

PROJECT FOLDER



The First Swallow



Directed by Kristína “Kika” Bujnová
Personal Documentary

Contents:

- Introduction.....pp.3-4
- Logline.....p.4
- Short synopsis.....p.4
- Long synopsis.....p.5
- Characters.....p.6
- Treatment.....pp.7-11
- Director´s statement.....p.12
- Visual materials.....pp.13-15

Introduction

"The First Swallow" was born from a short practice film I made, exploring the changes in Slovakia after the Velvet Revolution – which marked the transition from a socialist regime to capitalism. This simple film featured interviews from the early 90s of famous Slovak singers of the time. One of them mentioned the term "first swallow," symbolizing these young musicians and their newfound freedom to compose and release songs in the West. This term struck a chord with me, making me realize that within my family, I, too, am the "first swallow" – venturing westward for a better life, akin to those birds seeking warmer climates during winter.

Thinking about this metaphor, I began contemplating the idea of making a film about my personal journey within the context of my family's history and my country's past. This raised several compelling questions in my mind: "Were people happy back then?", given the bleak portrayal of that era. "Those four decades of closed borders surely must have had an impact on the country, why did people stay despite the option to leave now?". Furthermore, I pondered why my own father, who, at the time of the revolution, was at the age when individuals make decisions about their next steps in life, never seized the opportunity to depart. And, reflecting on these queries, I couldn't help but strive to delve deeper into why I felt the need to pursue such a departure three decades later. Was it impacted by Slovakia's socialist past? In attempting to find answers for myself, I concluded that there is no better way to explore this than through making a film about it.

While contemplating whether to pursue a fictional narrative, my decision has leaned towards crafting a personal documentary for several reasons: Firstly, I aim to depict the truth as faithfully as possible. Secondly, I seek to ensure that individuals unfamiliar with the subject matter can understand better. Thirdly, as an editor, I aspire to create a film where I grant myself the liberty to shape the story during the editing process and allow for ample experimentation. And lastly, my family possesses an assortment of archival material tucked away at home, and I wish to assign them a fresh purpose, infusing them with a renewed sense of significance.

After laying the groundwork for creating this documentary, I came to the realization of just how deeply personal this story is, despite its broader themes. However, rather than tempering its intimacy, I've chosen to fully embrace it. This also mirrors the style of the film, where the audience is invited to observe, almost voyeuristically, as myself, my father, and my grandfather peruse old videotapes and photographs. Throughout, we engage in casual yet personal conversations about our lives and share insights into the era.

The reasoning behind interviewing these two family members lies in the fact that my grandfather dedicated over 30 years to working as a shopkeeper during socialism, granting him unparalleled understanding of that period. Consequently, the next logical option for an interviewee was my father, his son, who, despite being naturally influenced by his parent, holds distinctly opposing viewpoints on political movements from him. Moreover, as stated above, I sought to uncover the distinctions in our decision-making processes regarding staying home or heading West, particularly given our shared fondness for travel and new experiences. Ultimately, in view of the context, it was clear that incorporating my own voice into the film, serving as both a platform for personal introspection and reflection on the insights gained from my family members, was the natural path to take.

In essence, this documentary invites the audience to delve into the intersecting realms of personal and national history, where intimate reflections illuminate broader societal shifts and explore the echoes of the past that resonate within the fabric of our present lives.

Logline

Through the lens of three generations within a Hungarian-Slovak family, this personal documentary illuminates the profound shifts from socialism to capitalism, capturing the complexities of newfound freedoms and societal transformations in post-socialist Slovakia.

Short synopsis

In an introspective documentary, the director embarks on a journey through the lives of three generations within her family, illustrating the challenges and drawbacks, but also the concealed beauty of socialist and post-socialist Slovakia. Shedding light on a time and space relatively unexplored by Western audiences, this project navigates through the past of a once-restricted nation, bridging it with present times. Through a fusion of home videos, photos and interviews, she reflects on her country's political transformation and its impact on ordinary moments of everyday life and her decision to leave her roots for the Western world. The director offers a compelling perspective of regular citizens on their own understanding of Slovakia's history, portraying the unexpected areas underneath the harsh surface of growing up behind the Iron Curtain and the ambivalent changes brought on by capitalism.

Long Synopsis

Step into a personal documentary that invites the viewer to travel across the narrative of Slovakia's transformation from a socialist regime to capitalism. "The First Swallow" unravels the layers of everyday life amidst change, as seen through the eyes of the director and the generations before.

The heart of this project lies in the director's own family archives, a treasure trove of videos and photographs. The viewer embarks on a deeply personal journey, navigating through both general and familiar past and connecting it with the present. The director, driven by a profound desire to understand her own upbringing in the context of a once-restricted nation, uses these archives as a visual and emotional anchor. But the immersive nature of the film incorporates more than just visual elements. Intimate interviews with family members, as well as the director herself, further enrich the narrative. The director's father reflects on his youth, discussing his experiences in his late teens and twenties when Slovakia's borders opened to the West after four decades. He shares his reasons for choosing to stay in his homeland, despite the newfound opportunity to explore a life elsewhere, and reveals his hopes for the country's future. In contrast, the director's grandfather laments the absence of the former socialist regime. He paints a vivid picture of life during socialism, emphasizing its positive aspects, asserting they surpass certain drawbacks. He expresses dissatisfaction with the current state of the country and fondly recalls the "good old days." The director considers the personal implications of her country's socialist past from the standpoint of a younger generation. Through reflecting on her family's perspectives, she explores her decision to leave her country for the West.

This film, however, does not only serve the director's desire to explore the reasons that motivated her departure from Slovakia in more depth. It also illustrates a time and space that will stir the senses within the Western viewer. Through the voices of these three family members and personal stories, portrayals of triumphs and tribulations also unfold - each a testament to the indomitable spirit that thrived before, amidst and after the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc.

Slovak melodies, spanning from socialist orchestras to traditional instruments, fill the space, echoing the tunes of the past and the aspirations that transcended borders. As viewers navigate through the documentary, these musical interludes amplify the emotional resonance, transporting them to a different era, fostering understanding for the struggles and achievements of those who lived behind the Iron Curtain.

This deliberate juxtaposition of old and new, the personal and the universal, prompts to question one's own perspective on hardship, transformation, and the beauty of everyday life. "The First Swallow" stands as a testament to the power of filmmaking to bridge social gaps of different political movements, cultivating a deeper comprehension of history and the human condition through one's own personal story.

Characters

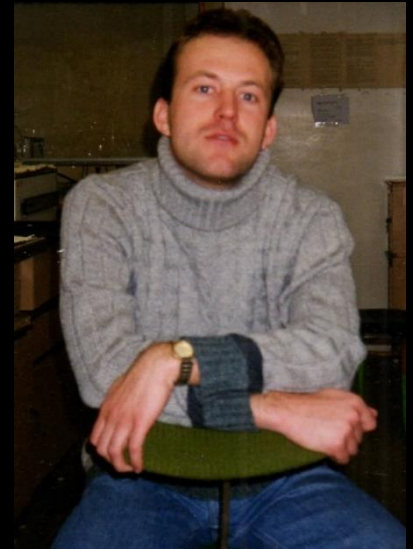


Koloman Bujna

- director's grandfather
- now 79 and retired
- sets the scene for a life as a shopkeeper during the socialist era
- illustrates everyday life during the "good old days"
- "Communism is very good, socialism is very good, it just needs to be improved."

Ladislav Bujna

- director's father
- 52, a police investigator
- puts the focus on his experiences after the revolution and on newfound freedoms, hopes and uncertainties of that time
- reveals the reasons for not venturing into the Western world and staying in his home country
- "Well, if you don't know the language, why flock there?"



Kristína "Kika" Bujnová

- director
- 23, a student in the UK
- reflects on her father's and grandfather's insights
- explores the decision and emotions tied to leaving behind her roots, discussing the motivations and the impact on her sense of identity
- "It does make me sad that I couldn't find my place in my home country."

Treatment

Title: The First Swallow

Length: 12 minutes

Genre: Personal documentary

Structure:

“The First Swallow” is a journey through time that unfolds as a mosaic of familial history intertwined with the socio-political landscape of Slovakia. Showcased through three distinct acts, the documentary navigates pivotal eras, blending personal narratives with broader societal shifts.

Preface:

The documentary begins with a written contextual backdrop - a brief explanation of the historical and political background of the Slovak society. It transports the viewer back in time and across the borders to the East, to the era of the Velvet Revolution in 1989, which marked the end of the four-decade-long socialist rule. The audience is faced with the dawn of newfound freedoms - a transition from a closed society to a one where Slovak citizens were free to venture beyond the Iron Curtain and explore the Western World.

Act 1: Venturing Westward, or...?

In 1997, almost eight years after the Velvet Revolution, a young man is preparing for his departure to Tokyo. Through the lens of his VHS camera, he captures his journey to the Japanese capital, documenting his time spent there, seemingly mesmerized by the bustling cityscape and technological innovations.

However, the narrative takes a more introspective turn as the protagonist's daughter initiates a heartfelt conversation. In reaction to his experiences in Tokyo, she enquires about his youth and decision-making regarding the next steps of his life after Slovakia's borders were opened.

The scene shifts to a quaint house in a distinctly non-urban setting. The rustic interiors of the residence, a stark contrast to Tokyo, seem to belong to a different era compared to the modernity of the bustling metropolis, yet the footage remains set in the same year.

Here, the viewers are transported to the father's family home in Slovakia, as he shares his reflections on why he opted to stay in his country despite the allure of opportunities elsewhere.

From there, the narrative seamlessly transitions to the serene mountainside, where he is depicted enjoying a tranquil excursion, as he further reveals his satisfaction in his homeland.

Transitioning from the VHS footage, a slider projector illuminates the room with images from the past, a collection of photographs related to the father's interview comes into view. This time, the conversation veers away from personal decision-making and delves into the broader historical context following the revolution. He reflects on the challenges of transitioning to capitalism, shedding light on its pitfalls. However, when prompted about his agreement with his own father's sentiment that life pre-revolution was superior, he offers a dissenting perspective, leaving viewers to contemplate the complexities of historical interpretation.

Act 2: "The Good Old Days"

As the narrative unfolds, the documentary delves deeper into the generational divide, offering poignant insights from the interviewer's grandfather. Initially, familiar images reminiscent of previous footage flicker across the screen, but then transition to an era preceding the revolution, capturing moments from the socialist regime. As the archival footage proceeds to present the viewer with a time and space yet unshown, the grandfather's voice echoes sentiments of scepticism, offering a candid response to his son's assertion about the present. Amidst footage of cheerful gatherings and celebratory marches from the socialist era, the grandfather articulates his views on the shortcomings of capitalism compared to the past. He emphasizes the advantages enjoyed by the working class during that time, particularly in terms of employment and financial stability. Critiquing modern-day practices, he labels certain employment standards as "unacceptable" and refers to present-day politicians with disdain. As he laments the deviations from the principles upheld during the socialist era, the footage concludes, leaving a lingering resonance of contrasting viewpoints.

The slide projector makes a reappearance, casting light on a series of photographs depicting a quintessential Slovak shopfront and offering glimpses into the grandfather's life as a shopkeeper during the socialist era. A display of artifacts from the shop, such as tools, toys, and everyday items, provide a distinct connection to the past. The photos capture both the camaraderie and the challenges of running a shop during those times. Reflecting on that period of his life, he once again highlights the benefits of the regime and a sense of community that permeated not only the shop but also the broader fabric of the country.

He then briefly recounts his travel experiences from before the borders opened. Naturally, travel was limited to other socialist countries only. He recalls visits to East Germany and Hungary, noting that despite their socialist systems, they had a wider variety of goods available. He discusses the stringent border controls of that era and the necessity of smuggling items back into the country. However, he argues that the benefits of the current era, such as free travel, do not outweigh the advantages of the socialist regime in terms

of the quality of life for ordinary working people. "Communism is very good, socialism is very good, it just needs to be improved," he asserts, as more footage from the socialist period unfolds on the screen.

Transitional Act: Satisfaction or Comfort?

Shifting to a more contemporary setting, the audience returns to the father's perspective, now responding to the grandfather's viewpoints. He contradicts his parent, once again emphasizing the advantages of the present era and the newfound liberties. In support of his arguments, glimpses from the 1990s captured during his travels present contrasting images to those seen in the grandfather's segment. Prompted by his reflections, his daughter inquires whether his decision to remain in Slovakia stems from a belief that the country has aligned with Western standards. He encapsulates his stance with the statement, "Well, if you don't know the language, why flock there (to the West)?" This leaves viewers pondering whether his choice reflects satisfaction with his homeland or reluctance to step out of his comfort zone.

A fleeting look into the father's life during the late 1990s unravels – from the moment he met his wife, through their wedding ceremony, to the joyous occasion of their daughter's arrival into the world.

Act 3: The First Swallow

Snippets of the father with his newborn daughter unfold. He presents his thoughts on why he believes she left their homeland for the West, revealing that, in essence, "the first swallow" symbolizes the daughter's departure from their home country, rather than him and his travels after the revolution.

As more home videos play out, the interviewer becomes the interviewee herself, marking the shift in focus to her own narrative. The documentary then delves into her personal journey, examining the decision to venture westward. A montage of her formative years, combining the footage into snippets of key moments in her life is shown, as she offers her perspective in response to her father's insights on her departure. She concludes that while his reasons hold some truth, they are not the sole driving force behind her decision. She delves into her experience growing up in Slovakia, revealing the pressures she faced to conform to the expectations of her country and family.

She then elaborates on the differences between herself and her father, shedding light on how these distinctions influenced their divergent paths in choosing where to begin their adult lives. The juxtaposition between the childhood portrayed in the imagery and the interview is stark – the audience witnesses a young girl seemingly enjoying a carefree childhood, immersed in loving family moments, while the now older woman reflects on the negative emotions tied to her upbringing.

As the film draws to a close, she expresses the complex emotions intertwined with departing from her roots, delving into the profound impact it has had on her sense of identity. The closing shot captures a poignant moment: an image of a young girl at an airport, her finger outstretched toward a plane, captures the essence of anticipation and departure – a symbolic nod to the foreshadowing moments of the past.

The film culminates with a peculiar rendition of the song "Go West" by the Pet Shop Boys, gradually intensifying in the background. Echoing back to the film's opening moments, the post-credit scene unfolds to reveal the strange delivery of the song to be the father, singing in a karaoke bar in Tokyo. This unexpected twist serves as yet another foreshadowing element, hinting at the future journey of his yet unborn daughter.

Approach:

Editing

The documentary employs a mosaic-like editing style, weaving together VHS home footage, archival material and photographs. Cultivating a sense of intimacy, the audience is invited into an enclosed environment where they can, almost voyeuristically, observe the interactions of the three characters. The aim is to evoke the sensation of being present in the same room as the family members, while they collectively sift through years of gathered material and share insights on both the familial and general history. To achieve this, the editing simulates the appearance of video footage viewed through a VHS player, while the photos are presented using a recreation of a slide projector. Employing a "rewind" and "forward" effect serves as a narrative tool to alternate between the past and the present, enabling the exploration of events and perspectives through a non-linear structure. The film's visual style prioritizes authenticity, utilizing photographs and home videos to forge tangible links to the past. Montages of everyday life evoke feelings of nostalgia, while contrasting images underscore the nuanced dynamics of familial bonds and individual identity.

Music

The musical composition is also segmented into three distinct acts. For the father's soundtrack, a blend of traditional instruments and lively synth melodies from the 80s and 90s are incorporated, juxtaposing the traditional with the contemporary. In the grandfather's segment, a socialist orchestra sets the tone, reflecting the harsh yet somewhat celebratory atmosphere of the era. As for the daughter's part, elements from both preceding themes are interwoven into her score, serving as a reminder that the past continues to influence her own journey. The sounds of Slovak melodies permeate the atmosphere, resonating with echoes of the past and the aspirations that transcended borders. Throughout the documentary, these musical interludes deepen the emotional impact, whisking viewers away to another time and space, fostering empathy for the challenges and triumphs experienced by those who lived within the confines of the Eastern bloc and navigated through its aftermath.

Target Audience:

"The First Swallow" offers an exploration of themes that transcend cultural and generational boundaries, making it appealing to a diverse audience.

For Western viewers, the documentary provides a nuanced look at Slovakia's transition from socialism to democracy, offering insights into the social and political dynamics of that era. Through personal narratives and archival material, one gains a deeper understanding of the historical context and its impact on individual lives.

This documentary offers Slovak audiences an opportunity to reflect on their country's past, present, and future through the lens of individual stories and familial dynamics. Through the incorporation of archival footage, intimate interviews, and cultural elements such as Slovak melodies, the film evokes a sense of nostalgia and appreciation for the resilience of the Slovak people. It provides a platform for viewers to re-connect with their heritage on a deeply personal level.

However, for those less interested in Eastern European history, the film also delves into themes of family, identity, and belonging; reflecting on the complexities of familial relationships, the struggle to embrace change, and the quest for personal fulfillment. Thus, regardless of origin, all viewers can empathize with the personal stories portrayed in the film, as they resonate with the universal struggles and triumphs of the human experience.

Director's Statement

"The First Swallow" is not just a documentary to me; it is a deeply personal exploration born from the desire to unravel the threads of my life choices and understand the differences between me and my family members. The decision to embark on this filmmaking journey emerged from a place of introspection and a longing to reconcile with my past, present, and future.

Growing up in post-socialist Slovakia, I have always felt the weight of history pressing down on me, shaping my worldview and influencing my decisions. But it wasn't until I stumbled upon the term "first swallow" that something clicked inside me. Suddenly, I saw myself mirrored in that metaphor – a young woman venturing westward for a better life, just like those birds migrate to warmer countries during winter.

This realization "ignited a fire within me", setting off a series of questions about happiness, freedom, and transformation. Why did my father choose to stay in our home country despite the opportunity to leave? What drove my grandfather's nostalgia for the socialist era? And why did I, three decades later after the dissolution of the regime, feel the pull to leave my roots?

Though I have always sensed that I differ from my family and often felt like the "black sheep," these questions challenged my preconceived notions. Therefore, standing face to face with the opportunity to create a graduation film for my university course felt like the perfect timing to delve into both Slovak history and my own.

Furthermore, after spending almost four years in the UK, I began to miss my country and culture, despite never wanting to return permanently. Thus, this film provides a chance to share my roots with not only my Western friends but also the broader public. The documentary serves as my attempt to combat the prevalent misconception about Eastern Europe and, in doing so, shed light on my own identity as well.

As I near the end of my university journey, I'm acutely aware of the echoes of the past reverberating in my present, making this a pivotal moment of self-discovery – a chance to confront the ghosts of history and chart a course for the future.

Through "The First Swallow," I aim to peel back the layers of my own story and uncover the deeper truths that lie beneath. It's a cathartic quest of self-exploration and reconciliation, a testament to the power of filmmaking to illuminate the hidden corners of not only my country's history, but also our hearts and minds.

Now, more than ever, feels like the right time to tell this story – a story of resilience, transformation, and the enduring pursuit of freedom. As I delve into the intimate details of my family's past and present, I invite viewers to join me on this journey of discovery, to witness the beauty and complexity of life behind the Iron Curtain and beyond.

Visual Materials

- family archives of the Bujna family – photographs and videos from around 1965-2005, Slovakia

Koloman's shop



Children during the socialist regime in school

Kika in front of her great-grandparents' house



Ladislav and his classmate during their police training before entering the Academy



Kika with her grandmother and grandfather, Koloman, on his 60th birthday



Ladislav and his wife shovelling snow in front of his family house

Visually, Slovakia in the 1990s and early 2000s displayed a blend of socialist remnants and burgeoning Western influence, which is showcased through the rustic house interior of the character's family home filled with modern gadgets imported from abroad.

Fashion and everyday items also reflected a mix of socialist realism and emerging trends, mirroring a nation transitioning from its pre-revolution past to newfound cultural diversity. This can be also observed through the home videos and photographs present in the film.

With these materials, the documentary illustrates a time and space often overlooked within European history, especially by the West.

- archive material from “Rodinné Archívy” (Family Archives) – a semi-private internet archive curated by a documentary filmmaking professor from Bratislava, Slovakia

People gathered for a socialist event in town



Worker's day march during the socialist regime

The archival footage from the Socialist era serves to underscore the lived experience of that period. The picture sheds light on the somewhat disregarded reality that despite the challenges of those times, people were still able to find happiness.

This material, with both its contents and bright colours, supports the grandfather's accounts of those times and his positive views toward it.