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Munich: The forgotten survivor

A young Yugoslav diplomat was among those injured in the Munich air crash. He tells his story for the first time

By Cole Moreton
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Bato Tomasevic was not a player. He was a young attaché with the Yugoslav embassy in London, who travelled with the team as a fixer. But he too was seriously hurt, and spent a month in the same hospital room as Bobby Charlton and other members of the team. He has not seen them since those harrowing days, but will take part in commemorative events this week. "I was asked to things every year for the past 50 years, but I never accepted," he told *The Independent on Sunday* in his first national newspaper interview. "I always found some excuse and never kept in touch. I didn't want to give interviews or be written about."

So many words have been written about the night of 6 February 1958, on which some of the best players of their generation were killed. "I saw the plane burning and people running and moaning," said Mr Tomasevic. "Young, healthy men, falling down. Dying. It was a hellish scene."

The British European Airways plane carrying the team back from a game against Red Star Belgrade had stopped off in Munich for fuel. Snow and ice hampered the take-off. At the third attempt, the aircraft overshot the runway. The manager Matt Busby was almost killed. Duncan Edwards, star of the young side known as the Busby Babes, was one of two people who died in hospital. Seven players lost their lives in the plane itself, along with 14 other people, including club staff, journalists and members of the crew.

Next Sunday, current Manchester United players will play their local rivals City in a sponsorless replica of the kit from 1958. The Manchester City manager, Sven Goran Eriksson, has written to his side's fans, pleading with them to respect a minute's silence.

Before that, on the day of the anniversary, England players will wear black armbands and keep silence ahead of a game with Switzerland. And Mr Tomasevic will travel from his home in Exeter to Manchester for a service of remembrance at the club's ground, Old Trafford. Half of the 1,000 seats will go to those who survived the crash, their friends and relatives and club staff; season ticket holders have been invited to apply for the rest. "Quite a number of survivors have passed away," he said. "There are only a few of us left."

He was 28 when he travelled with the team. "It was the peak of the Cold War. Yugoslavia was under Communism and it was not easy to go there. Somebody from the embassy had to accompany them, to help with police and customs and so on."

He wanted to go to Belgrade anyway, to ask for special permission to marry an English girl called Madge. They had met while he was at Exeter University.

After drawing the match in Belgrade, the players were in a good mood on the plane. "Laughter, cracking jokes. The steward helped things along by serving whisky."

Mr Tomasevic was sitting in the front row, facing the steward who had his back to the cockpit, until the third time they boarded. "The steward asked if I wanted to swap, as other people were doing. I did. He died. I survived."

The crash took less than a minute but "seemed to last a lifetime". Mr Tomasevic blacked out but came round 100 yards from the plane, still in his seat. "I got up, and then saw that there were hardly any clothes left on me." They had been blown off in the crash. "Even my shoes, which were heavy and laced properly, were gone." At first he could not take in what had happened. "I looked one way and saw white, snow, fields, nothing wrong. Then I turned and saw the plane. Faces and bodies were bleeding. Some people were drenched in petrol."

A woman was screaming for her baby daughter, who had been on her lap. She ran into the burning plane. "Then I saw Harry Gregg, the goalkeeper, come out of the wreckage with the little child in his

arms. He went back in to find the mother, and pulled her out. He was a real hero."

In hospital in Munich, Mr Tomasevic shared a room with the players Bobby Charlton, Dennis Violet, Ray Wood and Albert Scanlon. "Harry Gregg came in with all the newspapers in his hands and told us who had died and who had survived. I remember Bobby Charlton saying, 'I shall never, ever get into an aeroplane again, even if it costs me my football career.' But of course, that was impossible to stick to, for any of us."

Mr Tomasevic did marry Madge, without permission, in Devon two months after the crash - and was sacked from the diplomatic service. They both went to live in Belgrade, working at the university. Later, Mr Tomasevic was a journalist. "I was general director of the federal TV channel in 1991," he said. "Slobodan Milosevic did not like my programmes. I was about to be imprisoned, but Madge and I managed to escape the country."

They moved to Exeter in 1997, and have two grown-up daughters. Why take part in a Munich event now? "I have become sentimental," he sighed. "I am 78. I thought, 'Yes, now is the time to see them all, at last.'" He was asked by Harry Gregg, after the two men spent time together in Belfast. "I cannot believe it is 50 years. The scenes stay in your mind. They are not something you can forget."

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