

THE TALE OF JULIUS AND GRETA MUNCH (THE FORGOTTEN BENEFACTORS)



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I pondered a long time how to begin my tale of people who had big hearts, and little is known of them...I do not know much either, but I want to share with you what I learned. I ask all who will read this tale, if by some chance they heard something about them or their descendants, to get in touch with me.

In 1955 I visited the Rtanj for the first time, an amazing mountain of extraordinary beauty in Eastern Serbia. Until then I often passed near the Rtanj and often heard about the church - chapel on its very summit. By chance a fellow student of mine started work there. She invited me to the New Year celebration. Since I was a graduate student at the time and the holes in my boots 'smiled' maliciously, I did not know until the last moment whether I would be able to visit my friend. Luckily my former roommate lent me some money and so I left for Boljevac and the Rtanj at 5.30 in the morning with new boots and a smile on my face. I believe that fate had its fingers in all that happened later. Actually, my 'visit' lasted almost ten years. I celebrated the 1996 New Year there. I intended to stay another few days and return home. But my colleague fell ill and I had to replace her. So I started working...

In that winter the snow dominated the mountain ... One morning the sun's rays enticed me to a walk. In the colony itself there is a park/forest which always looked mysterious to me and a bit like from a fairy tale. The snow started to melt and there was no more obstacle for me to go for a round of the forest that was rather neglected. I managed to find a small path that had not been used by anybody for quite some time. Only a few meters above the building where we accommodated the guests I caught sight of the remainder of an unusual structure, I could not believe it... I had been living on this mountain for months and did not know what the forest was hiding... Between two yews, although the tooth of time had done its job, a magnificent cupola stood proudly, which looked to me like a stage awaiting the musicians to

start their long postponed concert under its vault. You know how it was once... the musicians play, the ladies walk and the gentlemen talk business and smoke pipes... I discovered a stairway that led me to the 'stage' itself. I closed my eyes, spread my arms and turned around a few times. The feeling was fantastic, unusual, but I could still not believe that something like this existed in such a modest, almost poor surrounding.

I followed the path further and after several minutes saw a small house with a large courtyard covered with grass. Behind the house there was a cherry orchard. Although there was no gate, it could be seen that somebody took care of the house and the courtyard. The door was locked and the windows were protected by wooden shutters. Pieces of old furniture stood in front of the door. I would say that this was an old chest of drawers, long ago eaten by the tooth of time and by some worms. And since nobody was there I decided to return. I again passed the 'cupola' and stopped beside it. I entered and felt an incredible calm. I descended the stairs and came to a small bridge. Its purpose was not clear to me, for no river flowed below it. For a short time I sat on an old concrete bench... After a few minutes, I saw the remainders of another 'structure' that was hardly visible behind thorny bushes and grass. It was a drinking fountain and remainders of pillars. I understood that probably someone had once lived there. I decided to inquire with the locals...

The children of the colony told me about the "Queen's park" and the cupola was for them part of the Queen's castle. They spoke of the owner as of the Queen. You must agree that children have a divine fantasy. Then I visited the director of the rest home, who had previously worked as professor of literature and I expected that he would be able to tell me something about the mysterious structure in the forest. I told him enthusiastically what I had seen. The old director laughed and told me an almost incredible story. .

The 'cupola' that I had seen is in fact a Rosarium². It belonged to the former owners of the 'Rtanj Mines ' Greta and Julius Munch. The drinking fountain that I had

discovered in the thorny bushes also belonged to them and was part of a whole - of Greta's large park. Their villa was nearby and exists to this day but with an altered roof and different purpose. The gardeners lived in the little house with the cherry orchard behind it. "Once the forest was part of the Munch family's estate and everything looked differently' - said the director. We drank our coffee and I left him to his duties. The story that he had told me and the view that I had seen in the forest aroused my curiosity and I firmly decided to learn as much as possible about those people. .

In the Rtanj colony there lived a certain Rudi whom everybody knew. I heard that he had personally known the owners of the mine. And not only did he know them, he also possessed their photos which he showed me with pride. Thanks to Uncle Rudi who was already deceased and who was an inexhaustible source of information about the Munchs, this married couple will not sink into oblivion, and this tale will see the light of day.



Greta Munch



Julius Munch

Greta and Julius were exceptionally wealthy people...The "Rtanj" Mines, the villa, the park, the Rosarium, the fountain, an apartment in Belgrade... they

owned all this and yet they were poor - they had no children

Greta was a Jewess of Austrian origin³. She lived in Slovenia and worked as a nurse. It was by chance that Julius was treated in the hospital in which Greta worked. Thus they met and, since love knows no bounds, Greta came from Slovenia to the Rtanj and became a member of the Munch family which was already well known and respected in those parts.

The Jew Samuel Munch, Julius's father from Moravia, arrived in Serbia in the second half of the 19th century. He engaged in the production of textile and owned a Textile factory in Paraćin, founded in 1870. The factory worked well and its products were appreciated both at home and abroad. Julius persuaded his father to open a mine in Serbia. Thus the mines at Aleksinac and Čičevac were opened. The Munch family acquired the mines at the foothills of the Rtanj. The first site was opened in 1902. The miners performed their work with great difficulty and the coal was carried to Paraćin in oxen - drawn carts until 1912, when the railway line Paraćin - Zaječar was constructed.

The Munch family were diligent and responsible people. They constructed a cable railway to carry the coal as well as a steam - operated power station. They also owned a coal separation plant, as well as various workshops. All in all they were good employers and took care of their workers and the whole Rtanj colony. However in 1915 the Germans occupied the mine and the Munch family was forced to leave Serbia. The mine was in German hands for three years, and when they withdrew they destroyed the machines, set fire to the mine and flooded it. They left chaos behind. After the liberation in 1918, the Munch family returned to the mine. It was not easy - all they had created was destroyed. However, with huge work and effort the mine regained its former splendor. The hard coal was of excellent quality and the owners were content. New coal deposits were exploited.

When he fell ill Samuel Munch went for treatment to Vienna where he died in 1919 in a sanatorium. Julius, Samuel's oldest son, took over the management of the

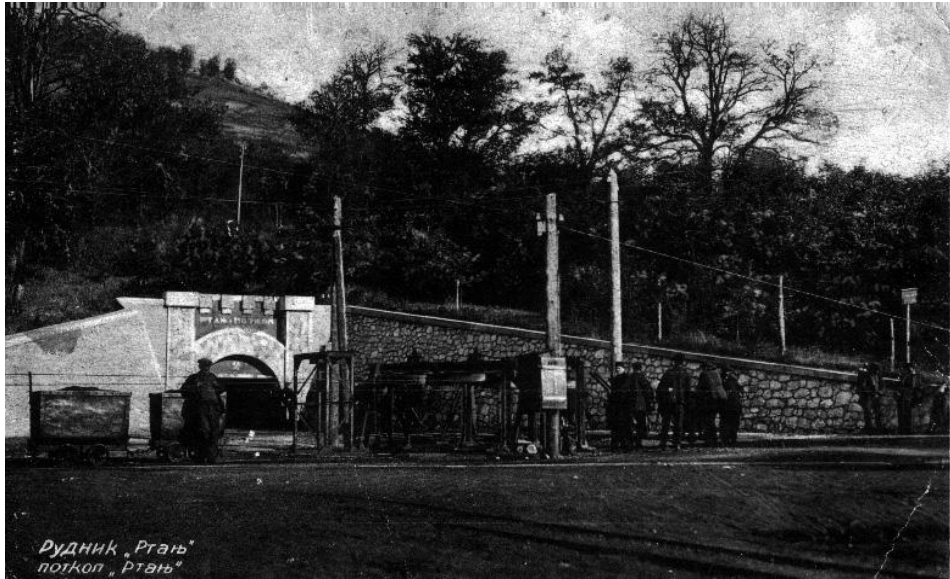
mine and was assisted by his brothers Adolph and Alexander.

The mine worked well and professional staff was brought in from many countries. Rtanj thus became home to many Germans, Hungarians, Czechs, Austrians and Slovenes who were engineers, surveyors, miners... Some still live there and remember the good times. I found that in 1923 there were 550 workers and 15 clerks and supervisors. It was difficult for me imagine such a great number of people, when today the colony has about one hundred local residents and some fifty refugees.

The Munch family took care of their workers and heir families They built them apartments and produced the furniture in their own carpentry free of cost. They opened a policlinic, a food shop and a bakery. The Munch family also took care of the cultural life of their workers so they opened a cinema in the framework of the gymnasium. What would the present inhabitants give to have a cinema in the colony...

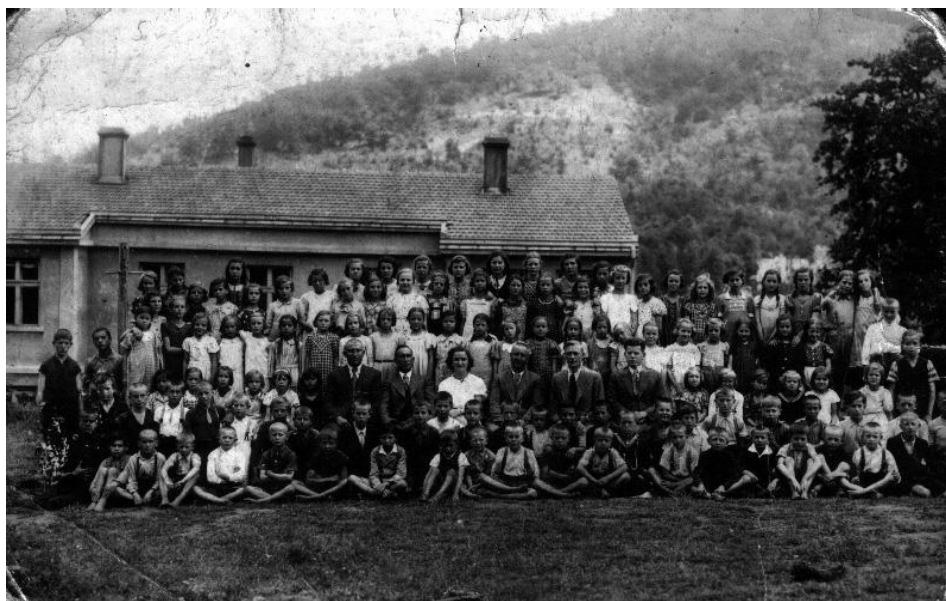


Julius Munch with his collaborators



The Rtanj Mine - entrance to the shaft, 1920

In those days Rtanj was a merry and lively place with many inhabitants, and therefore many children. The Munch family, on Greta's initiative, in 1922 opened the first private school in this region. The Munch family granted scholarships to good pupils and helped surrounding schools. The bell tower in the school courtyard in Ilino still exists today to witness the kindness and generosity of that family. There are data that in 1929 the Rtanj colony had 2000 inhabitants. Greta gave rich presents to the colony's children for each holiday.



The Munch brothers' private School

The Munch family was in love with nature. They had a large park through which they often strolled, alone or with friends. The park contained about 150 species of trees and ornamental shrubs. from all over the world. Greta liked to travel and always brought some new plants from her trips. She often sat on a bench in front of the Rosarium and looked at the cars that transported coal. Below the bridge whose purpose I had not been able to discover the little coal train passed.

All loved and respected the mistress Greta. The gardener grafted especially for her the so-called Black Rose. Greta's favorite place was the Rosarium which was overgrown with roses and surrounded by various flowers. There she found her peace and "healed her sad heart" because she could not become a mother. Greta also had a very nice greenhouse.



**Gardener
Bogoljub Vidojević
In front of the Rosarium**

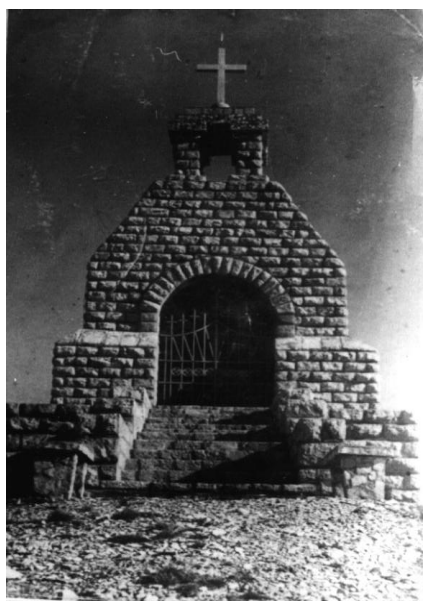


The Rosarium today

And just when I thought that this tale simply could not have a sad end the late Uncle Rudi who liked to visit me for coffee and a conversation, told me something dreadful...

Namely, Julius Munch for some reason committed suicide in 1931 in his apartment in Belgrade. Some said that he had done it because the authorities had confiscated great quantities of fodder on the Danube, which he had promised to the peasants. Others again say that all this happened under unexplained circumstances.

So Greta remained without her great love. She decided to build a small church - a chapel in memory of her husband on the peak of the Rtanj. This was not easy. The peak - 'Šiljak' is 1565 high over the sea level. She therefore had to engage numerous workers - some say up to 1000 - which carried stones to the peak on donkeys. Greta knew that this was not easy work, but she was persistent in her intention to erect a special symbol of her love and respect for Julius. And she succeeded. The church was consecrated in 1936. Greta could see the church from her park and was thus 'in touch' with her great love... Unfortunately only two walls have remained of the church. Gold hunters blew it up if I am correctly informed. in 1969. Today many mountain climbers and vacationers visit the church and try to imagine how it once looked.



The Chapel - Church on the Peak of Mt. Rtanj, 1936.

Julius's death changed many things. Greta had to take over the management of the mine. Adolph and Alexander, Julius's brothers, helped her a lot with that. The fate of Samuel's children is sad... Adolph also committed suicide. When he saw Gestapo agents he swallowed a pill and ended his life in the garage of his house in Belgrade at the beginning of 1941⁴. Adolph's and Julius's brother Alexander survived the war, but only by concealing his Jewish origin. He lived in Belgrade, where he died in 1977.

In 1941 Mrs. Greta was forced to hide from the Germans and leave her villa and the mine⁵. She was taken care of by the Radenković family from Ilino, a small village in the foothills of the Rtanj⁶. The mine was immediately taken over by Eng. Julius Holik, who had been director of the mine under Julius Munch. It was later discovered that Holik was an agent of the Gestapo. He betrayed the Munch family. Following his information the Germans in 1941 executed Alfred Herrmann, Julius Munch's nephew. Holik was convinced that the mine was now his, but the Partisans upset his plan.

Thus the Munch family, after 40 years, left the Rtanj forever, leaving all their wealth behind. Greta died in Ilino in 1947. The Radenković family claim that she passed away in their house. Just two days ago I heard another version: that Greta died in Boljevac in 1952 and was buried there, and later Alexander moved her remains to Belgrade. Today Greta rests beside her husband Julius.

When I wrote this tale about the Munch family, I could not even dream that a telephone call would rouse so strong emotions in me. In the beginning I asked all those who would read this text to contact me if they knew something about the Munch family and their descendants. I was with a friend in Belgrade and just at the moment when I showed her photos of Greta and Julius Munch, the telephone rang. I answered and at the other end heard a female voice telling me that Munch's granddaughter was beside her and would like to meet me. The rest of the conversation passed in disbelief and tears that flowed down my face. It was not easy for me to believe what that woman told me. I was looking for the Munch family, and

they had really found me. I somehow managed to agree with the lady at the other end that we should meet at the Rtanj in two days. My friend who witnessed this conversation looked at me in astonishment. What was the probability that you get a phone call from the descendant of a family that had long disappeared from this region and just at the moment when you wrote about them and showed somebody their pictures? In the following nights I could not sleep. I reexamined myself whether I had well heard and understood what a female voice had told me on the phone. What if they did not come, if they could not find me?

Two days later I was in Boljevac, impatiently waiting for Munch's granddaughter. When a car appeared with Ljubljana registration, I knew the guests had arrived. I approached at once. First I saw a red-headed woman who smiled broadly at me. Afterwards a woman with curly hair stepped out of the car, with an almost childlike smile. This was Vida Jovanović Minh. Vida speaks English and Spanish since she lives in Mexico. The red-haired lady was Daniela Voljč from Ljubljana, her good friend who kindly translated everything for us. Vida Minh embraced me and kissed me on the cheek three times. We were both visibly excited and often put our hands on the chest trying to soothe our emotions. We did not need a translation for what we felt at that moment. .

We were together for three days. She saw the former park of the Munch family. I remember that she looked around her with wide open eyes. She had before her the Rosarium, the park and the house in which her ancestors had lived. She took pictures of everything ... The Rosarium, the house, the fountain, the pillars and the trees. She turned around herself, looked and absorbed every detail, as if she wanted to carry off in her thoughts every moment of the stay on the Rtanj. On the same day we visited the Radenković family in Ilino who hid Greta Munch during the war. The emotion and disbelief were mutual. The hosts showed us the house from 1929 in which Greta stayed. We saw the room in which she lived and her desk was preserved, as well as her chest of drawers. The Radenkoviés spoke of Greta with great

respect. Unfortunately, grandfather Vlasta, the oldest member of the Radenković family who knew Greta personally and knew all details is no more among the living, so there were only memories of his tale.

On the next day we visited the Munch family's villa. We spent the night vis-à-vis so that Vida could enjoy the sight of her ancestors' house. Words cannot describe the expression of that woman when she entered the house. She went from room to room and took pictures of every detail. Vida is an art photographer and a well known artist in Mexico and I am looking forward with impatience to see her photos. Her friend Daniela Voljč, who works at the School of Economics of Ljubljana University and deals with international relations, not only followed us closely but also offered us strong moral support.

Afterwards we took the road for Zaječar. I have already mentioned that Alfred Herrmann was executed there. We managed to find the place where people from Zaječar were executed by firing squad in those years (1941-1944). There is now a big wooden cross as a silent witness to the perfidious killing of innocent people. Vida looked at the cross for a long time and took pictures of it. She walked in silence, moved away and approached the cross again. Can you imagine how a person feels in such a moment? We returned to the Rtanj full of impressions and commented on the events from the past. .

On the next day we put our impressions in order, translated texts on the Munch family and made plans for new associations but even now - friendly cooperation.

The new owner of the Munch villa plans to divide it into apartments. Vida would prefer a Munch Family Museum, but what is done is done. We can only hope that the house will not lose much of its value and that from its walls the Munch family will 'watch' the guests.

Vida also visited the former entrance to the mine which functioned until 1967, when it was closed. She took pictures of it and touched it with her hand. It looked as if she wanted to greet her ancestors....

We shall never know whether our meeting was by chance or otherwise, but while I completed the tale about

the Munch family, I got a message from Vida and Daniela that they had safely arrived in Ljubljana.

Life is really full of surprises...

We agreed to meet again. Her relative who lives in Israel and who, I believe, visited the Rtanj 10-15 years ago and wept when he saw what had remained of the former property of the Munch family, will get in touch with me⁷.

Vida told me part of the story of her ancestors and parents. She will send me more details. She remembered that as a 16 year - old girl she came to the Rtanj with her mother. She expressed the wish that I should help her with her further research on the Munch family. She invited me to visit her in Mexico. Who knows, maybe from this acquaintance a book on the Munch family will emerge...

I have worked on the Rtanj for one decade. I lived opposite the Munch villa, drank coffee and tea in their Rosarium, strolled in their park and enjoyed myself just as they had once done... Exactly for that reason I feel an obligation toward those people to publish this tale. After so many years of silence, the Munch family merits that we start speaking of them. If your road brings you to the Rtanj, you must find the Rosarium. It is not far, immediately above the restaurant. Ask them to bring you coffee or tea there... believe me, coffee and tea have another taste there and you will feel as the Munch family's guest. Is this not marvellous?

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Translated from Serbian
Paul Münch

Translator's Notes

1. Names: I have used the original family name Munch throughout, except for Vida Jovanović Minh. Grete had become Greta in Serbia and this I used throughout the text.
2. Rosarium is a rose garden according to Wikipedia; I do not know who gave the structure this name.
3. Grete was a German Protestant from Germany.
4. Adolph did not take a pill; he shot himself.
5. Greta did not hide from the Germans since she was a Christian German herself. She even gave shelter to her nephew Georg Steger during the war.
6. The Radenković family did not hide Greta but my grandmother Sophie who survived the war thanks to them. The young generation confused the two.
7. During my visit to Rtanj in 1991 I did not weep; I saw the colony rather as a childhood memory than in terms of lost property.