

Last Shift

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Abstract

'The Romanian authorities submitted a detailed table with viability scores for each production unit. The results of the ranking outlined that Paroseni, Uricani and Petrila production units do not have viable economic perspectives and need to be included in the closure plan'

(State aid SA. 33033 — Romania — National Hard Coal Company Petroșani, 22nd November 2012)

On 26th November 2012, Valea Jiului (the National Society of Closing Coal Mines), was established with the sole purpose of closing down three coal mines (S.M. Paroseni, S.M. Petrila and S.M. Uricani) that were perceived as uneconomical and unreliable.. *Last Shift* is a photographic documentary of the last few months of mining activity in each of the three mines. The collection of images aims to raise awareness of the coal mining industry in Romania, and the proposed closures. The project shares a similar topic to Sebastiao Salgado's *Workers* project of the 1990s. However, Salgado's images are often criticized for being too aestheticized, exploiting human misery and showing the effects of heavy toil in a romantic way, whilst the purpose of *Last Shift* is to show the miners as individuals in a dignified manner, focusing on the humanity of each subject.

Keywords: coal, energy, miners, photography, recession

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Summary

Last Shift avoids the photographic clichés and tropes of miners working underground, or images of them in the shower rooms cleaning off thick black coal dust. In this respect, my aim was to show the miners in a positive light, similar to how August Sander portrayed his *People of the 20th Century*.

Last Shift also touches upon the perception of miners during a period of social unrest. In June 1990 the miners from Jiu Valley were summoned to Bucharest by the emerging democratic power in an attempt to suppress the riots against former communist politicians who were still holding Government positions. Easily convinced and appropriated, the miners supported the police in a violent defence for the emerging democratic authorities. Stereotypes of miners being uneducated, violent and easily manipulated still survive as popular beliefs; the miners are still tainted with this perception and seen as a group one should avoid. Through a positive approach, *Last Shift* questions these generalisations to overturn misconceptions and prejudices, crucially repositioning the miners as individuals and reinstating their human qualities.

The project was developed over a period of 11 months (September 2012-August 2013). In order to gain access and permission to photograph the miners, the National Society of Closing Coal Mines requested a formal application, which was accredited by the Romanian Ministry of Economy. Afterwards all three mines were informed about the project that was about to follow. This process was important not only for gaining access to mines and miners, but also to gain the managers' and miners' confidence, which provided the opportunity for one-to-one discussions about the project and its purpose. Throughout the process, every brigade leader was informed about the project and every portrayed miner was also asked for their permission.

The closing date for all three mines is set for 31st December 2017 (31st December 2015 for S.M. Petrila). Collectively the three mines will send around 2,400 employees towards retirement or make them redundant. The project may not change the denouement of these three mines, but the photographs can represent a platform for future remembrance and a way of offering the miners a form of dignity they have been looking for since 1990.

References

European Commission (2012). *State aid SA. 33033 – Romania - National Hard Coal Company* Brussels. Retrieved from: http://ec.europa.eu/competition/state_aid/cases/241737/241737_1352982_64_2.pdf



Miner finishing the shift – Uricani Mine,
01.08.2013



Paroşeni Mine, 02.08.2013 – the cat was living there, being fed by
the miners



Miners Brigade Leader – Petrita Mine,
12.09.2012



The miners adopted the cat as the mine's pet – Paroşeni Mine,
02.08.2013



Miner before the shift – Uricani Mine,
01.08.2013



The mine is a community and it feels more like a family than a job for some of the
miners – Paroşeni
Mine,
02.08.2013



Locksmith – Paroşeni Mine,
02.08.2013



Miner having the last smoke before his shift – Paroşeni Mine,
02.08.2013



Injured miner – Petrița Mine,
12.09.2012



Miner resting on the trolley – Paroșeni Mine,
02.08.2013