

2013 Berlin Film Festival prize winner dies in poverty

Stefan Steinberg
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Nazif Muji?, winner of a Silver Bear award for Best Actor at the Berlin Film Festival in 2013, has died aged just 48. According to the first accounts of his death, Muji? died in extreme poverty in the hamlet of Svatovac in Bosnia. Muji? starred in the film *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker* by Danis Tanovic at the Berlin Film Festival.

Muji? plays himself in the film, which recounts his real-life struggles as a scrap-iron collector whose wife suffers a miscarriage. The family seeks to obtain medical help, but are turned away from Bosnian hospitals because they are Roma. Tanovic's film shone a spotlight on the extent of the persecution and discrimination of Roma in Bosnia after the break-up of Yugoslavia and the reintroduction of capitalism.

Following his success at the Berlin festival—*Iron Picker* won two Silver Bears, for Muji? as best actor and for the film itself—and after failing to find proper work after returning to Bosnia, Muji? lodged a claim in 2014 to reside in Germany with his family. Explaining his claim at the time, Muji? declared: "I don't want to be rich. I just want an ordinary job, a chance to feed my family." Expressing his disenchantment with Bosnia, he said, "Bosnia betrayed me...I will not go back. I would rather hang myself."

Around 75,000 Roma live in Bosnia, but according to the local NGO Atlantic Initiative just five percent have official employment.

In 2016, Human Rights Watch stated that Roma remain "the most vulnerable group" in Bosnia, facing "widespread discrimination in employment, education, and political representation."

Germany rejected Muji?'s application for asylum, declaring cynically that, for humanitarian reasons, the government would not deport Muji? and his family until after the Bosnian winter. Back in Bosnia, Muji?

was forced to resume his former work of gathering scrap metal for a few euros a day.

Unable to pay for his family's basic needs, Muji? sold his Silver Bear to a local tavern owner for €4,000 (\$US4,930). "First I sold an old car, then some personal items, and then it was the Bear's turn," Muji? said at the time. He said the decision to sell the trophy was "very difficult" but "my children had eaten almost nothing for three days."

According to the actor's brother, Suljo Muji?, Muji? had been suffering from ill health in recent months and was very worried because of his financial situation. In January of this year, he tried to find a way to enter Germany again, but came back, the brother said.

Using some of the money he made from the sale of the trophy, Muji? purchased a bus ticket to Berlin, but was forced to return to Bosnia after being informed he was liable for a fine that he could not afford to pay, dating back to the time he and his family had applied for asylum in Germany.

It is clear that the inhumane asylum policy of the German government and the Berlin Senate, formerly a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and since December 2016 a so-called red-red-Green coalition (SPD-Left Party-Greens), contributed to Muji?'s early death.

In a typical case, in mid-January 2016, the Berlin police deported eight-year-old Denica, who suffers from a heart condition, and her father back to Bosnia. The boy's mother and Denica's brother, who also has a heart condition, had received temporary permission to stay because of the severity of his condition, but then decided to travel back to Bosnia "voluntarily."

In 2017, 2,028 refugees were deported from Berlin, of which more than 80 percent were sent back to Balkan

countries, including 254 to Bosnia.

At the end of December, the Senate Department for Integration, Labor and Social Affairs assessed that there was a total of 11,754 migrants who had been denied asylum and were legible for deportation.



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