

Ravne na Koroskem

The Place of Broken Promises



Yugoslavia was still a country in nineteen eighty-four when I won an international competition to design and build a steel park as a war memorial in Northern Yugoslavia.

Even after Josip Broz (Marshall) Tito died in 1980, the loose agglomeration held together, at least for a while. Even if disliked, Tito had performed a miracle of sorts. He threw Hitler out one door and then threw Stalin out the other. So this cobbled together group of disparate interests became a nation and communist too. But even after having worked there, I don't pretend to understand the complexities of Balkan politics and am convinced that anyone who says they do is either crazy or substantially misinformed.

I had entered the design competition because I had substantial experience in park design, had competed in war memorial design competitions and had many years of working in steel, both as an Iron worker and later as a sculptor. This particular competition was an outgrowth of a sculptor's symposium held every few years by Forma Viva, an arts organization who sponsored events where sculptors would come together and work in a specific medium. This particular competition was different in that the avowed purpose was to create a steel park and at the same time produce a war memorial for the last battle of World War Two which had occurred five days after the Nazi capitulation.

I was elated to discover that I had been assigned to a four man team to design and build the park. Myself from the U.S.A., Jim Buckley from Ireland but living in Scotland, Roberto Stael and Dushan Tirsar, both Yugoslavs, would make up the team. All had substantial experience and significant achievements. A producing steel mill nearby was to provide material and logistical support. The organization had shipped aerial photos and topographic maps of the site. Translators and transportation were being arranged. This was going to be fun.

I had envisioned that the team would engage in a kind of design charette, agree on methods and philosophical intent and then with the aid of cranes, welders and assistants, use the sheet and

plate steel from the mill to build not only a war memorial, but the first park made entirely out of steel in the whole world.

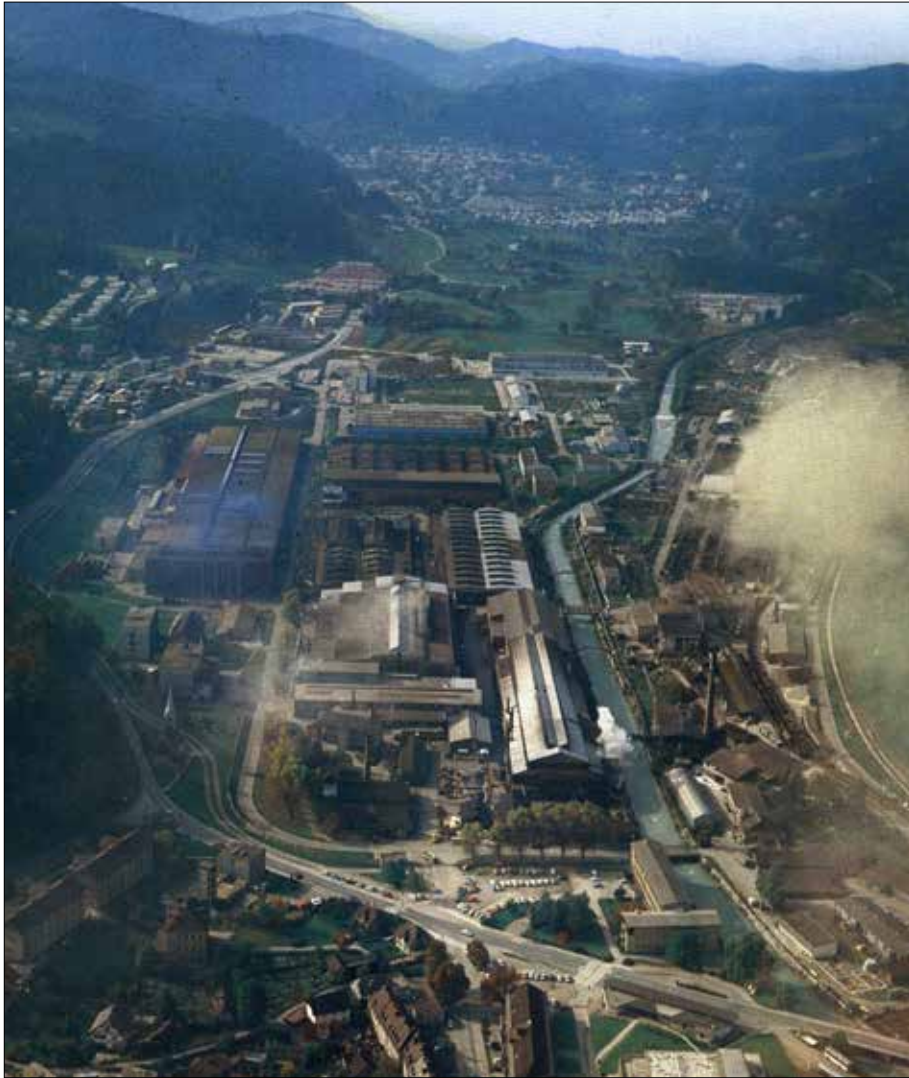
I had worked in steel mills and fabrication plants before and had an idea of what I was in for. My first mill foreman had taken my brand new goggles away from me on my first day and used his thumb to scratch the lenses with mill grit as he said, "You gonna work here, get used to seeing the world through green steel wool." He handed the goggles back to me and didn't say another word. After I had been at the mill for a while, a friend asked me what it was like to work there and I said, "Tonight when you go home, turn your oven up to broil, wait till it gets up to temperature, then rest your chin on the open oven door and have some one blow hot cigarette ashes in your eyes."

I was recognized at the airport because I was carrying my welding helmet under my arm. The three hour taxi ride from the airport in Ljubljana should have been a tip off as to what was in the works. The taxi driver informed me that taxis had special dispensation, but the ordinary citizen was rationed to twenty liters of gasoline a month.

Roberto, Jim and myself were billeted at what was called a "tourist hotel" because it was a training ground for the expanding tourist industry and because even though Roberto was a Yugoslav, he spoke excellent English. We were in the town of Ravne na Koroskem and you could smell the steel works before you could hear it and you could hear it before you could see it.



Shopping bag with the seal of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia



This area has a nearly four hundred year tradition in iron and steel. The town belonged to Austria until 1919 and consequently has a mixed set of relations with its northern neighbors.

I have read several conflicting reports of some of the events I am about to describe. The only thing I know for sure is that I did a substantial amount of work under the guidance of the information I had. It may have been naive to behave that way, but as somebody said, “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Tania was our translator and the first thing you need to know about any translator is that you can't trust them to translate anything. Tania was twenty something, married to an absent army man and stiff-necked and arrogant. A typical translator. By contrast the project coordinator was Mirko Angili. Yes, an Italian name, and in this part of the world where national borders have been confused for as long as anyone can remember, he was also a Slovene and a Yugoslav. Try to imagine a country with three different languages on the money. Mirko was our link to the organization and the steel mills link to us and as a consequence, he took heat from all sides. One day, he took us out to the country side and tried to explain to us, with and through Tania, what was the task before us.



Any country that has three official languages on the money lets you know there is trouble up ahead

We stopped in a rather ordinary roadside restaurant out in the countryside near the village of Poljana. In front of the restaurant was a small dark stone obelisk with inscriptions on each of the four sided base. Each one in a different language. I was so new in the country, I don't even remember what three of the languages were, but one was in German and I could read it reasonably well. I did have trouble with the numbers however and asked Mirko if I had understood them correctly. "Weil hundert funfzig tousand starben sein."
"Because a hundred and fifty thousand died."

(See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bleiburg_massacre)

Mirko did not answer, but got up from his seat and walked over to the nearby field that had been recently plowed, reached down and picked up a bone about a foot long and while walking back toward us, said in English, "This is not from a cow."

I was told the following occurred: Five days after the War was declared over, (13 May 1945) meaning five days after the Nazi capitulation, an enormous number of Nazis and collaborators (quislings) were terribly afraid they were going to be held accountable for war crimes and were running from Greece and Yugoslavia to attempt to find asylum in German-speaking Axis-aligned Austria.

The British, however had decided to block the pass through the Triglav Alps at Bleiburg. Hence

these Nazis and collaborators were stuck in a bottle neck on the Northern border between Yugoslavia and Austria. Surrounding them were thousands of Tito's Partisans and they were trapped.

A meeting was held in a castle on the pass between the various parties. The British were represented as were Tito's Partisans. There were two German Generals. One of whom agreed that the war was over and laid his pistol down on the table as a gesture of surrender. The other general drew his pistol and promptly blew the head off the other German general and declared that there would indeed be a battle. Tito's troupes immediately descended from the surrounding mountains and carnage ensued.

I know I read correctly the number of dead on the stone obelisk. Having been a stone carver, I know you check very carefully anything before committing it to stone. However, the number is very difficult to believe because we know we lost one hundred and forty thousand at Hiroshima but almost no one knows of this place in the Slovenian Alps. I have read accounts which tell the story differently, even with different bad guys that still leave thirty thousand dead. So, let's say they are both wrong and that sixty thousand died. In one battle. That is close to the number the United States lost in the whole of the Vietnam war. And this place, no one knows. And the ultimate insult is that all these lives were lost after the war was officially over.



Mirko's description of the battle was followed by the announcement that a great hero of this battle was also a sculptor and that he had leveraged his connections in the government to award him a commission for a single sculptural memorial. There would not be a park made of steel, but instead an enormous bronze grenade with doves of peace flying out of the top. In fact, the commission had been awarded before we arrived and therefore the money for our park project had already been spent. As an alternative, Mirko suggested we each make individual sculptures to be put in the various communities along the valley where the battle had taken place. We had been deceived and lied to. Angry and disgusted, we walked away from the battle site.

What were we to do? Individually and collectively? You can imagine the discussions. They were not civil or gracious. With the exception of Dushan, we had made substantial sacrifices to be there. (Dushan, it turned out, seemed to be operating with a different set of rules entirely. Was given differential treatment and not interested in our collective or individual concerns.)

We could abandon the project entirely, fly home and try to explain what had happened to our friends and families, or we could try to make the best out

of a bad situation. To the mill, or the factory as I will call it, we artists were, at best, skilled nuisances.

This factory was in the business of production. It made parts for Bulgarian tanks, cutting knives for the tobacco industry, rock drills for road construction. It had Yugoslav army officers guarding the entrances to the plant and they had guns and hats with red stars and the hammer and sickle inside. They had forging hammers they had stolen from Hitler that I could feel in my hotel room a kilometer away. They had twenty first century rolling equipment and nineteenth century blacksmiths working in conditions from the middle ages. The factory had production levels imposed by the Soviets. They really had no use for a bunch of weird artists.

One day at lunch, (At 9 AM, because when your work day starts at 5 AM, lunch is at 9 AM.) I asked one of the managers why the air pollution control equipment had recently been disconnected from the arc furnaces? He looked at me angrily, and said, "Because it costs money, and because it doesn't make steel."

After long discussions with the other artists we decided to agree with Mirko's request and we would each make individual sculptures. Mine would end up being called : "The Place of Broken Promises."



Marko was about fifteen, maybe fourteen and completely useless. His job in the factory had been odd jobs and I only saw him intermittently but I never complained about it because I could never come up with a task I thought he could do without making a mistake or hurting himself. Our common language was *Rock and Roll English*. That means I would quote a common song lyric and he would get the meaning. It was hard to talk to Marko, but we had some surprising conversations. Particularly with Rolling Stones Lyrics. He was way too young to be doing what he was doing in the factory and smart enough to see his bleak future laid out in front of him.

The image on the left has a worker standing on the far right. He is watching molten steel (around 2900 degrees Fahrenheit) being poured into molds and issues directions to the crane operator above. He has no ear, eye or thermal protection. Where he is standing is about 125 degrees. This is where he works every day.

I had been given a workers uniform, steel toed boots and were amazed at my small my feet and they said I would have to wear women's boots. (They said they only had Bosnian sizes and laughed.) They issued a worker's identity pass for the entry gate. No safety equipment was issued. What hearing protection and respirator equipment I used, I had brought from home. No photography was allowed. Period.

Early on, we were introduced to the upper echelon in the factory. Lots of toasts of vodka and ceremonial rubbish and then we were assigned assistants. We had no idea what their background was, but we could guess. I had two: Andre and Marko.

Andre was about fifty-five. He had worked in the factory for as long as he could remember. He worked in the factory in the morning and when he got off at 4 PM, he went home to work as a farmer. He was little when the battle had been fought at Poljana. He had been forced to learn German by the occupation forces and we used it as our only common language. He was obviously much too old to be doing the kind of work he was doing in the factory.



This beer is 26 proof and if it were not for beer and the plum brandy called Shlivovitz, this town and this mill would have stopped producing centuries ago.



Shoveling manganese nodules into the mouth of an electric arc furnace to make new steel was how I spent my time before ending up working with scrap found laying around the mill.

So now I had access to a steel mill, two assistants and not a clue what it was that I could or would be able to do. Questioning the factory management revealed another problem that was nearly a fatal blow. The factory was behind in production and the material we were going to use for our (now) individual sculptures had to be used to fill the quotas. This was a total lie intended to discourage us even further. The volume of steel we proposed using was a pittance in comparison to the output of the mill and those at the top simply wanted to give us a bad time. They even said we would have to help make the steel we used. The management was extremely surprised when each of us put our shoulder to the wheel. I did my time standing in front of an electric arc furnace. “Feeding the monster,” they called it, but when I pressed other workers they called the furnace, “Hudobvinic” or the asshole of the devil. Normally they gave this job to the younger workers because after a few years the roar from the furnace caused you to go deaf. My paltry few weeks there shoveling manganese nodules into the arc fire was a huge lesson in humility.

Even though the factory management was astonished at our willingness to participate in their farcical games, they attached even more hurdles. Now they said that we could not use new steel for our projects, but had to make them out of scrap laying about the factory. I was one beer away from walking out when Jim Buckley said, “Before we decide, let’s see what is available.”

In the great tradition of David Smith working at Voltri, Italy, Buckley found all manner of enormous things to his liking. It had been several years since I had been done with the mere assemblage of scrap steel and I was much harder to please. I felt an obligation to make a meaningful memorial regardless of the insane impediments thrown in front of me. And before I knew what materials to use, I needed to know what I wanted to say.

All during college, I considered Art History as a useless exercise in the memorization of slides. Nothing seemed to have stuck, but as I sat frustrated in the foreign hotel room, an image popped out of the mass of visuals I had been forced to endure in art history:



The Stone Breakers by Gustave Courbet, (1849-50) *It depicts two workers who are amazingly similar to my assistants Andre and Marko.*

One is obviously too old for work as hard as breaking stones. The other is obviously too young. Both are faceless, doing the ordinary work of the world and receiving little pay or credit for it. It is somehow fitting that this painting was destroyed in the fire bombing of Dresden in 1945, but its avowed purpose continued as slides and photographs.

The longer I spent in the factory, the more I realized that these people had really been screwed. They thought they got rid of the bad guys, only to be sold into a life of continual drudgery. Even the enormous battle after the capitulation and the armistice had been for nothing. The promise of happy days after the war had vanished. **This was the place of broken promises.**

The three other sculptors with some images of their works from a catalogue that was produced years after the project was concluded. You would expect us to have remained in close contact but my experience with many other activities of a similar nature told me it would not happen.



Roberto Stell wanted to be an architect as much as a sculptor and probably has gone that direction.



Dusan Tursar was the odd man out in the group. An aloof loner. He has completely disappeared from the arts scene.



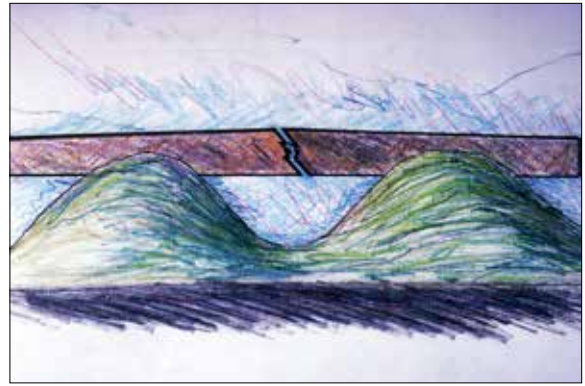
Jim Buckley, from Cork Ireland is shown above with the sculpture he created in the factory. It was eventually located at a school. He has gone on to be a highly successful sculptor in Europe and the U.K. and is best known in Scotland.

In the process of rummaging through the factory I came upon an enormous rectangular built-up box beam which had been intended for use in a crane project by one of the factory managers. The project had been abandoned for reasons of cost effectiveness. The remaining part was a source of embarrassment and the factory would probably be happy to get rid of this eyesore. The real question is what could be done with it.

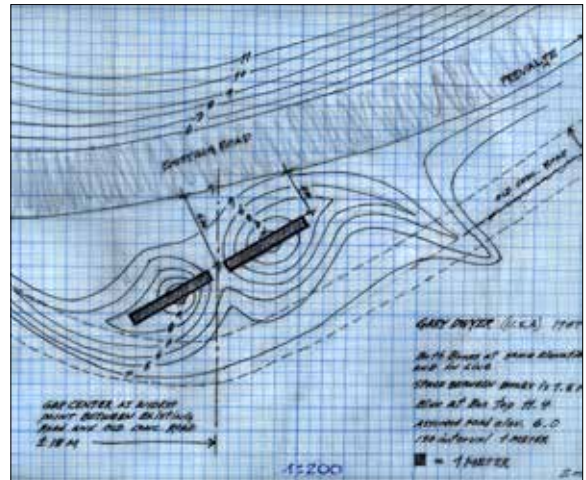
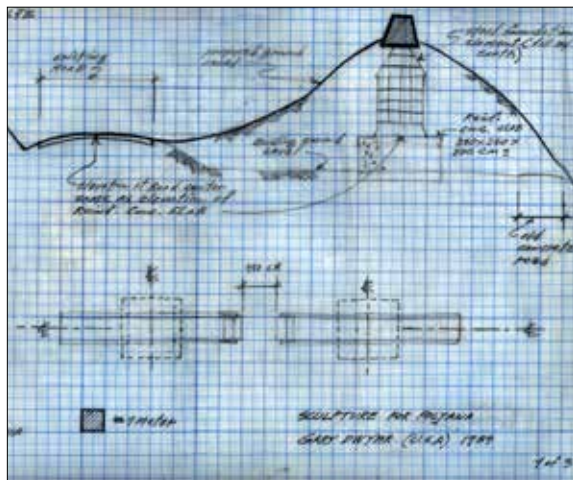
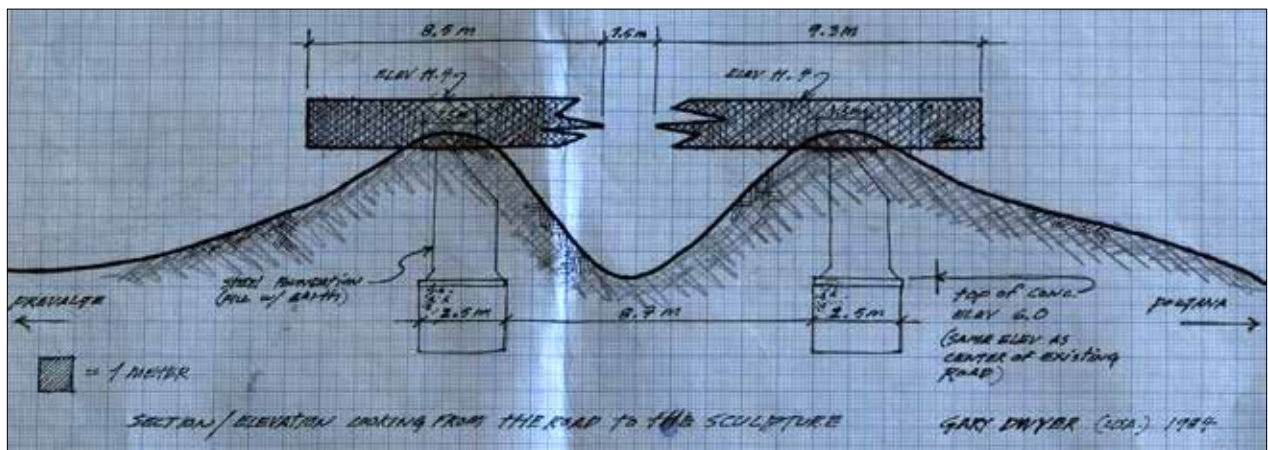
The epicenter of the battle had been near the town of Poljana and although I originally wanted to locate the monument in the 500 meters of no-mans land between the Austrian check point and Yugoslavian check point, the Yugoslav army had said no to my request, and in this part of the world, no means no.

So, Poljana was it. I decided that for the monument to be effective, since there was no reason to stop in the village, it had to be seen from a car at highway speed. Of course I could have turned it into the kind of roadside attraction that is the James Dean Memorial in Cholam, California, but I didn't think there was either the time or the money to do it, so I opted for the windshield view.

After finding the beam, I knew I wanted to break it. To show a rupture. A literal rupture, in what now is so glibly called the *Peace Process*. I wanted to break this beam using underwater explosives. However, the technology for this kind of work was not available at the factory, so we had to make an abstracted break using the 'Heat it and beat it' method.



It seemed that it was necessary to elevate the steel pieces in order to give them more presence as the work will be seen from the highway at fifty to sixty miles per hour. This required elaborate steel stanchion supports which were attached to a thick concrete pad and eventually backfilled to make the earth mounds.





This is the portion of my American passport which contains my special 'Opcina' a document that declares I work in a Communist Weapons Factory. It was given much scrutiny and derision by officials on a train from Yugoslavia to Austria. The train guards were real armed tough guys with German Shepherds. I found out the reason they gave us such a hard time: Two thousand kilos of coffee come into Slovenia each month and most of it is smuggled in on this train



By Yugoslav standards, we artists had pretty posh accommodations for our stay. It was Sixties-style or perhaps Soviet influenced era complex. It was being used as a training facility for hotel employees and restaurant trainees for the tourist industry. In reality, each of us had a small motel room with a television that received one station in Serbo-Croatian. The complex was about a kilometer away (Shown in the far left.) When they were running either the forge or the arc furnace, my windows would rattle. A lot of people working with us in the mill would come by for coffee in the morning. Coffee is a Turkish product in this time and place and there was an embargo on coffee that had been in place for years. But if you had connections with someone in a "Tourist" hotel, you could come and have coffee with them



Martin



Goran

These two are additional assistants who did a huge amount of work for this project. Andre was a good craftsman, but not very strong. Marko was useless and never there.

Martin and Goran were in a band together and with little pieces of various languages we had a very friendly working relationship.



For some insane reason the mill did not want to use a proper crane to move the components of my work. When they were finally taken to the project site, they did it with two fork lifts and two drivers. One at each end of a 12 ton beam. This was not Laurel and Hardy moving a ladder. This was dangerous and stupid and everyone knew it. I am amazed they got to the job site without killing themselves and some bystanders.



The stanchions had been assembled out of various left over bins and hoppers, but by the time I had to leave they had not been delivered to the site. There was no way for me to know if the project would ever be completed.



The Crew: Top row, left to right - Martin, Roberto Stell, Jim Buckley, Gary Dwyer. Second Row: Goran, Mirko Angeli. Third row: Unknown, Andre, Unknown (management), Tanya (translator) Bottom row: Unknown, Dusan Trsar, Unknown, (management).

The artists finally had to go on strike in order to get permission to bring cameras into the mill. We stayed out for three days before the upper management said we could bring our cameras in and photograph both our work and the mill.

They sent armed guards with us. They said it was because in addition to the tools and industrial materials, they also made military goods for the Russians and the Eastern block countries. Even though they knew we were there to help memorialize their history, they thought we were a security risk and the Army guard with the Kalashnikov, who knew me on sight, would check my papers every day, when I walked in the mill entrance with five thousand other people in blue uniforms at 5 o'clock in the morning. No one but the artists ever got their papers checked.

Gary C. Dwyer
ZDA

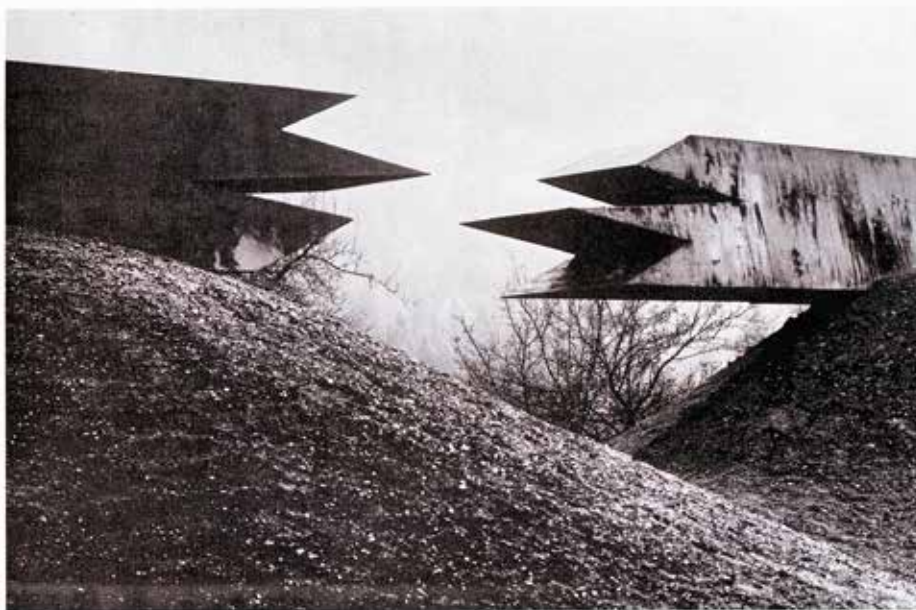
444 Indian Knob Road, San Luis
Obispo,
California 93401
USA



Rojen leta 1943 v Denverju, Colorado. V letih 1967 – 1970 je obiskoval Univerzo v Siracusi, solo za krajinsko arhitekturo v New Yorku, Umetniško solo v Denverju in leta 1980 tudi Akademijo za likovno umetnost v Salzburgu. Je profesor na Politehnični državni univerzi v San Luisu Obispo v Californiji na oddelku za krajinsko arhitekturo. Ima petnajstletne izkušnje pri delu z jeklom in kot krajinski arhitekt je uredil številne vrtove in druge javne površine v ameriških mestih. Pripravlja organizacijo simpozija v Californiji. Samostojno in skupinsko razstavlja v Ameriki in Evropi od leta 1968 naprej. O njegovem delu je izšlo več strokovnih člankov v strokovnih časopisih in revijah.

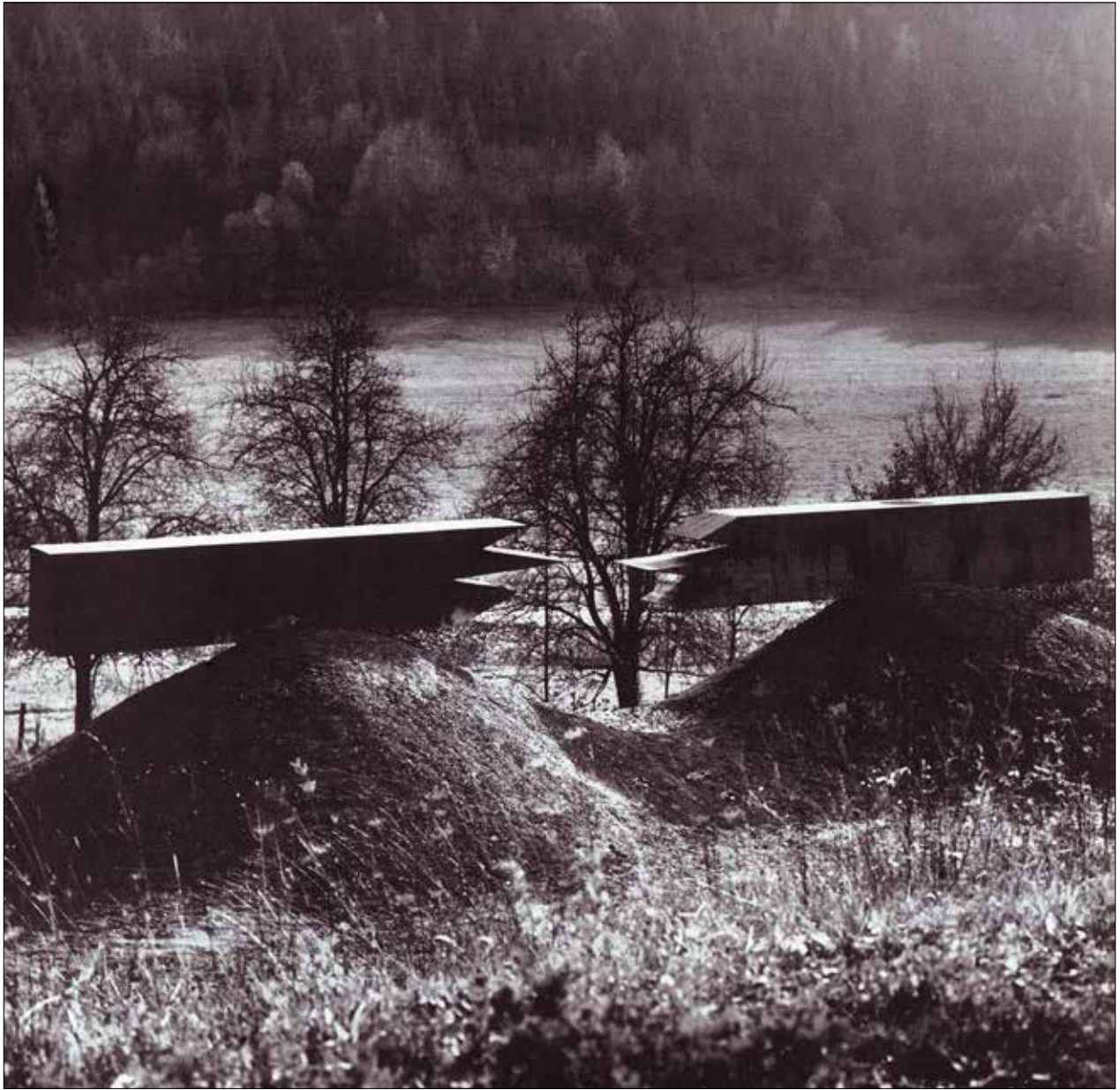
lokacija: Poljana, spominski park
svobode in miru
material: železo, zemlja
dimenzije: prostor 10/14 m, v 6 m,
d 17 m, š 1,20 m

Location: Poljana, Freedom and peace
memorial park
Material: iron, earth



He was born in 1943 in Denver, Colorado. From 1967 to 1970, he attended the Syracuse University's School of Landscape Architecture in New York, Art School in Denver and in 1980 also Salzburg's Academy of Fine Arts. He is professor at the Polytechnic State University of San Luis Obispo, California at the department of landscape architecture. He has 15 years of experience with working in steel and as a landscape architect produced numerous landscape designs for parks, gardens, and other public areas in American cities. At the moment, he is preparing a symposium in California. He has been exhibiting individually and jointly in America and Europe since 1968. Many articles were published on his works in professional periodicals.







The memorial is sited such that if you come around the curve from the Yugoslavia direction, you will see a large mound or small hill with a trapezoidal box on the top. Reminiscent of a tombstone. If you arrive from the Austrian side, where the quislings and collaborators wanted to go, you see a long beam supported by two hills. It has been split apart in the middle.



A fair criticism of many of my projects is that they are too literal. I accept this as being accurate. But in defense, I believe forms to have a didactic function and I would rather have my audience get a simple message than none at all. A huge ruptured steel thing as a symbol of the place of broken promises is as simple and painful a reminder I could make.

After I returned home, I spent years haggling with the Yugoslav government, the U.S. Department of State, and the mill, just to discover if the project had been completed. When I had to leave, the foundations were not poured, the stanchions had not been delivered and the piece had not been sandblasted. . Many of the final photos were taken by Martin and Goran took. A friend of mine and former student in California, Paul Dooley made a pilgrimage to the site as an elaborate detour and made some excellent progress shots before the earthwork was completed. Both governments refused to understand that photographic documentation is almost the only thing the artist takes away. Photographs are the demonstrable elements of the past allowing the artist to extend themselves into the future.

An indication of how things were being run at the time is that State-run Yugoslavian television from Ljubljana came to make a program about the various projects and when they finished shooting I asked the production team if I could have a copy of the tape. They said, "If you go to Austria and buy a tape, we can copy it for you, but we only have one tape for ourselves. After we show a program, we erase it and shoot a new program." I never got to Austria to buy the tape and consequently the records disappeared.



Our backbreaking work on the various sculptures was paid by a big pile of Yugoslav Dinars, a non-convertible currency. For Buckley and Trsar and Stell, it was not a problem as they intended to stay in Yugoslavia and spend the money. For me, I had another project that was beginning in San Francisco soon and had to return to the United States within a few days. To solve this problem, the Communist director of the mill gave me a map to the town nearby that was big enough to have a jewelry store. There I bought gold chains, paid for them by weight, stuffed them inside my cameras where the film was supposed to go, and smuggled the gold out of the country. My daughters got some very nice jewelry. Years later I got some photographs.



Judith F. Buncher
Director
Ameriski Center
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Yugoslavia

23 May 88

Dear Ms. Buncher,

I am pleased to report, at long last, I have actually recieved some black and white photo negatives and some color slides of the war memorial project that I designed in Ravne na Koroskem. The video tape that I have been requesting for years will probably never arrive. At this point I don't really care. If it took three plus years to get a few slides, I will probably have died of old age by the time a video is taken copied and sent..... Not to worry. In spite of the above, please thank Mr. Logar for me. Late and slow is better than not at all and he is the only one that has actually come through. His sincerity is truly appreciated.

Thanks also goes to you and your staff, and interestingly, your prediccessor, as this thing has gone on forever. Thanks for your time and intrest.

A note in passing: The next time you are at a cocktail party and someone makes note of how artists seem to be a pain in the ass to work with, you might remember that you know an artist who is not a prima donna, gave his heart and soul to a project that he was envited to do, and was screwed by the entire process of trying to help a country express itself.

Sincerely,

Gary C. Dwyer
Professor

THE CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY

This letter was typed by a University secretary. I did not see the spelling errors until twenty years later.



My workbench, Ravne na Koroskem, Yugoslavia, 1984



The sculpture was declared a Slovenian National Monument in 2000.

It has its own web site: http://www.burger.si/RavneNaKoroskem/FormaViva_a5.HTM

I have re-visited the now ex-Yugoslavia (currently a handful of countries still arguing with each other) in 2004 and again in 2007. The good news is, it is not the same as it was in 1984. The bad news is, it is filled with rich tourists and they are almost all Germans.