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Dečije Novine. From School Magazine to Major Comics Publisher

Aleksandar Zograf

- 1 Can the presence of children change the way a magazine, and publishing house, develops its ideas? Some of the answers to these questions can be found in the history of *Dečije novine*, one of the major publishers in Yugoslavia/Serbia. One might assume that **the inclusion of schoolkids in the magazine staff** was probably not an efficient move, and that it only slowed the decision-making process. Nevertheless, it clearly had a positive impact on the young people, who were excited to take part in creative endeavors, and who were keen to understand the production of magazines, and especially comics. It is fairly easy to imagine that the very energy, enthusiasm and honesty of the children had an impact on all aspects of magazine publishing as the activities of *Dečije novine* expanded. The young readership reacted enthusiastically to the innovative magazine concepts, and, through interacting with senior editors, the children eventually transformed the overall magazine and publishing scene, more or less without intervention by authorities of any kind. The *Dečije novine* project's affiliation with a school also paved the way to less rigid ways of conceiving the popular magazine; its links to the school system gave it credibility, and lessened restrictions.
- 2 To understand the emergence of a publisher such as *Dečije novine*, we need to understand the development of Serbian comics in general. Even though protocomics (sequential picture stories with captions placed under images) were published in the Serbian press since the 19th century, and continued to appear until the early 1930s, the true explosion of sequential storytelling occurred when American newspaper comics were introduced by the leading daily paper, *Politika*, in 1934. Very soon, all daily papers in Serbia started to publish comics, and comics were included in many weekly and monthly magazines as well. The rising popularity of the medium led to the publication of several comics magazines; some of the magazines were even published two or three times a week, an unusual frequency for comics magazines. Dozens of comics creators were active in pre-war Belgrade, and many of them were translated and published in France, Italy, Sweden, Denmark, Poland, Bulgaria, Turkey, Argentina, Brazil, among

others. Information about translations has only surfaced recently: since authors were rarely mentioned in the 1930s and 1940s, details about the scope of the foreign translations emerged through the advances of internet, which facilitated contacts with early comics enthusiasts from other countries (fig. 1).¹ The “comics miracle” in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (poorer than the Western parts of Europe, with the majority of the population still living in villages) was interrupted by the catastrophic events of WW2, followed by the change of government in 1944, when the Communist Party came to power. The situation changed once again after 1948, when the Yugoslavian president Tito parted ways with Stalin and the country adopted a course “between East and West”. Still, it took years for comics to reestablish their place in society. One of the publishers crucial to the Yugoslav comics revival in post-war times was *Dečije novine*, from Gornji Milanovac, a town in Central Serbia. The rise of this publishing house is a rather peculiar case: it was not only connected to creative expression made by or for children, but also to the editorial process of following suggestions from young readers, and even to accept the presence of children in the editorial team.



Fig. 1 – French translation of a comic known as *Princeza Ru* in Serbia, by Đorđe Lobačev, published under the title *Princesse Thanit* in *Aventures*. Vol. 4, No. 27, 1939.

Source: Alain Van Passen Collection, Faculty Library of Arts & Philosophy, Ghent University.

Beginnings

- 3 In post-war times, one of the key ideas for the cultural strategy of Yugoslavia was that art and culture should be accessible for everyone, instead of being reserved for the elites. Even though “elite culture” did not vanish completely, more space was given to the art of amateurs, or children. This cultural strategy was largely depended on initiatives taken by gifted individuals, and it was especially effective when projects were executed by people who were willing to use their organizational skills to establish

and share networks and ideas. The right kind of person for such initiatives was Srećko Jovanović (1930-2008), who was teaching at the elementary school in Gornji Milanovac in 1956 when he came up with the idea of starting a school magazine. The idea was supported by a few teachers, among them Aleksandar Lazarević (1929-1999), and some of the pupils expressed their eagerness to submit manuscripts and art. The first issue of the school magazine, published in January 1957, was called *Dečija Politika* (*Children's Politika*), named after the most influential daily paper in the country. After protests by *Politika's* staff, the magazine was renamed *Dečije novine* (*Children's Newspaper*). This name was retained even after it grew to become a regular publishing house.



Fig. 2 – Planning the new issue of the school magazine *Dečije novine*, photo from *Ilustrovana politika*, Belgrade, 16 December 1958.

Source: personal collection of Saša Rakezić.

- 4 The school magazine *Dečije novine* would probably have been just one of many school publications, if at some point Srećko Jovanović hadn't decided to invite schoolkids from all parts of Yugoslavia to send contributions. Right from the start, the idea was to have a magazine made of children's contributions and edited by children (fig. 2). The concept of the magazine was obviously coordinated by the teachers, but it was clearly stated in the imprint that columns were edited by a group of 23 pupils, and that there were no limits on the number of correspondents from other towns; everyone was free to send contributions². Every other Saturday, a jury of 40 children made decisions about rewarding the best articles, reportage and literary works (fig.3).



Fig. 3 – Staff of *Dečije novine* at the offices of a school in Gornji Milanovac, photo from *Ilustrovana politika*, Belgrade, 16.12.1958.

Source: personal collection of Saša Rakezić.

- 5 Through a network of schoolteachers established all over the country, information spread about the invitation for contributions, which started to arrive in bulk, accompanied by numerous subscription requests. In just two years, the print run of *Dečije novine*, even though it was still published by a local school in Gornji Milanovac, rose to 45,000 copies³. This was a major achievement for a magazine from a small town of about 5,000 inhabitants in the 1950s, and 120 km away from Belgrade, the capital (a considerable distance for that time).

Dečije novine and the comics

- 6 Very early on, thanks to Srećko Jovanović, *Dečije novine* started to pay attention to comics, a form of youth literature that was quite popular in the 1930s and even during the turbulent 1940s, but very much marginalized in the 1950s. In one of his accounts, Srećko Jovanović remembers:

While I was a teacher at the elementary school, I remember that once I had to instruct pupils to write a report on some, as usual, pretty stereotypical topic... I noticed that one of the kids was not writing at all, instead he was reading something under his desk... “What is it under your desk?”—I asked. “Nothing, just a comic book”—he answered, a bit befuddled. I looked at his notebook briefly, and then added: “Still, could you please show me what you are reading?” He took out a worn and poorly bound collection of the *Mikijevo carstvo* comics magazines, published in Belgrade in the 1930s. I was suddenly overwhelmed with nostalgic feelings for these old comics. “Read that at home,” I told him, returning his comic book. It was in the spring of 1957, when only a few issues of *Dečije novine* had come out... Less than 10 years later, the kid who was reading the comic book in the class, Slobodan Lukić, whom we called Lukica [his surname in diminutive], would become one of the editors of comic book production at our publishing house in Gornji Milanovac.

At that time, I came to the conclusion that *Dečije novine* should encourage children to read comics again. I started to observe their reactions to comics, and even pushed some of the kids to bring the old comics magazines that they had at home, and show them to their classmates. It was surprising to see how lively the circle of 'comics readers' was. I assumed that re-introducing comics [to Yugoslav readers] might be difficult, and that we would have to face opponents of one kind or another, but I also knew that we had powerful and devoted allies on our side – the many curious boys and girls, who had yet to join the magazine (Pavković & Zupan 2007: 10-11).

- 7 Very soon, *Dečije novine* began to publish comics not only created by children, but also by young people who were either experimenting with comics, or who were introduced to the form by Srećko Jovanović himself. Although not as young as most other contributors, one such artist was Desimir Žižović Buin (1920-1996), a colorful figure, born in a tiny mountain village. Among his many jobs was carving tombstones, and he also learned the craft of blacksmithing. Buin easily got along with the children he met among the *Dečije novine* staff and, as a self-taught artist, he learned about comics while producing them. He debuted with a comic based on Serbian traditional poetry: *Kraljević Marko i Musa Kesadžija* (*Kraljević Marko and Musa Kesadžija*) and was active in the magazine from the first year of its existence. Alongside his more cartoony efforts, such as *Pustolovine Pevca Pece* (*The Adventures of Peca the Rooster*), he also made comics based on historical events, such as *Rudnička ofanziva* (*Offensive on Rudnik Mountain*), and *Magelan* (*Magellan*). In 1958 Buin made a comic page without words, based on the tragic events of WWI, and children were invited by the *Dečije novine* magazine to write their own script or a story based on the series of images; the aim was obviously to encourage schoolchildren to think about the relationship between sequential art and writing. The presence of Buin in the comics field, which would only expand in the 1960s and 1970s, was actually a result of Srećko Jovanović's idea that artists should be nourished and helped in understanding and raising their potential.
- 8 So, right from the start, *Dečije novine* developed an interest in searching for upcoming talents, which included mentoring potential new artists, work by and with children, who would retain an important role in the publisher's many activities in the future. Dragan Milovanović Džile remembered the informal and open atmosphere at *Dečije novine*. In 1962, the 10-year-old Milovanović already had a few drawings published in the magazine, and since he lived in Gornji Milanovac, he went straight to the school office of the magazine, claiming that he wanted to be part of it. Some grown-up told him "Quit it, kid. You should work in the packaging department". And so he did. Years later, Milovanović returned to *Dečije novine*, becoming one of the editors in 1976, and staying until 1997.⁴

Children's participation in *Dečije novine*

- 9 In a talk recorded in 1991, Srećko Jovanović explained: "*Dečije novine* came out of the school environment, and we were constantly listening to what children had to say, what their wishes were and we tried to understand their imagination. In the early days, we shared our offices with the child staff, and we observed their reactions to every article, every illustration. That is how we managed, with the smallest resources, and without much external help, to produce magazines and publications that were accepted by school children from all over the country" (Jevtić 2010: 81).



Fig. 4 – *Nasmejane dečije novine*, No 10, 1959, cover by a pupil, uncredited.

Source: personal collection of Saša Rakezić.



Fig. 5 – *Nasmejane dečije novine*, No 10, 1959, comic strip made by a pupil, uncredited.

Source: personal collection of Saša Rakezić.

- 10 And indeed, each year brought new developments in the school magazine, now distributed to schools all over the country. As early as 1959, a “spin off” edition was launched: bearing the title, *Nasmejane Dečije novine* (*The Smiling Children’s Newspaper*) (fig. 4). It focused on humor and comics. After 34 issues, the magazine changed its name to *Nasmejane novine* (*Smiling Newspaper*). From 1962 to 1964 it was published in a bigger format and with color pages (fig. 5), resembling a professional publication, rather than a school magazine. Its publishing frequency moved from monthly, to bi-weekly, and became weekly in 1963. Although it was distributed in schools, and published children’s drawings and literary works, it also gave considerable space to comics: besides works by the publisher’s star cartoonist, Desimir Žižović Buin, the magazine also published creations by mostly young and upcoming artists such as Miodrag Miša Đurđić (1941-1998), Nikola Mitrović Kokan (1933-1997) and others, with Srećko Jovanović often credited as script writer. The comics ranged from historical to cartoony to science fictional. Especially interesting were various novel approaches, such as the comic by

Brana Nikolić (1936), titled *Fudbalko* (fig. 6), and narrated from the perspective of a football (!).



Fig. 6 – *Fudbalko*, comic by Brana Nikolić, published in *Nasmějane dečije novine* no. 39, 8 February 1963.

Source: personal collection of Saša Rakezić.

- 11 A rather unexpected match was made between the cartoonist Aleksandar Karakušević Klas (1928-2002), and the then unknown, but later famous poet, Dobrica Erić (1936-2019): the comics they created together were a combination of poetry and popular comics (fig. 7).



Fig. 7 – *Začarana šuma* (Enchanted Forest), comic by Aleksandar Klas, based on poem by Dobrica Erić, published in *Dečije novine*, no 188, 12 May 1964.

Source: personal collection of Saša Rakezić.

- 12 As the 1960s progressed, space for comics continued to open up and grow. The young audience was quite responsive. It seemed that the comics medium was returning to a country where it had once been quite popular. Jovanović recalled:

We created new standards in the publishing field. Before comics were seen as, if not harmful, then certainly not recommended reading. However, a tradition of immediate contact with readers existed in all of our editions. That is why every spring and every fall we hosted many excursions with school children and through open communication with enthusiastic youth, we listened to them and learned about their preferences; that is something that even most detailed scientific surveys can't detect. From the start we had to rely on our own resources. In the beginning we really had to work out everything: from how to get the zinc printing plates, to collecting manuscripts and editing magazine columns, from obtaining the basic material to collecting drawings by children. It happened that in a single day we would receive several thousand letters! (Pavković & Zupan 2007: 13).

Professionalizing a children's magazine

- 13 With the increasing scope of the magazine's publishing activities, Srećko Jovanović ended up leaving the school in 1962 to collaborate with a publisher from the town of Čačak, in Central Serbia. He then established an independent publishing house in 1965, keeping the name *Dečije novine*, which had become well-known. Srećko Jovanović often pointed out how this move was deemed risky: the school job was considered safe, establishing a publishing house in contrast, could lead to a rather unpredictable outcome. Still, the former teacher and his team continued to publish *Dečije novine*, which wasn't strictly a school magazine anymore, even though the child editors were still part of the team, and it would still publish contributions sent by children, next to comics by cartoonists who were slowly but surely becoming known. The formula was still popular, but what was new was the different comics editions that were launched. One of the new magazines launched in 1963 was *Nikad robom* (*Never a slave*). *Nikad robom* were basically comic books with works by domestic creators. Printed in a smaller format than the magazine, they were cheap and collectible, and were soon distributed in kiosks around the country. It gave new visibility to comics production, and print runs grew rapidly. It also brought new elements to the development of post-war Yugoslav comics; while in the 1950s most of the cartoonists mainly published their work in magazines that serialized comics stories in installments, or occasionally as strips and self-contained pages, *Nikad robom* were books that published entire episodes. Some comics creators such as Živorad Žika Atanacković (1933-1998), Petar Radičević (1931-2013) and Branko Plavšić (1949-2011) were able to get a solid income for their comics work, and combined it with publishing illustrations. For those who were considering activities in this field, this was a turning point. In the early 1960s several Yugoslav publishers started similar comics editions. In this new environment, *Nikad robom* was still quite special: instead of publishing foreign translations, which was easier and cheaper, opportunities were offered to local creators, who produced stories based on national history. Publishing monthly books, as Srećko Jovanović once stated, "was a demanding activity that needed carefully planned and well organized coordination, a diverse choice of topics and covering of different historical epochs and regions...We found authors to cover topics connected to different [Yugoslav] regions, so we had art by Ljubomir Filipovski and Mile Topuz from Macedonia, Ivica Bednjanec and Mladen Trnski from Croatia, and Leo Korelc from Slovenia [along with Serbian cartoonists]" (Zupan 2007: 66).
- 14 Interestingly, the new development didn't stop *Dečije novine* from educational work with children and efforts to introduce them to comics. An invitation was sent to art

colleges from different parts of Yugoslavia to send selected pupils for workshops at the offices in Gornji Milanovac, at the expense of *Dečije novine*. The coordinator of the workshops was cartoonist Živorad Žika Atanacković, along with several assistants. The workshops lasted between two weeks and one month, and participants would get their comics published in some of the *Dečije novine* editions. These were pioneering efforts in education in the Yugoslav comics field.

New publications with translated comics

- 15 *Dečije novine* also wanted to have a share in foreign comics translations, and that is how, in 1964, another edition, published bi-weekly and named *Lale* (the name was derived from the nickname of one of the employees), was introduced. After 439 issues, the *Lale* editions ended in 1972. Until then, they published a selection of popular comics from *Tarzan* to *Red Ryder* and Marvel superhero comics. Some domestic cartoonists were still present, but the stories were usually connected to foreign topics (for example, Ivica Bednjanec did several stories dedicated to the Mexican Revolution). Soon after *Lale*, another magazine, *Zenit*, was launched by *Dečije novine* in 1965. The magazine published comics the old way, with serialized stories, which were still preferred by the majority of the readers. Besides local artists (some of whom were interviewed and introduced in articles, which was still a novelty back then), most of the pages were dedicated to a diverse range of foreign comics: American and British, Franco-Belgian and Italian. The magazine greatly contributed to the diversity of material available to Yugoslav readers. It is also noteworthy that *Dečije novine* used all of its profits to enlarge the scope of their activities. In one of his accounts, Srećko Jovanović points out:

Children's literature, several magazines and publications dedicated to children was where we were coming from, and due to respect for our basic market and the space given to the magazine in schools, we decided to keep the name of our original publication. We tried to connect most of our production to domestically produced content, series, characters, symbols and columns, but then we also realized that we could expand our activities...

At that time, it seemed impossible that profit could be increased ten-fold on a yearly basis, but that's what we did. Everything that we earned was used for new projects, and we tried to keep one step ahead of the other publishers... We concluded that there was enough space in the market for kiosk distribution, and we knew that some progress had been made after the [Yugoslav] economic reform in the 1960s, so we established connections with the Disney company and started to publish *Miki* (*Mickey*) magazine (Jevtić 2010: 24-25).

- 16 In 1966, *Dečije novine* became the first publisher, in all of Eastern Europe, of a Disney-only comics magazine. For that occasion, the magazine reproduced a letter from Walt Disney to readers in Yugoslavia, with a photo and his signature sent from his studio (fig. 8).

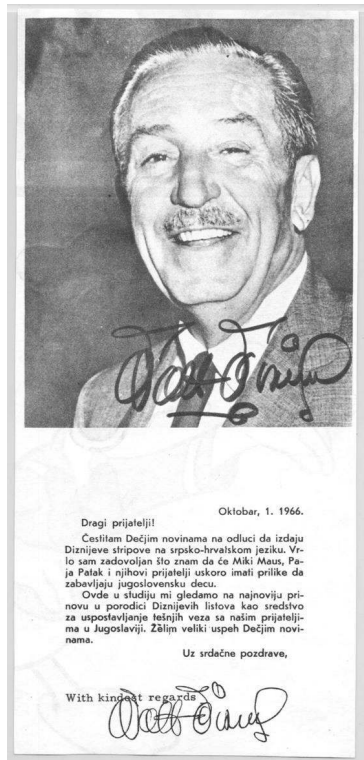


Fig. 8 – The letter to Yugoslav readers by Walt Disney, published in *Miki* magazine No 1, 1966.

Source: personal collection of Saša Rakezić.

- 17 The letter came out in the very first issue of *Miki* magazine and had a symbolic value: even though Disney comics had been published since the 1930s in Yugoslavia and were a widely accepted pop culture phenomena at the time—with local artists producing, of course without legal licensing, some now very intriguing versions of Disney characters - the specialized Disney comics edition proved that *Dečije novine*, and Yugoslavia as well, were playing by the international rules. Srećko Jovanović confided to comics historian Zdravko Zupan:

In the family of Disney publishers we were seen as a kind of wonder, as if we were coming from another planet. The notions about us as a nation and country were very strange, predominantly negative and based on incorrect assumptions. We were invited to Disney conventions, and at that time judging by the print runs and quality of the editions, we were somewhere in the middle: at that moment, similar magazines were published in about 40 countries from 5 continents. *Miki* had a steady readership, was published in two alphabets [Cyrillic and Latin], and it was the first and only magazine in all of Easter Europe to devote its pages to publishing Disney comics (Zupan 2007: 71-72).

- 18 When *Dečije novine* started to publish Disney comics, they also planned to initiate merchandise production, at first mostly connected to school equipment. It was soon realized that a similar idea could also be transposed to their popular *Mirko and Slavko* characters (fig. 9).



Fig. 9 – *Mirko and Slavko*, promotional drawing cca early 1970s, by Desimir Žižović Buin.
Source: personal collection of Saša Rakezić.

- 19 Gradually, motifs related to the stories of the two Partisan kids were printed on school bags, notebooks, T-Shirts, stickers, etc. The author of the comic, Desimir Žižović Buin suggested that the merchandise design should be made after drawings taken from the *Mirko and Slavko* comic book covers and original panels, which he could improve and adjust. For this, a special jury consisting of children was made for selecting published and unpublished drawings by Buin and making decisions about what to include and use for design patterns. During the first year of *Mirko and Slavko* merchandise production, sales were comparable to Disney merchandise sales in Yugoslavia. At the peak of the *Mirko and Slavko* craze, in 1973, the first (and only) feature film based on the Yugoslav-made comic was released, directed by Tori Janković (fig. 10).



Fig. 10 – Promotional material for the feature film *Mirko and Slavko*, directed by Tori Janković, and produced by *Dečije novine* in 1973.

- 20 *Mirko and Slavko*, one of the most emblematic projects of *Dečije novine*, was launched in the early days of the school magazine. The first installment of the comic, which unfolds during WWII, was published as early as 1958, in *Dečije novine* no. 23. The main character in the story is a boy called Mirko, who leaves his job in a bakery in 1941, after the Nazi occupation of Serbia. Mirko joins the partisans, and in the fourth episode he is joined by his sidekick Slavko. The story about the two partisan boys ends in the May 1959 issue of *Dečije novine*. It seems that the comic instantly gained the attention of the youth. This might have had to do with the fact that young comic readers were craving original, home-grown heroes reflecting the local mythology, which was at that time concerned with the difficult situation of emerging from the war with deep wounds, but with hope for a better future. Despite a harsh occupation regime established very early in Serbia, liberation from the Nazi forces was obtained by the Communist Resistance, helped by the USSR's Red Army and came with a massive loss of lives. In retaliation to the guerilla warfare and sabotage conducted against the occupiers, the Nazi military administration proposed draconic measures: 100 civilian hostages were executed for every German soldier or Volksdeutscher killed, and 50 for every wounded soldier. Harsh retributive measures were taken against Serbian civilians, who were sometimes killed in groups of thousands. In September 1941, after heavy fighting around Gornji Milanovac, 10 German soldiers were killed and 26 wounded. Vengeance was wreaked in the neighboring town of Kragujevac, where 2,300 hostages were taken, and about 3,000 men and boys were killed, 300 of which were Gymnasium pupils taken from the street or straight from their classrooms. In Central Serbia, children were not mere martyrs of the war, they also took part in the guerilla war, mostly as messengers, sometimes helping the underground resistance, or even participating in armed fighting. This was all part of common knowledge, and probably facilitated the rapid popularity of a comic

presenting two ordinary kids fighting the occupying army. The main idea was again conceived by Srećko Jovanović and the group around him, and they asked Desimir Žižović Buin to create a comic about the boy Partisans. In Buin's words:

One morning I met with the [*Dečije novine*] editors [Vojislav Veljić, Aleksandar Lazarević and Srećko Jovanović], and we were discussing about what we should do next. I had a feeling that the three of them were up to something, and that they were probably about to tell me about it. So I was waiting impatiently. Vojislav Veljić asked me straight away: 'We need a short piece happening in the wartime, about young boys who are fighting the enemies'... All the rest was left to my imagination... I started to think about the main character of the story. Where could I find a reference I could rely on? At a certain point I looked in the direction of my son Dragomir, who was sitting over his homework for the next day's classes... My son was a perfect role model for Mirko, the character I was working on. It also made drawing easier. If needed, he could easily pose for the action sequences. I was glad that I had found a solution and was quite happy with myself. I got the idea that Mirko should be presented as just a regular boy at the beginning of the story, one of many, a humble apprentice still learning the trade at a bakery in a small town somewhere in Šumadija [Central Serbia]. It was a familiar milieu to me, and the ambiance in the mid-1950s was almost the same as in the early 1940s. I immediately started to sketch the character. I wanted to show my drawings to the editors first. It was late in the evening when I brought the sketches to the school. I knew that I would find all three of them there, as they only worked on the magazine after teaching class, when they had finished their other obligations. We made an agreement on the format, the number of panels, the deadline. The path to the Mirko and Slavko comics was almost completely paved, and yet at that time nobody was able to guess that it would become the most popular domestically produced comic ever in this country (Jovanović *et al.* 1998: 70-71).

- 21 Gaining in popularity, the comic about the boy Partisans eventually acquired its own line of comic books in April 1969. The *Mirko and Slavko* comic books would last until 1979. According to comics historian Zdravko Zupan, the first issue of *Mirko and Slavko* comics had a print run of 120,000 copies in color, on a new printing press, in a handy smaller format, and with a higher page count than other publications issued by the same house. Following an extremely positive initial reception, the print run reached 180,000-200,000 copies (Zupan 2007: 66), which had never happened before, and has never happened since, with comics produced by Yugoslav authors. As the production increased in scope, it demanded new ways of manufacturing, and a fine-grained understanding of how industrially produced comics series elsewhere in the world were made. Several artists were hired to finish different portions of the drawings, and scripts were a joint effort. Through teamwork, it was possible to meet the weekly deadlines and other demands. Even though Buin was still engaged in the production, he was now working with a group of authors. Despite all their success, the *Mirko and Slavko* comics were often criticized as an example of oversimplification, and in later times became a symbol of the romanticization of the difficult war context in the Balkans. Stories of omnipotent kids, fighting and winning against the Nazi army from one episode to another seemed ridiculous to many. The joke that turned into an urban legend, is allegedly from one of the *Mirko and Slavko* stories:

Mirko: Look out, Slavko, there's a bullet coming!

Slavko: Thank you, Mirko, you saved my life!

- 22 Often told as a joke, the citation was even referenced in some theoretical works to highlight the frivolity of the comics. Since no one has been able to find the pages in which the dialogue appeared, it can be classified as an urban legend. Another form of

criticism came from comics creators exploring different forms of comics, who found such an “industrial” approach to art unoriginal and empty. This criticism cannot be completely dismissed, but it is worth remembering that the industrial production of comics was, and is, present in many countries, and that it was also a product of its time: most of the superhero, Western, war and funny animal comics made for popular, mass consumption were nothing but simplifications, often lacking substance; these comics tend to frame characters in black and white, and defeating villains is presented, more often than not, as too easy. What is clearly positive about the mass productions is that it is something that attracts young readers to the very form of comics, and that it enables artists to be paid for their work in the field of comics, which, in turn, enables the field to grow in many different directions. *Dečije novine* succeeded in proving that the production of popular comics is also possible in a small country, even in a small town, and that it can reflect local needs and imagination instead of simply copying foreign narratives. Therefore, in more ways than one, *Dečije novine* was an emancipatory project.

Concluding remarks

- 23 After *Mirko and Slavko*, *Dečije novine* kept developing, changing with the times, and enlarging its activities. It was actually through commercial comics editions that the publisher earned funds for publishing, from the 1960s onwards, ‘serious’ non-comics books, and translations of works by imposing figures of world literature. The link with children’s creativity and collaboration was kept right until the very end, first through the *Dečije novine* magazine, which kept publishing children’s contributions next to the comics and texts of adult authors. Also of interest is that the magazine published in both alphabets used in Yugoslavia (Cyrillic and Latin) even while it was still a school publication. The magazine’s production continued to expand during the 1970s to include the rock magazine *Džuboks (Jukebox)*, dedicated to serious rock criticism; *Moment*, an art magazine; *Yu Strip*, a comics magazine publishing only comics (from popular to avant-garde) by Yugoslav artists; and *Kulture istoka (Cultures of the East)*, specializing in popular science articles on Middle and Far Eastern cultures, to name but a few.
- 24 In the 1980s some of the *Dečije novine* publications were printed in the Roma language, and in Braille. It was also during the 1980s that *Dečije novine* began exporting to China, at a time when Western companies didn’t have access to that market. They published, in addition, schoolbooks for many African countries. Rumor has it that for covering large orders from Angola alone, *Dečije novine* had to employ 23 printers from all parts of Yugoslavia. The publishing house closed in the 1990s: with the fragmentation of Yugoslavia, it lost its market and the funds it had were destroyed by the hyperinflation that came with the war, and many of the original staff were forced to find jobs elsewhere. In 1991, shortly before the split of Yugoslavia, *Dečije novine* was publishing 27 magazines, about 200 books, all kinds of school equipment and toys on a yearly basis. The publishing house had an office in Chicago and there were plans to open branches in many European countries. This had to come to an end in the turbulent 1990s. Even though this publisher had to stop abruptly, it remains one of the success stories from Eastern Europe. The editorial team members’ effort to communicate and listen to the youth is something that still needs to be analyzed and fully understood. They did not

follow pre-existing formulas and tried instead to find original ways of promoting comics and other forms of literature for young readers. For this, Dečije novine also relied on new and upcoming artists and did not hesitate to directly employ schoolkids to help shape ideas. This also proved to be a way to find new directions and to transform the general cultural scene.

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NOTES

1. Among the many comics authors active in Belgrade in the 1930s and 1940s were Đorđe Lobačev, Konstantin Kuznjecov, Sergej Solovjev, Đuka Janković, Nikola Navojev. The Universum Press agency based in Belgrade distributed their stories around Europe and the world.
 2. *Ilustrovana politika* #6, 16.12.1958, p. 26.
 3. *Ilustrovana politika* #6, 16.12.1958, p. 26-27.
 4. Phone interview conducted by the writer, 22 May 2022.
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ABSTRACTS

This essay considers the curious case of *Dečije novine* (*Children's Papers*), an initiative which started as a simple school magazine established by the teachers of the elementary school in Gornji Milanovac, a small town in Central Serbia, way back in 1956. *Dečije novine* published works by local children and gained popularity by accepting submissions from all over Yugoslavia, quickly starting to published young cartoonists developing a simple style aimed at children. This text looks at this shift from a school magazine, supplied by children's submissions, to what would become one of the largest comics publishers in Eastern Europe, considering the specific involvement of reading and drawing audiences in its development.

Cet essai examine le cas curieux de *Dečije novine* (*Children's Papers*), une initiative qui a commencé comme un simple magazine scolaire créé par les enseignants de l'école élémentaire de

Gornji Milanovac, une petite ville de Serbie centrale, en 1956. Dečije novine a publié des œuvres d'enfants locaux, et a gagné en popularité en acceptant des soumissions de toute la Yougoslavie, commençant rapidement à publier de jeunes dessinateurs développant un style simple destiné aux enfants. Ce texte examine ce passage d'un magazine scolaire, alimenté par des soumissions d'enfants, à ce qui allait devenir l'un des plus grands éditeurs de bandes dessinées d'Europe de l'Est, en considérant l'implication spécifique des publics de la lecture et du dessin dans son développement.

INDEX

Keywords: children's magazine, school, children's drawings, Yugoslavia, Serbia

Mots-clés: périodique jeunesse, école, dessin d'enfant, Yougoslavie, Serbie

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Aleksandar Zograf (which is the pen name of Saša Rakezić) is a Serbian cartoonist and writer, living in Pančevo, across the Danube from Belgrade. His collections of comics were published in the US, UK, France, Italy, Japan, Portugal, Spain, Austria, Germany and elsewhere. Working on weekly comics for Belgrade's independent magazine *Vreme*, and occasionally for Italian magazine *Internazionale*. Also active as a writer and editor of the reprints of the early Serbian comics. Appears as a main narrator and researcher in the hybrid (documentary - live action - animation) movie *The Final Adventure of Kaktus Kid*.

Aleksandar Zograf (nom de plume de Saša Rakezić) est un dessinateur et écrivain serbe, vivant à Pančevo, de l'autre côté du Danube depuis Belgrade. Ses recueils de bandes dessinées ont été publiés aux États-Unis, au Royaume-Uni, en France, en Italie, au Japon, au Portugal, en Espagne, en Autriche, en Allemagne et ailleurs. Il réalise des bandes dessinées hebdomadaires pour le magazine indépendant *Vreme* de Belgrade, et occasionnellement pour le magazine italien *Internazionale*. Également actif en tant que scénariste et éditeur de rééditions des premières bandes dessinées serbes. Il apparaît en tant que narrateur principal et chercheur dans le film hybride (documentaire - action en direct - animation) *The Final Adventure of Kaktus Kid*.