as the potential consequences of his actions.<sup>27</sup> From the perspective of the residents, the overall situation must have been rather tense due to their »invitation« of a stranger into the building, thereby breaking the house rules. Based on this knowledge, it would seem reasonable to expect nervous, pensive faces among those photographed. At first glance, this is not readily apparent in the pictures, with the majority of images giving the impression of a well thought out photo report, and not composed under any sort of constraints. How else can we comprehend the pictures of camaraderie and a jovial atmosphere that dominate the second part of the series? They point to the pictures being ambiguous, and not having a single meaning. After all, as Roland Barthes notes, »so much can be read in a single face« (Barthes 1989, p. 23).

One interpretation is that the photographs provide historical traces of a joint experience of togetherness forged at this very place. In so doing, Ritopečki relies on tested patterns of representation, since the motifs and representations are like those of other images from the photographer's estate, in which other group constellations are visible. The photographer himself appears to have been aware of the discrepancy between the message conveyed by the images and the text accompanying them, as can be seen in his comments on one of the published group shots, depicting residents laughing: »They laugh. You can only admire them: The ›curtain‹ in the center is a door that leads into the ›marriage chamber‹ of Milan and Vera Radojković from Požarevac. For the ten inhabitants of this room, a total of five chairs are available«.

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<sup>27</sup> He asks himself in the text »What will happen [following his flight, author's insertion] to the people? How will Mr. Fischer punish them?«

As indicated in the title of the series, and reinforced by how its photographs were used, the series is entangled in a tapestry of meanings going far beyond its historical origins and uses, which, in turn, brings further levels of meaning to light. A central argument is that the title »Rio Grande« *Kuća Užasa* has a far deeper meaning, endowing and linking the series to additional symbolic images, discourses, and contexts. From the article, we learn that »Rio Grande« was how residents referred to the place, as well as the room documented in 14 shots and inhabited by 30 Yugoslavs. However, it is only possible to make assumptions about the concrete frames of reference.

It is plausible to suggest that the inspiration behind the name »Rio Grande« may have stemmed from popular culture influences, such as western films, which were immensely popular in socialist Yugoslavia during that time (Vučetić 2018, p. 65). The term »Rio Grande« itself evokes imagery of a distinct geographical area, notably the renowned river marking the border between the United States and Mexico (known as Rio Bravo in Mexico). This river featured prominently in numerous American western films, including a 1950 John Wayne feature that bore its name. The connection between the accommodation's name and these cinematic references might lie in the thematic portrayal of the Rio Grande as a frontier between civilization and lawlessness, a recurring motif in westerns. In the Yugoslavian context, the 1950 film was among the most beloved westerns of the era (Vučetić 2018, p. 64). Additionally, the West German western film *The Bandits from Rio Grande* (*Die Banditen vom Rio Grande*, 1965), which was filmed in Yugoslavia, could have further contributed to the association.

Furthermore, the symbolic significance of the Rio Grande as a representation of cross-border aspirations for a better life, both historically and temporarily, adds another layer of meaning. Moreover, the portrayal of the »Wild West« in comics, often depicting clashes between »good« and »evil« and the struggle between »civilization« and »barbarism«, might have influenced the choice of name. One of socialist Yugoslavia's beloved comic strips was the *Golden Series* by Italian publisher Sergio Bonelli Editore, appearing in the *Dnevnik* newspaper from 1968 to 1992. The Wild West also served as one of *Golden Series'* settings. In 1969, two comic books, »*Adventure on the Rio Grande*« and »*The House of Horror*«, were released. In the first, the main character, Tex Wheeler (a Texas Ranger), frees the inhabitants of El Paso from their violent and corrupt rulers, drawing a concrete parallel to the Wild West. This relationship is only indirectly implied in *The House of Horror*.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The author thanks Darko Leitner-Stojanov for the suggestion. For more on the popularity of the comics in socialist Yugoslavia, see Vučetić 2018, pp. 218–226.

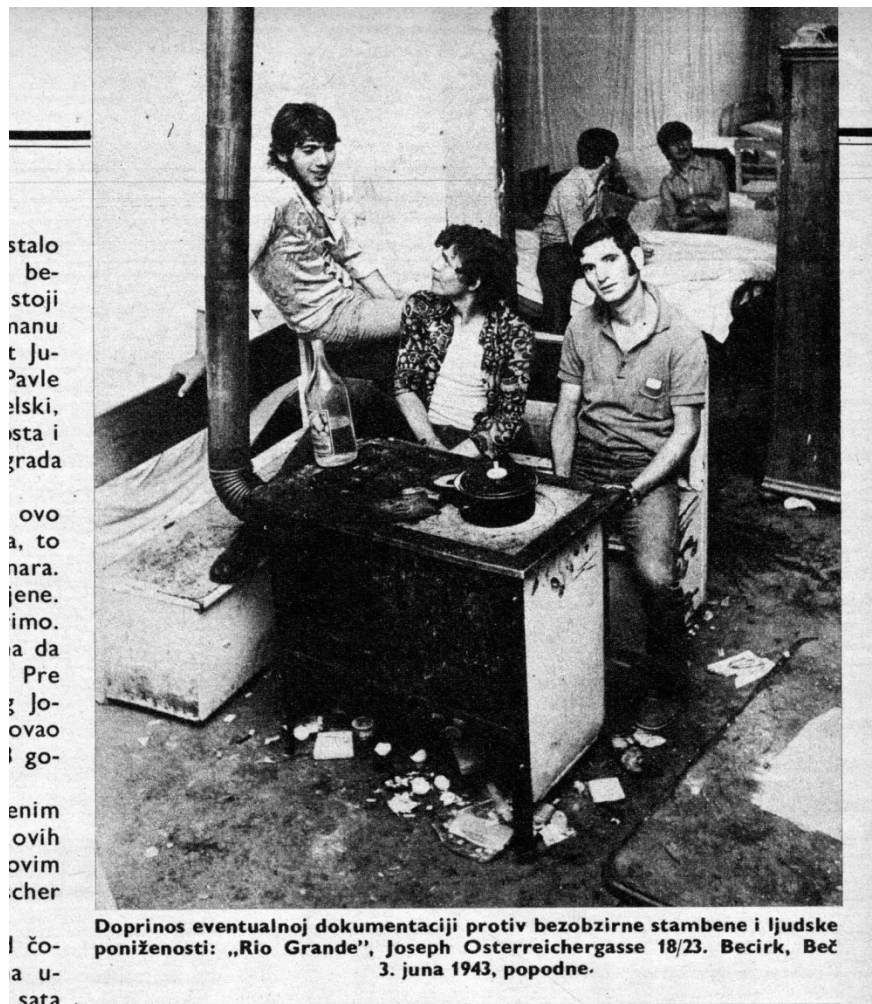
Therefore, »*Rio Grande*« *Kuća Užasa*« could be interpreted as a metaphorical representation of lawlessness and unpredictability akin to the Wild West. From the perspective of its residents, the accommodation embodied a liminal space where no one was safe and arbitrariness reigned, with the landlord serving as »the villain« or »barbarian« ruler. This is supported by both descriptions in the text, as well as the note that the residents were in Austria without valid residence permits, and as such were subject to the landlord's whims. In the context of the series' publication, this line of thought takes on an additional dimension of meaning. Considering that the periodical reported on the life of Yugoslav citizens abroad on behalf of the Yugoslav state, *Rio Grande* could also be a code for Western Europe (the North), with Yugoslavia viewed as its South. In this understanding, the text's message becomes clearer, particularly within the context of contemporary political disillusionment with labor migration within Yugoslavia: the capitalist West is a house of horrors, which ruthlessly shatters any hopes for a better life. Supporting this is the fact that in socialist adaptations of westerns, the so-called »easterns« or »red westerns«, which started to be produced by *DEFA* (East Germany's film production company) and filmed in Yugoslavia in the 1960s, the roles of good and bad were reversed. Radina Vučetić explored the popularity of westerns in Yugoslav popular culture in the 1960s, concluding that these can be best described as »Indian films«, which pit Native Americans (often led by the Yugoslav film star, Gojko Mitić) against White people, portrayed as greedy conquerors and imperialists, in the Wild West (Vučetić 2018, pp. 66 f.).

The selections of title and textual description leads me to conclude that the photographer must have been deeply shaken by his experience at the locale. Supporting this assumption is his depiction of what he saw, which makes the effect this experience had on him clear: on the one hand, the threat to his life made by the owner, and on the other hand, the living conditions he witnessed there. The photos should preserve what he saw, as noted by the caption he supplied to one of the images selected for the article, showing three young men sitting on a bench (Fig. 18): »Exhibit for possible documentation of careless living and human abasement: »*Rio Grande*« Joseph Österreicher-Gasse 18/23<sup>rd</sup> district, Vienna, 3 June 1943 (sic), afternoon.«

Owing to the lack of source material, it is impossible to determine whether the erroneous date (1943 instead of 1973) was an error made by the photographer or the editorial team of *Yu Novosti*. However, dating the image to 1943 places the photograph in the final two years of the National Socialist Regime in Austria and the Second World War, linking the horrific conditions endured by Yugoslav labor migrants in 1973 to those experienced by racialized groups under the Nazi regime. Reinforcing this point is the characteriza-



tion of the landlord as authoritarian and ruthless. At the very least, this can be understood as an expression of outrage at what the next generation of Yugoslav citizens, only a few decades removed from their country's occupation by and armed struggle against Nazi Germany, had to endure during migration to one of the successor states; namely injustice, discrimination, and inhumane conditions.



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**Doprinos eventualnoj dokumentaciji protiv bezobzirne stambene i ljudske poniženosti: „Rio Grande”, Joseph Osterreichergasse 18/23. Becirk, Beč 3. juna 1943, popodne.**

Fig. 18: Extract from the article »Rio Grande« *Kuća Užasa* (»Rio Grande« House of Horror). *Yu Novosti*, 21.6.1973: 20.

According to Ulf Brunnbauer, who examined this specific historical constellation in the context of Yugoslav labor migration to West Germany, this topic was not thematically touched upon by the Yugoslav press of the period (Brunnbauer 2019, p. 424). However, in Yugoslav cinema, we find examples that criticize the discriminatory treatment of Yugoslav labor migrants in West Germany, directly and indirectly referencing the Nazi past (e.g., Krsto Papić's film *Specijalni Vlakovi* from 1972, see Le Normand 2021, pp. 69 f.).<sup>29</sup>

Unfortunately, additional historical sources that might afford us greater insight into how Ritopečki's story as well as its images were received and interpreted by the public and the readers of the magazine are not available. Their place of publication does lead me to the conclusion that migrants were intended as the primary audience. Therefore, this case study exemplifies how Ritopečki's photography and journalistic work might have also served as a resource for migrants to document and articulate their life worlds in Austria with all of their accompanying difficulties and challenges. The story signalled that someone, in this case the Yugoslav state, cared for them. The housing problem was one of the major topics of scandalization, highlighting the weaknesses of the guest worker system and the precarious status of migrants in the destination countries (cf. Brunnbauer 2019). At that time, both Austrian and Yugoslav media reported on the living conditions of migrant workers. While the Austrian press typically portrayed migrants as an anonymized group without individual histories, Ritopečki's report »Rio Grande« *Kuća Užasa* situates the affected individuals in the foreground. They are depicted as victims who are individuals with names, biographies, and personal narratives.

## 4 Closing Thoughts

The fragmentary nature of photographs, their »rawness«, to borrow a term from Elizabeth Edwards (2001, p. 6), always poses a challenge to historical research. The ambiguity of photographs should, however, as Edwards argues, not only be seen as a disadvantage but also as somewhat of an invitation to explore the historical experiences conveyed more deeply and to trace clues relating to how they were created and what they depicted.

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<sup>29</sup> In Austria there are also a few media examples where the structural racism against migrants in the 1970s was regarded as a historical continuation of Nazi discrimination and extermination policies, and the result of Austrian society's failure to adequately revisit its Nazi history and rehabilitate itself (Bakondy and Winter 2013, p. 30) See, for example, the discussion format *Stadtgespräche* in the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF) on the topic of guest work from September 25, 1973: *Kolaric mal 300 000. Wächst uns das Gastarbeiterproblem über den Kopf?*

Jovan Ritopečki's photographs do more than document the living conditions he encountered. They also reflect the interaction between photographer and inhabitants, based on photographic consent. His shock at what he witnessed is reflected in the detailed documentation of the living conditions and in the written report and the title selection. The series contrasts with his usual method of documenting the living conditions of Yugoslav migrants in Austria, which typically focuses on social gatherings and portraiture.

The historical contextualization of the »House of Horror« photographs as well as their montage with other discourses and images, to tie into the photo-analytical ideas of Georges Didi-Huberman (2007, p. 173), reveals historical content that goes beyond what is immediately visible. In this manner, the transnational dimension of image production, their usage histories, and reception can be detailed. The series offers an example of how photographs »are mobilized as a form of agency [...] between migrant communities and the homeland« (Carville and Lien 2021, p. 15).

Additional sources make it possible to gain insight into the photographic practices adopted by the photographer, something that is rarely documented. Beyond that, they also help to better understand the historical horizons of meaning and expectations displayed in the pictures (About and Chéroux 2004, p. 31): as manifestations of capriciousness, exploitation, the absence of legal protection in the West, and documentation that in the best case should usher in changes.

Moreover, the photographer chose titles that at first glance are unsettling. These add a complexity to the documentation and enable multifaceted readings of the developed material – a practice/technique known from some of Ritopečki's other works.<sup>30</sup> They eventually allow us to put the historical power of imagination into motion and to penetrate the images' deeper layers of meaning.

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<sup>30</sup> In some of his exhibitions, Ritopečki attempted to reflect on the experiences of Yugoslav migrants in Austria in a more artistic manner than was possible in his professional work as a press photographer. This concerns, e.g., a collection of 31 large format black and white photographic prints originating from the 1970s, in which he combined images with text excerpts clipped from newspaper reports. Another example is a photographic album presented to Tito in 1972 (Bakondy 2024).

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