



*Bethnal Green, undated*

# In conversation with Dragan Novakovic

by Philip Gray

## ● What tempted you to leave Belgrade and move to London in the late 1960s?

After graduating from secondary school in May 1965, I had three months in which to make up my mind about what I wanted to do in my life before Belgrade University opened its doors to entrants the following September. I had no idea until the last moment, and only a chance meeting with one of my best friends and some persuasion on his part decided that I should study to become a veterinarian, or more precisely, a meat technologist.

For the next three years I struggled and toiled without any enthusiasm, until in the summer of 1968 my sister and her boyfriend announced that they had decided to move to England and asked me whether I would like to join them. By that time I felt as if I was at a dead end, and my imagination had already been fired by scenes of Swinging Sixties London as portrayed in Antonioni's *Blowup*, so I did not need much persuasion. I packed the Asahi Pentax Spotmatic my father had just bought me with a few of my other possessions and off I went.

## ● What sparked your early interests in photography?

Although I became interested in photography in my mid-teens merely as a way of preserving my memories, it was not long before I became aware of photography's other potential when I was introduced to the work of Ansel Adams in a US Embassy brochure and had my breath taken away. Later I discovered other photographers and fell under their spell. I realised that there are as many ways of portraying the world and saying something about it as there are artists. My chief influences at that time were also Bill Brandt, Walker Evans, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Andre Kertesz, Josef Koudelka and W. Eugene Smith – amongst others.

## ● It wasn't long before you changed from using an SLR to the classic combination of a Leica M4, Summicron and Tri-X

I went to see Henri Cartier-Bresson's exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1969 and was deeply impressed by both his art and the quality of



*Bow, 1972*

his large prints. I felt that his candid style was what suited me and set about finding out as much about him as possible, including what 'magic wand' he used. In those days Leicas were not yet the luxury status symbols they are today: they were primarily serious and relatively affordable tools for taking pictures. I saved up, sold my perfectly satisfactory Pentax gear and bought a Leica M4 with 35mm and 50mm Summicron lenses. While I detected no improvement in image quality, the Leica gave me an edge in being quieter, especially indoors, and letting me use zone focusing. I opted for Kodak's Tri-X because it was by far the most popular film at the time and I never felt any need to change it.

● **What are your memories of London at that time?**

While my particular memories of London are slowly and inevitably fading – which is no wonder as it all happened nearly half a century ago – I still remember it as a huge and immensely exciting hive of activity and a very pleasant place to live: the people were friendly and easy-going and there was always something exciting going on in the worlds of music, fashion and the arts. What I liked in particular about London was the endless opportunities it offered for exploration. However well you thought you knew it, and I did seem to know it better than many of my Londoner friends, you never knew what surprise was awaiting

you around the next corner. You could spend all your life roaming the city's streets without seeing it all. As an avid amateur photographer I could not have wished for more.

● **What made you choose the locations you photographed?**

Looking back, I seem to have been attracted chiefly by what was new and unfamiliar to me and characteristic of my new environment. As this applied to pretty much everything the range of subjects was very wide indeed, but I tended to concentrate on street scenes, street markets and architecture, as well as anything I found visually interesting.

● **Luckily you remembered to take your negatives and contact sheets when you returned to Belgrade in late 1970s**

In 1977 I returned to Belgrade with my wife, whom I had met in London, and our son, who was born there. My priorities were first to do my compulsory military service and then look for a job. I made sure the negatives and contact prints were with us when we set out in our old Fiat 124 car although I had only a vague idea of what the photos might look like enlarged and none whatever about whether they were worth anything.



*Bermondsey, undated*



*Spitalfields, undated*



*Brick Lane Market, 1975*



Brick Lane Market, undated

My military service over, I was lucky in that the state news agency Tanjug was looking for an English language translator and my knowledge of English stood me in good stead. I was employed in 1980 to translate general and other news and features and I stayed with the agency until I went freelancing 16 years later, mainly for leading human rights organisations and, during the 1996-97 winter demonstrations in Belgrade, for Reuters.

● **Thanks to a number of photography-related websites your photographs of a long vanished London are now being seen and appreciated by a large audience**

I am not sure that I am best qualified to judge how or whether at all my London photographs are important today: I will have to leave that to the professionals to decide. To me they are my intimate visual memories of England and proof that what I saw and experienced nearly fifty years ago was not a mere dream after all. It also gives me great pleasure to know that my photographs have struck many a responsive chord judging by the numerous enthusiastic comments in several blogs which have featured my work so far. Surfing the Internet I see that many of the places where I took my photographs have changed beyond recognition, so I shall be very glad to know that they have helped towards enriching and preserving England's visual heritage.

Visit Dragan Novakovic's website at [www.dragannovakovicphotography.com](http://www.dragannovakovicphotography.com) to see more of his photographs of 1970s London and the north of England



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**Toothbrush, Passport and Camera by John Robert Young**

This book was reviewed in Issue 23, February 2017, but it was only available in Kindle eBook format.

The author was also a guest speaker at the 2017 Society Weekend in Chester. His memoir is now available as a paperback book, price £8.99 – ISBN 978-1986024631.

