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## Remembering December 1994

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December is typically an exciting month, with holidays and winter break approaching, gifts and cookies, with snow on the ground for the complete winter experience. But in 1994, December was sad.

The War in Yugoslavia was in full force, and on the night of Dec. 5, military police raided my house in an attempt to take me and my father back to forced labor. According to rumors, this time we would be assigned to dig combat trenches at the front line, with a slim chance of survival.

That evening, loud banging on the front door alerted me to hide in the attic. The police interrogated my mother and searched the house, but they didn't find me. My father was visiting his sister in the hills and stayed there overnight. The next day they came back after our neighbors assured them that I was in the house. This time they searched the attic and surprisingly missed me again. I waited until nightfall, packed a bag and left my house.

That night marked the beginning of a new phase in my life, a new identity, becoming an immigrant and an artist.

For the next several days, I hid between my friends' homes, putting them in danger if I was discovered. I couldn't go back home, I couldn't stay in the town, and I had to find a way to escape. With the help of a close friend, I falsified a military ID, put on a uniform, practiced an accent and familiarized myself with a new identity.

On Dec. 18, I left my hometown through a corridor dividing the war zone, crossed the border between Bosnia and Serbia, and arrived in Belgrade.

This ironic act of becoming someone else was, unknowingly, my first

art project that I effectively planned, executed, and later shared with others through my art practice. While living in Belgrade, I discovered the Academic Film Center (AFC) where I made experimental films and interacted with other artists.

I felt as if I had won the lottery, blessed to discover this amazing place where I could be myself, do what made me happy, and share my ideas. During the time at the AFC, I dreamed about screening at least one film at a film festival. I focused on creating video art while applying for refugee status, and in April 1997, I was approved to migrate to the U.S.

This December, I reflect on the days when I was forced to leave my home and parents, changing my identity, an act that most likely saved my life and inspired me to become an artist. My art practice motivates me to continue to reflect upon my experiences, teach art, and share my creative ideas. Since 1995, I've created over 100 short films and video installations and shared my artwork with audiences in over 40 countries through festivals and exhibitions.

The war in Yugoslavia destroyed part of my youth, broke apart my family, and set us on a journey as immigrants. Today I am thankful that my family survived and that I gained valuable knowledge and experiences that shaped who I am.

As I'm writing, it's snowing outside, reminding me of the good memories of growing up in my hometown, sledding and skiing with my brother. I am grateful that I can drink coffee in my cozy home in front of a beautiful Christmas tree and reflect upon the moments that make me happy.



*Only the Chimney Stays, 2010, video, 5:30*

Zlatko Ćosić fuels his art with memories of his past.