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Michael Borek

An Abandoned Factory's Clinton Connection

By James Estrin Jul. 22, 2015

Michael Borek talks for a living, as a freelance Czech interpreter for the United States government. So it shouldn't come as a surprise that when he isn't working, he relishes silence. He has spent years searching for and photographing "old and dilapidated things," like abandoned industrial sites.

Not long ago, he went to an enormous lace factory in Scranton, Pa., that was eerily frozen in time from the day it closed in 2002. Walking through the complex, which included an infirmary and a bowling alley, he could feel the presence of the generations of unsung workers who toiled there throughout the 20th century.

“I was very touched by the place when I was there, because people were sent home in the middle of their shift and they left many personal belongings there,” [Mr. Borek](#), 56, said. “I didn’t try to make it into social commentary, but more a meditation on empty space that started to have a life of its own.”



Lace display from a former showroom. Michael Borek

Mr. Borek returned to Scranton throughout 2010 as he researched the history of the factory, which was once the world’s largest producer of Nottingham lace. He soon came across a small but curious detail: Among its thousands of workers was Hugh Simpson Rodham, a Welsh immigrant who started there as a teenager and

spent his entire working life at the factory. He married a coal miner's daughter, had children and retired at 65. There was little that made him stick out, except for his granddaughter Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Although Mrs. Clinton [now mentions](#) her immigrant grandfather in campaign speeches, Mr. Borek thought little of it at the time. He was much more interested in the factory ruins than the Clinton connection. Besides, while he had interpreted for Presidents Obama, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, as well as Secretaries of State Madeleine Albright and Condoleezza Rice, he had never been called upon to by Mrs. Clinton.

Like Mrs. Clinton's grandfather, Mr. Borek is an immigrant. He was born in Prague in 1958 and earned an M.B.A. in economics, but hated working for the Communist government and soon quit his job as an economist. Instead, he worked as a night watchman so he could study English and pursue his growing interest in photography. He eventually became an interpreter, a profession that was in great demand after the 1989 Velvet Revolution opened up the country. A software developing company lured him to the United States in 1992 and he stayed.

“Once I got the peeling paint photos out of my organism, I started focusing on details and things that had geometric shapes,” he said. “I began to see it as more than a dilapidated building but a visual study of something that had a life of its own.”

After photographing the lace factory, he accompanied Mrs. Clinton on her last trip to Europe as secretary of state. He mentioned to her aides that he had photographed the sprawling complex where her grandfather had spent his working life. She asked to see the photos



Old machinery found in the factory. Michael Borek

A few years later, when digital cameras hit the market, Mr. Borek renewed his interest in photography and soon began exhibiting his work. His visual influences include the surrealist art movement and the Czech photographer Josef Sudek, which partly explains his desire to get past “old factory porn” when he explored the lace factory.

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and later sent him a warm thank you note, bringing this unusual coincidence full circle.

“It was just a simple twist of fate,” he said. “Kind of weird, but kind of natural.”

An exhibit of Mr. Borek’s photographs, entitled “What Would Sudek Do?,” [is on view](#) at the Bohemian National Hall in New York City until August 3rd.

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