

In the bowels of the earth, beside the last female miners in Europe

Only around a dozen remain throughout the Balkans. As a legacy from the Communist era and its ideal of emancipating women through work, the employment of women in the mining industry has for a time survived the transition to capitalism. Encounter with the last female "black faces" in Europe.

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Sakiba Čović (left) has worked as a ventilation technician at the Breza mine in Bosnia for more than thirty years.



When Šemsa Hadžo wakes at 5 a.m. and goes out to the yard to milk her only cow, her breath fogs due to the cold, even though it's June. At this time of the year in central Bosnia-Herzegovina, the mornings are cool and the days warm. Šemsa uses the fresh milk to make herself a coffee, which she quietly drinks before preparing for work. Her husband is still asleep. Having spent his working life in the mine, he no longer has to get up early now that he's retired. For him, the dark pit of the mine is a thing of the past. But not for Šemsa. Every morning, at 7 a.m. on the dot, she descends 300 metres below ground. Šemsa is a female miner, which is the term used in Bosnia even though it's easy in Bosnian to change the gender of the noun miner, simply by adding two letters to the end of the word: *rudar/rudarka*. But there are so few women in the mines that they are still not properly named.

When the earthly goods were being shared out, Bosnia-Herzegovina found itself on a soil rich in high-quality black coal. But its mining has proved difficult and dangerous: the soil structure means that deep mines are required, and the thick and sloping seams of coal easily ignite due to the high concentration of methane and coal dust, not to mention the underground water and rock debris. Despite this hostile environment, over 15 000 people work in the mines of Bosnia-Herzegovina¹, of which 15% are women. But only 15 of those still descend to the mine bottom.

Most of them work in the Breza black coal mine that we visited in June 2015. Out of the 1 258 employees at Breza, 10 women work at the coalface. They are referred to as the last female miners in the Balkans. Šemsa works below ground, in the dark, every day. And she has done so for 31 years.



1. The coal industry is the main industrial sector in this poor country, which has a gross domestic product of 4 120 euros per inhabitant, according to United Nations data.

"Breza is the mine, the mine is Breza"

When she leaves on foot for work in the morning, Šemsa knows that her path will cross with someone who will give her a lift to the mine. Breza is a district of 15 000 inhabitants. For a century, the mine has been the main employer. In fact, if there were no mine, there would be no Breza. When the mine opened in 1907, as public property of the Austro-Hungarian Empire of which Bosnia was part at



the time, the toughest work was carried out by poor peasants from the local area. By 1910, the local newspaper was already reporting on 400 workers in the mine, toiling away in terrible conditions for meagre wages. It was then that the Socialist Party of Bosnia-Herzegovina was born, which was the first to support the miners. They organised themselves into trade unions and over time managed to negotiate an initial collective agreement with the government. Due to the mine, an increasing number of people converged upon Breza, transforming the small village into an industrial town. Before the breakup of Yugoslavia and its socialist system in 1991, the mining company built apartments for its workers, a public swimming pool and a cinema. It invested in the construction of roads and in the electricity and water supply systems. The mine had holiday centres in Grabac on the Croatian coast, where the miners spent their summer holidays. Some still go there out of habit, only now they have to pay their own way. "Breza is the mine, the mine is Breza",



Šemsa Hadžo, an explosives agent, in the shaft named "Sretno" (meaning "Good luck").

people say. Everyone has miners in their family. Everyone respects the miners.

Šemsa gets to the mine by 6.30 a.m. Rather than "good morning", she says "good luck" to her colleagues: it's the traditional greeting used by miners instead of "hello" and "goodbye", before descending to the bottom and when you meet someone in the darkness of the mine. She dons her dark blue coveralls, heavy helmet and lamp, attaches the old metal box containing her emergency mask around her waist, and pulls on her rubber boots. The boots are too soft to protect her if something heavy were to fall on her feet. At 7 a.m., she descends with the first shift 250 metres below ground, and then even deeper on foot along dark passages stinking of sulphur, through the temperature changes, mud, occasional gusts of wind bringing in air from the outside, and reflections from the shining coal.

Šemsa is responsible for the explosive and her "office" is located in a passageway full of explosives. Every day she walks up to 15 kilometres below ground, never without 5 or 6 kilogram load at least. When her husband hears how many kilometres she has walked, he gets angry and thinks that they could have spared her after three decades of work that have left her with constant pain in her knees. But Šemsa still has to do

her household chores. She cooks, cleans, tidies, gardens and looks after the cow. She has raised her son while working at the mine in one of the three shifts per day. But she does not complain. She knows that working at the mine is better than most other jobs in Breza. She earns up to three times more than if she worked in a shop, gets more holiday and does no overtime, whereas in a private company she could have to work up to 12 hours a day.

The last generation

For Breza's women, the main source of work is the poorly paid jobs offered by private companies. The wage at the mine is higher than the average wage in Bosnia-Herzegovina: 537 euros compared to 409 euros. The salary comes on time, there is no weekend work and the collective agreement is observed. "If a young man works at the mine, it's easy for him to get married, because it means that he has a decent wage and is solvent", we are told in Breza. No one mentions the status of the female miners, because they are too few to become the symbol of the situation in their town. The Breza mine has been stable since 2009, when it joined with six other coal mines to restore the public energy consortium "Elektroprivreda Bosne i Hercegovine d.d." Eighty per cent of the electricity in Bosnia-Herzegovina is produced in thermal power plants thanks to coal. Before the merger in 2009, the Breza workers

went on strike because the collective agreement was not being properly observed. But it's better now. However, when you question Šemsa, she says that she regrets not having studied at the medical school located in the capital Sarajevo, 27 kilometres from Breza. But her mother did not want her to leave home. It was not seemly for a young girl to live alone in a large city. The year that she started secondary school, a new school opened its doors in Breza. That was why, like so many other young women at the time, she ended up in the bowels of the earth. Everything began in 1980, with the first generation to study at the School for Mining and Geology.

For decades before that, Breza had been living off its mine, but the skilled staff actually came from other regions of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and even from across Yugoslavia. The small town had no training establishment. Finally, the specialist school opened in 1980. There were 42 students: 23 girls and 19 boys. The new school was close to Šemsa's home and the mining company offered a scholarship and a guaranteed job at the end, so many young people signed up. Among the girls, there were Šemsa Hadžo, Sakiba Čović and Almedina Kaljun. They are the only ones of their generation to still be working in the mine and descending to the bottom every day.

Many other female students never actually worked at the mine, some did work there but left, whilst others were not supported by their husbands. "It's not for women", they would say. Some got fed up with everything: the house, the children, the work; everything rested on their shoulders. And there are others who work above ground, in the mine's administration. Šemsa, Sakiba and Almedina were born in 1965, all three are mining technicians, and they all started working



in the Breza mine in September 1984. Their husbands "earned" their retirement from the same mine. Soon, in 2016, all three will also retire. "We were the first generation of female miners and we will be the last", comments Sakiba. We spent a few days with Šemsa, Sakiba and Almedina, and we went twice down the shaft that is called "Sretno", which means "good luck". We went to the "end of civilisation", as Sakiba terms it.

The Yugoslav Stakhanov

While we're in the metal lift that survived the Second World War and the last Yugoslav war, Sakiba recalls her first descent to the bottom of the mine. "I was working with the third shift. It was dark above ground and dark below ground. While we were descending, the miners started talking: 'Imagine if the lift broke loose. Tomorrow's headlines would be: *Miners leave 40 widows and 1 widower*'. I went cold all of a sudden. I was 19 years old, newly married and starting work. Whenever the cage rattled a bit, I froze with fear and thought that I really should not have brought such bad luck by going down into the mine. They say that a woman in a mine brings misfortune. But the men were only teasing me. Miners use humour to cope with their difficult daily lives". Sakiba is the same. Full of laughs. She gets up every morning at 5.30 a.m. Before work, she does her chores: ironing, baking bread, tidying up a bit. She lives with her husband and their daughter. Even though she is the only one of the three with a job, it's still she that does everything in the house. "Here, the men are not gifted to help the women", she jokes.

Sakiba's father and her two brothers are miners, which is common. Sometimes several generations of the same family have worked and work in the mine. When she started in the mine, her housewife mother was against it. "She was particularly concerned because it's a man's job and she was worried about how I would get on down the mine, and what people would say. She would have preferred me to be at home with the children". Sakiba is a ventilation technician and analyses the air and dust. She's afraid of the dark. She says that sometimes, just for a moment, she turns off the light on her helmet when she's walking alone at the bottom, just to see what it's like in the darkest dark, but she can't bear it for long. After two seconds, she turns her lamp back

Rather than "good morning", she says "good luck" to her colleagues: it's the traditional greeting used by miners instead of "hello" and "goodbye".



on. She also hates the rats that scuttle along the passageways reinforced with old wood. The wood supports 300 metres of earth above us, but it's cracked in places, and in this mine you could think that you were back in 1950.

It was then that the spirit of competition developed in the mines of Bosnia-Herzegovina, with the aim of increasing production. The mines competed with each other to extract as much coal as possible, and boards were hung on the walls with the names of the most productive work teams. Being the "shock worker", as it was called, meant being respected and popular. In post-war Yugoslavia, which was facing a difficult economic situation, the idea spread that you could love your country by working. Those workers who extracted the most coal each week were rewarded by being taken home in horse-drawn cart, which was the only comfortable means of transport at the time. Everyone therefore knew who the best workers were.

But no one surpassed Alija Sirotnović. After the President for life of Socialist Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, broke with Stalin, it was vital to show that the Russian blockade could not destroy Yugoslavia. In 1949, with a team of eight, Alija mined 152 tonnes of coal in an eight-hour shift. He exceeded the target by 215% and, more importantly, broke the 1935 record set by the Russian Alexey Stakhanov by 50 tonnes, and so won the world record for coal extraction. The exploits of Sirotnović filled the Yugoslav media, inspired numerous songs, and short films on him and the Breza miners were shown in cinemas between the fiction films. When Tito received Alija Sirotnović and asked him what he needed, he simply replied: "a larger shovel". Since then, the colloquial term in Breza for a large shovel has been a "Sirotnović".

Morale at work was high, but working conditions were not great at that time, although no one talked about them. Nowadays,

the miners are no longer in competition, but everyone has their target and, if they achieve more than expected, they get a bonus.

"A man's work"

The female miners show us the jackets and shirts hanging on nails. They explain that the men remove their layers here, because further on the temperature rises and it starts to get hot. But the women do not remove any of their clothing, nor do they change if they get wet. It's a habit that they have adopted, as embarrassment prevents them from removing anything. Likewise, the men have a few places identified as toilets. But the women never use them, as they're not appropriate for them. They therefore have to be careful not to drink too much water when they're going into the mine. They have to last all those hours without going to the toilet. Otherwise, the salaries, the distribution of work between the men and women and their efficiency are exactly the same. What is more, it is said that the women are excellent workers in the mine, that they are meticulous, conscientious and organised in their work.

"Each of our tasks has been done by men before us and will be done by men after us. There have never been any complaints about us. When the inspector comes to Šemsa's explosives store, he advises all the men who do the same work in other mines to come and look at how a woman does it at Breza", Almedina tells us. "And the director says that, if everything were done like it is in the explosives store, the mine would be like those in Germany", adds Šemsa.

"But there will be no more women here! They are no longer employing women to work at the bottom of the mine. Why are girls studying all those years at the mining school when no one is going to employ them? They are showing in this way that they consider mining to be man's work", concludes Sakiba. "Men are preferred when they are hiring because they can be taken on as unskilled workers. There are currently people with degrees who are doing the most difficult work in the mine", explains Almedina.

This was confirmed to us by the mine director, Suad Čosić. When he advertises vacancies, he receives applications from women, but they have "abandoned the idea of sending women underground, because it's

difficult work". We asked him if this were not discrimination, to which he replied that he can employ men as "labourers" who only subsequently become mining technicians, which is the status that the women currently working underground had when they were hired.

During their careers, both Sakiba and Almedina have done "strictly" male work. Almedina was a blaster and Sakiba looked after the ventilation ensuring a supply of fresh air to the mine. There weren't any men, so the women were taken on.

All three have been working in the mine for 31 years, which counts as 40 years thanks to the special retirement scheme. Sakiba will retire first in autumn 2015. We ask her what her health is like at the end of her career. Under our feet there is coal and mud. Streams of water run along narrow, sloping and slippery paths. It's hot. "I feel rather worn out. How many times have I walked up to 15 kilometres carrying a piece of equipment that weighs five or six kilograms? In addition to that, it's psychologically exhausting. Whenever you descend to the bottom, you don't know if you will come back up. There were many tragedies here", she says.

This time she's not smiling. The last major accident was three years ago, when a fire killed one of their colleagues. He was suffocated by carbon monoxide. The passages in which we are walking were burnt and

crumbling. If they had been reinforced with concrete, rather than wood, this probably would not have happened. The fire could not have spread. "But every metre of such a more secure mine costs 3 000 euros, whereas a metre of passageway at Breza costs a maximum of 1 000 euros", explains Amir Kulagić, the occupational health and safety inspector for the mine. Sakiba tells us that she thought it would be impossible to restore the passageways after the fire: "I cried to see how much human suffering it would take to clean everything. I saw our workers as slaves, like when Spartacus dragged those huge rocks. It was truly a fight for survival, because we lived on the coal."

During the mine's restoration, another miner was killed. He was suffocated while working in a location where there was not enough oxygen. The breathing apparatus that they were using at the time was more than 30 years old. It was then that the mining inspector Ferid Osmanović concluded that most of the equipment used by the miners had been worn out for a long time and, as it was no longer made, it was difficult to find parts when something stopped working.

Sakiba's younger brother also had an accident in the mine. He suffered a head trauma when he a landslide hit him. He was 24 years old. He was rescued and now works at the surface.



"It was truly a fight for survival, because we lived on the coal".

Sakiba, ventilation technician



Far behind European standards

When you talk to the people who work "above ground", it turns out that many of them were injured in the mine, which allowed them to move to less dangerous positions. One woman in administration went completely between the roller and conveyor belt carrying coal out of the mine. She barely survived. The director's secretary had her hand crushed by the same conveyor. She was recognised as disabled and obtained an administrative position.

Amir Kulagić, the occupational health and safety inspector, confirms that Breza is far behind the European standards on occupational safety, equipment compliance, maintenance of mining areas, fire protection, and also technology and investment.

In 2014 there were 250 industrial accidents. Between 2009 and 2013, 31 employees were left disabled following an industrial accident. In the Slovenian coal mine at Velenje, which when it was in Yugoslavia was well behind Breza and which is now the leader in the region, every year one person is disabled as a result of their work. Breza miners mostly end up being signed off sick because of respiratory, muscular and bone diseases and problems with their musculoskeletal systems caused by the unnatural body positions and demanding physical work.

Amir Kulagić notes that the Breza miners who work down the mine often develop

bone fractures and spinal injuries because they work in all sorts of positions and carry weights that are often heavier than the permitted load. Due to working in the dark, some end up losing their sight. There are no differences between the diseases and injuries suffered by the men and women working at the bottom. In reality, the only difference is that, during International Women's Day on 8 March, the women in the mine do not work and are given a gift. Everything else – the danger and the toil – are shared equally with the men.

We arrive at the heart of the mine, where the coalface and main machinery for extracting the coal are found. Having walked for kilometres, we encounter our first miners. Their faces are black with coal, they are dripping with sweat and the noise is deafening. Among them is a woman, the mechanical engineer Besima. She goes underground from time to time, but not every day. Her mascara has run and with her hand she pushes back blond hair that is stuck to her brow. We ask her how she is: "So so. You can't say you're satisfied when you're working underground because of the conditions and hard work, but the relationship towards female workers is good. I can't complain on that."

The machine extracting the coal dates from 1983, but has been renovated. There is another newer machine, purchased in 2014, which has significantly reduced the number of accidents in the mine. The safety and efficiency

of the work would improve if another machine could be purchased. Fewer miners would have to "break down" the coal using explosives, and drill and dig by hand. But a new machine costs 11 million euros, and there is little investment in the mines at the moment.

Sinan Husić, President of the Independent Trade Union of Miners for the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, tell us that one of the key points highlighted by the trade union concerns safer and more humane working conditions. This could be achieved if more modern technology were introduced. But there has been no investment in Bosnia's mines for long enough, in fact since the war in the early 1990s. "At Breza, the working conditions are still good compared with those in other coal mines in Bosnia", he reckons.

"Since the last war, we have been using the working methods of our grandparents: picks and shovels. The old equipment has had it and we haven't any new replacement. It was better in the beginning, when we started work in the 1980s", says Sakiba when we go back up towards the exit. "At the time of elections, attention is always focused on the miners as they represent an important part of the electorate, and politicians make them many promises. But after elections, nothing comes of those promises", says Almedina as we inch our way along a passage that is not even a metre high. "You don't need to exercise", we joked.

These women walk several kilometres a day in the dark and must be in good physical condition. "Don't talk to me about exercise! If only I could rest! When I get home, I've got to work in the garden and in the field, I've got the dinner to prepare and the cleaning to do. I don't get to rest my back until the evening", Almedina says. If she were 19 again and as good a student as she was then, she would still choose the same path. Work at the mine. Her son also works in the mine. Šemsa says that she could have been a nurse or even a doctor, if only her parents had allowed her to go to the medical school in Sarajevo. "That would have been a nice job", she says. Sakiba has two daughters and would not like to meet either of them at the bottom of the mine. "It is physically demanding work. All the time you have to drag, carry, walk, pull. At the same time, there are women who would like to do that and who would stick at it, as we have done. In fact, I no longer know what's a man's work and what's a woman's work. And what would be best for women." ●