

1949. 'You should show the future, this is the reality,' he was told by Bulgarian officials. Villagers tell the story and their comments: 'He had seen some terrible things in Russia!'... 'No, it was a love story.' My comments. Marion's comments. Why?

Radilovo again. The 1990's. There lived an old school teacher, working on the history of the village. At a celebration in the village inn, the mayor of the village got drunk, took out his pistol and started shooting in the air. A stray bullet hit the village historian, killing him. Why him? A love story again? But why the historian anyway?

### Yugoslavia: 'A bridge to separate people'

The Yugoslavian story is be centred around two 'heroes.' Firstly, Marko – a fisher boy from an island in the Adriatic, who was the main player in the sequence, following his life from 1947. Secondly, the bridge – over Bosna River built by voluntary workers, although volunteering was obligatory – every household had to do 200 days a year of volunteer working. The Bridge was a witness to the passing of time, of hatred, of wars and grief – a bridge over a small river that tries to connect people, but separates them instead. While shooting the film, Michelle and Ivens nearly fell victims to a truck accident, supposedly an act of sabotage organised by the nationalists. Of course, worse atrocities happened during the ethnic wars of the 1990s, but the bridge is still there.

The only piece of footage from the Yugoslavian part of THE FIRST YEARS that has survived, is a short sequence showing Marshall Josip Broz Tito, the Yugoslavian communist leader, visiting the volunteers in 1947. In her book 'Good People in Times of Evil' (1999) Tito's granddaughter Svetlana Broz, an internationally renowned humanist and journalist, has collected stories from the wars of the 1990s about people having acted humanely and been good to their enemies, in spite of ethnic and religious differences. 'It's my choice. I'm not a politician. We've had enough of politics in the family,' she wrote. There are enough stories to either believe that there is general hope for humanity, or become disappointed with the whole human race. It's always a question of choice.

### Czechoslovakia: 'Shoes and Puppets'

The original intention of THE FIRST YEARS was to only show Czechoslovakia's rapid industrial progress. It was to be a film about the nationalised 'Bata' shoe factory. For example in THE FIRST YEARS we see a factory worker at home, on Christmas eve, with his wife and children, making his plans for Christmas. Will his children make shoes too?

Prague is famous as the city of puppets. I am thinking of including a puppet sequence in the film, based on the propaganda puppet film that was cut out (which I hope to find), and using the same puppets (the workers).

Prague will appear again in the film concerning 1968 and the new rise and fall of the Dream in the East and the West. On one of my visits to Prague I saw a cross, made of black stones set in the white stone pavement. Local people were carefully passing by, avoiding stepping on it, creating a somewhat forbidden, sacred zone of about 2 sq. m. Tourists, looking up through the displays of their cameras to the facades of buildings, stepped right across it. It was a memorial of the place where a 19-year old boy committed suicide in 1968, burning himself to death with

gasoline, as a protest against the Soviet invasion. A 19-year Bulgarian boy - a soldier - was killed in Czechoslovakia at the same time. Some people say it was a love story. But Bulgarians tend to explain everything with love stories.

Puppets are immortal. Even if the puppet sequence from Ivens' film is completely lost, there are still photos of him with the puppets. A puppet of a worker from 1948 can easily be run down by tanks in 1968 and survive to work and live in a flat, and hope... and ring with his keys in 1989 in the Velvet Revolution, and have his puppet wife and puppet kids, and hope... and live to entertain the tourists at Charles's Bridge in 2005, and hope, and hope...

### 'Memories'

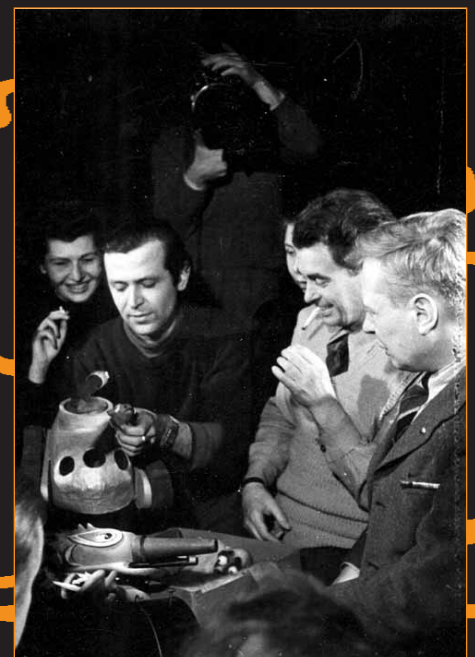
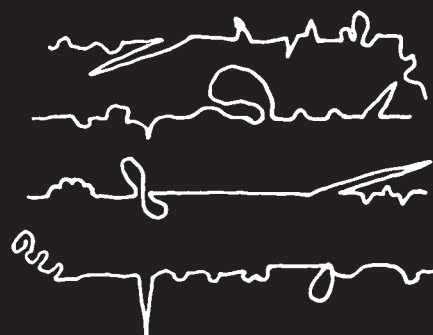
I remember 1968, I was a 6-year old boy then, living in a suburb of an industrial town in North West Bulgaria, where my parents had migrated like thousands of Bulgarians. I had a friend called Bogdan, a 60-year old actor. During that time Marion Michelle had been in Radilovo, shooting MASTERS OF THE RAIN. We were sitting on a bench in front of the house and talking about the Youth Festival in Sofia and about the prize my mother had got as an amateur poet for a verse about youth and peace. Bogdan said: "The real festival is in Prague now." He didn't explain himself. But he told me about the house where he had spent his early life and that it would soon be pulled down for a high rise building to be erected. "I was never sorry for the house but for the book. They took it away. Maybe they burnt it." It was his favourite book - the book of books – a novel in 9 volumes called 'The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman,' by Laurence Sterne. For years after I tried to find the book and was always told that there was no such book. Until it became the book of books for me too.

Bogdan's last appearance on screen was in a film from 1974 about migration to cities from devastated villages in Bulgaria. In 2002 I made a documentary in the same locations, about some peasants who were forced to leave their village when a dam was built – only the church is visible above the water.

When I asked at the Bulgarian Film Archive about THE FIRST YEARS, I was told that there was no such film. Things get easily lost and destroyed in Bulgaria. Burning 'Tristram Shandy' or destroying a Joris Ivens film – who cares.

### 'Narration lines'

As I have to explain the storyline of my 'sentimental journeys' and 'pilgrimages' among 'Us 4' and across Europe, I can draw narration lines between past and present, and dreams and hopes and all, like Tristram Shandy did, in Volume Six, Chapter 40 of the tiny book:



Joris Ivens shooting the puppet scene, sequence from the Czechoslovakian part of THE FIRST YEARS, which was censored © Joris Ivens Archive / EFJI



Marion Michelle dancing with Bebe Slavka during the shooting of MASTERS OF THE RAIN, 1968



Marion Michelle having fun with the people of Radilovo, during the shooting of THE FIRST YEARS, 1968