

Yugoslav-African solidarity, Women and Personal Archives: The case of Olja Džuverović's Materials

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Abstract (147 Words)

This paper introduces an archive in the making, a body of material emerging from the life and work of Olja Džuverović (1947 – 2006), a Yugoslav political worker who was in the leadership of the Commission for Assistance to the Liberation Movements at the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Yugoslavia, a key agent in Yugoslav support of and solidarity with countries undergoing the process of decolonialisation in the latter half of the 20th Century, and later a diplomat to countries including Zimbabwe and South Africa. Written by Olja Džuverović's niece, Dr Lina Džuverović, who is in the process of cataloguing the archive, the paper gives an overview of the archive contents, giving a short biographical introduction to Olja Džuverović, while also highlighting key methodological challenges in working with personal archives and discussing questions that arise in through archival work in relation to how collective memory is formed.

Keywords: Non-aligned movement, Yugoslavia, Olja Džuverović, archive, collective memory, gender history, exclusion.

The birth of an archive –from the personal to the public

At what point does a collection of materials become an archive? When does somebody's life and work, their books, papers, photographs, informal handwritten notes and objects become of interest and value to others? Who is in a position to make a decision about turning somebody else's belongings into a public resource? What about privacy? What about things the person was uncertain about, possibly not happy with, that can be gleaned from the materials that survive them? What to edit out and what to leave in? What are the ethical decisions along the way and how much intervention and interpretation is necessary for the

material to make sense and be meaningful to others? Most importantly – what would this person, no longer there, say about this new publicness?

This paper introduces an archive in the making, and the questions that arise as I work with the materials from the life and work of my aunt Olja Džuverović. Olja worked for the Commission for Assistance to the Liberation Movements at the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Yugoslavia, was a diplomat, and a key agent in Yugoslav support of and solidarity with countries undergoing the process of decolonialisation in the latter half of the 20th Century.

The material in question has come to be in my possession after Olja's untimely death in Windhoek, Namibia, in 2006. For some years after her death, doing anything with her work papers which were left in our family home in Belgrade seemed impossible, too emotional, and too raw. But the reality of a damp unoccupied house, flooding, break-ins, decay and the risk of the material being forever lost, eventually made the question of her papers, photographs, notebooks and conference documentation, an urgent matter. Allowing for this wealth of material to decay and disappear was not an option, knowing that some of the documents left in Olja's room were of public interest and could be of genuine use to researchers of Yugoslav political history.

In 2015, my mother Vesna (Olja's sister) and I packed up as much of the material as we could into suitcases and transported them to Zagreb where I was then living. The materials (by then referred to as Olja's archive) subsequently travelled with me to Reading and then London, following my professional journey from one University to another. The boxes remained unopened.

Eventually, in 2019 a conversation about Olja's work in Africa began with the curatorial team of the Museum of African Art in Belgrade, initially with my mother and then myself. This was an impetus for me to begin to make my way through the archive, gradually cataloguing its contents and, as I went along, asking the above questions. I approached this task not so much as an academic, or a niece, but something in between - as a custodian, aiming to remain a neutral voice trying to serve the material in the best possible way, by working to make it available to others and minimally intervening in its contents and interpretation.

Some years later, this archive-in-the-making is gradually finding its place in the world, through inclusion in exhibitions and through the formation of a working group which will begin its meetings in September 2022, as a way of supporting the archive's journey from private to public. The long-term goal of this working group is to engage with the content of the archive, to learn from it and perhaps propose ways forward. Ultimately, we will aim to identify a permanent home for these materials, in a library or archive, making them easily available to researchers. My hope with the group is to 'give flight' to the voices within the archive and engage with it by moving beyond the limitations of the exhibition space. By inviting interested peers to delve into the material through focussed sessions, the group will focus on particular clusters of the material, using the sessions to tell others about a particular part of the archive.

In this text I will present introduce these materials, starting with a short biographical introduction to Olja Džuverović, then moving to the contents of the archive itself, even though of course the personal story and the archive materials are deeply interconnected and cannot be separated. I will conclude with some thoughts on the methodological challenges in doing this work and questions that arise in relation to how collective memory is formed.

How the personal became the political – an attempt at a biography

Born in 1947 in Belgrade, an archaeologist by university education, Olja Džuverović was politically engaged from an early age through her participation in the Yugoslav student movement (**Savez socijalističke omladine Jugoslavije**). It was not long before politics took over her archaeological explorations, through organisational work to support international students and her interest in the struggle of countries seeking to gain independence from colonial rule. Olja soon built-up knowledge about the decolonial struggle, through research and organising but above all fuelled by her friendships with African students, learning through people's first-hand accounts and experiences and connecting with them on a simple and human level. The more she learned about the struggle for liberation, the more she read and researched about the broader political situation in different African countries. Often inviting international visitors to our home, I recall witnessing, as a child, frequent late night gatherings, informal dinner parties populated by guests from different countries, speaking various languages, with fado music, cigarettes, homemade meals and political discussions stretching late into the night.



Fig 1: Olja Dzuverovic (center) with friends during her student days, circa 1967, photographer unknown.

As a result of her active role in the student movement and her growing knowledge about liberation movements across Africa, Olja took a position in the leadership of the Commission for Assistance to the Liberation Movements at the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Yugoslavia (SSRNJ), the largest and most influential mass organization in the country. It is from this period (late 1970s to late 1980s) that most of the documents of the archive date. Olja later became a diplomat, taking positions in Zimbabwe in the mid-1980s and South Africa in early 2000s. Towards the end of her career she moved from South Africa to Namibia, leaving her political work in the now former Yugoslavia behind for good. She was immediately granted Namibian nationality as a result of her earlier solidarity and active support during the country's struggle for liberation, the links she had established with South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) and the then president of Namibia, Sam Nujoma. (Fig 2). In Namibia, in the early 2000s, she took up the role of Special Advisor to the Minister of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, a role she held until her untimely death at the age of 57, in 2006.

But as important as the more formal CV, listing roles she occupied, is Olja's lifetime commitment to principles of socialism, equality, the decolonial project and her deep-seated belief in pursuing the struggle for independence for her comrades. These were principles which were woven into everything she did and can be felt in the texts she authored and the many speeches her later wrote in Namibia. She was a curious person, hungry for knowledge

and always learning, who aside from her lifelong engagement in politics, both professionally and at a grassroots level through simple forms of help and support to anyone in need, also had a keen interest in philosophy, psychoanalysis, archeology, art history, nutrition, spirituality and Eastern religions. It would be wrong not to mention her enormous dedication to animal welfare (and her numerous beloved dogs), her lifelong interest and passion for art, her drawing which she actively pursued throughout her life, and her commitment to the Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen teachings.

Whose Non-alignment?



Figure 2: Olja Dzuverovic at a summit in Libya, circa 1969 (the only woman in the picture), photographer unknown

I would like us to think, in relation to the Non-Aligned Movement, about how we historicise and remember, what material, events, images and acts reach the public realm and contribute to knowledge production, becoming canonical representations of historical events. I would like us to consider the act of *reading* of the archive, thinking with Gayatri Spivak's when she writes about the 'pattern of exclusions that makes the familiar function as such'. Spivak asks:

‘As the historical record is made up, who is dropped out, when, and why?’¹ In other words, I would like us to think of the political unconscious that underpins the material in any archive, both through the very existence of those particular materials, and what importance and role we subsequently give them. In the case of this archive, I am particularly interested in the role someone like Olja Džuverović would have played in the history of the Yugoslav role in the Non-aligned Movement, a progressive and emancipatory political initiative which has nevertheless been inscribed within a deeply patriarchal logic, as is evident in the image of Olja at a political gathering (Fig 2) – an image I will return to later in this text.

Into the Archive – A Window into Non-Aligned Solidarity on the Ground

Delving into what I have provisionally named the *Yugoslav Non-Aligned Movement Solidarity Archive* can be approached as a case study in diplomatic relations, knowledge-production and processes and communications that underpin in such work. The materials illuminate ways in which foreign policy is turned into action, through both internal and external communication within a government department. Some of the material was intended as working documents, and never meant to be seen externally, preserved, or archived. A crucial significance, for me, lies in the way we can observe working processes of a government department whose mission was one of solidarity and support with other nations times of crisis. The communication channels, the protocols as well as hierarchies become evident, as is the case in any other working environment. Studying the documents opens up questions about naturalised hierarchies and structures within diplomacy, inviting an entire angle of analysis.

So, what is to be found in this archive in the making?

The archive consists of several thousand individual items, comprising internal SSRNJ documents, United Nations Reports, newsletters, briefing documents, a wide range of bulletins by various grassroots organisations, communiqués, magazines, books, newspaper clippings, personal notes taken at conferences, handwritten or hand-corrected draft notes for speeches or reports, Olja’s own summaries of foreign language books (often written as a way

¹ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives*, History and Theory, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Oct., 1985), pp. 247-272

of rendering publications she deemed important, accessible to her colleagues), academic texts or conference papers, photographs. (Fig 3).



Fig 3: Parts of the archive being repacked en route from Zagreb to Reading, 2015,

The materials are in English, French, Portuguese, and Serbo-Croat with a couple of documents in Arabic. The value lies in the combination of materials collected over decades, primary documents demonstrating methodical work as well as extensive travels of someone deeply immersed in international relations and diplomacy, as well as the fact that some of this material may not exist elsewhere due to a fire that took place at the Archives of Yugoslavia (or Serbia?) in year (?), in which some of the material that vanished were precisely SSRNJ files.

Most of the material dates from the late 1970s to mid-1980s and most of it document Yugoslavia's relations with Zimbabwe, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania and Angola, although not exclusively these countries. Yugoslav- Namibian relations perhaps form the largest part of the archive.

The archive contains numerous 'clusters' of up to 30 documents, centered around events of key importance that Olja would have attended, or summarised in order to brief colleagues. For example, the Symposium Amilcar Cabral, held in Praia, Cabo Verde, 17 – 20 January 1983 is covered thoroughly, comprising approximately 20 documents from the symposium. Not only does this 'cluster' include copies of numerous speeches given at the symposium, but it also contains Olja's handwritten summaries of many of the speeches, written in Serbian, thus expanding access to their content, and making them available to her non-English

speaking colleagues, drawing out key arguments and information. She was fluent in English with a working knowledge of French and Portuguese and she methodically provided summaries of documents, in Serbo-Croat, drawing out key points and jotting down relevant passages and pages. It is material like this that I find to be of most significance, adding another level to the existing documents, with the summaries drawing attention to what felt urgent and significant at that particular moment.

The materials also include unique primary documents, such as for instance the handwritten letter authored by members of the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (South Africa) in 1982, sent to the Yugoslav Ambassador to Tanzania, which he then forwarded to Olja's office, in which the authors draw attention to the tensions within the party, even anticipating its imminent demise. (Fig 4)

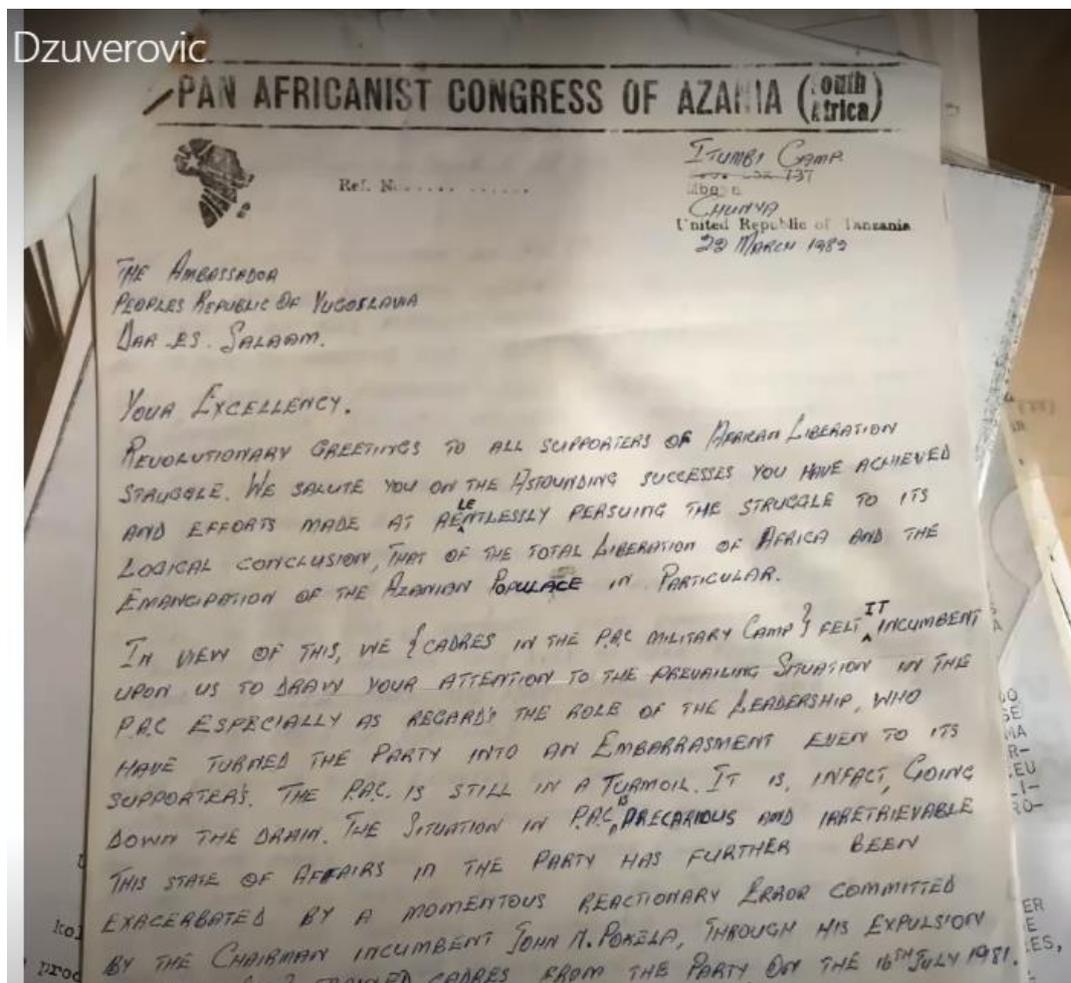


Figure 4: First page of a handwritten letter from the members of the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania to the Yugoslav ambassador to Tanzania,

Freeing up the Many Voices within the Archive

As has already become clear, this is a rich and multifaceted archive which will need substantial study, cataloguing and analysis. As with any such material, there are numerous stages of the archive coming into being and many voices involved in its creation and its readings. In this case, we of course must begin with the numerous authors of the material and their respective contexts, the primary voices that are to be found in the archive - the politicians, scholars, activists, revolutionaries, diplomats etc, and the overarching tone of Yugoslav foreign policy, the socio-political context that underpinned the work we can glean from the archive.

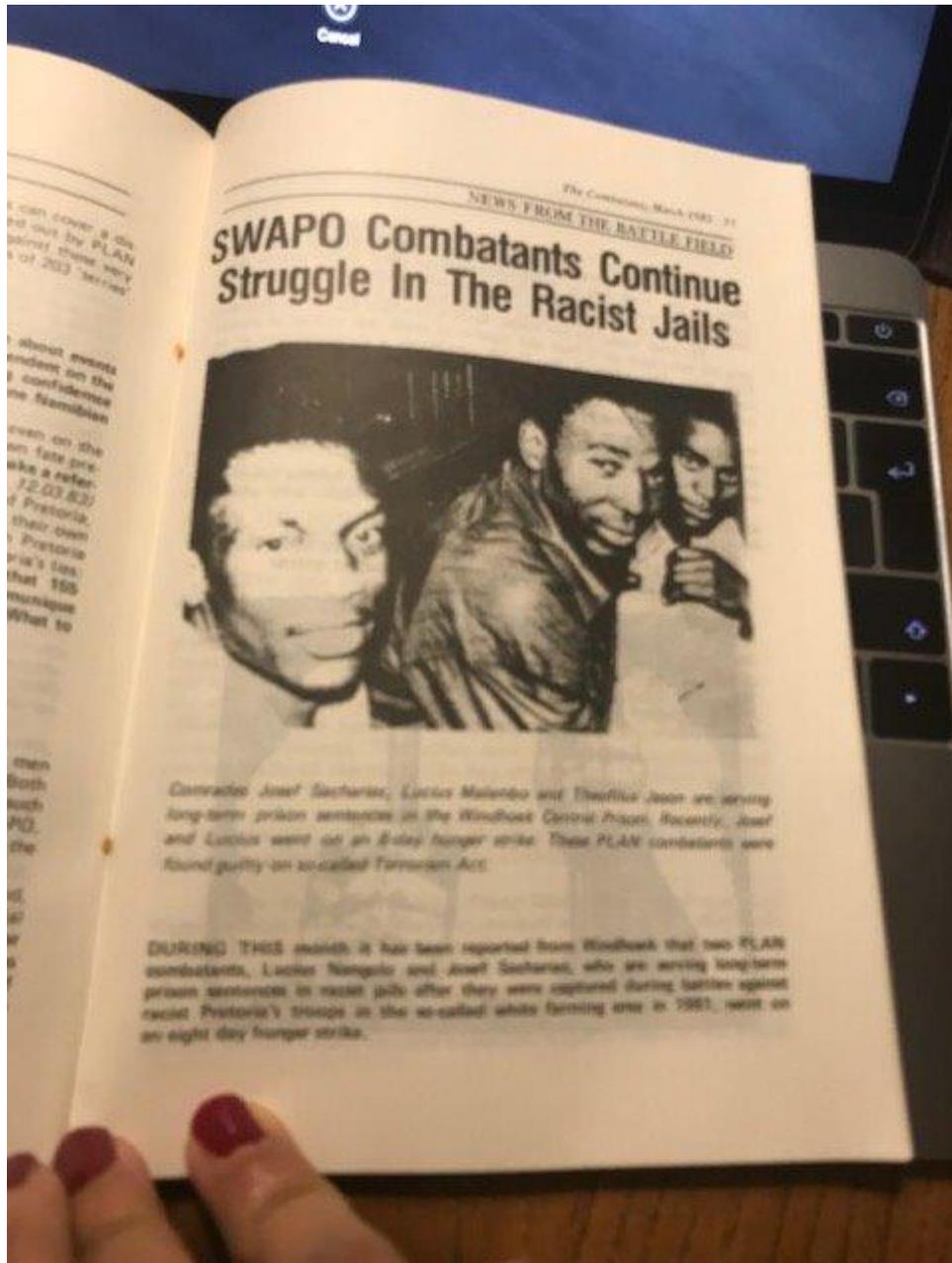
A very important central agent is Olja herself and her selections and readings of the texts as well as her decision to preserve these materials, no doubt fuelled by the understanding of their importance (I should add that parts of the archive were organised, wrapped in brown paper and clearly labelled by her, which demonstrates a clear intention to preserve them, while other parts of these materials were lying around in her room in Belgrade). There is, of course, the political context, the 'voice' of Yugoslav Non-alignment and the very fact that a Commission for Assistance to the Liberation Movements at the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Yugoslavia existed as a government department and had substantial agency and support to aid the liberation struggles of these countries in concrete and practical ways.

There is, of course, some thirty-odd years later, the intervention by my mother and myself to preserve, pack, transport and begin to catalogue this material, and our own contexts, positionality as well as our personal agenda, which is to ensure Olja's work remains available. Our initiative to do so is inspired and made possible by the enthusiasm of curators and cultural workers across the region, whose invitations have given us the context to begin this work.

Gayatri Spivak reminds us that the 'willed (auto)biography of the West masquerades as disinterested history, even when the critic presumes to touch its unconscious.' Whilst we are here working with material that ruptures imperialist narratives, we must also put into question the uninterrupted narratives of Yugoslavia and its socialism. The very existence of this archive (and no doubt many others like it) points to an anomaly. The narrative of non-alignment and the narrative of Yugoslavia, with their progressive and emancipatory impulses are still narratives written and cemented by agents of patriarchy. The anomaly of this archive

is that by its very existence it demonstrates an active central role of a female protagonist who is nowhere to be seen in the dominant narratives inscribed through official channels.

Questions, in place of a Conclusion



As with any archive, the deeper one delves, the more questions emerge and I find myself at the very beginning of the possibilities this material opens up. The process of cataloguing the material, and in the process beginning to learn about it, has generated two lines of enquiry. The first emerges from the material itself and the second concerns the role of the archivist,

the custodian, the institution, asking how to activate the material and ensure a link to the present allowing it to be adequately understood, used, disseminated and researched in the best and most accessible way..

In the first category, I am drawn to the many narratives the archive opens. Wishing to fill in the blanks in the picture as I make my way through dozens of texts each calling out for further research, I wonder where this material fits in the broader study of NAM and its existing historical accounts. How much of this material is held elsewhere? What value does this combination of documents hold, on the one hand informing about Yugoslav history and on the other the political history of many African countries, and to whom can these combined resources be most useful?

Whilst some of the documented events, such as for instance the conference on Namibian independence held in Vienna in 1986, are likely to be thoroughly covered elsewhere, other material feels like a rare gem, opening up dozens of follow up questions. For instance, one of the items is an itinerary for a visit to Belgrade by Vusumzi Make – the President of the Pan African Congress of Azania and prominent civil rights activist (also, interestingly, the former husband of Maya Angelou) and his delegation. The group was welcomed and led by Olja herself, and the schedule of meetings and visits, the choices of where to visit and whom to meet with make for an intriguing account, inviting further research into this visit and the content of conversations. Similarly, delving into individual news stories reported in SWAPO bulletins (Fig 4) describing events, protests, instances of suppressed uprisings, police brutality, imprisoned activists, organisational issues but also revolutionary poetry, all call for a research project unto itself.

In the second category of questions, I think about the work necessary to illuminate the lesser known events and protagonists within the history of Yugoslav socialism. As a feminist scholar, interested in forms of labour that remain invisible and written out of narratives, I cannot help but ask questions along the gender lines wondering about and easily overlooked and forgotten aspects of the work performed by Olja (and no doubt others too) which often extended into affective, socially reproductive labour, would have seamlessly incorporated into her political work, drawing on her enthusiasm to host people in our home, entertain and cook. Her whole life Olja worked in a heavily male-dominated environment, a career that came to an end in a less than satisfactory way, in the difficult years around 2000. While this was not something she spoke about much in relation to her own experience, in many of the

subsequent speeches she wrote passionately about gender equality and the urgent need for women's emancipation and equality. The history of the Non-aligned movement is, we must not forget, a predominantly male history (despite the country's proclamations of gender equality in the workplace) as far as its public image is concerned. With many women occupying key roles but enjoying little subsequent visibility, this dominant but impoverished narrative must continue to be challenged and gaps must continue to be filled in.

As I read through this material, I wonder about gender relations in the field of politics at the time and cannot help but wonder whether Olja's diplomatic work, her enormous knowledge and rigour in research were duly acknowledged. In the image above, jokingly now referred to as 'Olja in a sea of men', we see Olja as the only woman amongst hundreds of men gathered at an event, which we believe is the inauguration of Moammar El Ghaddafi in 1969. Would she have observed and thought about her own presence as the only woman in the picture, or would this have been simply part and parcel of her usual experience? Was this image just one of many examples of her quiet presence, but equally pointing to her unique achievements.

In conclusion, I invite you, reader, to think through these questions with me and explore how to best activate this resource and tap into the revolutionary spirit present on the pages of these documents, but to also give due recognition to a woman whose work behind the scenes deserves to be acknowledged and made available for further study.