

# A diary from the Croatian diaspora : the suffering of the Croatian people in the 20th century as seen through the prism of one Croatain family

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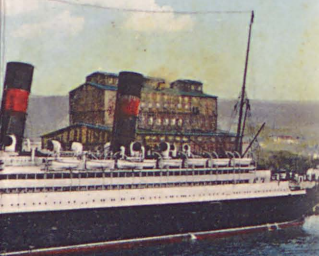
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VANDA BORAS PODRAVAC

A DIARY  
FROM  
THE CROATIAN  
DIASPORA





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VANDA BORAS PODRAVAC

## A DIARY FROM THE CROATIAN DIASPORA

THE SUFFERING OF THE CROATIAN PEOPLE IN THE 20TH CENTURY  
AS SEEN THROUGH THE PRISM OF ONE CROATIAN FAMILY

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Croatian Heritage Foundation  
Zagreb, 2018





*Dedicated to all Croatian martyrs, whose graves are not known.*



Scene from the Homeland War (1991 – 1995) in the Republic of Croatia:  
destroyed Amerling Fountain at the capital square in the centre of Dubrovnik in May 1992.

*Should we forget?*



In June 1995 the Amerling fountain was restored thanks to a donation  
from the Bruno Grillo Foundation. (Photographs: Damir Fabijanić).



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## INTRODUCTION

For many years I have often thought about what brought me here to this country – Australia, after so much wandering abroad.

That journey took me to different sides of the world, far from my beloved homeland, to build a new life from the beginning, not once but twice.

The Croatian diaspora is scattered across the four corners of the earth. Our people are connected through the same nationality, religion and culture, in many new environments far from our homeland leading the same lives we were accustomed to at home.

I think that these wanderings are all about finding a better life for ourselves and our families. There is also a matter of great loss – loss of family and homeland, and adjustment to new environments, while at the same time living in two cultures, but truth be known, belonging to neither. Yet, in the end, we do so for our families, as I have done for my family, my husband Milko, and my four children.

Croatia is blessed as one of the most beautiful countries in the world, however at the same time its history is perilous. There had been many battles fought seizing it by force because of its abundant wealth and beauty.

In the first part of the book I write about the lives of my family and Milko's family, who experienced many upheavals before and during the time of the Second World War, and beyond. This was the time when the Croatian people suffered more than at any other time in history, as evidenced by many events of this time. This is a time when we, who now belong to the older generations, lived through many trials, which at the same time were experiences that forged a path to the future. These trials were a turning point, later paving the way for our people in society.

In the second part of the book, I recount the challenges we encountered in a foreign land which did not always welcome us with open arms. We had to learn a new language not once, but twice. We had to strive to overcome all obstacles, with only sheer determination and the will to make a better life for my family and also to help my



people, culminating with my achievement of a university degree which I attained in a language other than my mother tongue. It was difficult for me as an adult with ongoing responsibilities, with a permanent job and many family commitments, to find the time to study, but with the support of my husband Milko and my four children, I achieved my study goals.

Doing voluntary work in the community, we helped not only people in need, but also found shelter and comfort in each other's company since we could not return to our homeland. Only after a long absence, when Croatia was finally free, we returned to its soil.

I have tried to relate all that we lived through in our homeland and abroad during those 45 years of struggle in the twentieth century. Little is known of those times, much less written.

By the end of the book, the reader will have some idea of the obstacles we overcame, not only helping each other in a foreign land, but also together contributing to facilitate the return of dignity to our homeland, which had been blemished by skilful anti-Croatian propaganda.

Often we encountered obstacles, but we also experienced successes. Our greatest contribution was during the time of the Homeland War, 1990-1995, when all of us, building on established foundations, were successful in having Croatia recognised as an old nation that had fought throughout history for its survival.

It is my intent to recount my thoughts because there are fewer and fewer of us who were witness to that period in history. All those who can, should leave behind something to retell the truth about that turbulent but significant time in our history. We owe that to those who placed their lives before the altar of our homeland.

This book is the tragic story of one Croatian family (and there were plenty), that clearly depicts the causes and consequences of the Croatian tragedy in the past century.

## I. LIFE IN THE HOMELAND

### UNHAPPY MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD EVENTS

Childhood is the time when we form our own perceptions of reality, and our experiences shape us, distinguish us, and make us unique. Everyone is a reflection of the environment in which they live, and this stays with us for the rest of our lives.

But, often it is just one incident in childhood that crucially has the greatest impact on what we remember and on shaping our future thinking. The incident might be some rare occurrence, but one which the individual remembers forever.

And so it is, that I shall forever remember an event that occurred in Senj, my hometown, on 9 May 1937, when I was seven years old.

The day before, 8 May 1937, we went to a formal reception for the Croatian choir group "Trebević" from Sarajevo, led by a Member of Parliament, Dr. Jure Šutej, which arrived in Senj as part of its national tour. At that celebration there were many people from the surrounding region, including Gospić, a town in Lika, a region in Croatia. It was a two-day cultural celebration to honour the founders of the HSS (Croatian Country Party) the brothers Radić (one of them, Stjepan, was shot in the Belgrade parliament in 1928 and later died), as well as to honour Matija Gubec, (leader of Croatian Peasant Revolt in 1573), who was tortured and executed in Zagreb by order of Baron Ferenc Tahy).

On that occasion they sang "Oj ti vilo Velebita", and all went well until the next day when the guests from Lika were to travel back to Gospić.

On that day, the 9<sup>th</sup> of May, young people from Gospić, soccer players from the Gospić Građanski team, were playing a friendly match against the team from Senj. We children, and other Senj locals were participating in the celebrations and talking with our guests. On that fateful day Serbian *žandars* [Serbian special military unit],

under the leadership of Maks Besedić started to fire at the third truck, which had Croatian flags twirling from it. On that occasion, seven young Croatians were killed, and many others wounded.

At the same time my father found himself caught up in the middle of these events as he had been sitting in front of the Velebit Café, where the trucks with the Gospić visitors were passing. When he heard the shooting, coming from the direction of the trucks, he jumped to his feet and flew in front of the *žandars*, to protect the Gospić youth.

Our mother quickly took us home and then she went to the hospital to visit her cousin, who had been wounded in the leg.

These events which my father experienced, together with other witness statements, were recorded by Dr. Vlatko Maček in the publication "The truth about the bloody events in Senj of the 9<sup>th</sup> May 1937." (Printing Merkantile, Ilica 35).

Among other things, Dr. Maček wrote the following statement from my father:

"On the 9<sup>th</sup> May I was sitting in front of the Café 'Velebit'. While I was sitting in front of the café I heard a shot from the western side of the The First Croatian Savings Bank. After a few minutes I heard a second revolver fire shot, and I noticed the face of the *žandar*, who we all knew by the name Maks. At the same time a truck with the youth travelling to Gospić was passing by, and when the truck came to a turn in front of the former Hotel Nehaj, I heard gunshots. I ran in front of the hotel Nehaj and there I found the *žandar* Captain Koprivica and six to seven other *žandars* in a single line. I jumped at Captain Koprivica with the following words:

"Captain, what are you doing? He replied to me ironically: 'Nothing'. This *žandar*, whom I know personally but do not know his name, threw his gun to the ground and told me: 'Mister Bude, leave here at once because I am shooting'. Of course, I ignored his order, and continued to ask him to clarify what the Captain was doing. I was commanded by that *žandar*, since the Captain did not answer my question, 'Hands up, and turn around!' And I moved away. I thought, there are two possibilities for that slaughter either that a district mayor who issued one-off order that there be a massacre, is not normal or that the particular *žandar* had unconditional orders to carry this out.

This is a true statement, which I can repeat at any time.

Budimir Boras. (signature)

Because of my father's statement, he was persecuted, as was his entire family. Our future under Serbian terror was thus sealed.





Picture 1. Six young men and a woman in their twenties, from Gospić, known as the Victims from Senj, were slaughtered in Senj on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 1937, as a result of terror carried out by Grand Serbian hegemonists, who were exterminating Croatian national identity in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

The day after the massacre, we found out that two young people, who were recently engaged, and died that day, had died together. Namely, when Nikola Bevandić, a young man who served his conscription in the Navy and was on leave, was shot and killed, his fiancée Katica Tonković threw herself in front of the bullet fire and one bullet hit her in the head and blew her brains out, scattering them on the pavement. The next day, we children went to see, out of curiosity, even though we did not understand, what had happened. Only later did that image of the scattered brain of that young lady on the sidewalk, as well as the lighting of candles at the site of the massacre, burn itself into my eternal memory. These bloody sidewalks were preserved in the catacombs below the Senj cathedral. Sadly, we cannot erase the memory of that sad day in Senj.

And so we children, at the time of our innocent childhood, instead of enjoying care-free games, witnessed something we did not understand, but which has impacted on our entire lives. Because of this event we were somehow punished and often missed out on many things which other children were able to enjoy.



## A SUDDEN RETURN TO CROATIA

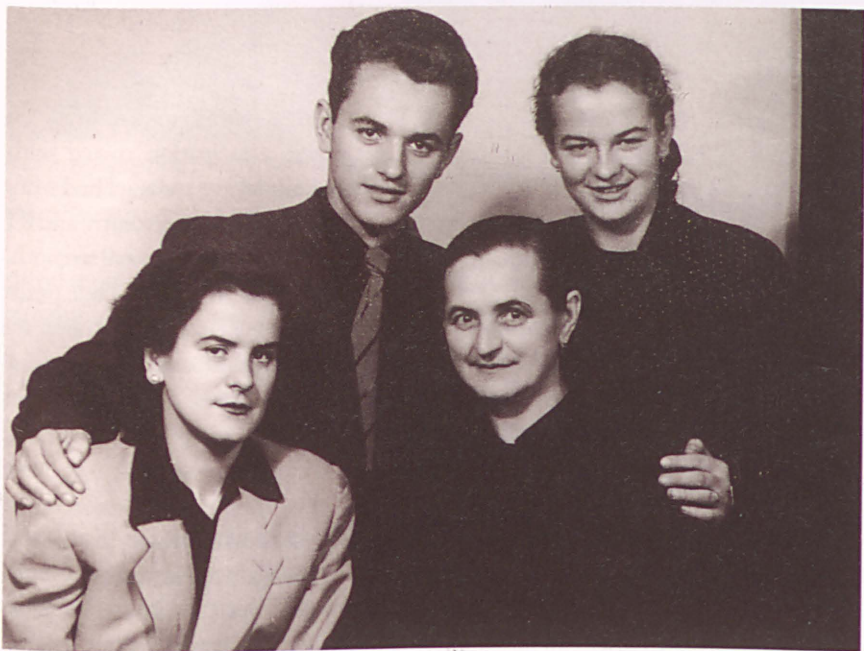
During the Homeland War in Croatia, all of us who live in the diaspora followed developments each and every day, not only through radio and other media, but also by telephone updates from our loved ones back home. We knew that this was a David and Goliath battle, and that in this unequal fight the West stood by and watched as innocent people were dying in defence of their motherland, in a war that Croatia neither caused nor sought. And the Croatian diaspora rose to their feet.

Not even one month after the international recognition of Croatian independence, my brother Krešimir, who lives in Crikvenica, phoned to tell me that our eldest sister Dolores had been killed in a bus accident. She had been visiting Croatia to investigate possibilities for a permanent return to her homeland. While travelling through Germany back to her home in Spain, where she lived following the death of her husband, the bus in which she was travelling overturned and she was killed instantly. On that occasion, she was travelling from Crikvenica to Munich on a double-decker bus full of passengers. According to the testimony of witnesses, she was seated in the last row on the top deck. And as the bus overturned, only two passengers were killed, and she was one of them. Sadly, she was so badly injured, that her children were not able to confirm her identity. It was only by the jewelry she wore that her children were able to formally confirm her identity. It was just one year earlier that she had visited me and my family, and that was the last time we met.

My sister had moved with her family from Argentina to Germany in 1962, where she lived with her three children, and the fourth child, Ivan, was born in Spain, where they briefly stayed while travelling to Germany to live there. They settled in Ludwigshafen, where my sister's husband, a law student and native of Ilača, got a job as a social worker for the Croatian community. And there they lived until his death, whereupon they returned to Spain, buying an apartment in Blanes, near Barcelona. But, when her husband Mato died in 1988, her wish was to return to Croatia. And with that intent she embarked on this fateful journey. That night when I received the sad news, the whole life of our family unfolded before my eyes, how we had suffered and how we had dispersed throughout the world, all of our destinies and tragedies that we had experienced, which seemed to be never ending. For a long time, I had considered, with the urging of my late husband and our children, writing of our family's ordeals, to convey in words how the Croatian people had suffered in the last century. Going to my sister's funeral was my first visit to Croatia in 38 years.

## FAREWELL TO MOTHER – FOREVER

Even today I can still see before my eyes the vision of my mother when I last saw her, more than fifty years ago, when we became forever separated. I still see her face, pressed against the glass door of the waiting room at the railway station in Sežana when we were pulled apart by the militiaman who would not allow her onto the platform. It was an autumn day, in September 1954, on the border between the former Yugoslavia and Italy. She personally accompanied me to the border as she feared that something would happen to me when leaving Croatia on my journey to Argentina, where I was to join my sister Dolores. My mother wanted to make sure that the communists did not arrest me or remove me from the train. I was 24 years old.



Picture 2. Last picture with mother before my departure to Argentina in 1954.  
(Standing: my brother Krešimir and my sister Ada).

At that time, it was impossible to get a visa to leave Yugoslavia. Knowing that I would have problems had I applied for passage to Argentina, I tried to find another way of getting there. My friend Ljubica came to my help. I had worked with Ljubica at the offices of "Ina" in Zagreb. Since I obtained a visa illegally, by paying a bribe to



a communist official, there was good reason for my mother to be concerned. There was a possibility that the Udba (the Yugoslav secret police), could possibly prevent my departure. My mother feared that I could end up in jail, or that she would not be able to trace my movements if I disappeared. And that is how I came to get a visa via Ljubica, whose good friend Marija had the appropriate contacts, and that same connection assisted Marija in getting to Canada. In fact, her husband defected over the border, skiing across Slovenia into Austria, leaving behind a pregnant spouse, for whom he later arranged to join him.



Picture 3. On Croatian soil after 38 years

And so I left Croatia, and only returned after 38 years, and that was for the funeral of my eldest sister Dolores. At the border I was met by my brother Krešimir. My return home after so many years was full of emotion, tears, and incredible anticipation mixed with uncertainty. For so long I had wondered if I would ever return, and if I would have the emotional strength, because long ago I had made peace with the fact that I would never return to my native soil.

### OUR FAMILY LIFE IN SENJ

Our family was large, there were eight children (plus two who died at birth), and in those times it was not unusual for Senj families to have so many children. Of the eight of us, three died tragically, two died at a young age, which can be attributed to the circumstances and times in which they lived. This applies especially to my brother Budimir who, from the early age of 17 years, was imprisoned so it is not surprising he died at 49. Our father met a similar fate, passing away when he was 60.

My father also came from a large family, which had eleven children, all of whom got along with each other. I remember happy childhood Christmas holidays when my father's sisters, they were eight, would get together with us in our family home and together we would spend a traditional family day. In our family the custom was to



Picture 4. Remaining children from Boras family with mother in 1947. Father was imprisoned in concentration camp Lepoglava. (Sitting: Ada, mother Marica and Domagoj. Standing: Jadranka, Vanda, Budimir and Krešimir).

spend those special days in the home of the eldest male, which was my father, the only remaining male of three brothers who still lived in Senj.

In those days, it was not a custom to give gifts as it is today, and circumstances did not allow it, but instead we would visit each other on that special day. First, we would attend midnight mass, which everyone attended regardless of whether they regularly went to church or not. After the Midnight Mass we all celebrated at each other's home, with ham, cabbage rolls and cakes. There would be lots of singing, mostly Christmas carols and holiday songs, bringing back childhood memories, and sometimes we shed a tear in memory of those who were no longer with us. My father rarely went to church, but he never missed a Christmas Midnight Mass. The next day, on Christmas Day, we went to Mass, and after the Mass, we visited neighbouring homes, children carrying apples, hoping that someone would score the apple with the coin in it. And this inevitably included all our many aunts, so we visited them first. And that was our Christmas gift!

These are memories that I have carried with me throughout my refugee's life, and which came back to me when I returned, although this return was neither a celebration nor a happy homecoming.





Picture 5. Family Boras grave in Senj.



Picture 6. My mother (in white) with her friend.

These days most of my loved ones and friends are found in the town cemetery, and amongst those closest to me, lie my eight aunts and their families. There is much truth in the saying that people used to get along and help each other more than they do now, even though life was much harder than today. I can see that this tradition is gradually creeping back into our homes.

Since we were a large family, and my father was in the hospitality industry, and the times were unstable and economically difficult in Croatia, we got by without many things. My father would allow the Senj dock workers to buy refreshments on credit when they were awaiting ships from Italy load-

ing timber, and my father would allow them to settle their accounts after they had completed their work. However, sometimes these ships did not appear for months (especially in winter during the wind storms). My father used to say his "account is sick", referring to the eternal unpaid debt.

However, as was the custom in Senj families, a lot of attention was given to children's education. Senj at that time was an educational and cultural centre of the whole of the Croatian North Coast. My parents did their best to ensure we all graduated high school, and that we also had opportunities for further education. And my mother, in her day, was educated according to this tradition, but at age 16 she married my father and dropped out of school. In those days, few females completed their education. My mother helped us with our homework, especially Latin and mathematics.

### MY FATHER'S LARGE FAMILY

Apparently one of our ancestors came to Senj as a young sailor, married, and made his life there. As my father came from a large family, the children went without a lot of things. Their life was hard because my grandfather Ivan Boras, as a Customs officer in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, could not provide for anything more than the absolute minimum for his children, in particular, education beyond primary school, or high school level. And it was education that could, in the future, provide a springboard out of poverty, as well as a pathway to a better life than the one they had previously had. However, despite this hardship, or perhaps because of it, the brothers and sisters of my father were very close and connected, not only as children, but also in adulthood when they had their own families and their lives had taken different paths. They helped each other and cared for each other.

My grandfather Ivan had one brother and three sisters, Paula, Angelica and Anna. His brother Anton was a sailor and sailed to Australia, where he married an Irish girl, Mary Byrne. They had ten children, and four children died at a very early age. From that family there were no male off-springs, and even though we made contact with the granddaughter of my grandfather's brother, she did not know much about the rest of the family, and most of them had never even met. This is not unusual in Australian families. Anton's family in Australia knew nothing about him, only that he was "Austro Hungarian". Closer relations among families is not strong in Australia, and this is evident in the relationship between the brothers. My grandfather's brother had noth-





Picture 7. Father Budimir in Austro-Hungarian Army.



Picture 8. Sitting: My grandfather Ivan Boras. Standing in the middle, my father Budimir. Photo taken before World War I.

ing to do with his family in Croatia, and that was the end of the 19th century, when it was very difficult to maintain links across such distances. Mostly, my grandfather's remaining sisters lived in Senj until their death.

My grandfather married Vladimira Baričević from Jablanac, and they mostly lived in Senj and sometimes in the surrounding region, due to the nature of my grandfather's Customs work. When my grandfather met my grandmother and they decided to get married, they could not do so immediately, because the then Austro-Hungarian authorities asked my grandfather to provide a large deposit on the grounds that civil servants were not allowed to marry. The Austro-Hungarian authorities, it seems, managed the private lives of its citizens. Only later, after a longer period of time, did the government allow them to marry.

As my grandfather served as Chief Customs Officer, he was classified as "Chief," and everyone knew him by the name "Capo (Chief)". Even today, older Senj folk recount an anecdote that one of his official addresses from that era, while he was working in Šiljevica, was:

*Ivan Boras, poglavica (chief)*  
*Sveti Jakov, Šiljevica*  
*Last post office, Kraljevica*

That place is today known as Dramalj, not far from Crikvenica.

Some of my aunts worked in a tobacco factory in Senj, along with many other women from Senj who needed to work. In Senj these workers were known as “Paltarice”. One of my father’s older sisters married a local seaman and later all their family lived in Herceg Novi, where he served in the Navy. At the time, my father’s younger sister Zdenka finished high school, and since she wanted to study pharmacology, she needed to have work experience prior to studying. Since she could not do this in Senj, she went to her sister’s in Herceg Novi, where she met her future husband. My aunt invited another of her sisters, Slava, to Herceg Novi, and she subsequently also married an officer of the (Serb-Yugoslav) army. Thus, Zdenka and Slava had to get married in the Orthodox Church. Their husbands were killed after World War II so they returned with their children to Senj, where they got work and lived with their sisters Olga and Draga until they got their own apartments. Aunt Olga’s and Draga’s apartment was very small, with two rooms and a small kitchen, in which the seven of them lived. After the war, Zdenka worked in the Senj hospital as a medical nurse, and Slava worked in an office. My father had two brothers, Josip, known as Pepe, and a younger brother Krešimir. Josip was a seaman and lived mainly in Herceg Novi, where he established his family.

The life of my father’s younger brother Krešimir took a different direction to his other brothers. As with others who were potential academics, poverty and life circumstances stood in the way of further education or some kind of career in life. But my uncle believed, as did other Croatian politicians of the time, that opportunities under the new state of Yugoslavia would be no worse than under Austria Hungary. The Serbs took full advantage of those potential academics, as can be seen from what happened to my uncle. Life circumstances physically separated him from his siblings, yet they remained close. His life story was told to me by his wife, a native of Mostar, who lived in Zagreb, and whom I visited every year until her death in 1998. Uncle Krešimir, born in 1908, was an excellent student in Senj High School, and was a member of the “Croatian Falcons” (*Hrvatski sokol*), a sports team. One professor noticed his talent for learning and took him under his wing.

That professor, Benić, was a known Yugoslav, associated with the Senj “Falcons”, which later turned into the “Yugoslav Falcons”, under pressure of the Serbs and





**Bakalarada „Hrv. Sokola“ u Senju 14./2. 1923.**

Picture 9. Festival of Croatian Falcons Association, held on 14 February 1923 in Senj, which was active in a massive undertaking in sport and cultural movements, aiming to promote national awareness amongst people.

Yugoslavs. This was not surprising, because at that time the sports club “Senia”, which brought together all Senj youth, was banned and abolished in 1927 by the Serbs.

One Serbian officer (everywhere only Serbs held offices), who was serving in the army in Senj, and who was a friend of Professor Benić, promised my uncle that he would negotiate a scholarship for his further education in Belgrade. So, uncle Krešo travelled to Serbia to study, this being his only opportunity for his further education.

In Belgrade, he met up with the officer he knew from Senj, and the officer introduced him to his colleagues as the Dalmatian Serb, to which my uncle responded that he was a Yugoslav from the Croatian North Coast. My uncle had intended to study medicine, but when he arrived in Belgrade he was told that before being granted a scholarship he needed to attain two semesters. As he came from a poor family and had no money to return to Senj, let alone for living expenses during those two semesters, he was contemplating what to do in this hopeless situation.

While walking around Belgrade he noticed a poster advertising for applicants for the military academy, which provided immediate scholarships to new cadets. He applied and was immediately accepted. There were very few Croats attending the academy.





Picture 10. My father's brother, Krešo Boras (1929), one of the best pilots at the Military Academy of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

My uncle was an excellent student and after the completion of his military academy training, he opted to work in aviation, only available in the Yugoslav army which was just being founded.

On completion of his studies, he was the best pilot at the academy and on the 6<sup>th</sup> September 1934, he was awarded the King Alexander gold watch prize. That was the last prize awarded by King Alexander because soon after that, on 9<sup>th</sup> October 1934, he was assassinated in Marseilles. The final

medal had been presented to a Croat! In his aviator duties, my uncle was posted to Novi Sad and Sarajevo, and then to Mostar.

In Mostar he met his future wife, and they married in 1936. Aunt Stanka comes from a distinguished Mostar lawyers' family, and as a family unit (she had three brothers), they wanted for nothing.

As an aviation officer, my uncle flew for the then Yugoslavia and awaited the Second World War with his family in Mostar. After the arrival of the Italians in Mostar, he was immediately arrested. On that occasion my aunt's father made representations to the Italians in Mostar via Bishop Petar Čule and my uncle was released. He was constantly in fear of being arrested and sent to prison again.

Thus, he worked in Split for a while, where later, with the help of clandestine connections, he fled to Jajce to join the partisans. When my uncle arrived at the Supreme Headquarters, on that first night he sat with Tito. There he also met Koča Popović, who confided in him whilst they strolled that he had had enough of everything.

On 27 December 1943, my uncle was selected, along with Ivo Lola Ribar, Miloj Milojević and Vladimir Velebit, at Glamočko Polje, Bosnia, to go by plane to Italy to negotiate with the Allies, who were represented by General Wilson Maitland, Allied

commander for the Middle East. And as he waited for Ivo Lola Ribar and the others, ready to go, the Germans began to bombard very heavily. In this bombing Ivo Lola Ribar was killed, and upon news of his death, my uncle met up with Vladimir Velebit, who was also ready to go to Italy. Because of all the bombings, they all scattered and fled on foot through Kaštel to Split and ended up crossing to the island of Hvar. My aunt's aunt lived there.

From Hvar, my uncle secretly moved to Vis, where he again met with Tito. From there he was sent to Italy, and this was at the time when the British and Americans were beginning to disembark. There he served as an aviator under the British, who sent him to Egypt. In Egypt he was injured in a car accident and remained in Cairo for treatment. Once recovered, he participated in the invasion of Normandy, after which the British invited him to remain in their service. Uncle Krešo declined because he wanted to return to his family, which he did in September 1945, as a partisan lieutenant colonel in Mostar.

After returning from Egypt, Ranković offered my uncle the post of commander of the Yugoslav Air Force, which he refused on the basis that he was not a member of the Communist Party. And so he left the service in 1946 because he could not bear the system and orders from the many fellow officers in the new army dominated by Serbs, nor communism, for which he did not fight. He was a Croat anti-fascist, but never a Communist.

Later he worked in Sarajevo, as a director of a company, and in 1971 he and aunt moved to their daughter's place in Zagreb. His son and his family stayed in Sarajevo, where he endured hard times during the siege of Sarajevo. Later he moved to Croatia, where he now lives with his family in their family house on the island of Hvar.

When my uncle moved to Zagreb, he spent a lot more time with his sisters in Senj. To the end of his life he regretted the hard times and difficulties he had faced and he made friends with a priest who understood him and comforted him.

At the time when uncle Krešimir returned to Croatia in 1945, as a partisan lieutenant colonel, his brother, and my father Budimir, and my older brother, met their own hell, and, without any trial, nor justification, they were thrown in jail. While this was happening, my uncle visited us in Zagreb, in the uniform of a high officer of the Yugoslav Army. He did not hesitate to visit the family of his brother.

Unfortunately, my father, his sisters and brothers were followers of different political parties; some were partisans, others among the Yugoslavs, some among the





Picture 11. Father's sisters and brother in Senj in 1960 (Standing from left: Slava, Draga, Zdenka and Olga; sitting: Mera, Krešo and Pava).

Orthodox, while others opted for the *Ustasha* movement in which they saw the only chance for salvation of the Croatian nation and the termination of Serbian terror against Croats.

In each of my father's siblings' families (and this applies to almost all families from Senj), at least one person was killed, and in many families, more than one. As we were a large family, some were

killed in the Partisans, others on the Serbian side, and some were killed as *Ustasha*, or were killed in Bleiburg.

An old Senj family's life and fortunes were scattered into various paths, all differing and perilous. Serbo Communist policies in place since the creation of Yugoslavia and up until the Homeland War, which aimed to exterminate Croats, destroyed the life of an average Croatian family. The same political system is responsible for the disappearance without any trace of several hundred thousand Croats since the end of 1945.

Despite all this, and mostly due to their family upbringing, all the siblings of my father and their families got along well and supported each other, knowing that they had been thrown into the whirlpool of life. Like most Croatian families, they fought for their survival, despite difficult circumstances.

My aunts (there were eight of them) shared all the good and the bad. They were inseparable, and in Senj they were known as the "Dionne sisters". This name derived from the famous Canadian Dionne quintuplets.

Together they went to each movie screening. They even had seats in the cinema that were reserved just for them. Every fine evening, they strolled along "potok", the Senj Promenade, and never missed any festivity processions – where my Aunt Olga was one of the main singers in the 'Saint Cecilia' choir.

## MY MOTHER'S FAMILY

My mother's family, on the other hand, was scattered in a different way. Her mother was from Krivi Put, which is located approximately 14 kilometres from Senj. Her father, who came from the large Milkovic clan, was born in the village of Smiljan, in Lika, where the Croatian scientist Nikola Tesla was also born. My grandfather Fabijan came to Senj looking for work and got a job as a janitor in the seminary. In Senj he met my grandmother and they got married. My mother was the only daughter, but she had three brothers, one of whom died at a young age. The other two brothers, Josip and Krešimir, were supporters, from an early age, of The Croatian Party of Rights (Hrvatska stranka prava – HSP)<sup>1</sup>, which wanted to bring down Serbian occupation of Croatia.

My Grandmother's large family had a tough life in their country village. Her uncles Grgo, Joso and Mate Vukelić went to Russia at a young age to look for work. First they went to China at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where they helped build the Trans-Asian railway all the way to where it joined with Russia at the Urals. During that time they lived in Hong Kong. They had left behind four sisters, and one of them, Ana, was the mother of my grandmother Marija. After that my grandmother's brothers Tomo, Joso and Ivan Butković, as well as my grandfather Fabijan joined their uncles in Russia. Ivan's life in Russia was a good one, he married an aristocrat, Claudia, and they had three children. All three were born in Irkutsk, one of the larger cities near the border with Mongolia. Before the October Revolution, Ivan and two other Croats had a tobacco factory in Krasnovarsko, another large city in Russia. In this town he built many large buildings, including the City Museum. However, after the October Revolution everything they possessed was confiscated, so in 1931 they came to live in Krivi Put. During World War II, their two daughters joined the communist Partisans, while their brother joined the other side.

My grandmother's second brother, Joso, was killed by the Bolsheviks, and Tomo relocated to Manchuria, from where he later emigrated to America, where he died. They experienced similar fates to those of their uncles, who brought them to Russia.

Whilst working in Russia, they occasionally visited their birthplace, and ultimately returned to Krivi Put in 1927. During their visits to their homeland, they always brought so many goods that they had to hire donkeys in Senj to transfer their luggage up the hilly path, through towering gorges, to Krivi Put. Thus they earned the nickname "Donkeys". The large three-story house which they built in Senj, was nicknamed by

<sup>1</sup> The Croatian Party of Rights (Hrvatska stranka prava – HSP) is the oldest of the modern Croatian parties and was founded by Dr Ante Starčević (1823 – 1896) and Dr Eugen Kvaternik (1825 – 1871) on 26 June 1861.



them as the “Donkey’s house”, and is still known by this name by everyone in Senj. That is the house in which I spent part of my life, and today my relatives still live there.

My mother’s brother Josip (named Joža, born in Senj in 1909), went to Zagreb to study law after he finished high school in Senj. My mother, though having to support her own large family, also supported him through his university studies.

While studying, Joža, like many students at the time, became involved in politics, and this was at a time when the *žandars* were severely persecuting many Croats. Dr. Milan Šufflay, the great Croatian scientist and member of The Croatian Party of Rights, was ambushed by Serbian police on 18 February 1931 in the middle of Zagreb and murdered with a hammer blow to the head, and this was widely reported at the time. In August of the same year Uncle Joža, with several of his like-minded friends, (Branimir Jelić, Mladen Lorković and others), had been an organiser and signatory of multi-lingual brochures and protests against the criminal persecutions and assassinations of Croats such as Dr. Šufflay, by Serbian *žandars*. These protests were joined by many prominent people of that time, among them Albert Einstein and Heinrich Mann.

In 1928, from around twenty years of age, Joža served as a senior secretary of the “Croatian Domobran” (Croatian soldier). Afterwards, he was forced to go into political exile and, in Berlin, he edited the “Croatia Presse” bulletin. He was associated with the bulletin “Grič” and when the bulletin was banned in Vienna in 1934, Joža went to Zadar, which was under Italian occupation, where he participated in the emigration confederation. He then travelled to Belgium, Austria and Italy, avoiding crossing into Croatia, and from 1935 to 1938 was interned in camps, mainly in Italy. He returned to Croatia in 1938, under the pretext of further study, but actually continued with his political activism.

After the founding of the NDH (Independent State of Croatia), he went to Rome as ambassador, and when he returned from Rome, he was sent to Switzerland, also as an emissary, because Switzerland did not recognise Croatia as a State. Apparently, he was involved in the Vokić-Lorković plot, and was recalled to Zagreb, but did not comply. One of his friends, who was a senior in the government (Mimo Rosandić, Secretary of the Forestry Ministry – in the NDH, who was killed in “Kavran affair”), secretly contacted him and advised him not to return to Croatia, so he and his family sought political asylum in Switzerland. Later, they all ended up in a Swiss asylum camp for foreigners, and their children, who were born there, still do not have Swiss citizenship.

He had never forgotten that it was my mother who had supported him during his studies. They were very close and it was his great wish to meet up with her again, any-time. Thus, my mother finally succeeded in 1966 in obtaining a visa for Switzerland, when she went to visit him.



He really longed for some Lika *škrpavac*, a type of cheese, which my mother brought to Switzerland. When he awaited her arrival at the station in Zurich, he was so excited that he fell ill and so on that night of 19 February 1966, he suddenly died of a heart attack. It was a very sad meeting of sister and brother, who had not seen each other in 24 years, and even sadder, their parting was for good. He died in Brissago, Switzerland.

In 1985, when I went to Germany for the first time since 1954, I met with my younger brother Krešo, and we stayed at my sister's place and we visited my uncle's family living in Lugano. On that occasion I first met my cousin Tomislav.

On that day, we were faced with the stark reality of a typical Croatian family. My uncle's children spoke only Italian, the children of my sister spoke German and Spanish, and my children who later visited their cousins, spoke English. This was not just about communication in five languages, but also about the five different cultures, customs and family lifestyles which had moved in five different life directions. And that was the eternal tragedy of the Croatian peoples!

My mother's other brother Krešimir lived, worked and married in Otočac, until 1941, when he moved to Zagreb. He had long been associated with the Independence party movement, and from 1941 on continued his political activism. He was in the army and worked in administration. Like many others, he too fled Croatia in the spring of 1945, but was saved by arriving in the English zone. However, as with so many thousands of other Croats, he was handed over to the partisans and executed in Bleiburg. He was a very good man, helping everyone, never harming anyone, even helping his cousins when he knew that they were communist sympathisers working for the Partisans, which they eventually joined.

His friend from Otočac, Dina Kolaković, whom I met in Argentina, retold the story of how and why Krešo ended up with such a sad fate. After they were captured by the English, they were all assembled together in one big meadow which was surrounded by barbed wire and were under strict guard to prevent anyone escaping. They were hungry and thirsty, naked and barefoot, treated like cattle. After a while the English officer/translator told them that everyone would be treated under the international rules of army surrender, and according to their ranks. They were told that all army officers would be treated the same as the English officers, with the same privileges, such as food, clothing and the like. Krešo decided to take up the surrender despite Dina saying that he feared it was a set up, but Krešo replied that he would do it so as to get more food which he would then share with him and others.

That night Krešo was abducted and executed. He left behind a wife and a daughter, in whose birth he had so rejoiced, and celebrated with all his acquaintances, including those that did not personally know him.

The Senj high school had always enjoyed a distinguished reputation, boasting of graduates such as the famous Senj writers and residents: Silvije Strahimir Kranjčević, Vjenceslav Novak, Milan Ogrizović, and Milutin Cihlar Nehajev. It is a little-known fact that the 'father of the homeland', Dr. Ante Starčević attended the Senj high school, and at that time was going to go into the priesthood, but changed his mind and went on to study law. It is worth to mention that the famous 'parliamentary *vritnjak*' (kick in the back) is also related to the Senj Rights party activist, Josip Grzanić, who struck the Ban (the Austro-Hungarian title for the Head of State), Khuen Hedervary. This occurred in the Croatian Parliament on the 5<sup>th</sup> October 1885. Afterwards it was revealed that Hedervary, who had been the Ban that summer, had secretly stolen 'chamber writings' from the Parliament and transferred them to Budapest. These were documents which the Hungarians gradually took from Croatia and transferred to Hungary, and which Ban<sup>2</sup> Jelačić brought back to Croatia in 1848.



Picture 12. Celebration of 60th anniversary of high school graduation of Vanda's generation colleagues from year 1949, held in Senj, 27.6.2009.

<sup>2</sup> Ban of Croatia was the title of local rulers or office holders and after 1102 viceroys of Croatia. From earliest periods of Croatian state, some provinces were ruled by Bans as a rulers representative (viceroys) and supreme military commander. In the 18th century, Croatian bans eventually become chief government officials in Croatia. They were at the head of Ban's Government, effectively the first prime ministers of Croatia. The institution of ban in Croatia persisted until the 20th century.



Khuen Hedervary was at that famous session, held on the 5th October 1885, and sought to justify the theft of the Croatian documents, and the Croatian Party of Rights protested. In this melee, Hedervary moved from the assembly hall, passing the parliamentary bench where Josip Gržanić was seated, and kicked him in the behind. Two other Rights activists, David Starčević and Eugen Kumičić, assisted him.

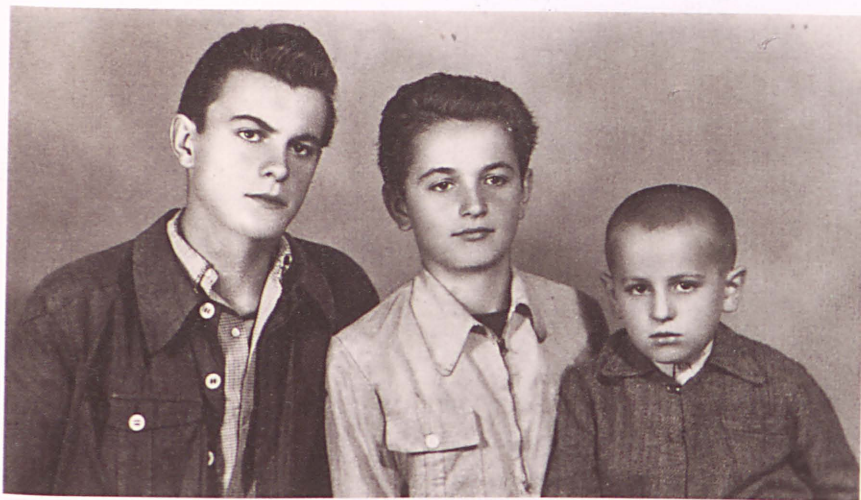
As the Senj educational boundaries extended across a wide area of the Croatian North Coast, as well as a large part of the Lika region, the Senj high school [up to Year 8 in the old system], was attended not only by Senj residents but also children from the surrounding towns and villages, like Novi Vinodolski, Crikvenica, Krk, Rab, Pag, Otočac, and even from Zagreb and the interior. Those who came to school in Senj, were active in student life, but at the same time benefited from Senj humour, social life and patriotism. Even now, many still come to the annual meeting of high school seniors to renew their memories and friendships.

Local Senj parents wanted their children to be educated in order to have a better life than they had had. And in the difficult circumstances of life during the time of my childhood, in the second half of the 1930s, there was enormous political pressure on Senj residents, as well as many of the surrounding towns in Lika who were known for their Croatian patriotism. Because of that, the terror came from the Serbs and the pro-Yugoslavs, who sought to take over cities and towns in key positions, with the goal of making them Serbian.

There is a wellknown anecdote about our Senj shopkeeper, who was the mayor of Senj, Mile Brajković (killed by partisans), who welcomed the new chief of the city, informing him about life in Senj. The Serb was talking and constantly using the Serbian word 'uopšte', and our Senj mayor kept interjecting 'dapašte, dapašte' [which has no meaning at all]. Old Senj residents similarly recounted an anecdote about their fellow citizen Pere Prpić (also



Picture 13. Parents Budimir and Marica Boras, children: Ante, Dolores and Budimir, 1928.



Picture 14. Brothers Budimir, Krešimir and Domagoj, 1946.

known as Pek), a steward at a bank, who was known for his humour and patriotism. When he was asked by a stranger what his religion was, he replied "Croatian", and when asked his nationality, he replied, "Senjanin", meaning someone from Senj'.

And in these difficult times my father lost his licence to operate his business, because of his political activism, so he had to undertake all kinds of jobs, such as collecting taxes in the surrounding villages and the like. At the same time my mother had to take in boarding students from other cities who attended the high school in Senj.

The persecution of all Croats forced many people to go into exile. They left behind a family, their livelihoods and their futures. Some Senj residents ended up in prison, and those that were left behind, were oppressed, including us children.

My uncle Joža was one of those who went into exile early on. My friend Vjera's father was another who fled the country and went into exile in Italy. She was a child when he left, and when he returned in early April 1941, her aunt collected me and her and we went and awaited his return at the entrance to Senj. It was touching, father and daughter meeting for the first time since he had left her behind as a baby. He did not know which of the two of us was actually his daughter and asked: "And which of you two is my daughter?"

As the then Serbian government placed its own people in positions of power and leadership, this was also the case in positions of authority in our schools. In our primary school there was a teacher from Serbia, Petar Perović. As early as the second grade of



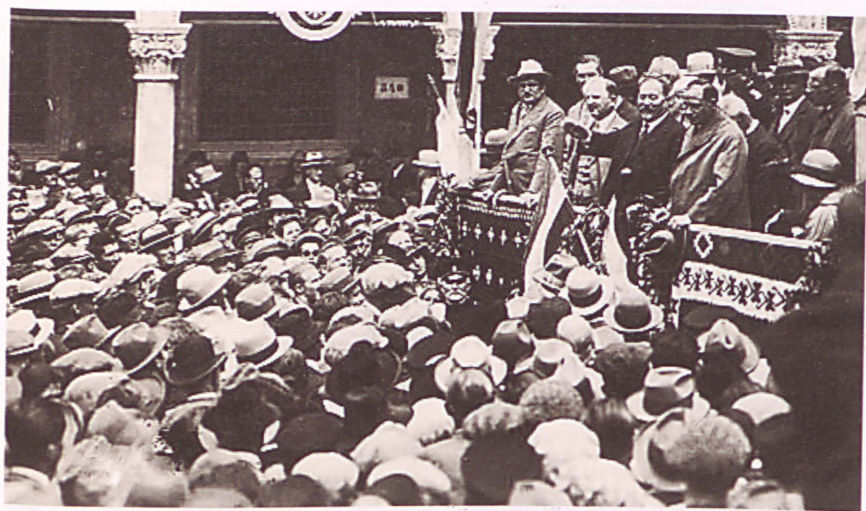
elementary school, he graded his pupils, including me and my friend Vjera, according to the political beliefs of our family. This teacher would come to class, begin teaching, but at the same time threaten us and speak against our parents for “deceiving” their children and not “educating” us correctly. Not one of us kids believed this man, who was so determined to stain the reputation of our parents.



Picture 15. The First Holy Communion in front of the church of Saint Francesco, which was later destroyed by bombs. Vanda is the second from left standing in the first row.

We were, of course, immediately meant to tell our parents and soon we began to realise what was going on. Through his actions the teacher Perović was getting himself enemies, and we children were being instilled with a fear of wider Serbian terror and rule. And that is how we children lost our carefree and innocent lives. We could not get used to speaking Serbian, writing in Cyrillic and the glorification of Yugoslavia, Serbia and Orthodoxy, because it was all contrary to our upbringing in the family home and the church. Senj was known as a Croatian Catholic town with its own diocese, and we children were a part of it.

That feeling of pressure and constant nagging provoked in us just the opposite sense of what our ‘educators’ wanted to achieve. So already at a young age, thanks to my teacher Perović and his teachings, I realised that we were expected to grow up not the way our mothers had brought us up into this world. The attempts at indoctrination caused revulsion against these people who asked us to give up our true selves and our



Picture 16. Croatian politician Stjepan Radić (1871-1928), who was killed in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia Parliament in Belgrade, because he was against Grand Serbian hegemony and persisted in a federal system for all other nations.

loved ones. And these guidelines were imposed on us in childhood, at a young age when characters begin to form and we progress into adulthood.

Senj was a Croatian city, and because of that, the Serbs' terror was present everywhere. People from Senj knew each other because the city is not large. And when the opportunity arose in 1941, many people decided to join the fighting against the Serbs, because they believed in their ideals, and a large number of these people gave their lives for the just cause. All these people were good Catholics and Croats, honest family men, who never did anyone any harm and did not deserve the epithets assigned to them after death. But the then Yugoslavia, and those who ruled it, fought against everything Croatian. To this end, in 1929, they killed our leaders in the Belgrade Parliament, including the Radić brothers, and in 1931 they killed Dr. Milan Šufflay and many others, and about 400 Croats were executed in the old Yugoslavia, and some 10,000 detained around Yugoslavia. It's a part of our history that we cannot deny, much less erase.

## LIFE IN THE MAELSTROM OF WORLD WAR II

In these circumstances, we were drawn into the Second World War. Most of our fellow citizens greeted the demolition of the former regime and its terror and changed



Picture 17. My brother Ante pictured on day of his graduation in 1941.

order with joy, in the hope that things would be better, and believing that it could not be worse than it was under the old regime.

Many young people volunteered in the Croatian army. Rare were the families that did not take part in this. Soon after the fall of Yugoslavia, the Italians arrived in Senj. Again, we suffered under a foreign boot, mostly our people from the islands and in parts of Dalmatia. The Italians too acted as an army occupying Croatia, and my father, in fear, left Senj for Osijek, and afterwards we followed.



My eldest brother Ante, a law student, was Head of the *Ustasha* youth group in Senj, but in 1942 he was killed as a Croatian volunteer. As he was an amateur photographer, he had a camera (I think it was a Leica or Kodak), which our mother bought him as a gift for his high school graduation, and he always carried it with him, as well as all his photographs. So, in the army he became a war reporter, and while filming fighting around Bihać, he was captured by the Serbs and partisans. Apparently, he was tortured and had one ear cut off, and then thrown into the Una River while still alive, (later we learnt that he was actually beheaded). My mother sensed his death. She dreamed about him on her name day [it is a Croatian custom to celebrate the name day], the day of the Assumption. In her dream, he was standing beside Black Lake and when she approached him, he pushed her away, warning her that danger and death lie there. A few hours after that dream came the news that her son disappeared near Black Lake near Bihać, on 10 August 1942. I visited this place near Bihać in 2001 and it looks awful – big steep cliffs ending in an abyss with murky black water at the bottom, which flows into the Una. Undoubtedly, those who met their death at this place found it creepy. Although I intended to investigate whether there is some data about the massacre or maybe living witnesses who remember those events, I failed. It's been a long time since then. The only thing I saw was a plaque laid during the time of Yugoslavia commemorating the deaths of Partisans there. To what extent this plaque



Picture 18. Vanda with friends, Nora, Nevenka and Zdenka in Osijek 1943.

represented the truth, we can conclude ourselves!

While the Second World War continued to spread, my mother gathered us all up and took us from Senj, via Rijeka, to Osijek. This was my first trip out of Senj, and we had to go through Rijeka because it was not possible to travel across the train station at Plase. To us kids, everything was new and unusual, so we were fascinated by the stores in Rijeka, the trams and our first ride in them. My mother told us to temper our amazement, but we did not manage to.

Then our mother, for the first time in our lives, bought each of us an umbrella, which was a great luxury. And we went to Osijek, where we were welcomed by our father. My father, in the meantime, had rented a small Hotel next to which we all settled. My eldest sister Dolores was also there.

In Osijek, despite of the difficult wartime, we managed to live a calm family life. The death of our eldest brother hung over us all like a ghostly spectre. However, life went on and I formed strong and long-lasting friendships, one of whom with Nora, who today lives in Zadar. I am still in touch with her and we visit each other regularly when I return to Senj.

During the war we lived in Osijek until the autumn of 1944 when the Russians began to move towards Hungary and Croatia. Their advance frightened the local population. There were rumours that the Russians did terrible things – robbing, raping, burning entire villages and killing people. Our parents decided to leave Osijek and we went to Zagreb. At that time travel was very risky because the partisans blew up trains, so my parents decided it would be safer to travel through Hungary. And so we travelled across Pécu to Zagreb, in a freight wagon for cattle, and the trip lasted seven days. Our childhood during the war was imbued with tension, as war is felt on all sides I remember when I was in Osijek for the first time in the autumn of 1942, and saw planes dropping bombs, that I thought the English are sending us children small planes as gifts from the air.



As Senj lies on a strategic road between inland Lika and the coastline, it has always been a military target, and because of that, during the Second World War, it was often bombed. Most bombs were dropped by the British. Our house was also bombed, but fortunately no one was hurt. Unfortunately, the family of my father's cousin Pave, and there were six of them, suffered a heavy loss. In 1940 his young son Križan suddenly died. He had not been otherwise sick, and we never learned the real cause of his death. In those days it was not unusual for young children to die.

Just one year later, his eldest daughter Ota died from tuberculosis, which struck many families in Senj. When the bombing started, on October 7, 1943, his daughter Neda, recently graduated from high school, was critically injured by a bomb and died while being taken to the hospital. The bombing continued, and the next day, October 8, 1943, Pave was killed. While shielding himself from the bombings in a garden, the force of a bomb propelled him over a roof and onto Stara Cesta, the old road, in the distance, and his body lay there for three days until he was finally found.

He was identified by the slippers he had been wearing that were still on his feet. So, the father and daughter were buried together. But this was not the end of their tragedy. Their son Oskar, who had served in the Croatian army, managed to escape war unharmed, but died suddenly in Argentina, where he had travelled to from Austria. In the space of a few short years, only two of a family of seven remained, the aunt and her son Ante, who was a priest and who died in Germany in 2002.

In Senj many people died from the bombing. Many of the names of these people found themselves on the list of Jasenovac victims, published by the Jasenovac Research Institute in New York, which is led by Serbs. Let me list some names of people killed in the bombings of Senj, but which are on the list of Jasenovac victims. Of 111 listed, not a single one was killed in Jasenovac.

*Killed by bombing in October 1943:* Juraj Bačić (1932), Marija Bačić (1894), Marijan Babić (1897), Maro Butorac (1901), Hela Dundović (1930), Roza Dundović (1889), Josip Glavaš (1866), Anđelka Hebda (1900), Anton Hebda (1935), Milan Hebda (1939).

*Killed by bombing January 18, 1945:* Zlata Karadžija (1929), Ivan Lončarić (1913), Ana Nekić (1919), Roza Nekić (1869), Ivan Rogić (1924), Vinka Sečka (1887), Josipa Vukelić (1928). These Senj residents also appear on the list of victims in Jasenovac: Neda Knifić (1925), died in Istria in NOB, and Delko Krmpotić (1909), died in Lika. Furthermore, eight names are listed twice and mentioned twice as victims. Of the remaining names, some are not even known in Senj, while others are the names of people who died in Senj of natural causes. Most of these are buried in Senj. Despite



Picture 19. Cathedral in Senj after the bombardment in 1943.

a protest letter to the administration of the Memorial Park Jasenovac, the Jasenovac Research Institute refuses to amend the list to delete these names.

When the Partisans arrived in Senj in 1943, they took all the young people into their army. Many prominent elderly, including some women, were taken about six kilometres from Senj and killed. Those killed there were the well-known Senj residents Katica Krmpotić (born Dragičević), Mile Brajković, Milan Biondić, Ive Mihovilić, Marijan Karadžija, amongst others. All of them were just citizens of the town, they were

not a threat to the partisans, they were known as being active Croats.

### CROATIA IN MOURNING

At the end of the war in 1945, nearly every family had lost someone, and many families lost more than one family member. That is why today, many pits are being unearthed, full of bones. In Croatia alone there are about 800, and about the same amount in Slovenia. Our family stayed in Zagreb until the end of the war. My mother then decided to take us back to Senj.

Before the partisans came to Zagreb, there was terrible panic everywhere, people were fleeing distraught, fearing reprisals after the change of government. In those days, tension was prevalent in Croatia, especially in Zagreb. Families were fleeing from the Partisans to Austria, leaving everything behind in the hope that they would soon come home. Most of them, who remained alive, never returned to their homeland. My father and brother also fled but were soon captured in Slovenia.

They endured their own Road to Calvary known as the Death March, on the path towards Serbia. It was an ordeal in the true sense of the word. They were tortured,



starved, and barefoot, because they could not wear footwear due to bad wounds on their feet, and others, who did have shoes, had them confiscated by the Partisans. Many who dared to stop from exhaustion or pain, paid for it with their lives, on the spot. My father traded his thick wedding ring for some bread. After the journey, they were thrown into concentration camps. I remember visiting the camps with my mother but we could not locate our family members. In those days there was a camp on the Kanal, on the grounds where the bus station in Zagreb is now located. Many searched for their loved ones there because that camp was surrounded by barbed wire, open, and the prisoners were standing on the bare earth. Some prisoners disappeared from this camp without a trace. I remember that I recognized one acquaintance who from the camp yelled my name. I think I was the last to see him alive. He was a young man, an only child, then still a student. Stories began secretly circulating about the biggest Croatian tragedy, Bleiburg.

My friend Ljubica, who today lives in Argentina, also experienced close proximity to death. She was retreating, along with some volunteers from the military hospital, and made it to Klagenfurt. There, she found her two brothers, Stanko and Slavko, who had crossed the border into Austria, but were then handed over to the Partisans. They were executed in one of the execution sites around Bleiburg.

Ljubica survived along with others in the barracks in Klagenfurt. Later they were transferred to a school. They were placed forty in a classroom, and also found other young Croats there. In the courtyard they picked leaves from the branches for food. In the schoolyard they also saw pieces of scalp with hair, pieces of a hand and other body parts that had been strewn about.

As they were being held captive by the British, one day they were put into a truck and transferred to a train in Villach, with the explanation that they would be transferred to Udine. But their destination was Yugoslavia. They arrived in Udine, where they were met by the partisans who ordered them to the death march, and they had to walk from Jesenica to Škofja Loka. The next day they were forced to walk to Šentvid, and later they were placed with around five hundred women in a chapel which had no toilet. They had to go to the toilet behind the altar. There they were all interrogated, every night, at twelve o'clock, by the Serbs. The questions were always the same. Below the chapel were young Croats, prisoners whose fate is unknown, and it is surmised that they met the same fate as thousands of their compatriots.

Later their march continued, three in a row, without food or water, and if someone stopped along the road to drink water from the village well, they were shot. The Partisans accompanied them on each side. People drank their own urine to quench their



thirst. Some Slovenians they encountered along the way made them stop and took all the gold they were wearing. The first food they had, a piece of bread and black coffee without sugar, they were given 'generously' on May 25, for Tito's birthday.

In the end, the soldiers transferred them by train to Židani Most, where they began to make their way to Zagreb, to Zapadni kolodvor, the West Railway Station. In Židani Most one Slovenian switchman gave Ljubica a glass of water, which she shared with others. Later they walked to Samobor, where Vera Stipetić and Vika Bišćan were removed and executed.

The rest of the group were taken to Vrapče, a mental hospital, where they were placed in a cage with a hundred of mentally ill people, and a corner of the cage served as a toilet. Again, they were interrogated every day by the Serbs. As they were in very poor condition, full of lice and scabies, at the end of June they were freed and released to go to their homes.

The English deceitfully handed over all disarmed soldiers, women, children and the elderly, to the pro-Serbian Yugoslav Army. The Croats who had been captured by the Americans survived. Among them was my future husband, captured as a Croatian soldier. He served in the army in Slavonia, under the command of Colonel Ivan Štir from Osijek.

In those times, almost all of Croatia was not only in mourning, but also in anticipation of any news about loved ones. Such anxiety remained for many years after the war. Mostly family men were gone, who were happy to fight for their own country. This includes a lot of Senj families who were hit by the war tragedy. It can be said that an entire generation of Senj disappeared, and this is very much felt in Senj today.



Picture 20. Victims on Bleiburg's fields, near Bleiburg in May 1945. The killing lasted from May to August 1945. According to Milovan Đilas, communist dissident, "no similar slaughter, as the one carried on Croats, was known in European History (Milovan Đilas, *Wartime 1947*)" and according to statistics, Tito slaughtered 1,170,000 ([www.vency.com/wars](http://www.vency.com/wars)).

Our friend Zdenko is one of the few Croatian survivors of Bleiburg. He was born in Varaždin, and we met him in Argentina. He told us how he travelled his own 'Death March'. He and seven other colleagues were captured by partisans. They were all shot. He was shot in the knee and fell into the pit with the others. After the shooting, the Partisans checked that all the slain were in fact dead. One of the Partisans who approached Zdenko recognised him. It was his acquaintance, a Jew, who took mercy on him and went on. Zdenko was severely wounded, and as a medical student he knew how to dress wounds with pieces of clothing, and after the Partisans left he continued on to Austria.

However, such cases were few. Those killed numbered, according to estimates, about several hundreds of thousands. They are forever silenced and their stories of what they endured will never be heard.

Whenever I return to my homeland I try to visit Bleiburg. This is the only way to remember and honour the victims. My visit in 2004 stands out. On that occasion I felt a connection with those that I knew died in this place. There were 8,000 people there, having arrived in 121 buses. Many buses had two levels. And many people came by car. The main Mass was held by Msgr. Mile Bogović. For the slain Muslims, the Imam of Gunja, Idriz Bašić, came to lead prayers. He said that 50,000 Muslims were killed at Bleiburg. Muslims fought in the units of the Croatian Army because they felt themselves to be Croats. I recalled then that I had read somewhere that in the Yugoslav government in Belgrade in 1924, of 24 members of parliament from Bosnia, who were of the Muslim faith, 23 of them identified themselves as Croats.

## BACK IN SENJ

After we left Osijek, we returned to Senj, but in reduced numbers. My father and brother ended up in prison, and my eldest sister had already fled to Austria. Sadly, we couldn't return to our house because it was destroyed in the bombing, and we could not rebuild it. Only later we learned that the former Yugoslavia received compensation from Germany for a large sum of money for reparation, in which money for the restoration of our house was included. Senj Communists had generously forwarded the money back to Belgrade. So, our house was never restored and was sold in that condition. We were forced to live in one tiny apartment, which my mother inherited from her uncles. And so seven of us (including my grandmother) lived in a one bedroom apartment for a



DRAGA MAJKO

CIO MOJ VIJEK ŽIVOTA BIO JE PATNJA I BOL,  
I OVAJ SVIJET ZA MENE BIO JE SUZA DOČ.

SA KOLIKO ŽRTVE I LJUBAVI TI SI ME MAJKO GOJILA,  
KAD TREBA DA TI LJUBAV VRATIM SUDEBINA NAS JE RAZDOJILA.

NA SMRT ME MAJKO GOJIOŠE IAKO NISAM BIO KRIV,  
JA SLUTIT NISAM MOGO DA JE KRIVNJA BITI ŽIV.

BIO SAM PREDMET MRŽNJE OPTUŽEN, LAŽI, KLEVETA,  
ZATO TI DRAGA MAJKO JA PODOH SA OVOGA SVIJETA.

NE PLACI MILA MAJKO NE ZALI SVOGA SINA,  
JEST TO JE LJUDSKA ZLOBA A NE MOJA SUDBINA.

TI BUDI HRABRA MAJKO NE KUNTI SUDBINU SVOJU,  
VEĆ MOLI DRAGOG BOGA DA PRIMI DUŠU MOJU.

SINUT CE ZARKO SUNCE NEŠTAT CE CELAKA TINE,  
SINUT CE ZLATNA SLOBODA ZA KOJU TVOJ SINAK GINE.

TI MOJA DRAGA MAJKO ZA GROB NEČES ZNATI MOJ,  
GDJE VIDIS PALOG HRVATA TU JE I SINAK TVOJ.

spjevao: JURE MANDEKIĆ 1948.g.  
- prije strijeljanja -

Posljednje pismo mlađica Jure Mandekića, prokumčevano iz zatvora, prije njegovoga strijeljanja. Za njegov grob se ne zna, niti je ikto odgovarao za njegovo smaknuće.

SUPPLEMENT: Letter written by one of them, Jure Mandekić Page 43.

Letter written by Jure Mandekić, a young man from Senj, to his mother, after he was sentenced to death in Rijeka in 1948. This letter was smuggled inside his jacket's stuffing and returned to his mother.

long time, until we moved to a slightly larger apartment in the same house, which also belonged to my mother. After the war, we children rejoiced in returning to Senj, but we had no idea what lay ahead.

My mother could not work because she had to take care of us, so we barely subsisted from what she could sell, and this could not last forever. At the same time, it was necessary to visit my father and brother, who were in

prison, to help them. I remember traveling with my mother to the marketplace in Zagreb every first Wednesday of the month, when she carried everything she could sell, so we could eat. All of her life, through difficult times, she collected valuable items, especially for the female children, which she later had to sell at very low prices.

These trips to Zagreb were nothing like that journey is today. Firstly, you travelled overnight by truck from Senj to Vrhovine or Plase railway stations and from there you caught the train to Zagreb. And the same on the return journey. It was a similar journey, though more difficult, when we travelled to visit my father and brother in prison in Stara Gradiška or in Lepoglava, where we would journey from the station in Stara Gradiška to the prison in an agricultural wagon. We would spend the night in a school, and the next day we would spend a brief time with our loved ones. There were always many people who travelled the same journey as us.

Before we returned to Senj, the then commander of OZNA, the communist secret police, arrested many Senj minors and piled them into prison in the 'Blue villa' where they were tortured and detained for approximately 25 days. They were mostly juvenile, aged about fifteen or sixteen years.



MY BROTHER'S FATE AFTER *THE DEATH MARCH*

At that time my brother Budimir was arrested for the second time. The first time was as a juvenile after the Golgotha 'death march' and he was released. Later when he was called up to serve in the army, he had to report directly to the "disciplinary battalion" in Vrapče, where he remained, tortured like other people in 'the death march'. As soon as he had the opportunity, he managed to escape during a visit to the dentist, by finding a side door, even though he was followed by a guard. He immediately went to his friends, changed his clothing, and with the help of connections headed to the Slovenian border. However, at the border he was met by a member of the UDBA State Security Detectives. Among his colleagues there was a traitor who betrayed him. So, again he ended up in a military prison, but this time he was sent to do prisoner work in the construction of "New Belgrade".

When he had escaped from the disciplinary battalion, he left behind his personal possessions including his beloved guitar. Later I went to get his things and was met by the commander of the military camp, who said he would give me all of my brother's little things, but not his guitar. He was surprised that I even dared to ask for the guitar, as if my brother had no right to it. He also said to me that my brother "should be shorter by a head" and I asked how he thought I should feel about such a remark. I did not get a response.

After I started working, my annual two-week vacations would be spent visiting my loved ones in the prison camps, which I also did on national holidays. On the public holiday in May 1950, I went to visit my brother in Zemun, formerly a Croatian city that was renamed Novi Beograd. Our convict people built it with hard work and pain and many working there lost their health, and some even their lives. I went to visit my brother, not knowing what awaited me there. He was in hospital, disfigured, and one side of his neck was so swollen that his head lay on one side of his shoulder. When I saw him, he encouraged me not to cry. He told me that there were inmates there who were doctors who were caring for him. Later I found out that he was beaten by his "education teachers", mainly Serbs. I mentioned to him that I would apply for an early release for him due to his bad health, but he was not thrilled with my suggestion.

Since he was sentenced to seven years in prison, I wrote my appeal and sent it to Moša Pijade, the Head of the State of Yugoslavia in Belgrade, describing my brother's state of health. And surprisingly, after a period of some months, my brother was released. First, he visited me in Rijeka. When I first saw him, he looked at least ten years older and he was very skinny. His Golgotha started when he was only 17, when he was pros-

educated as a cadet of the Croatian officers' school, with which he fled to Austria and therefore ended up in prison in Nova Ves, Zagreb.

After returning to Senj, he occasionally worked as a docker, and since he had no "civil rights", he was unable to seek permanent employment. He then worked as an assistant bricklayer, and after that he managed to get work as a storeman for a company. I was told by some of his colleagues and their families that he did not want to accept the way of life that had been imposed on him and he showed this in his own way. Not only did he regularly go to church, but on church holidays he dressed in a formal suit for work, and when there were public holidays, he would again protest in his own way by wearing work clothes outside of work.

As he loved Croatia, he later wrote to me in Australia imploring me to return to Croatia with my family because "they are scattering us so that we disappear." The future of his country and his love of Croatia were above all the suffering and persecution that he experienced, and what my family and I would suffer, had we returned to live in our homeland. Nevertheless, he believed in the resurrection of Croatia! Then I remembered how he desperately wanted to leave Yugoslavia and planned to flee across the sea to Italy and how he also wanted to take me with him. He told me that he would call me by phone and that it would mean that I must immediately come to Senj to escape across the sea. However, this never happened as he later changed his stance on the abandonment of his homeland.

However, sadly, wearied by all the suffering, he died in 1976 at 49 years of age without seeing a free Croatia. His death had a terrible effect on me because I shared with him all his suffering in concentration camps and prisons, and otherwise we got along very well and understood each other. He left behind his wife Sonja, son Tomislav and daughter Snježana, who still live in Senj.

Shortly after the death of my other brother Domagoj (in 1948), our father was released from prison. But he did not get to enjoy freedom for very long, as in the beginning of 1954, he died suddenly at 60. His suffering had finally come to an end.

### SCHOOL DAYS AFTER THE WAR

Immediately after our return to Senj we continued our education in high school, and the persecution began again in a relentless way. Students in the fifth grade of high school (in those days there were eight grades), among whom was I, were greeted every



## Zapisnik

Ujedinjene Nastavničkog zbora, održane 5. veljače 1946. o discipliniranim prekršajima nekih učenika.

Ujedinjen odbor direktor, članice Jakov, koji je prisutan i pročelnik prosvjetnog odjela ONO-a za Hrv. Primorje, Antio Linko. Prisutni su svi nastavnici.

Direktor čita zapisnik sastanka srednjoškolskog odbora od 5. I. 1946., kojega je primio 5. II. 1946. u 7<sup>h</sup> na vešer (vidi prilog).

Prvi saopćio presesu o prekršajima navedenih učenika u kulturnom zapisniku: čita se članak iz „Borbe“ o „Radu naroda srednjoškolski mladeži od Bugarije“. Zatim je pročelnik Antio Linko govorio o odnom umjetu nastavnika i omladine i o radu mladeži pod kontrolom profesora.

Kaznenice su o svakom učeniku obradili tako o vladavini tako o najgorom napretku, a da se dobije potpunija slika nastupa i ostali nastavnici. Nakon diskusije predlaže Baretio Milina, nastavnik II. razreda, da se:

Borac Jadranka, učenik II. razr. kazni po čl. 31 disciplinskih pravila za sred. škole tri 7 isključenjem iz škole za 1 godinu, zbog prekršaja navedenih u zapisniku S.O. pod b. 1

Žepić Blanka, učenik II. razr. kaznjara se po čl. 31 tri 5 disc. pr. i ovom direktoru, zbog prekršaja navedenih u zapisniku S.O. pod b. 13

Kaznenice II. razreda, Kirovichi Melanija, predlaže, da se kazni:

Marica Lada, učenik II. razr. po čl. 31 tri 7 disc. pr. isključenjem iz škole za 2 godine, zbog prekršaja navedenih u zapisniku S.O. pod b. 2

Bulovac Kira, učenik II. razr. po čl. 31 tri 7 disc. pr. isključenjem iz škole za 1 godinu, zbog prekršaja navedenih u zapisniku S.O. pod b. 4

Bilović Tilda, učenik II. razr. po čl. 31 tri 7 disc. pr. isključenjem iz škole za 1 godinu, zbog prekršaja navedenih u zapisniku S.O. pod b. 4

Bilović Ivanjica, učenik II. razr. po čl. 31 tri 7 disc. pr. isključenjem iz škole za 1 godinu, zbog prekršaja navedenih u zapisniku S.O. pod b. 4

1. olt.





day by the class teacher in the partisan uniform. She was a professor of the French language, who returned from the partisans, telling us how we should be happy that, in spite of everything, they kept us in school on their class benches, alluding to our family. Her favorite phrase was: "The dog barks, but caravans go by". She meant that we all must adapt to the new order. We did not learn the French language, which she was supposed to teach us, because she was more motivated by putting down "people's enemies". So, we were back to where we were with Perović, the teacher in primary school, only in a more forceful form. Because of this our patriotism grew even more, even though they wanted to crush it.

It was also common for young communists, members of the Communist Youth League (Young Communist League of Yugoslavia), to come to school, and also to inspect us bodily in class in order to find leaflets or the like. It was very embarrassing and humiliating. They even claimed in public "youth" meetings that they saw us distributing political flyers.

The strategy was to remove us from the school. And that is exactly what happened on February 5, 1946, when five of us from my class were thrown out from all schools in Yugoslavia – four students were expelled from school for one year, while I was the only one to be expelled for two years. In other classes penalties were less severe (see Minutes pp. 46-47).

The expulsion was executed during the class of Croatian language, and we had a notice read to us by our teacher Zlata, who had lost her husband in Bleiburg. She too was constantly being oppressed. Later she was transferred to Novi Vinodolski and had to travel from Senj and back every day. At the same time my sister Jadranka, who was in the sixth year of high school, was also expelled from school for a year.

Those were very difficult days for all of us, and especially for our mother. In protest she removed our younger brother Krešimir from school and at the end of the school year she went to Zagreb to the Ministry of Education to look for a reason and explanation as to the exclusion of her children from school. On that occasion, she said that her children should not suffer because the family was already suffering due to the fact that their father and brother were in the prison camps. They gave her no explanation as they did not have one, but she was able to have us reinstated in that class at the end of the year, we had to pass the exams and we did so, and at the beginning of the next school year we moved to the next class.

As I had been expelled from school for two years, after I successfully passed the fifth grade I moved on to attend the high school. However, at the end of the sixth grade, a



former priest who had been a friend of the family and also my catechist from primary school, and who was now a professor of the French language, sent me to take an exam even though I passed all the other subjects. In the examination, he asked me questions that were not in the program for the sixth grade. It appeared to be a plan to prevent me from participating in further education. The same teacher was for a time in the Yugoslav diplomatic mission in Paris, where he represented Yugoslavia, and he was even received by Tito on his boat as he sailed past Senj.

That was the time when we should have been enjoying a carefree youth. Even with all the trouble, we socialized, laughed and passed the time. Senj people are known for their enjoyment of life, even when things are at their worst. In summer we went swimming, we jumped from trampolines, and played "zvanja". The game went like this: when one of us jumped into the water they shouted the name of another person who was then supposed to jump in next. We also played diving, "frakanja", or we caught someone by their shoulders and pushed them under the water with our legs. It happened that the person who did the pushing would end up being the one submerged, and the first underneath would go the deepest. A favourite swimming game was on the "catara". It was a wooden raft from which we jumped, pushing each other and enjoying jumping. Today's young people wouldn't think to play such games.

Each summer after the war, "war veterans" arrived on the Adriatic, mainly from Serbia. Such was the case in Senj. The former communist fighters often fell, in a trance-like state yelling about killing enemies, shouting cries linked to their war fighting and combat. That's when I first heard and saw "žikino kolo", which they danced at the beach.

As we did not know too much about Bleiburg and other killing fields in Croatia, we could not know that these incidents were associated with those events, the killing of innocent people, as well as with the "Death March". Only after many years, we realized that some of these people suffered a guilty conscience and were expressing remorse that was haunting them.

In winter, we went to the "marketplace". It was an open-air market in the centre of which was the "špina", the tap from which there was always water spraying, which the "bura" wind blew across the market. Here we would slip and slide, tearing the soles of our shoes, for which our mothers would tell us off.

At that time, you could not buy anything nor did we have any money to spend. Not only food, but clothes and shoes were also not available. Everything was bought using "dots", issued by the government, and these were not sufficient for the barest essentials. Many supplies were coming from America, via UNRRA, but these were not



available to everyone. Clothing, which arrived via that way, was first handled by “skojevci”, young communists, who satisfied their own needs first. They then resold clothing in the villages, but most of it did not suit either citizens or peasants, such as, for example, riding pants that no one wanted. I remember on one occasion getting a pair of men’s shoes, which were too big for me. I had to wear old shoes that had belonged to my older sisters, who had feet smaller than mine, so I always had blisters. My toes have remained forever squashed together. My summer shoes were made for me by a Senj shoemaker, out of my sister’s leather bags. Many children had coats sewn from blankets, and such deprivation lasted long after the Second World War.

Meat could also be bought only with “dots”, in limited quantities, and to buy it we had to wait in line from midnight onwards. We took turns in shifts during the night to wait to get a minimum amount of meat in the morning when the butcher opened. I remember the amount that we received, and usually it would be “a quarter of a kilogram of meat” with bones still in. As well as having to look after her children, my mother also had to care for my father and brother in the prison camp. She would cook up some “ampren”, flour braised with pig fat, and send it in a container to the prison for my father and brother. They would then add hot water, thereby tricking their stomachs into believing they had eaten a meal.

These times were very difficult for our family, and as I was denied further education, my mother tried to get me some employment so that there was at least one income in the household. In those days, a new road was being built from the centre of Senj to Art, a well-known Senj park. They needed workers so I applied and got the job of cementing the bridge. This hard work was also being carried out by some of our widows, whose husbands had disappeared, and who had to feed a large family. After I got a job, my mother finally had some income. As I knew this job would not last, I looked all over for another job. So, I intended to apply for a job as a teacher in one of the villages around Senj. This was suggested to me by two of my friends, Olga and Danica, who themselves had secured such work, and both had completed fewer years of school than me. There was a high demand for teachers as many had died during the war or were killed after the war.

Since I had decided to seek such a job because I could not find employment elsewhere, I had to attend an interview with the Head of Culture, otherwise a hardened communist. He was from the Senj area, but as his father worked for the forestry office, their family lived in Senj. Taking all my documents with me, I went to the then Office of Education and came to the chief’s office. As I walked into his office, I expected he would ask me about the job, and for that I was prepared, but it did not happen that

way. The first question he asked was whether I understood and admitted that my family were all criminals. Surprised by the question, I answered that I did not come to discuss politics and expressed surprise that he would expect me to speak against my family. He looked at me and laughed sarcastically, at which point I walked out of his office. That is how ended my attempt to become a teacher under the former system.

## THE START OF MY WORKING LIFE

With autumn arriving and without any hope that I would be able to get employment and knowing that I could not continue my education, I had to seriously consider the possibility of employment outside of Senj. An acquaintance suggested I take a course in bookkeeping conducted by INA, the oil company, in Zagreb. Over coffee I wrote my application, and since I had no money for postage, a waitress at the cafe bought me a stamp for the letter. So, I sent in an application to Zagreb. To my great surprise, I was admitted to the course.

So my regular schooling in Senj was discontinued and my career in accounting began. At this course, I met other colleagues and we quickly came to the conclusion that almost all of us, and even the head of the course, were bound by a similar fate. These were the people I befriended and one of them, Zdenka, is to this day my dear friend.

Our teachers were very good people. No one asked us about our families and I felt reborn after the continuous persecution in Senj. After successful completion of the course, we became interns as young accountants and we were able to choose where we wanted to go, to be offered term appointments. I decided to go to Rijeka, which was closest to Senj. Zdenka also chose Rijeka, Fiume in Italian. The work that I was doing was tiring. I worked in the pay office for a large refinery, and wages always had to be processed on time so we often had to work overtime, sometimes until one o'clock in the morning, and without any compensation for it. The Director of the refinery was a Serb, as were all the other senior, important staff. There were ten of us in the office, and only the two of us were Croatian.

The rest were from Rijeka, Fiumani, as they called themselves, and in those times all business was conducted bilingually, an arrangement that was in force for five years. So, through this enforced circumstance I learned Italian. At the same time, I made friendships with other colleagues. Jone and Miranda became my friends, and they were in the process of "opting", that is, they were seeking an exit visa from Yugoslavia



on the basis of their Italian citizenship. They both had Croatian surnames, but they did not know, and maybe did not want to know, one word of Croatian.

Most of the people of Rijeka had a Croatian surname, which they kept during the Italian statehood even though Italy was offering large cash incentives for people to change their Croatian surnames to Italian. In the Refinery worked a man whose surname was Zajc, but he changed his Croatian surname for 1,000 lire, which was big money in the 1920s, to the name Zalfieri. Despite this tempting reward, very few people agreed to change names and continued to carry the surnames of their ancestors. And my close friends did the same. The father of one of them joined the Communist Party and led the union, while the uncle of another friend died as a Partisan. My friends were granted Yugoslav visas and went to live in Italy. That Rijeka was Croatian is best seen while touring the old part of the Rijeka cemetery, Kozala.

My friend Marica, who was the only other Croat in the office apart from me, lived in Sušak, and during the time of the first Yugoslavia this was the border between Italy and Yugoslavia. The two of us maintain a friendship to this day and each year we meet when I come home. She is very religious. She regularly attends Mass on Trsat, in the Cathedral, and even on foot from her home in Krimeja.

Marica is one rare good soul, I'd say a living saint. While we worked together, she was aware of our family situation, so often brought me hot coffee in the mornings knowing that I always went to work on an empty stomach because I was sending home "dots" for food purchase. Those moments you never forget indeed, they encourage within us hope for humanity. Despite her age, she is still in excellent health, a witty and cheerful person and at 97 years bursting with life.

The rest of our colleagues later went to Italy, and their places were taken by the old Rijeka Croats, who began returning to Rijeka from all over Croatia, after they abandoned their homes as children due to the Italian occupation



Picture 21. Sisters Boras, Vanda, Ada and Jadranka.



after World War I, when Serb King Alexander handed Rijeka to Italy. A friend, who remained in Rijeka during the time of the Italian occupation, told me of the experiences of his youth to illustrate how Croats lived under the occupation. As he walked along the 'Promenade' with his brother, they spoke in their native language. Then they were approached by an 'Italian' who asked them to follow him to behind the first 'gate', which they did out of curiosity. He beat them with his fists, telling them in Croatian, in the dialect of Rijeka, that this was their 'reward' for their 'Hrvatski' language (this was how the attacker spoke Croatian). The two men later joined the partisans and only one returned home. This same friend was a committed antifascist, but never supported communism and was not a member of the Communist Party.

During the time I lived in Rijeka, on the 10<sup>th</sup> August 1948 I received a call from my mother to come urgently to Senj because my youngest brother Domagoj had died. He was only eight years old and went, together with his class and teachers, on a trip to Zagorje during the summer holidays. As no one supervised the children, they entertained themselves as best they could. He and the other boys climbed on the truck, which started to move, and he fell from it and died on the spot. And it happened exactly on the sixth anniversary of the death of our eldest brother Ante. Nobody was ever held to account for his death, and since his father and brother were in the prison camp, the Senj communists commented that with the death of a child there was one *Ustasha* less. Only recently have I learned that he was actually thrown from the truck by some communist kids.

Since my sister Jadranka wanted to study, my mother asked me to pay for her education, at least for the first year, because she could not get any scholarship. So that from little I earned I sent half to my sister in Zagreb, and the only thing for which I could save was food, even though I was already sending some of the "dots" to my mother in Senj. I was very thin, 53-54 kilograms, so because of insufficient nutrition I developed infected lungs. But, fortunately, I've never tested positive for tuberculosis. I was treated with PAS tablets, of which I had to take 24 per day.

I ate in the factory canteen, where we generally had soup for lunch which resembled 'minestrone'. I remember how my friend Zdenka and I were so hungry that we went to the railway station restaurant and begged them through the window of the kitchen for food. We were given leftovers, but that was okay. We recalled this event when we met in Munich 40 years later. Such humiliation leaves permanent scars.

I remember one episode when we were hungry in the office and working late into the night to get salaries paid and our new boss, an old Riječanin who returned from Zagreb to Rijeka, brought a sandwich of black bread and potatoes in order to keep us going as long as possible. It is interesting that these two episodes have stayed not only in my memory but also in Zdenka's and Marica's.

This post-war era was a time of many upheavals in Croatia. People were always expecting news, hoping to hear something about their own who were still missing. Many young people realised that their only prospects for an education and employment were possible by adapting to the ruling authorities. Feuds were created in families, where the parents and children opted for opposing sides, and some families were split forever as a result.

### MOVING TO ZAGREB

I decided in 1951 to seek a transfer to Zagreb so I could be with my sister Jadranka and brother Krešimir who were studying in Zagreb. I quickly got a transfer to Sesvetski Kraljevec, the parent company of refineries in Croatia. As I lived in Zagreb, I travelled to work and back every day by bus. The biggest problem was to find a flat to rent. Finally, my sister and I, we found accommodation in Massarykova Street, where we had to sleep both on one couch, in the middle room, while the landlady's daughter slept on the other couch. The apartment was expensive, but we had no choice but to take what we could find.

### NEW JOB – NEW FRIENDS

In Sesvetski Kraljevec I again found myself with Zdenka, who was also working there, and in 1953, after two years, I received a transfer to the main office in Zagreb, where I met my new friend Ljubica, who now lives in Argentina. The friendship with Ljubica was the turning point in my later life. She had a father in Argentina, the well-known Croatian academic, Stjepan Horvat. She told me about her father, who had to leave his birthplace of Srijem, which was annexed to Serbia, because of his nationalism. Since he was persecuted, Stjepan Horvat could not attend high school and graduated from high school in Vinkovci. He was born in Srijemski Karlovac in 1895, which was founded around year 1500 by Karlo Horvat, from whom the Horvats originate. Karlo Horvat was the brother of Pavle Horvat, the Croatian ban. During the Turkish invasion, Serbs were accepted as refugees, and later founded their seminary and Serbian high school. Today there are no Horvats in Srijemski Karlovac, they have all died or were exterminated. Rector Horvat died in Buenos Aires in 1985.

He was rector of the University of Zagreb from 1944 to 1945. In May 1945, while retreating to Austria, he had with him his belongings, including the gold Rector's chain that Emperor Franjo Josip gave to the Croatian university in 1877. Secretly he handed



it over for safe keeping to the Croatian Institute of St. Jeronim in Rome, which returned the chain to the University of Zagreb in 1991. Rector Horvat is the author of the Rector's Memorandums of Croatian universities in 1945, by which he had tried in the university circles to seek moral support for his people and for the survival of the Croatian state. He also wrote poems, mostly spiritual songs including Ave Maria, which is dedicated to the blessed Alojzije Stepinac.

Ljubica was my supervisor and a true friendship quickly developed between us. It was thanks to Ljubica that I learnt about the possibility of obtaining an exit visa from Yugoslavia, through connections she had through her friend Marija who herself was trying to arrange documents to emigrate to Canada, where her husband was waiting for her.

The connection via Ljubica to Marija was actually a connection with an UDBA member, who was seeking 10,000 dinars for the service, claiming that it was a small price because it was my first visa request, and that first visas are easier to obtain. Once the visa application is refused, it is much harder to reverse the previous refusal. At that time, my monthly salary was 12,000 dinars, a lot of money for me, yet if it came to that I would somehow manage. Subsequently, when the connection realized I wanted to leave Yugoslavia at all costs, the price jumped to 20,000 dinars, and in the end, I had to pay the blackmailer 25,000 dinars. That much money, of course, I did not have. My friend Zdenka lent me some of the money, and later my mother sent the amount of 10,000 that I was to return to Zdenka. A part of it I raised myself when I sold some of my winter clothing.



In fact, at that time my sister Jadranka went to the Congress of Esperanto in Sweden with the intention of not returning to Croatia, which would disrupt my plans so I gave in to the blackmailer. Marija didn't get her visa until 1955, and the same UDBA member later escaped from Croatia because he was being tracked down. He turned to Marija for help, but she rejected him.

Picture 22. Visit to Argentina 2004, with my friend Ljubica (sitting), and my daughters Blanca and Stela.

Ljubica and I, we were the happiest on the first of each month when we received our salary and were able to afford better food, sometimes even some chocolate. That was a real luxury.

I have twice had the opportunity to meet up again with Ljubica, in 1996 and then again in 2004, when I visited Argentina with my children, and we are still in touch.

At the time, I had to look for accommodation again. I found it in Đorđićeva Street, in a Hungarian woman's house, who made a living from renting the rooms out. The only thing this woman could offer me was again a hard couch on which I was to sleep, while she slept in a bed, and another tenant slept in a second bed. There was also another room where the landlady's husband slept with his mistress, so it took me a long time to get used to the strange arrangement. The worst times were the mornings, when I had to do my morning hygiene, and the bathroom door had no key so I could not wash in peace.

Those days in Zagreb were difficult for me because I still lived in accordance with my upbringing, and the life that was on offer was very different and difficult to get used to. I wanted to have my own family one day and a home in order not to depend on anyone else.

### JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN

Finally, on October 23, 1954, I left Croatia and arrived in Argentina after a 26-day trip on the 18th of November 1954.

I said my farewells with Ljubica, who wanted also to go to Argentina to be with her father. I was hoping that we would meet up again in Argentina, which in fact did happen later. My sister Dolores organised everything for the trip, and my relative Ante Kosina, who was a priest in the Vatican, met me in Rome, where I slept with the nuns and accompanied him the next day after Holy Mass, which he held for me, to Genoa and on to the boat 'Andrea Doria' for Argentina.

I eventually parted with Ante, who was left alone after his family was killed in the war. I felt a great relief being in his company, as no one could arrest me because I was leaving Yugoslavia. This sense of freedom that I was experiencing travelling to Italy was indescribable. I thought I was beginning a new life and anything that happened to me in the future, would not be even remotely like my past. I was not aware that I left behind a heartbroken mother and I did not even imagine that going abroad would hold anything but a sense of intoxicating freedom and material benefits, and that not all people feel equally.



## BEGINNING LIFE IN EXILE

So, I set off into the unknown, full of enthusiasm, satisfaction, happiness and dreams, and arrived in Argentina in mid-November 1954. To my great surprise, there I found my sister Jadranka who arrived in Argentina from Sweden. She did not want to write home because she was afraid, knowing that our mail was being read, and that her communications could hinder my journey to Argentina. Dolores had three children, the youngest child was only a few months old.

Meeting with my sister Dolores was like any meeting of two sisters who used to be close, although time had taken its toll. I remember from childhood when we went 'promenading' in Osijek she would always stop and buy something from the street vendors. It would be blue plums, or hot chestnuts, which we shared. Then "coincidentally" her boyfriend would appear and join us. I was covering for her outings. In early childhood, we shared the same bed because at that time it was common in large families.

As I had lived under communism for more than nine years, I was still under the influence of fear, afraid of everyone and everything around me. I could not immediately figure out what it meant to live in a free world where you can express your thoughts



Picture 22 a. Argentina accepted many refugees after the Second World War, who were catalogued according to their educational classification, at the time of embarking.

without fear that you will be expelled or persecuted. It took me a long while to understand free trade, and the many choices in the stores were a constant temptation for me, but since I had no money, I said nothing to my sister. I was eager to try everything, including the food that for years I could not afford.

My other sister Jadranka was already doing well in Argentina so I followed her cue in adopting a new way of life. We could not get a job without knowledge of the language and recognition of our qualifications, especially Jadranka, who was an advanced student in law studies. And so the two of us realised, as had many Croats before us, that we would have to accept physical work wherever it was offered. Our people in Argentina mainly worked in the textile industry and in small crafts, though many got a job in their profession because Argentina was a country that accepted immigrants from all over, especially those who were displaced after the Second World War.



Picture 22 b. This Visa picture symbolised the result, that Vanda had to archive, before leaving Croatia. By buying then output visa, encourages Vanda set off to Argentina, on 23 October 1954 where she arrived on 18 November 1954.

The Argentine authorities had organised the cataloguing of all refugees and their qualifications and their levels of education, when the refugees were boarding ships in Europe and during their journey, so that these people could be deployed into work according to their qualifications. Therefore, many Croats on board were already assigned to the type of work that awaited them at their destination, and a large number of intellectuals commenced work in offices, even though they did not know the language. A typical example is the case of the Rector Stjepan Horvat, who immediately began working in his field, and was highly respected and well known in the academic circles of Argentina. As many Croats, even those who had worked in offices, started small businesses, mainly knitting wool garments for trade, this industry rapidly developed among our people. So, my sister Jadranka worked in that particular industry for all of the years of our life in Argentina. I started working in a small fabric factory, but decided to leave it after a few months, since soon after my arrival in Argentina I met my future husband. And soon we got married.



## II. THE HARSH REALITY OF THE DISPLACED

### MILKO'S LIFE IN THE HOMELAND

A native of Virovitica, Milko was born in Dugo Selo in the Virovitica region. His father was from Lukač, and his mother from Gradina. As his father was a train driver, the family constantly changed residence. The family lived for a long time in Karlovac, and then in 1941 they moved to Zagreb, where they lived in the railway colony in Trnje. As his father had to relocate for work, Milko's schooling was interrupted several times. He had three brothers and one sister.

Milko's family had some land in Gradina and his mother often traveled from Zagreb to Virovitica to assist in farming, and in autumn returned to Zagreb with the fruits of her labour. While their mother was gone, and as his father was regularly travelling with his job, Milko had to assume responsibility for the household and cook and care for the children. But when the war broke out, they decided to move back to Virovitica to be closer to the land their mother continued to cultivate.

According to Milko, his father was a very quiet family man, who was never involved in politics. He was therefore surprised to learn that his father had been killed by OZNA (the Yugoslav secret police), and he learnt about his death from a neighbour from Zagreb, who had at that time been with him in Bagnoli [Italy]. The neighbour had heard the news from his wife in Croatia. His father's death in 1948 surprised all who knew him, especially those closest to him. Specifically, Milko had not written back home to anyone, not wanting to compromise his family, so his family did not know whether he was alive or dead. At that time his father was constantly travelling as part of his railway service and on one of these trips, in Bjelovar, the OZNA pulled him off the train and took him to jail. It was a time of general terror against the Croatian people, when family members of those who had experienced 'the death march',



Picture 23. Family Podravac. Milko with father and mother (Milko standing on the right, father sitting first on the left and mother sitting last on the right, his sister sitting on her mother's lap).

and the former communists who belonged to the Cominform, were investigated and prosecuted. So, his father was beaten all night long. It appears that they wanted to get a confession out of him about something that did not exist, so they thought they could achieve it by beating him and continued to torture him until he was beaten to death. And such a deformed and disfigured man was buried in the cemetery in Bjelovar, in a section where they bury those who have no one, as well as those the government thought, were not worthy enough to be buried among other deceased.

The family never found out the reason for the father's arrest. Milko's mother, who was left with four children, asked for the body of her husband so that he could be buried, but without any success. Later, she went to a lawyer asking for this right, and he in turn sought an exhumation of the body in order to determine whether this body was Milko's father. The lawyer was then told to discontinue with the case, because he might end up in the same way as Milko's father. To this day, the case has never been resolved nor the perpetrators punished.

Milko began his education in Karlovac, where his father was transferred. As he was the first child, his parents wanted to provide the best education for him and sent him



to Varaždin where he attended first grade Classical high school and the prefect was Grga Vamporac. As the education was expensive, with parents paying 350 dinars a month, they had to, after the end of school, bring him back to Virovitica, where in the meantime his father had once again been transferred. In Virovitica he completed the second year of high school, while for the third, he went to Bjelovar where they then lived. Only for the three years, from the fourth to the sixth grade, did Milko have three consecutive years of continued schooling in the same high school, in Zagreb. He attended high school in Križanićeva street, where his class teacher was Professor Zvonimir Pinterović, an otherwise famous Croatian chemist, physicist and mathematician, who eventually ended up as a scientist in Belgium.

In Zagreb Milko again had to quit high school because they were once again moved to Virovitica. That was in February 1942, in the sixth grade, and following the urging of his neighbour Vlado Štefović, went to the Military Academy in Zagreb.

He reported to the military warrant school Third Company, First Regiment, which was located in Svačićev Square. This school taught radio service, and after a few months he was transferred to Požega, where they continued with training during the following year. In that school their commander was Officer Peršon, who had previously been the commander of a battalion ship.

After finishing school, the cadets were deployed into service at military radio stations, and Milko, together with his colleagues Publić and Gradišević, was sent to the military radio station in Karlovac. After three months in Karlovac, they returned back to Požega, where they completed the course and were promoted to sergeants, and then were distributed at military stations. Milko was sent to the 15th Battalion, II. Standing Brigade, headquartered in Našice. With the Commander Ivan Štir from the Osijek 15th Battalion, they were allocated to Podravska Slatina, where Milko served until the winter of 1944, when he moved to Osijek. There he stayed all winter, and in the end in the spring of 1945 he was transferred to Zagreb. In Osijek he was moved again due to the impossibility of return to Slatina, which was in the hands of the Partisans. During the combat for Slatina, he was wounded in Moslavina near the Drava, and that happened during the second fall of Slatina in 1944. They were retreating on foot towards Donji Miholjac, under the command of Franjo Masarić. The fighting lasted two days and two nights without stopping and they had no sleep at all. All this time he had been located in the radio station.

The winter was very cold, with lots of snow, and since Milko was very tired and sleepy, he did not even notice that a bullet hit him in the ribs, but only realised that when he

collapsed and saw the blood. His comrades thought he was dead, so they moved on, leaving him on the ground. He was semiconscious and heard two partisan women approaching him, and one of them pointed a gun at his chest to kill him if he was still alive. As he was semiconscious, he was not sure if she would kill him or not, and since he survived, he concluded that the partisan women thought he was dead and did not want to waste a bullet on him.

One of these two partisan women took off his boots and the two of them continued on their way. Milko continued to pretend, until late at night, that he was dead. Then he managed to get up and started walking on in the moonlight, bleeding and in pain, barefoot in the snow, sneaking under the first bridge, some 700 meters away. He wanted to check whether the partisans were still there, and when he was certain he could safely continue, he went to the first house, knocked on the door, and the people who were sitting at a table immediately received him into their house. It was risky to knock on a stranger's door because the peasants could have surrendered him to the partisans, but he knew from his experience that these peasants were against partisans, and he would be safe so he was not afraid. The next day that farmer drove him by the agricultural wagon to Donji Miholjac. On the main road, they came across his unit, which had taken a counter offensive from Slatina over Suhopolje to Voćin. He was taken for treatment to a military hospital in Osijek, and after he got out of the hospital, he remained there to work at the military station because the *Domobrani* [regular Croatian army] who had been working there had fled to join the partisans. During the battles, Milko worked as a radio operator directly under the commander of the regiment, Colonel Ivan Štir.

Military school was also attended by two of Milko's brothers, who went through the Death march, after which, as juveniles they were released to go home. After the Death march, they returned to Virovitica and the younger brother Ivica, who now lives in Canada, went to Bakar to the Naval Academy where he graduated as a mechanical engineer and later travelled all over the world, then settled with his family in Canada. The elder brother Vlado worked in Rijeka as a turner, where he lived with his family, and where he died.



When Milko arrived in Zagreb from Osijek, he was placed in a military building in Bukovac, where for a time he taught military radio signalling to new cadets. There he found his colleagues Pereza and Bubić who had previously worked at the airport in Zemunik. The commander of the military station was Captain Bilić. Milko remained there until his withdrawal from Zagreb on Sunday May 6, 1945. The military station was located at St. Mark's Square, and Milko, together with colleagues Drago Bubić, Vlado Pereza, Franjo Meštrović and their colleague Kihalić was assigned to Headquarters. They were all assigned radio station duties and travelled in three trucks, which followed the Head of State, Dr. Ante Pavelić, and they headed north, towards Slovenia. The first night they spent in Krapina, then headed towards Maribor, where they crossed the border to Austria.

When crossing into Austria they were ordered to send their last message to the Croatian army that was withdrawing, and then to destroy all military radio station equipment, and that afterwards everyone was responsible for their own survival. Up until then they had been travelling for about four days. First, they came to Judenburg and then to Leoben. There they were bombed and near Leoben Milko saw the Head of the State, disguised as a Tyrolean in an outfit of short leather pants, walking alone in the woods. Milko separated from his colleagues and Bubić and Pereza, with whom he did not meet up again until he met them in Fermo.

Those who stayed in that area wandered through the woods, and after two or three days crossed the river Ems and came to the Americans, who were on the other side of the river. While they were with the Americans, in a camp which was surrounded by a wire, they were not given any food for two weeks. They slept on the ground under the open sky. As it was not comfortable lying on the ground and sleeping in the open, they tore grass and branches to make a pit, in which four of them slept, including his colleague Franjo Meštrović. The grass was their only food. There they remained until May 26, and the Americans took all their documents and gave them a written release from the camp. Milko's letter of dismissal was "Certificate of Discharge – Control Form D-2-14 issued by Headquarters – 31st Infantry Regiment", and signed by Donald Falk, "2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. LNF". When the Americans completed this process, they transferred them by train to Mauerkirchner near Salzburg, where they were handed over to the English. Finally, they were transferred to another camp near Salzachbruck, which was run by the British where, on the other side of the camp, they saw Chetniks and Yugoslav officers who returned voluntarily back to Yugoslavia.

## THE BLACK MASK

In this camp, which had many barracks, there were four people housed in each room and there were five bedrooms on each side of the barrack, which were divided by a hallway in the middle. In Milko's room there were Ivan Kralj, then Milko's colleague Franjo Meštrović and an elderly man, whose surname Milko had forgotten, but he recalled was Herzegovinian. And while they slept deeply, one night, they were suddenly awoken by Englishmen who came into the room with a masked person, from whose height it could be concluded was a man. That masked man, who together with the Englishmen visited every room, pointed a finger at individuals who the British then removed from the room. From Milko's room two were removed, Ivan Kralj and the older man. They were swallowed by the night, and never heard of again. The next morning, they found out that many from the other rooms were taken, and that the 'black Mask' was a Croat detainee who betrayed his countrymen. They speculated who it may have been. This happened around July or August of 1945.

## THE ROAD TO ITALY

Since no one felt safe any longer in the English camp, Milko and four or five others decided to seek out other camps so they eventually headed towards Italy, where there were a lot of Croatian refugees. They left the camp near Salzburg, arrived in Sazderhelden, and settled in a bigger camp where they remained until winter. In each new camp they met new people with whom they shared the same fate and here Milko met Senj resident, Boris Butorac. We met up with him again many years later in Australia. Later this friendship in Australia became close and we became family to each other.

The fate of a refugee's life constantly followed them and Milko decided with a few friends to go on to the camp Fermo in Italy. On the way they went to Austria to Spital, and from there they went on to Lienz. There they met a man who accompanied them overnight on foot to near Belluno in Italy, where they caught a train for the onward journey to Fermo.



CAMP FERMO IN ITALY – SORTING REFUGEES  
INTO BLACK, GREY AND WHITE

They did not pay for their train tickets and they told the conductor they had no money, as they were refugees and this is how they travelled through Verona, Bologna, Ancona and finally arriving in Porto San Giorgio, from where they next went on to Fermo, where there was a big camp for refugees, in which there were many Croats. It was the winter of 1945/1946. When they arrived at the camp, the administrators were Croats so they felt safer. The camp was run by the British, who placed refugees in one large room that had once been a warehouse. Altogether there were approximately 16 such buildings, warehouses, and Milko was placed in building number 14, where they were mainly single males, two hundred of them. This camp opened for refugees on 15 August 1945 and closed in 1948.

All these barracks were one-room so they all spent the entire day in them and slept there as well. Later, because of this lack of privacy, they had canvas partitions installed. Then Milko met another Senj resident, Krešo Župan, who later joined the Kavran group, which had fallen into the UDBA trap, on their return to Croatia. The Udba awaited them and Krešo Župan died after being tortured by the secret police. They claimed that he took his own life. That young man was known in Senj by his good character, he was loved by all of Senj, and was popular among all the young people, especially because he sang and played the accordion. He never did anybody any harm. His brother Ante ended up in a similar manner. And Kavran himself, as well as others who took part in that plot, were betrayed, tortured and executed.

Colonel Ivan Štir, whom I met in 1996 in Argentina, told me that he knew what was going to happen with the Kavran group, he had found out through an Ukrainian, who was close to the Englishmen. Colonel Štir conveyed the information to them, but they did not listen. In Fermo, Milko met his colleague from the army, Vlado Pereza. Then they realized that of the 52 graduates of their military school, only three of them remained alive. After they arrived in Fermo, they were constantly interrogated by various and many interrogators. These interrogators classified the refugees as “black”, “grey” and “white”. All those who were “black” soon disappeared from the camp.

Milko found out, and not until Bagnoli, that he was classified as “grey”, as were many in the Fermo camp. While they were in Fermo, all “whites” were able to emigrate to other countries without difficulty, while the “grey” had to wait to become “white”, because additional information on them was to be collected. All those who were so

Picture 24. Vanda's future husband  
in the Italian camp Fermo 1947.



Picture 25. Milko with his friends in refugee camp Fermo in Italy in 1947 (seated at left).



marked, were afraid that the Italians would hand them over to Yugoslavia and some of them fled from the camp, while others waited to have their name appear on the list of "white". These lists were posted on the camp bulletin board.

In Fermo, the food was very poor and there was not enough. Everyone was always hungry. And so some decided to go to Rome with the intention of applying with the French Embassy to join the Foreign Legion because they had heard that the French were accepting candidates for the Legion and housed them in their barracks before they finalized their choice of candidates for the Legion. They did this because they were constantly hungry. From Fermo they travelled to Rome via Ancona, and stopped in Loreto, where they toured the world-famous cathedral.

They then continued to Rome, without paying for their train tickets. They intended to eat up well at the sign-up centre for the Legion in Rome, and then come back to Fermo. But French Legion had its collection center in Naples, where they were sent. They abandoned this idea because they knew that when they arrive in Naples to enrol, it would be difficult to get out. And so again after two days they were back in Fermo and hungry again, where Milko stayed until mid-1946 when he was moved, with others, in the first group to be transferred to Bagnoli near Naples.

#### THE JOURNEY TO BAGNOLI, THEN TO GERMANY AND FINALLY TO ARGENTINA

In Bagnoli they were placed in one camp, which had previously been a fascist officers' school. These buildings even had tunnels under the hills, and the Bagnoli camp was under English rule. They remained there until the Allies withdrew from Italy, and then transferred by train to Darmstadt in Germany, where they were placed in the school in Dieburg. Those who arrived there immediately went into forced labor, constructing a railway. The food was bad and scarce, and they were always hungry. This lasted until the winter of 1947, when they were loaded onto a train and taken to Hamburg, where they received Red Cross passports from our priests and were to board the ship "Entre Rios" for Argentina. However, they did not on that occasion embark because there were too many of them, and they had to be sent back. It was only after two months, in early January, that they managed to get onto that ship. Finally, in February 1948, they arrived in Buenos Aires. After arriving in Argentina they were placed in the "Hotel Inmigrantes", which was surrounded by wire, and they

had to stay in that hotel a whole month because they did not have permission to enter Buenos Aires.

Later they were transferred to the new immigrants' village, where Milko was again transferred at Ezeiza airport, where they lived in a large barracks. There were several hundred people there, mostly Croats, and a smaller number of Italians. Milko immediately began working as an electrician in the field that was closest to what he was taught in military college. Because of the labour shortage, the authorities did not ask for documents because they needed many workers for the construction of the new airport. Many Croat professionals met up here, who had already signed in onboard, before disembarking in Buenos Aires.



### III. FINAL DESTINATION ARGENTINA

#### ARRIVAL IN BUENOS AIRES

In Argentina, especially in Buenos Aires, there were a lot of Croats. They immediately organized themselves well, establishing their own club in Salta Street, in the very centre of Buenos Aires. There they all regularly met, held events, and founded their own choir and tambura (guitar and mandolin) group, which was named "Ciciban", after a local bird. Together they spent time trying to forget their nostalgia for their homeland. There were families who had left Croatia, and also a lot of singles, even widows with children, whose husbands were killed, mostly in Bleiburg, or who ended up on the Death March.

So the families befriended each other and visited each other not only for common socializing, but also for their children. The biggest obstacle to socializing was transport because Buenos Aires is scattered, and it takes longer to drive from one end of town to the other. In those days Croats did not have cars and were dependent on local buses, and those were scarce and often crowded.

People regularly attended Mass, and after that, went to communal lunches, often in the Buenos Aires "Croatian Home Centre", where homemade food was prepared and a homely atmosphere prevailed.

#### A NEW LIFE AFTER A DANCE AT THE BUENOS AIRES CROATIAN *HOME CENTRE*

Upon arrival in Buenos Aires, Milko began his new life working as an electrician. He worked at the Ezeiza airport for five or six months, then went to Patagonia, 2000 kilo-

metres south of Buenos Aires. Some Croats were already there, at whose invitation he came and who welcomed him. He immediately got a job in a company called "Dorignac". Everyone was housed in one village, which the company had built for them. Specifically, this part of Patagonia, with the city of Comodoro Rivadavia, had always been under military control so they actually worked for the army. In Comodoro Rivadavia, he met up with his catechism teacher from the second and third grade of high school in Virovitica, Father Osvald Toth, who had also been his religion teacher in first grade of the Grammar School in Varaždin. Milko served as an altar boy at his masses. Life in Patagonia was a carefree life for a single person and lasted two and a half years. The money they earned during the week they spent on weekends in Comodoro Rivadavia, and they were so extravagant they caught taxis from their workplace to the city. Milko then returned to Buenos Aires, where the two of us met in 1955.

And so fate had it, that the two of us met on the eve of Milko's birthday on 19<sup>th</sup> February 1955 in the Croatian Civic Centre, Croatian *Dom* 'Salta' / Croatian *Home* 'Salta' (the name derived from the street where the *Dom* / *Home* was located). That night, Milko played in the *tamburica* group "Ciciban", and I was in the company of my older sister Dolores and her husband Mate. With us was a resident of Zagreb, Ivo Drenski, who lived alone, and in our company found a substitute for his family, which he had left behind in Croatia. That night there was a 'Miss Croatia' contest, a title that was awarded to the candidate who sold the most tombola (raffle) tickets. All the money from the raffle went towards paying the debts associated with the *Dom*. That night I was one of the candidates, and Ivo Drenski bought so many tickets from me that I won the title of 'Miss Croatia'. We stayed long at the party and Milko joined us after he had finished playing with his group. Right away we realized that we had a lot in common, so we started dating and after a short time we decided to get married. As we had both roamed the world from pillar to post, we wanted to immediately start our own family and have a roof over our heads. We were full of ideals and hope for a better future.

But as much as we wanted that badly, we were prevented by some obstacles that we had to overcome. Namely, when my sister Dolores arranged documentation for me and Jadranka, an entry requirement at the time in Argentina was that new immigrants must be a permanent resident a minimum of 100 kilometres from Buenos Aires. The capital was overcrowded and the infrastructure problems of new settlements was huge, because of the extremely large influx of new-migrants. So, my sister arranged for our residence through her acquaintances who lived a few hundred kilometres from Buenos Aires, indicating that we would work and live with them. In addition, at the time, Juan Peron ruled, and many moved to Buenos Aires, mostly



'descamisados' (the homeless) to whom Peron offered all the privileges that they did not have in their home provinces, with the aim that they support his rule.

### THE FOUNDING OF THE PODRAVAC FAMILY

Milko decided to work outside of Buenos Aires to earn more because neither of us had any savings to start our life together. Because of my residency status we had to get married outside of Buenos Aires. So we went to Villa Constitución, near Rosario, a village situated about 400 kilometres from Buenos Aires. Out there lived Slavko, our future best man, and also the brother of my Aunt Vjera Milković, who lived in Switzerland. After their arrival in Argentina they had settled in the provinces.

In Villa Constitución we were married on December 22, 1955. The wedding was very modest, just the family were present, along with Slavko's family and the family of his friend Vlado. The mood that night was raised by Vlado's daughter Gloria, who sang a Croatian song "Kad se cigo zaželi", [When the Gypsy wishes]" all night. After the wedding, we rented a one-bedroom apartment not far from Buenos Aires, and since Milko worked outside of Buenos Aires, my sister Jadranka came to live with me.



Picture 26. Young, newly married Vanda and Milko in Buenos Aires in 1955.

Like all newlywed women, I had big dreams and expectations. I wanted us to have at least three children, to give them everything we did not have in childhood, especially in our youth, when we were denied so much because of our circumstances. Still in our youth, we were already burdened by suffering arising from the way of life that had been enforced on us by persecution in our home country, and life in foreign lands imposed huge sacrifices on us. We were able to start a family, despite encountering many setbacks and problems, which we somehow overcame and moved on to live with greater enthusiasm.

Soon I was pregnant and gave birth to our first daughter Stela on 8 April 1957. My happiness was indescribable. During pregnancy, I felt wonderful, knowing that inside me I carried the fruit of love, a part of ourselves, something that no one could take away. Childbirth lasted about 27 hours, it was quite difficult, but when this new creation, weighing 3140 grams, was placed in my hands, I forgot all the pain. In the meantime, Milko had returned to Buenos Aires. He was also happy, finally we had what we wanted our entire lives. For me as a mother, everything was new, I knew nothing about motherhood, and I did not have someone to teach me. My ignorance was most evident in child feeding. In fact, I thought that my milk was providing sufficient nutrition, as that was how I fed the baby those first few days after leaving the hospital. However, on Holy Saturday, April 14, she was constantly crying at night so that night we had to call the doctor. As soon as he took the baby, the doctor stuck a



Picture 27. On Rio de la Plata beach with Stela, 6 months old, in 1957.



spoon in Stela's mouth, and she started sucking it. He concluded immediately that the baby was hungry as the mother's milk was not adequate for her. So, from then on, I fed her with the appropriate baby food for her age.

Stela was born in the 'Hospital Aleman' (German Hospital), in the centre of Buenos Aires (where our second daughter was also born), and there I took her for a check-up once a month and her progress was always good. The only problem was that as a child she had flat feet so as soon as she could walk, she had to wear special orthopaedic shoes that helped her. Stela was a good child, we had no difficulties with her when she was small. She was surrounded by children, loved company and quickly learned the 'castellano' version of Spanish that is spoken in South America.

Sometimes we would take her to lunch at the Croatian Dom in Buenos Aires, which was not far from the train station Constitución. It was a short ride because we lived only 20 minutes from the city centre. In the Croatian Dom she made friends with her peer Dinka, the daughter of the Dom manager's spouse, who at that time was the cook.

One Saturday, Dinka was playing carefree in the lobby of the Croatian Dom during a party, when UDBA agents threw a bomb inside the dom. Dinka died on the spot. This innocent child was a victim of the distant hand of Yugoslavia.

When I got pregnant again, I was experienced at motherhood. With eager anticipation and joy I carried our second child. However, during pregnancy I became very sick

and the doctor found that I had to have emergency surgery for appendicitis. That happened in the fifth month of pregnancy, and although doctors were not in favour of surgery, the risk for me and the baby was large. Our second daughter Blanca was born on August 17, 1959. The delivery was again trying and lasted for about 26 hours, and the child was 10 grams less than the first child, that is, 3130 grams. When she was born, she was pale and fragile.



Picture 28. Stela and Blanca in Argentina in 1960.

I do not know if this was because of my surgery during pregnancy or if she would have been born this way anyway. She had long, curly black hair at birth, while Stela had short gold hair. I was happy that Stela now had the company she had always wanted.

Blanca was born very vulnerable so I had to constantly take her to doctors. She suffered the most at Christmas 1959 when we went to visit our dear friend Slavko in Villa Constitución, where she got sick. There was always a terrible humidity, and the Parana River is the cause of tremendous moisture, it is so wide that you cannot see the bank on the other side. Because of this humidity there was much illness, and a lot of mosquitoes. This unhealthy climate worsened her fragile health. She was just over four months old, she was having difficulty feeding, and became very weak, losing a lot of weight. At four months of age, she weighed barely a few grams more than at birth.

During this Christmas period our regular doctor in the German hospital was on vacation so I depended on other doctors who were not of much help. She was given mainly antibiotics, which at that time were the cure for all possible diseases. The antibiotics did her more harm than good. They killed all the microorganisms in her gut, which are necessary for the retention of useful substances. I took her to emergency rooms in four hospitals as well as to a private doctor, who also gave her strong antibiotics.

This lasted a month, and one morning when I went to the pharmacy for a new antibiotic, the pharmacist looked at Blanca and advised me to go with her to the hospital immediately. Since our doctor had returned from vacation (otherwise he was German by nationality), I placed her on the table and told him to do whatever he could to save her.

He told me the first thing to do was to throw all the antibiotics in the trash, as well as all the other drugs, and that I should constantly feed Blanca white maize porridge because he was convinced that at least part of that food would be absorbed and retained. He prescribed injections of magnesium, of which there were 20, which had to be given over 20 days. These injections were supposed to make up for the microorganisms destroyed by the antibiotics. And so, she slowly began to recover. Finally, it all ended well, although Blanca continued to be frail. Our ancestors used to say that the mother is the best healer because she instinctively knows how her child is, and later in life I was repeatedly assured of this. Medicine heals the body, but love saves lives! Unfortunately, at that time I was alone again because Milko had to work outside of Buenos Aires.

Naturally, we wanted to give our children Croatian names. Blanca was meant to be Zrinka, as was Stela before her, but according to Argentine law, children could only





Picture 29. Stela and Blanca standing in front in the middle. Buenos Aires 1960.

be given those names that could be pronounced by anyone, and these were mainly only Spanish names. Although we were well accepted in Argentina, we nonetheless felt like strangers. Argentina was a country that respected its immigrants, while Australia, at that time, with its

Anglo-Saxon mentality, was not inclined to new immigrants.

We Croatians mostly hung out with each other, and our children formed friendships with each other. However, due to the worsening economic situation, we wanted to migrate to another country because we wanted to ensure a better future for our children than the one we had in Argentina. This decision proved to be a good one, as we left Argentina and changed lives for the better.

One of the biggest problems at that time in Argentina was the lack of water and electricity. We lived only nine kilometres from the centre of Buenos Aires, but water was available only at night, in such a weak stream that we had to wait for hours for all our containers to fill with water. It was hard without water at a time when the children were still in diapers. Every house had a generator for electricity, and refrigerators were working at night, while in the morning, they thawed again. There were also problems with the drainage of foul water, which poured out on the street and in front of each building, so it was indeed filthy. It was also a time of very high temperatures. I remember that in 1959 the heat was so great that some reporters covering the high temperatures, fried eggs on the hot asphalt. However, it was the most beautiful time of my life because I was a very devoted wife and mother and I enjoyed every moment I spent with Milko and the children.

At that time the political situation in Argentina also deteriorated because Peron lost power, and the Army took over. Before he was ousted, the economic situation was already bad. Admittedly, Peron was popular among the masses, handing out many privileges that led to economic collapse. Evita, his wife, was also popular, and sought

to continue to be identified with the common people, but her life was extremely luxurious. It was said that she had about 27 fur coats (which she could rarely wear due to the warm climate), and other valuable wardrobe items. She also had a lot of gold jewellery. As a former second-rate actress and as Peron's second wife, she knew how to approach the masses and win their favor.

We assessed the situation and decided to seek a better future elsewhere. My sister Jadranka and I sent letters everywhere, seeking entrance to another country. We tried to get the entry documents for Canada and America. We had some positive indications that we could gain entry to Canada, but war broke out on the Suez Canal so all further Canadian immigrations was suspended.

Right at that time Jadranka's boyfriend, who had remained in Croatia, fled to Italy and immediately got into contact with her. He had a chance to go from Germany to Argentina or Australia, but he decided to immigrate to Australia. And so she went to Australia in 1958, she married there, and tried to arrange for us to be brought to Australia. The first attempt was rejected. Jadranka tried again and this application was approved on September 27, 1960. In the second half of 1961 we were on our way, and that was three years after Jadranka's departure for Australia.



## IV. A SECOND EMIGRATION

### A FATEFUL DECISION ON THE FAMILY'S FUTURE

Now that Jadranka had finally managed to get a visa for our arrival in Australia, we busily prepared for the trip, and finally set out in October 1961. We were not admitted into Australia as refugees paid for by the state, so Jadranka had arranged through the Catholic organization "Caritas" that they pay for our journey, and we were to repay the loan in instalments after arriving in Australia. "Caritas" agreed to pay for our journey because the economic situation in Argentina was such that we could not save to travel to Australia. "Caritas" sent us the ticket and reservation for a hotel in Panama, where we were to transfer from one ship to another. And so, on October 29, 1961 we were supposed to travel firstly by train across the Andes to Santiago in Chile, and then on to the port of Valparaiso on the other side of the continent, on the Pacific Ocean, to board the ship to Panama and then onto the second ship to Australia.

We brought with us everything we could carry, and that we could use in our new home (including my sewing machine, Milko's tools and other electrical devices). And while we were waiting that Sunday morning with friends at the train station for our train, there was an announcement on the megaphone that while the train would be leaving at the normal time, because of the strikes (which were then frequent), it would stop in the middle of the night, during its journey. This meant that we would have found ourselves at the top of the Andes in the middle of the night, waiting until the strikes were suspended. Furthermore, had we caught this train, it was questionable as to whether we would have made the connection with our ship. So, we decided to fly by plane to Santiago and then on to Valparaiso by train in order to get to the ship on time. And we had to leave behind all the electrical appliances we had brought with us. We were able to take a few suitcases and gave our friends our hard-earned household

Picture 30. Refugees' drama – family Boras Podravac (in the presence of godfathers Veljo and Franjo) on the train platform at Buenos Aires, before leaving for Chile, which was cancelled because of the train workers strike, at the end of October 1961.



equipment. What little money we had saved, we spent immediately on the expensive airline tickets. We also had to pay an advance to cover our travel to Australia, which amounted to 537 US dollars.

### ANOTHER LONG JOURNEY OVERSEAS

Because they were scared on the flight, Stela and Blanca cried all the way, and we were not more comfortable ourselves as this was our first trip by plane. From Santiago we went on to Valparaiso by train.

Valparaiso is a very beautiful city, full of contrasts. It is a tourist destination for the wealthy, but also alongside this, there were homeless people living and sleeping on the streets. We still remember that here we saw and ate bananas which were twice the size and thickness of normal bananas. I think that these bananas come from a rainforest on the border of Brazil and Argentina.

We were in Valparaiso for a few days until the 5th November 1961. Then we boarded the Italian ship "Usodimare", which was to take us to Panama, through Balboa on the Pacific Ocean, to Colon on the Atlantic Ocean, where we again had to wait ten days to board the Dutch ship "Oranje" which would take us to Sydney. On the Italian ship, the menu was bountiful, with pasta and red wine, and snacks were abundant, so we all gained weight.



On the journey from Valparaíso to Panama we passed the west coast of South America, and stopped in the northernmost city of Chile, Arica, then again in Callao, the harbor of the capital of Peru, Lima. Next stop was the port of Buenaventura in Colombia and at the end, Balboa, on the west coast of Panama.

But we did not stop there, rather we crossed the Canal, traveling to the city of Colon, on the east bank of the Panama Canal. The trip was interesting, we sailed for nine hours, and the channel length is about 82 kilometres. On the occasions of the closure of the locks, and there were four, there was an unavoidable sense of fear and claustrophobia.

Along the coast it was rainforest and tropical climate. It was exciting when we were in the room and we could see the iron locks that lifted the boat come into operation, and the same types of locks on the other side opened. We went through this procedure four times, because the difference in sea level between the western and eastern coasts of Panama ranges from 25 centimetres to 3.5 meters, and this difference depends on the tides. For our children the journey was interesting.

In Colon we stayed in the hotel "Washington", where we were from 18 to 27 November 1961, waiting for the ship "Oranje" for Australia. This Dutch ship had been during the World War II commissioned as a military hospital.



Picture 31. Journey from Argentina to Australia. On board of the ship "Oranje" 1961, Saint Nicholas festivity. Stela and Blanca, sitting on the floor.



Picture 32. Stela and Blanca with father on board "Oranje", 1961.



Picture 33. Stela and Blanca with mother on board "Oranje", 1961.

While we stayed at the hotel, we were immediately alerted to the crime that is widespread in the area and advised that we need to be very careful. We had to pay extra at the hotel so we ate modestly. But as it was one of the better hotels, the final account for the food was \$242, which at that time was a large sum of money.

On board "Oranje" we did not have luxury accommodation. Although there was a kindergarten for children, our daughters could not participate because of the language barrier. Only English and Dutch were spoken on board, so we were inadvertently confronted with the reality of what was awaiting us in Australia, because we did not speak the English language. We crossed the Equator on December 6th, Saint Nicholas Day, who appeared with the 'Devil' on board to entertain the children. However, our daughters were so frightened of the Devil that they cried constantly.

The food was good, but not to our taste. The meals were mostly dressed with apple juice, even the goulash was sweet. We could not eat the soups because even those were sweet. We ended up hungry. We did not dare ask for other food because everyone at our table enjoyed these meals, and not knowing the language hindered our situation. I was very ill on the boat trip and I mostly lay in the cabin. Milko had to watch out for our children. We were joking about my seasickness because as a Primorka, raised by the sea, and used to the Bura wind, I could not stand the stormy waves, while Milko, born Slavonian, coped with the worst waves fairly well.



## V. REBOOTING LIFE IN THE NEW AUSTRALIAN HOMELAND

### THE END OF OUR WANDERING AROUND THE WORLD

The trip from Buenos Aires to Sydney lasted one month and 18 days, including the time waiting for the arrival of the first and second ships. In Sydney, we were welcomed by my sister and her family and one of their friends who had a car and we all drove to the house of my sister, in Kingswood, a 45-minute drive. As my sister and her husband had just started to build up their household, they had land they had purchased and only a small one-bedroom shack in which they lived. This was to serve as a temporary dwelling because they intended to build a house alongside this 'garage', which was the popular term for such a temporary home.



Picture 34. Ship "Oranje" arriving in Sydney on 18th December 1961.

As there was not enough room for all of us, my sister rented a small caravan (traveling house), in which the four of us slept. It was very cramped, at night we could not sleep from the heat, and there were no screens on the windows so we could not keep them open because there was plenty of mosquitoes. Blanca was again ill, her food was not agreeing with her and she refused to eat. We had no money. We came to Australia with 50 US dollars, two suitcases, and a large debt that we had to start paying off soon. Fortunately, there was plenty of work, including for those who did not speak English.

### MILKO STARTS WORK IN A NEW ENVIRONMENT

The English car factory 'Morris' in Sydney, known for manufacturing the small vehicle 'Mini Minor', was always looking for workers for its factory. And so Milko, with the help of some fellow Croats who worked there, got his first job at the car factory, where many new immigrants were already employed. His weekly wage was 19 pounds, or \$ 38. We soon found a dwelling with some Poles who rented us their 'garage' in which they had lived while they built a house in front of the garage. Having no household appliances, we had to borrow money to buy a refrigerator, beds and other necessities because we had to re-equip the household. In addition, we had to start paying off the debt for the trip, but fortunately we did not need to pay any interest.

It was hard! From Milko's 19 pounds a week, three and a half pounds a week we paid for the accommodation. From the first week, with the remaining money, we paid five pounds towards our debt for the trip, the next week we paid five pounds in repayment for the furniture and fridge, while the third week we repaid the sewing machine, and the fourth week we bought supplies for the house. We had to live off the remaining money, including Milko's daily travel expenses to Sydney and back. The food we bought was modest, for no more than three pounds. Then I decided to iron so I could earn at least some money. But the work was demanding. I was paid by the hour, and much was expected so I spent twice as much time on ironing, than I was earning.

As soon as I arrived in Australia I bought a sewing machine, which after 50 years still works. I sewed everything for myself and the kids, and if required, for Milko. The only clothing I bought was school uniforms that children in Catholic schools had to wear.

Our economic situation did not improve despite our concerted efforts. Caritas arranged for us to pay off our travel debt at a rate of at least five pounds a month, which



we did, though we intended to increase this amount when our financial situation improved. Our total debt amounted to US \$1,400, or 630 Australian pounds. We needed to repay the debt within ten years. However, we repaid it in five years. We paid the last instalment of AUD \$ 106.60 in August 1967. We were concerned in case something unwanted happened or that the children ended up 'on the street' without anything so we wanted to buy a smaller house that we would pay for with our rent money.

After several months of work in the car factory, in August 1962, Milko applied for a new job on a large hydroelectric power plant in the Australian Snowy Mountains. Many Croats worked there, as did immigrants of German, Italian and Greek nationality.

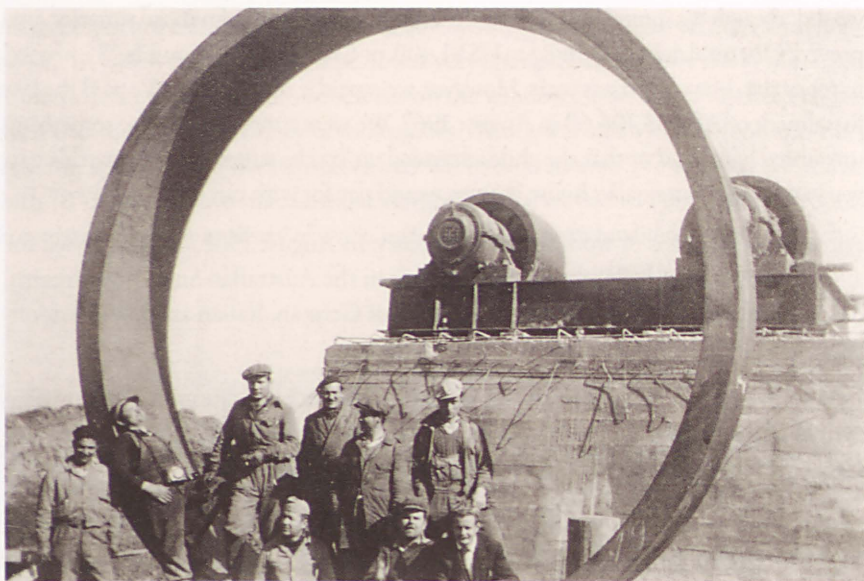
I always feared for Milko because he worked in difficult conditions, mostly mining tunnels. On average, one man was killed per every mile tunnelled and often it was a Croat. We continued to pay off our debts as quickly as possible.

About 100,000 people from 30 different countries worked on the 'Snowy Project', with the largest number of employees at any one time about 7,300 workers.

The total length of the built tunnel was 145 kilometres. As Australia is the driest country in the world, the issue of water supply needed to be addressed due to the rapidly increasing population. And so in 1949 a major project called 'Snowy Mountains Scheme' was commenced, one of the seven largest engineering projects in the world, and certainly the largest in Australia. Construction took 25 years, and after completion of the project, electricity was supplied to all the major Australian cities except Perth, with the help of seven electric power stations. The project cost was to be 800 million pounds, or in dollars 1 billion 600 million, but by the end of the construction, the cost of the project had risen to 3 billion 700 million dollars.

Since Milko started his job in the Snowy Mountains, our economic situation improved and we started saving money for our own home. It was hard for me alone with the children, because I was afraid of the owner of the house, a Pole, who was always drunk. As he was alone with his kids because his wife worked every afternoon, he was drinking behind our home under the pretext of working in the garden because he did not want his children to see him. There were so many empty bottles of alcohol around that a truck used to come from the alcohol factory to collect them.

His neighbour, also an immigrant, was not much sober than him. He lived alone in squalor and ate meat that he kept on the porch because he did not have a fridge and the meat smelled so bad that the stink would reach us.



Picture 35. Work on hydro-electric power plant. Milko standing at back, first on the left.

I wanted to get out of this environment as soon as possible. Before Milko's departure to the Snowy, I got pregnant a third time. I was worried about how I would cope by myself, but Milko would lose wages we relied on, so he could not be with his pregnant wife.

When we arrived in Australia, our eldest daughter Stela was four years and nine months old, and at that time should have gone to compulsory pre-school class. Fortunately, the school she attended was across the street from the house where we lived then so there was no problem in that regard.

Picture 36. "Snowy Mountains Project".  
Leaflets copy. 1999.





Our biggest problem was our lack of knowledge of the language. But Stela learned English at school quickly. Milko and I tried to learn the language with the help of a correspondence course consisting of twenty lessons. It was the only privilege granted to us by the government. Today, language lessons are much better organized. Each city offers paid training courses for every new migrant, and if they want to continue their education, the government provides them with the opportunity. Likewise, new residents have the right to immediate housing, which they get at a very low rent depending on their financial situation as the government supports them until they find employment.

Once Stela went to school and learned the language she became our 'interpreter'. We had some funny episodes with the translations. One time I wanted to buy a rabbit at the butcher's shop, as they were cheap, in view of our financial situation. As I did not know how to ask for a rabbit in English, I asked Stela for the correct expression, and she told me to ask for a "bunny rabbit", because just before Easter the kids were taught in school about chocolate bunnies. So I asked for a chocolate bunny, confusing the butcher because he did not sell any chocolate bunnies for children. He replied to me in English, but again I did not understand what he said. But I insisted I wanted to buy a rabbit and the butcher finally realised what I wanted and burst out laughing when he was aware of the misunderstanding, and everyone else at the butcher's shop laughed. It was very embarrassing for me, and then I decided to do everything I could to learn English as soon as possible. Although mastering English did not go as fast as I wished, I achieved my goal because eventually I successfully completed a degree in social studies at the Australian University of Canberra.

### THE MOTHER LANGUAGE AND ENGLISH

As parents we were concerned that our children learn the Croatian language. Our daughters, after arriving in Australia, began to forget Spanish and we decided to speak to them only in Croatian since we knew they would be taught English anyway at school. We wanted them to learn their parent's language and we succeeded.

To illustrate how well they speak Croatian I will mention an event in Dubrovnik, which Stela and I visited in 1997. A cleaner at the hotel where we were staying, thought Stela was a well-known figure in the entertainment industry in Croatia, whom she resembled. When we told her that she was born in Argentina and it was her first visit to Croatia, the woman marvelled and could not believe how Stela spoke

excellent Croatian. That was the finest compliment for us, on that trip. Not only did she learn both Croatian and English well, but she and Blanca and Tomislav achieved high positions in the Australian Public Service, while Zrinka engaged in painting and studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts.

And today I still speak only the Croatian language with the children, but I have noticed that what children learn in the first five years of their life has a much greater impact on their character and intellectual development than what we learn later in life, and that does not apply only to language, but also to everything else. With the first two children I was constantly in the house, and with the other two had to work so that their Croatian gets a little 'stuck'. In particular, it often gets literally translated from the English language.

#### OUR HOME – OUR FREEDOM

We badly wanted to buy some land with a 'garage' we could live in until we paid off all our debts, and then we wanted to start building a house. St Marys, the area in which we were living until then, was 40 minutes by train to Sydney. These places along the railway line to the west had been predominantly populated by the working class and new immigrants. New land and houses were then very cheap, which attracted newcomers. As Milko was working in the Snowy, he rarely came home because he worked seven days a week. However, it did help our financial situation for the purchase of real estate. I found a garage in Blacktown, not far from the train station, which was for sale, and closer to Sydney than St Marys had been. The price of this garage was about a thousand pounds, which of course we did not have so we took out a loan of 700 pounds from a finance company, with interest over two years amounting to 180 pounds. We were forced to accept such an unfavourable deal because the other companies refused us a loan. Still, we managed to repay this debt in less than two years. The rest of the money that we lacked, other than what we had saved, Milko borrowed from his acquaintances in the workplace.

And so in May 1963 we moved into our first 'home', which was actually a fibro shack with a small kitchen, one bedroom and a small room that was supposed to be a bathroom. The house was in an open field, with no fence, and behind it was bushland. The toilet was outside and very primitive, emptied at night, once a week. We got an Alsatian dog so we could feel more secure. We called him Grom (Thunder) and he



would bark at anyone who approached our home. Since he was dangerous, we had to tie him to a heavy chain, however, since he was constantly growling, we had to call the municipal office to take him. Even the dog handler did not dare to handle him, so I had to get him into the truck which was taking him away.

And just before we moved into our home, our family grew. The new member was also a girl who was born on the 21<sup>st</sup> March 1963. Finally, we used the name Zrinka. And finally, we had a home after our travels around the world, moving houses, and other difficulties.

When I was carrying Zrinka, I had regular visits to the doctor, a Czech lady, because she understood Croatian. For the birth, rather than sending me to a public hospital, she sent me to a private clinic, as she was co-owner of that business. Since I had sufficient funds for only three days stay in the private clinic, I asked the doctor to let me leave for home earlier. She did not immediately agree because in those days, at the time of childbirth mothers stayed for around seven days after the birthing at the hospital. My children at that time were being cared for by my sister and my Polish neighbour.

After we moved into the house, Milko found a job outside of Sydney, in Cobar, about 800 kilometres away, which necessitated a new financial expenditure, the car that Milko needed to drive to his new job.



Picture 37. In Australia, the third girl was born into the Podravac family. Picture is taken in front of the family home in Blacktown in 1963.

We decided to buy a car on credit over five years, a small Mazda with two doors and whose engine was equivalent to a stronger motorcycle and which cost was only 813 pounds. In those days the currency was still pounds, and in 1966 it moved to a decimal system.

We immigrants could barely await the transition to the new decimal system. The Australian pound consisted of 20 shillings and each shilling of 12 pence. First you needed to count pennies to 12, and display them as a shilling, and then to 20 shillings and turn them into one pound and eventually all the pounds added up. It was so difficult to recalculate the bills for food, and we did not at that time have calculators or computers. It was difficult to add other measures too, and even though they were not often used, we had to understand them.

### THE EDUCATION OF THE CHILDREN

The children were quickly settled in their school, a private Catholic school, for which we needed to pay fees. We were not sorry to give money for education, although we did not have enough, and we believed that the nuns would devote more attention to their language and education in general, than would be the case in a public school. Both older daughters quickly began to speak English, and Zrinka, being at home with me, spoke Croatian. I was glad we had a third child, because I always wanted to have that many children and wanted them to have each other in their lives in order not to feel alone in a foreign land. They always got along well with each other, so the household was like a one-party parliament with only the occasional argument, and so it is today with their own families.

Regardless of all the hardships and sacrifices during the raising of children, I am immensely pleased with their present lives, their achievements. My daughters were joined by their brother Tomislav, who was born in 1972. His birth was greeted by everyone with joy. Slowly, my maternal fear that followed me, worrying about the future of my children in a foreign land, dissipated. I enjoy tracking their current orderly lives, for which Milko and I had worked so hard.

When his job in Cobar was completed, Milko returned home, but then fell ill. He had an operation on his gallbladder. Fortunately, we did not have to pay for his operation, which was carried out in a hospital in Blacktown, not far from our house. The children finally had a father in the home, things were easier for me and I felt safer.



Before that, I relied on good neighbours, again a Polish immigrant, who lived across the street, and who always helped when necessary.

I felt vulnerable without my husband in a house that had no fence or any protection, and this fear was heightened by the fact that our neighbours were alcoholics with three children and lots of dogs and were always fighting. We had a garden overgrown with grass, where the children often played, and Zrinka was allergic to the grass, which caused burns to her legs that then turned into sores. As the other kids did not have them, we did not know the cause of these sores. The Czech doctor prescribed medications and creams to lubricate and gave me instructions about what food Zrinka could and could not eat. However, nothing helped her.



Picture 38. Three sisters sitting close to the house, on ground, with no fence around the house.

When the doctor saw that the drugs did not work, she prescribed a new drug, and the last medication she gave her was harmful to her health. With the first dose of this medicine, Zrinka began to turn blue, and after the second dose she completely froze. I wrapped her up and carried her on foot to the doctor's office because Milko could not take the car since he was only just out of hospital after surgery. The doctor called for a specialist from Sydney to urgently come, and he arrived in Blacktown in half an hour. I saw from the doctor's face that she feared the worst, she was in despair. The specialist examined her, gave her a shot, and after a certain time it was noticeable that Zrinka was better so they sent us home. The doctor never apologised for the wrong treatment nor did she ever mention the event afterwards, and I was convinced once again that maternal instinct can save a child's life.

Had something similar happened to me a few years later, I would surely have reacted differently. The doctor was aware that newly arrived migrants do not know the language nor their civil rights. This was the case in other areas of life until we learnt the English language. When we moved to Canberra, Zrinka's allergies disappeared forever.

### MY FIRST JOB IN AUSTRALIA

When Milko returned to work in Sydney, he was earning significantly less. I started to entertain the idea that I get a job because we were paying off the loan for the house, the car and our passage to Australia. Milko's working day began in the early morning, but ended early, so he was home in the early afternoon. So I thought about getting office work to complement this. I spoke three languages (Croatian, Italian and Spanish) and I was making progress with my English, so I was looking for a job where I could use my knowledge of these languages. I regularly followed the ads in the newspaper and sent in applications, but to no avail. I sent an application to the "Reader's Digest", a famous world-wide publishing house.

I always read their monthly magazine with interest, and thus I enhanced my English language skills. A second language is faster to learn through reading than by attending dull courses. And so I found a newspaper ad for clerks in their accounting department, seeking applicants from all continents.

My application was successful, and I got a job in the accounting department. And there I met others who spoke varying degrees of English, but we all wanted to learn the language as soon as possible. I made friends with a Jewish girl of Polish descent, then with a Greek woman, and each of us somehow had shared the same fate. The biggest problem was that I was travelling in the morning to Sydney, and returning home in the evenings. The trains were always overcrowded, and it was impossible to find a seat in the train.

As I was travelling by train, and the working hours started at nine o'clock, at eight o'clock I was on the train that got to "Central", the train station, and from there I walked to the "Reader's Digest" building. Returning home the same way, I left at five o'clock and arrived home at six o'clock. The hardest part was leaving two daughters to get to school by themselves, by a school bus that passed in front of our house a little before nine o'clock. In the mornings Milko would take Zrinka to a private kindergarten, which was run by a Hungarian woman, where she could not learn English. As for the afternoons, we knew that Milko would be home from work before me.



During the school holidays we could not hire anyone to take care of the children, but our daughters were very well settled and cared for each other. Stela was, in her ninth year of life, head of the house when we parents were not around. At that time, we had no phone and I could not call the children to see how they were. I constantly worried that everything was fine.

But that part of our lives also had its positive side.

Our children learned to appreciate what we could provide to them, they shared everything with each other and it was a good foundation for their future lives. And today they share everything and respect family as the most sacred thing.

When today I look back on those times, I realise how brave we were, and committed to family life, and how much effort we put into solving problems. We did not burden others with our difficulties but solved our problems through mutual assistance. I'm sure that God helped us and through that we became even stronger.

### AUSTRALIA, LAND OF THE FUTURE

After arriving in Australia we realised that it is a country of the future; work, order, peace and progress. And that is what we had always wanted. We knew this was going to be our final place of residence and we wanted to achieve the best for our family. We did not know too much about Australia, we always associated it with kangaroos, Aborigines and a dry climate. When we landed by boat in Sydney, we were pleasantly surprised because the city scenery was picturesque, with many high-rise buildings and bustling streets. We knew nothing about the history of Australia, or its population, its customs and other characteristics that make up a nation.

At that time, Australia had only ten and a half million inhabitants. Today there are more than 23 million Australians. In 1901, Australia had only three and a half million people. It was smaller than present day Croatia, according to population, and the smallest continent by mass in world. The 'invaders' arrived at the time of Captain Cook in 1788, with discrimination against its original inhabitants, culminating in 1901 with the establishment of the Australian Parliament, under the auspices of the English crown. Then the parliament introduced the "White Australia Policy" whose purpose was to receive only white people as new immigrants to Australia. It was justified on the basis that Australia is surrounded by Asians and Chinese, who might one

day overwhelm the smallest continent. That law ended in 1950, when the "Colombo Plan" was introduced for students from all Asian countries.

As new immigrants, we became Australian citizens on May 16, 1967.

It was only from one year after our arrival, 1962, that indigenous Australians who had lived here for 40,000 years were allowed to vote. They were not even on the census until 1967, as according to the Australian constitution Aborigines could not be counted in the census. The Constitution had to be changed, and for that to be carried out there had to be a referendum, which was conducted by the Government of Harold Holt. In the referendum, 91% of voters supported abolition of this part of the Constitution, which was later changed in favour of the Aborigines.

By implementing the "White Australia" policy the Aborigines fared the worst. They began to protest, but since none of them had a university education, awareness of their constitutional rights was slow to awaken. The first Aborigine who graduated from university was called Charles Perkins. He played for the Croatian football team in Adelaide, and with the help of the sport managed to get a higher education. After World War II, Australia was one of the countries that depended on immigration because industries were developing rapidly, and they ran many construction projects such as the construction of the hydroelectric power plants, the "Snowy Mountains Scheme", for which they needed to find professional staff that were not available in Australia. Australians who were qualified for those jobs did not want to accept such jobs because they were already earning well in their existing work.

The economic situation in Australia was favourable for all those who had left their own countries due to war conditions, and among them there were a lot of experts in various fields of human activity. But there was a discriminatory policy at that time under the Labor government, led by Immigration Minister Arthur Calwell. He was in this position from 1945 to 1949, during the mass immigration to Australia. It was easiest for English immigrants to gain entry to Australia because the government policy was that 'for every non-Anglo-Saxon immigrant, there should be ten Englishmen'. Of course, this was not possible.

Today, Australia has double the population it had when we moved here. The Australian social mosaic is varied. We came from all over the world, we all adapted to Australian customs, but also kept our own. At first, we missed the Argentine people and their Latin temperament, but gradually we realised that the Australian people have their own virtues. Most of them were people of Anglo-Saxon and Irish cultural traditions. They are very friendly because they do not have the American superiority, nor the English pomposity. However, family ties are not as strong here as in Croatia.



As members of an ancient European nation, we contributed to the new mix of peoples in Australia. Croats are highly respected here, considered to be honest, diligent, the people who contributed to the industrial development of the country. Life for us in Australia rapidly improved, and for that we could partly thank our children who were an excellent fit into Australian life. No one knows how many Croats Australia has in total, but according to the 2001 census, there were 51,860 persons who were born in Croatia. It must be taken into account that this does not include Croats born outside the country or in other countries, as well as descendants of Croats in Australia. Some experts estimate that in Australia there are between 150,000 and 200,000 Croats. This is 1% of the total population, the same as the number of Aborigines in Australia.

### THE LAST MOVE TO CANBERRA

When we settled into our house in Blacktown, which Milko had extended to include another room for the children, we planned to build a bigger house. Construction would take place gradually, given our financial capabilities. We needed to first pay off the loans and then save to build a house. My sister lived with her family in Canberra. She and her husband managed to build a house for a very good price, so we thought we could afford to move from Sydney to Canberra. The local government was selling land at prices attractive to buyers, in order to attract as many people to Canberra which was then in the full swing of development. The price of building land depended on whether there was a greater demand or supply and in fact there was one parcel of land selling for one dollar. So, we decided to sell our house in Blacktown and move to Canberra. Another reason why Canberra appealed was its small population, greater job opportunities, low crime rates, and the family lifestyle of its citizens. Canberra at that time had fewer than 100,000 inhabitants, and as the Australian Capital Territory, was administratively the centre of Australia in which all the ministries that had previously been located in other major cities were now centralized. The Australian Parliament was also located in Canberra. The name of the city in the Aboriginal language means 'meeting place', and the city has proven to be an ideal choice for the capital because it is between the two largest Australian cities, Melbourne and Sydney, who were always rivals. When Canberra became the capital of Australia in 1901, it had only 1,700 inhabitants, today there are more than 330,000.

While working in Sydney, I was away from home each day for at least ten hours. I would leave in the morning while it was still dark and I would be back when it was dark once again. This lasted for one year and three months. A new job in Canberra

was my goal. At that time government administration was expanding in Canberra so I was hoping to get a job in the government service. We moved to Canberra in January 1968 during school holidays.

Before we moved, Milko went to Canberra to the land sales, which took place once a month, and he bought a plot of land for only 550 dollars. Such locations in Sydney would cost at least twenty times more. After we sold our house in Sydney for three thousand dollars, we invested the money into building our first real home, where we subsequently lived for 24 years. That was the end of our wandering around the world! We did not complain about that because, in spite of all the difficulties, we achieved what we had wanted our entire lives. Milko immediately got a job in Canberra, and I was looking for employment in the civil service. I got a job as a temporary clerical assistant at a lower level.

I worked in the accounting department of the Ministry of Labour. In those days there was a difference in wages for people with graduate qualifications and those without,

DEPT NAME		IDENTITY NO.		NET PAY	
026 PODRAVAC VAND, A		701392		62.32	
ANNUAL SALARY	NORM	AL PAY	ADJUSTMENT THIS PAY	GROSS PAY	
1808		69.32		69.32	
PENALTY PAY	ADDN. ALL	ES. (TAXABLE)	ADVANCE IN GROSS	SEPARATE PAYMENT	
EXTRA DUTY	ADDN. ALL	ES. (NON-TAX)	ADVANCE RECOVERED	TAX THIS PAY	
				7.00	
OTHER DEDUCTIONS		NORMAL CONTRIBUTION		ADJUSTMENT THIS PAY	
24-04-68 28		18		12 08-02-68 CASH	
PAY DAY	APPROP CODE	BASE CODE	TAX CLAIM	EMP CODE	DATE LAST VARIED

Picture 39. Copy of pay slip showing pay of a lower-class clerk in Public Service in 1968.



whose wages were lower. My seven years of employment and accounting courses in Croatia were not recognised.

My boss suggested that I sit for higher school certificate qualifications, which I achieved after intensive night-school studies. Then I had to take the demanding government exam, which I successfully passed. After that, on December 4, 1968, I was promoted as a Clerk position. My starting salary on entry to the civil service was about \$ 1,808-00, and after achieving the higher school qualifications, this jumped to \$ 2,887.000 per annum.

While we planned the building of our house, we lived in a rented apartment for four months. Our house was being built by a Croat from Bosnia, and it cost us 10,260.00 dollars. The government provided the country's future homeowners with a long-term loan of seven thousand dollars, over 45 years. We immediately applied for a loan. However, the application process did not go smoothly. At that time the credit worthiness of the applicant was based on the salary of the husband, while the wife's salary was not taken into account, and the number of children were taken into account to determine the average capacity to repay the loan. The women were then, according to the law, paid 10% less than men. Later, wages were equalised. We were still paying off the loan for the car, so our application asking for a loan was rejected. I tried to contact the main head of the department who approved loans, but the clerk at the counter told me it was impossible. I asked her why this was impossible because the head of loans was a "public servant" like the rest of us, which meant that to serve the people we must be available when doing our jobs.

And while I was at the counter having this discussion with the officials, the head of the department, whose name was John O'Brien, was passing by and invited me into his office when he heard what it was about. Not only did he immediately approve the credit, but he also apologised. Our economic situation improved and we decided to pay the debt in a much shorter time, in just five years. It was always important to us that our children have their own roof over their head.

### FULFILMENT OF OUR GREAT WISH – MOVING INTO OUR OWN HOME

We moved into our house in the middle of 1968. We had to wait for all the building certifications before we could move. The house building inspectors were called out by the builders to assess each stage of construction to ensure it was properly carried out, and altogether this took about four months. The government paid our builders at

each stage of the construction, and after the last inspection the payments were completed. Then we repaid the government through our loan.

When we moved into the house, we started again from scratch with interior design and furnishing. Due to lack of money, old sheets served us for the curtains, and when we gathered enough money to buy material, I sewed them like I did most other things. The block on which we built the house was quite long, about 50 metres, so we began a garden. We planted vegetables and some fruit trees. It was a pleasure working in our own garden and picking the fruits of our work.

The children attended a private Catholic school run by nuns. Government schools were free, but we were not sorry to spend money on their education. Discipline was stricter in those schools, and they gave a discount on the second child enrolled in the same school, and then the third, and education was free for the fourth child.

These schools were founded by the Irish because in the beginning of the twentieth century immigration was permitted mainly for British people, and many Brits before that were sent to Australia as convicts which England wanted to get rid of. Among them there were a lot of Irish people. At that time, they were not welcome, mainly due to their Catholicism. Since migration from England had slowed, and Australia needed to build up its workforce, they opened their doors to the Irish. In Australia, they fared similar to their compatriots in the United States, but the Americans had a first Catholic president. Anglo-Saxon society was not benevolent to the Irish because of their faith and because the Irish families were numerous. That changed at a time when Australia needed additional manpower and when the Irish birth rate increased in this country.

Just when we thought that we would free ourselves of debt, I became pregnant again and on the 5th of January 1972 our son Tomislav was born. With his arrival our family became



Picture 40. Father holding his son Tomislav on his Baptism day in 1972.





Picture 41. Complete family picture, on Tomislav's Baptism day in 1972.  
Read more: [www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/NOTES.HTM](http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/NOTES.HTM)

complete in every way. Our happiness knew no bounds. Tomislav's sisters spoiled him, and he was constantly the centre of attention. Even though there is a large difference in years between him and his sisters, today as adults they all complement each other and get along well.

Since I had become a permanent employee in the civil service

after my graduation in 1968, I was not afraid of losing my job when I went on maternity leave. I returned to work when Tomislav was five months old. He was cared for by an Australian lady, with whom we still keep in touch to this day. By her side, he quickly learnt to speak English, and with us he spoke only Croatian. In Canberra, family obligations were easier to organise and deal with, than in Sydney, as everything was closer and easier.

At that time Anglo-Saxon culture dominated, but following the arrival of many immigrants, especially those who came to Australia after World War II, that influence began to fade. Each migrant in the civil service had to prove not only that they were as good an employee as their colleagues who were born here, but that they were twice as good as them. All of us who came to Australia as adults retained our accent, and many Australians were reluctant to accept the newcomers. As the new immigrants were often better workers than those born in Australia, there was hostility towards us. However, our children did not have this problem. Even though most immigrants moved to Australia due to economic problems, many still managed to provide a good education for their children, who later became prominent citizens of their new homeland. Nonetheless, the children of immigrants were sometimes disregarded even in Catholic schools.

I remember one incident my eldest daughter had in school before she finished the certificate level. Her class teacher, a nun, told me that Stela, who was a good student, should not continue her studies through to higher school certificate level, but that we should

instead find her a job as a typist or something similar. I was deeply hurt and replied that as her mother I was the most competent to judge what my daughter was capable of. Today Stela works in the civil service at a level that only fifty women in Australia work at. Sometimes I remind her of the 'advice' of her class teacher, and she just laughs.

Just at that time in Australia a campaign started against all things Croatian, encouraging me to get involved in Australian community life where we as Croats could work for the benefit of our community and the whole of our people. Multiculturalism began to develop, and so it was the right time for such activity.

Privately, I studied at the "University of Canberra" and had the support of the whole family, especially Milko's. They supported me so I completed my part-time study after seven years, receiving a degree in social studies.



Picture 42. Family Podravac. Sisters Stela, Blanca and Zrinka with brother Tomislav in 2009.

When I entered the Civil service, I started working in the accounting area, and I was soon promoted. My first job was at the Ministry of labour, and since Canberra was administered by the Federal government, the ministry was responsible for all public works in the capital city of Australia. Jobs in accounting were strenuous and required responsibility, but we could not pick and choose jobs, and so we were happy with what we had.

At the same time, I was able to devote more attention to work in the Croatian community, as well as outside of it, and there was plenty.



## VI. WORK AND RESPONSIBILITY IN THE CROATIAN COMMUNITY

### IN THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME

The importance of being in the right place at the right time was evident many times in my work for the Croatian community. To show the overall picture of what was happening in our community, I will try to describe some of the work we undertook covering various fields. Active participation in this work was fruitful for our community, and thus for our Croatian people too. The work did not comprise only hands-on work for the community, but also the promotion of Croatian names, customs, traditions, and culture. When the war started in Croatia in 1990, our work and achievements helped us to gain Australian support for recognition of the Croatian state. We were confident that as Croatian immigrants, together with the rest of the Diaspora across the world, we could contribute not only material but also political help for our true homeland – Croatia. In this we succeeded.

Our work consisted of several groups.

Much of our work was carried out well before implementation of the Galbally Report.

To describe our activities, I will mention only some duties for which I was responsible in the Croatian community in Canberra:

- Croatian Association Committee; Spokesperson, Secretary 1980 – 1992;
- Croatian Women's Association; President 1977 – 1981; 1990 – 1993;
- "Croatian village", a home for seniors; one of the founders of the village in 1989 and Member of the Board from 1989 to 2010.

## CROATIAN ASSOCIATIONS' BOARD

The Croatian community has had a supreme body consisting of all local communities, and that supreme body coordinated the work of all local Croatian community organisations and communicated as well with other Croatian organisations in Australia. The work of the Croatian Associations' Committee was undertaken on a voluntary amateur basis. But after the Galbally Report the situation improved for all immigrants and there was a need to have that committee registered as it would get access to all official institutions. At that time, the President of the Croatian Association Committee was Drago Ljubić, who was a very effective leader and, under his leadership, we officially registered in November 1983. Unfortunately, the Croatian Association Committee in its original form ceased in 1994.

It should be noted that all the groups included Croats from Queanbeyan, a city which is located near Canberra. Members of the Croatian Association Board were:

- Croatian football club Deakin
- Croatian National Club O'Connor
- Croatian Catholic Centre
- Croatian Women's Association
- Croatian Folkloric group 'Croatia'
- Croatian folkloric group "Cardinal Stepinac"
- Croatian Ethnic schools
- Croatian radio program
- Croatian National Congress
- The Croatian Party of Rights
- Croatian Republican Party
- Croatian Liberation Movement
- Croatian Country Party
- Croatian Hope
- A representative of the community at the Council of Ethnic Communities.



Once registered, the committee was able to represent with authority any of its members, and this was also necessary in the search for financial aid.

As the community grew to about eight thousand members, the need for a charity group center became clear. Until then, the work was undertaken mostly by nuns and some members of the community, but it was not enough for the growing needs of the community. It was decided to establish a charity centre, which would have permanent staff.

It was in our favour that in 1983 the government introduced a new program to promote employment in charitable and voluntary associations, with some financial assistance being made available. A government authority would consider applications for grants, providing grant money to various organisations that would submit a request asking for financial help. The Council of Ethnic Communities appointed me as a member of this newly established body, and as a member I had insight into the procedure and method of allocation of money. I was in this position from 1983 to 1986.

During this period, our community had applied for financial assistance for the establishment of the charity center. We had strong arguments in our application, and recommendations from politicians and members of the Council of Ethnic Communities, and we hoped for a positive reply.

When the grants committee met to consider our application, I did not want to be present, to avoid conflict of interest. Not only was the application much discussed at the meeting of May 8, 1984, but the same happened again at the next meeting on 22 May, when I again absented myself. Our request was denied. The reason for the refusal was not substantiated. We were told that the tape recording was "unfortunately destroyed", and so the President of the Croatian Association Board, Drago Ljubić, and I requested, under the Freedom of information Act, access to review the written notes from that meeting.

We were surprised that the arguments in those notes harked back to the same stigma, as was the practice until 1980.

Some of these remarks read:

- "particularly sensitive and delicate work"
- "politically sensitive"
- "some political problems associated with charitable work"
- "EAC identified some worrying Information" (Ethnic Affairs Commission)
- "the most needy community in the entire region"







Picture 43. Members of the Croatian Womens' Association, standing in front of the High Commission of Great Britain, praying rosary, in Canberra 1991. (From left: Marija, Marija, Karmela and Zdravka).

We were persistent in seeking the recognition of Croatia. We demanded meetings with local politicians, which were not always successful. We established a sub-committee that was responsible for contacting all embassies that could possibly help in seeking the recognition of Croatia. In this sub-committee were our president, Drago Ljubić, Doris Božin and myself and sometimes also Blaž Kraljević (before his departure to Croatia, where he was later killed). As some of these participants still worked and were very busy, and I was already retired for a year, I could dedicate my time to this. My task was to get in touch with all the embassies and ask for a meeting with their Ambassadors. It was interesting to see and hear their reactions, and to see how willing they were to meet with us, as that gave us an inkling of what the outcomes of our visits would be.

To illustrate, here are some brief details about these visits:

***Embassy of the United States*** – of all receptions at embassies, this was the most interesting. The Croatian Associations' committee organised a local protest outside the US Embassy, held on 8 October 1991. We particularly wanted to meet with them because they were ignoring any reference to the war in Croatia. We also knew that they were not inclined to recognise Croatia.

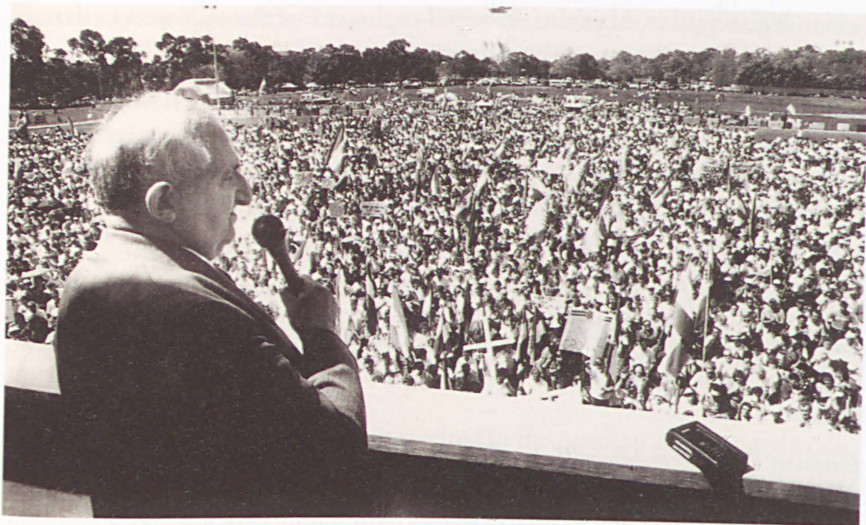
As it was impossible to meet them, as well as the offices of the European Union and British High Commission, we prepared a protest note with the intent of protest in a very well organised way and without incident. All Croats from Canberra were present at the protest. The embassy is located on a hill, opposite the Australian Parliament, and is surrounded by trees. We had to stand on the other side of the road, across from the embassy because we were not allowed to get in front of the embassy.



Picture 44. Demonstration in front USA Embassy, in relation to the demand for Recognition of Croatian Independence to UN, in Canberra 1991.

The three of us, Drago Ljubić, Doris Božin and myself, with police permission, approached the guard house in front of the embassy, in which there was a Marine, and asked him to advise the embassy that we wanted to talk to them. He asked me to give him the letter of protest, which we refused. After a few minutes, an officer came out of the embassy who, we later learned, was a second secretary at the embassy, Roger Carlson. He asked us to deliver a letter while out on the street, which would be forwarded to the authorities. I told him that we were neither bakers nor couriers who deliver shipments on the street. He responded by asking us to wait because he had to consult with the authorities. We stayed on the road, not knowing what would happen next. It was intense waiting in these few minutes of uncertainty. The Secretary of the Embassy again appeared and invited us to enter.





Picture 45. Visit by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs RH, Mr. Mihajlo Montiljo, giving a speech to the Croatian Community on the grounds of the Croatia Deakin stadium, Canberra 1991.

After we entered the embassy, the ice was broken and we began to outline our position. They intently listened to us and told us that they had only a little time to allocate to us, but were not sorry that our discussion ran for a longer period of time. As we talked, we were interrupted by a phone call from the British Embassy, which we could hear. The English called the Americans about our visit because we were to then move on to visit them, and they were concerned about why we were taking so long.

The Second Secretary of the Embassy of the United States told them over the phone about how they received us inside the embassy building and so, British responded that they were forced to do the same.

It seemed they had already agreed that we would be received in front of the embassy buildings so as to keep the meetings brief. However, in fact, they received us in the building and they were willing to listen to our demands, and this is confirmed by the fact that the second secretary of the Embassy of the US subsequently called me by phone several times. For their Independence Day of the United States on July 4, I was invited as an honorary guest to come to their celebration, which was held in the courtyard of the Embassy.

*Embassy of the Republic of Argentina* – Ambassador Juan Carlos Beltramino showed great interest in our problem. We believed that it was because Croats were

held in high regard in Argentina. It helped us that one of the employees in the embassy was a Croat, who came from Argentina.

*Embassy of the Republic of Austria* – We were received by Ms. Evi M. Moss, diplomat for intergovernmental affairs. That meeting was a pleasant surprise. She told us that she would personally support Croatian recognition, but others should follow Austria. She wanted to know who represents Croatia in Belgrade.

*Embassy of the Kingdom of Denmark* – We were also received by a diplomat for interstate Affairs, Mr. Edsberg. It was an informal reception.

*Embassy of the European Union* – We were received by Ambassador Roger Camelleri. He received us cordially, but without any promise or expression of views on our petition.

*Embassy of the Republic of Italy* – We were received by Ambassador Giulio Timoni who was very communicative, writing down notes during our conversation, but not making any comment, and he advised that he must consult with Rome on everything.

*Embassy of the Republic of Hungary* – Ambassador Dr. L. Pordany and the First Secretary Dr. Horvath showed great understanding for our objectives. They told us they would immediately send a letter of support from their embassy to Budapest. They expressed concern for their countrymen who, during the war, together with the Croats, were expelled from Vojvodina.

*Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany* – We were warmly received by Ambassador Dr. Hans Shauer, expressing concern about the events in Croatia.

*Embassy of the Portuguese Republic* – we were received by an advisor, João Prestrello Cavaco. Their reasons for not being able to recognise Croatia were interesting. He insisted that a diplomatic solution should be pursued, because the Soviet Union could be displeased in the event they recognised Croatia.

*Embassy of the Russian Federation* – Andrey Ovcharenko, a diplomat, whom we contacted several times, always answered that they were very busy.

*Embassy of the Kingdom of Sweden* – Ambassador (he did not introduce himself) showed interest in our people, asking about our community in Canberra, and Tito, and told us that they have their own observers in Croatia. He wondered how other European countries could help.

*Embassies of the Republics of Turkey and Poland* showed no interest in our quest for recognition of Croatia.



*Embassy of the Republic of Uruguay* – We were received by a diplomat for inter-governmental affairs, Julio Gianbruno, who told us that they cannot do much.

*British High Commission* – We met with the head of the Political Section, William Patey. After leaving the USA Embassy, we went on foot to the British High Commission, which was nearby. They invited us into the building, where they did not give us much time or any hope. They were cold and calculating, as we expected. The fact that we were received by an official and not the ambassador, did not give us much hope.

*Canadian High Commission* like some other countries, such as Australia, Canada is a member of the Commonwealth, and had its own High Commission. We were received by the First Secretary Joseph A. Makin. It was a formal meeting without a lot of comments.

I want to emphasize that we were best received in the Austrian and Hungarian embassies. Not only did they speak with us openly and at length, but they gave us their full support. This can be attributed to our traditional alliance.

Other embassies – although less important, showed no interest in receiving us. We were very surprised that the Embassy of the Holy See did not want to receive us.

We were persistent in our demand to have Australian recognition of Croatia. A community subcommittee was established, with the aim of contacting Australian parliamentarians and embassies, that could eventually help us in our demand for recognition of Croatia. We tried to arrange meetings with local politicians to have Australian Government recognition, but instead the government was waiting to see what the reaction of other countries would be. Some politicians were interested in our case, among them, helping us, were Senator Brian Harradine from Tasmania and Paul Filling from Perth. A number of parliamentarians established a group with their colleagues called "Parliamentarians for Croatian and Slovenian Recognition".

#### CROATIAN WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

Back in 1950, the first Croatian women who came to Canberra at the beginning of that year occasionally met in a shack, where they discussed ways of helping the community. They, along with others, also sewed flags to be used in the celebration of Croatian national days.

As the community grew, there was a growing need to establish a group that would bring together women from the community. Thus, the Croatian Women's Associa-

tion was founded in 1973, where women would meet with the intent of undertaking humanitarian, social and cultural work within the community. It was decided that the members would meet in one of the two Croatian Clubs in Canberra, and to teach the Croatian language. The group included nuns, who were part of the Croatian community.

As president of the Croatian Women's Association in Canberra from 1977 to 1983, and again from 1990 to 1993, I was responsible for key issues not only within our group, but also shared responsibility with other representatives for the work of our entire community. In that important time for Croatia, I had access to everything that was happening in the community.

As the Croatian Women's Association had an important role not only within the community, but also outside of it, we decided to register it, which we did in 1985.

Each year, members of the group organized a celebration honouring the 'father' and 'mother' of the year. The selection involved both the Croatian Clubs and our priests, with the most prominent and responsible people in the community chosen for 'mother' and 'father' of the year.



Picture 46. Celebration of the Day of Croatian nuns Adorers of the Christ Blood. With Sister Klara are Members of the Croatian Women's Association (standing: Vanda, Matilda, Ana and Elza).





Picture 47. Father's Day 1985 Celebration. In the Croatian Club. Our son Tomislav is leading the 'Kolo'.

Another important celebration organized by our group was the celebration of St. Nicholas. Both the Croatian Clubs were involved, and there would be a picnic in the field of the Croatian Club in Deakin, beginning with the distribution of gifts for children.

The group also arranged special celebrations, such as the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the arrival of the first priest in our community, Fr. Mate Bonić.



Picture 48. Celebration of Father Mate Bonić's 10th anniversary in Canberra in 1982.

The biggest celebration was organised by the group in 1980 when Cardinal Franjo Kuharić visited Australia. On this occasion, with the help of other members of the community, we prepared lunch for 700 people. Cardinal Kuharić advised us to continue to group as a community, but also not to forget our homeland.

When asked by one member of the community if we are Catholics first or Croats, the Cardinal replied that we are Croats at the time of our birth, and we become Catholics only by the act of baptism.

In the cultural field, we organised a successful exhibition of paintings, handicrafts and books at the Croatian Club in 1976, which was visited by Australian parliamentarians. The group put on a similar exhibition in the other Croatian Club in 1988.

Outside the community, and within the Ethnic Council, the group organised a highly attended exhibition of handicrafts in the Exhibition Centre in Canberra for Australia Day 1984.

On the humanitarian front, members of the group helped the needy within the community, visited the sick, and took care of the older members of the community. They



Picture 49. Exhibition of Croatian handicraft in Canberra Theatre, in 1984



also sent help to the needy outside of Australia. The extent to which this group was well organised in marshalling humanitarian help was best demonstrated during the time of the Homeland War. The group led the collection of clothing and financial assistance to compatriots in the homeland. Then group members organised a fashion show, with all proceeds going to help the homeland.

In 1992, we collected through various fundraising more than 82,000 dollars, which was sent to various Croatian organisations in the homeland and to the "Dora" organisation for Croatian war orphans.

Our group could take credit for great achievements outside the community because they directly or indirectly worked to promote our identity, and this later helped in the recognition of our rights, which had often been denied. In particular, our group, along with other Croatian groups, lobbied for and achieved official recognition of the Croatian language, as well as the cultural and linguistic heritage of Croats in Australia. But we often met with resistance because of a protest voice from the Yugoslav embassy. They were able to be successful because of support from a strong Serbian lobby. But we did not give up, and we were persistent.

The extent to which the Yugoslav embassy was successful in widely promoting their policies against the Croatian community to the general Australian public, was evident for me during an interview when I competed for a job. The interview was conducted by a young Australian clerk, who had just graduated and gotten a job there. Talking to me she asked what language I speak and when I answered that I speak Croatian she told me that such a language and such a nation do not exist. I tried to explain the position of the Croatian people within Yugoslavia, but she refused to listen to me, and I was advised in future to declare myself as Yugoslavian in accordance with what she had learned in her studies. I responded that, I guess I had to travel 12,000 miles from my native land, just so that a young Australian officer could tell me that my parents were wrong, when they told me that the language they speak and which they inherited from their parents is Croatian, and that I should have to come to Australia to be enlightened by her. Needless to say, I did not get the job.

In such conditions, we had to fight for our rights. This incident motivated me to be more committed to working towards the recognition of our identity, including the Croatian language. Recognition of our language could at the same time be a springboard for the recognition of our nation and the rights which this would bring us. We wrote to many institutions, representatives of local and state authorities (see some attached copies in the Supplement of the book) and numerous newsrooms and television stations in Australia.



Picture 49 a. Canberra – the Capital of Australia.





Picture 49 b. Senj, the Origin of Vanda's life joy and patriotism (photo by Dorotea Prpić).  
Australia is the first country in the world to have recognised the Croatian language.

### CROATIAN MOTHERS WANT TO RAISE THEIR CHILDREN SPEAKING THEIR MOTHER TONGUE

As we were unsuccessful in convincing the Australian community at large that Croatian is a separate language from other languages in Yugoslavia, we decided to finally write to the Minister for Immigration, Mr. Ian McPhee, whose ministry had responsibility for the recognition of languages in Australia. All our organisations around Australia worked to achieve this goal. This was talked about outside of our community, especially in the Council of Ethnic Communities, which supported us. Some official bodies at a lower level accepted the Croatian language, but it was still not officially recognised. In order to have a better chance of success, we came to the conclusion that the problem of the Croatian language needed to be explained from a different perspective.

In fact, all of our previous endeavours, which were based on the use of the language we speak; the documentation of the Croatian language in the former Yugoslavia, which is embedded in the Constitution; the age of the Croatian language, its origins and history; were not successful. We wrote to the Secretaries of Ministries and received nega-

tive responses. We argued on many occasions that it should be taken into account that we are mothers responsible for the upbringing of our children, and as we were all born in Croatia, we wanted to raise our children in their mother tongue because it is our right, the same right enjoyed by Australian mothers, who were raising their children in English. We stressed the fact that it is not a political issue, but it is the language spoken by our ancestors and which our people have spoken for thirteen hundred years. And to our great joy and satisfaction, the Croatian language was recognized!

The Immigration Minister officially informed us on October 15, 1980. This recognition paved the way for greater affirmation of our community. Soon after the Australian recognition of Croatian independence I attended a reception in the company of Minister Ian McPhee and I took the opportunity to thank him on the decision. To my astonishment, he said that I really should thank his wife, with whom he discussed our letter, and who told him that we are right and that she understood our arguments.

Often, we also participated in various celebrations in other ethnic communities, where we were always well received.



*Hrvatski zmaj (replika)*  
Biskupija kod Kana, IX-XI st.

Svi narodi vole svoju domovinu, ali je vrlo malo onih koji su bili u mogućnosti razviti državu i kulturnu zajednicu na prostoru blagoslovljenom izuzetnom prirodnom ljepotom i otvorenom utjecajima i različitostima kao što je to prostor Hrvatske.

Hrvatska je jedinstveni primjer male nacije koja je stoljećima kvariću branila europsku kulturu i kršćanstvo uspijevajući pritom sačuvati vlastitu kulturnu samobitnost ne zastojući niti za mnogo starijih europskih naroda. Hrvatski narod je od početka svoje povijesti umio koristiti utjecaje velikih kultura koje su ga okruživale te stvarati vlastiti originalan doprinos europskej znanosti i kulturi.

Danas, po prvi puta u novijoj povijesti naše domovine svjedoci smo nezapamćenih promjena za hrvatsku državu i kulturu u borbi za ravnopravnim položajem unutar demokratske Europe. Tmačeći povijesnu istinu slobodno možemo reći da smo među prvim nositeljima mije integracije suvereni europskih država.

Štoviše, Hrvatska postaje sve značajnijim političkim faktorom i na međunarodnom planu. Naš je zajednički izazov stvaranje slobodne i suverene hrvatske države, utemeljene na bijanjimljaj pojedi demokracije na prvim slobodnim izborima. S ponosom možemo utvrditi da obnovljenska snaga nacionalne samovijesti potkrijepljena jedinstvenim stvaralačkim duhom Hrvata i osjećajem njihove domoljubne odgovornosti jamče napredak mir i procvat svima.

Dr. Franjo Tuđman  
Predsjednik Republike Hrvatske



*Križ u planini (replika)*  
Kapela sv. Barbare, Trogir

*Hrvatska Hima*

*Lijepa naša*

*Antun Mihanović*

*Lijepa naša domovino,  
Oj punčula zemljo mila,  
Stare slave dhovino,  
da bi vazda svetla bila.*

*Mila kuno si nam slavna,  
Mila si nam ti jedina,  
Mila kuno si nam rodom,  
Mila kuno si plavina.*

*Tvrti Svoje, Druvo boki,  
Niti ti Druvo sila gubi,  
Singe more svijetlo reći  
da svoj narod Hrvati ljudi.*

*Dok su njive sunce grlo,  
Dok su bilje trava vito,  
Dok su nebo gredak bijeo,  
Dok su žito snice bije.*

14 Simoleon Crescent, O'Malley ACT 2066  
Tel: (06) 286 9988 Fax: (06) 286 1544

Consulate: 14 Simoleon Crescent, O'Malley ACT 2066  
Consulate: 14 Simoleon Crescent, O'Malley ACT 2066



## Veleposlanstvo REPUBLIKE Hrvatske

Canberra



Dobro došli

Picture 49 c. A book of the Program of Events issued by the Embassy of Croatia, on the official Embassy opening on 21 June 1995, 15 years after recognition of Croatian language on 15 October 1980.





Picture 50. A gathering of Croatian children, with their teacher Faust Šešelja (including the Podravac sisters) in the Croatian Club, 1970.



Picture 51. At the festival of ethnic communities of Australia, held in the German Club – Canberra. Standing from left, Andela, Katica, Marija, Milica and Katarina, squatting: Maca, Drago and Vanda.

## A MEETING WITH THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF AUSTRALIA – REPRESENTATIVE OF QUEEN ELIZABETH

On the 20 November 1983, the Governor General received our folkloric group 'Croatia', under the leadership of Ančica Czerny. He praised the performance of our beautiful dance group and inquired about us Croats. He was interested in our history, the homeland, and we took the opportunity to better inform him about Croatia.



Picture 52. Folkloric group Croatia, at the reception by Governor-General, representing the Queen in Australia, in 1983.

After that, on several occasions, we sent along our elderly, who with other elderly people were invited to lunch at the Governor-General's. Our elders always represented us well at such high occasions.

## NAATI – THE NATIONAL ACCREDITATION AUTHORITY FOR TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS IN AUSTRALIA

All of the Croatian communities in Australia had problems with the quality of translation into the Croatian language. Because of existing discrimination, state authorities preferred using unknown persons for translating, rather than Croats, so in most cases they chose Serbs. Therefore, until 1980, the language was recognised only as Serbo-Croatian, and the Serbs were already well established through their lobbies and often appeared for Croats where official translation was required.



Croatian interpreters in Canberra could not get a job in translating. Only a few were working in the field, but they did not have proper documents or a diploma which is issued after passing the exam in NAATI (National Agency for the Accreditation of Interpreters and Translators). As there were few Croatian interpreters and translators in Canberra, I decided, along with Marija Goodwin, sister of our first priest in Canberra, Fr. Mate Bonić, to sit for the exam.

We, two candidates, were invited a week before the exam, to a seminar to help us prepare for the exam. The seminar was supposed to be led by people who had recognised expertise and the highest degree of qualifications the third. We were expecting a Croatian with such accreditation from another city because in Canberra there were few translators who possessed such a degree, and those few who did (I think there were two), were not members of our community.

When we got to the study hall at the Australian National University, to attend the seminar, we were greeted by two unknown persons. As Croats mostly know each other, I asked them where they were from and whether they were appropriate for our preparation for this difficult exam. One of them told me that she was from Belgrade, married to an Australian, and the other was on a teacher's exchange between Yugoslavia and Australia.

We immediately protested, and one of them asked me what was wrong. I replied that we do not speak the language spoken in Belgrade and therefore she cannot review our mother tongue and the other lady who represents Yugoslavia cannot be objective in our case because it is the Croatian language, and not Serbo-Croatian, that we are sitting for. Then we left the hall. We protested in writing (and verbally) to the appropriate authorities and then we received an apology and a promise that this will never happen again. So, we achieved yet another victory! Our goal was to have translators from our midst, who would represent our community in Australian administration.

As the official translator of the Croatian language, I interpreted for the Croatian President, Mr. Stjepan Mesić, when he was received by the Prime Minister of Australia, Mr. Paul Keating, in 1992. The same happened when I acted as an interpreter for some Australian opposition politicians who wanted to discuss the recognition of Croatia before the UN.

We all were constantly engaged in seeking to stop the war in Croatia. Because of that we also tried to arrange meetings of our Croatian politicians who visited Australia, such as: Professor Marko Veselica, Anto Kovačević, Đuro Vidmarović, Đuro Perica and others, with many Australian politicians and academics.

## THE CROATIAN COMMUNITY'S RETIREMENT HOME IN CANBERRA

Many members of our community left their homeland in the 1960s, when most of them were in the 'best years of their lives'. After arriving in Australia, they went on to work in construction jobs, where labour was constantly sought, and these jobs were extremely hard. In those years a lot of Croats went out into the world in search of a better life. The exodus was the result of Yugoslav politics, which aimed to get rid of as many Croats as possible, and a constant persecution of Croatian people. As many reached retirement age, the need for accommodation in a retirement home became apparent. This was true for older family members who came to Australia to live with their children, but due to various reasons such coexistence was not always possible. In increasing numbers, these seniors had nowhere to go, and they could not return to Croatia for obvious reasons. All those who have lived in Australia for at least ten years, are entitled to a retirement pension, like other citizens of Australia who receive a pension from the age of sixty-five years, regardless of whether they have ever been in employment or not.

Some conditions apply to accessing the pension, relating to the financial status of citizens. However, our older population generally does not fall into this category. More retirement homes are opening, and when someone takes a place in a home, the government provides assistance depending on their financial position. Those who depend on a retirement pension on the basis of their age, have to pay 85% of their pensions, and the government covers the remaining costs. Homes may be established only with the permission of the government. Therefore, every year the government announces a tender providing for a certain number of people who will eventually be accommodated in such home. The government finances only for the number of people approved in the tender.

In the 1980s, the local authorities in Canberra allocated free land for the construction of retirement homes, as well as support for their construction. Today the government no longer provides help for the construction of such homes, and all those who decide to build a retirement home, must buy their own land.

There was a tender for the construction of new retirement homes in early September 1989, and we talked with our priest Fr. Tvrtko Gujić about doing everything possible towards submitting a proposal.

Fr. Tvrtko Gujić worked wholeheartedly for the Croatian community and immediately undertook the initial steps for the realisation of this project.



At that time, the government was still giving money to build homes, and the local government gave free land for construction. At the same time the newspapers were already reporting that the government would abolish assistance for the building of homes and that it would only help in the maintenance of pensioners, and that the gifting of land, whose prices were rising, would be terminated. A condition was that the community had to contribute an equal amount of money to the project as that which was allocated.

Our priests, who at that time lived in their home in the city centre, called a meeting of the whole community and they explained the requirements for obtaining a construction permit for the retirement home. Many community members responded to the call and agreed to be involved in the application for the construction of the Croatian retirement home.

We filed the application on time, arguing the need for the retirement home based on the increasing number of older people in the community. We were helped by the Ethnic Council, who provided a supporting statement, which was endorsed by local and federal parliamentarians. Some members of the Council, and members of the smaller communities, such as the Slovenians, Hungarians and Estonians, supported us and indicated that perhaps one day they would look for accommodation in our home. We stated that the criteria for admission to the home would be based on similarity with the communities of other nations. This related to religion, language group, political system in the mother country, or even to the community's status in Australia. In this way, we excluded the possibility of accommodating those who might cause problems among residents of the home.

Although we had arguments and recommendations, as the largest ethnic community in Canberra, to some extent we were skeptical about our application being successful, given our previous experiences when we were turned down just because we were Croats.

However, on 18 January 1990, our application was successful. We got permission for the construction of the centre and \$ 606,500.00 and the remaining funds we needed to collect ourselves. Fr. Tvrtko immediately went into action. He established a founding committee to oversee the establishment of the retirement home. These were members of the community who undertook to see the project through to completion.

Later a sub-committee was formed which was responsible for obtaining the appropriate land where the home would be built. On this committee were Fr. Tvrtko, two community members, and I. Those two members were Ivan Križaić (who is still involved in the management of the home) and Šime Gulan, known builders and promi-



Picture 53. Entrance to "Croatian Village", a home for people in their advanced age.

nent members of our community. They knew all the laws and were the ideal people to quickly achieve our goal-to build a retirement home for seniors.

We searched for the appropriate land, but we eventually were granted free land by the local authorities. The land value at the time was \$1,350,000. Our Retirement Home "Cardinal Stepinac" in Sydney had not received free land from the government. We encountered many bureaucratic obstacles, but we eventually succeeded. In addition to planning regulations for the construction, we had to comply with specific regulations pertaining to the construction of retirement homes. When the documentation requirements were satisfied, construction finally began and Fr. Tvrtko focused entirely on the organisation of voluntary work and collecting financial aid. If it was not for the volunteers' work, the home could not have been built. Most of our people in Canberra work in the construction industry and it was not hard for them to allocate part of their free time for this noble activity.

While the retirement home was being built, we established links with similar institutions in order to get a clearer picture of what awaited us, the kinds of problems we could expect to encounter. Among such homes there is good cooperation and they helped us with their advice.

And so, we built a home for seniors to which we gave the name "Croatian village" and it was blessed by Cardinal Franjo Kuharić on March 4, 1994.





At the opening ceremony, along with Minister Ros Kelly and the other guests, were our archbishop, His Eminence Franjo Kuharić, and Auxiliary Bishop of Canberra Patrick Power. Other guests included the Croatian ambassador Mr. Neven Jurica, with his wife Dunja.

At that time the home consisted of 21 rooms for seniors and eight smaller houses for those who wanted to live within the home and enjoy its benefits, while being independent. They were able to buy these houses provided that after they left or in the event of their death the house would revert back to the village. In 1998, fifteen more houses were built and also sold. The village further expanded and added on 21 rooms, with eight rooms designated for people suffering from dementia because this problem has become common in the Australian community. The government was no longer providing assistance with the capital works but committed to subsidising the tenancies after expansion of the village. We took care of the civil works and materials ourselves. There was still plenty of room, so we built another 15 houses, and the earnings on these covered the cost of construction. So, the home had a total of 42 rooms and 36 independent houses.

The waiting list for the home is quite large and the Croats have priority, although they do not occur in large numbers. In addition to placing our elderly countrymen in the home, we also aim to provide employment for more people of Croatian descent, although there are not many Croats specialising in work in this field. The government strictly controls the operation and licensing of retirement homes, and permits are issued every three years, following an audit in each institution. If any criteria are not satisfied, they need to be corrected. If the institution still does not meet the requirements, the operation of the institution will be suspended. In the meantime, government representatives will visit the institution, and they can take over control at any time and without notice.

The biggest problem is to find staff with the appropriate qualifications, who can communicate in Croatian, to work in the interests of the community, and who have work and people ethics. Many of our seniors did not master the English language and those who speak good English, want to talk in their mother tongue, Croatian, in their old age. So, it is difficult to find the ideal person for the role of director of the retirement home. Several times I had to assume that position while we were looking for a new person for the job. The intention was to have a person of Croatian origin who could advocate for interests of the home. Unfortunately, we were not always able to achieve this goal.

The home is currently managed by a refugee from Bosnia. She started work at the home in one of the lowest jobs in the home, but with great will and diligence com-



pleted all levels of work as well as nursing studies. I must point out the young Croat Marko Kokić, an accountant who through his work contributed so much to the home.

Since day one, when the idea was first canvassed for the establishment of a retirement home, the president position has been held by Ivan Križaić. He takes care of the business of the home, and through his invaluable advice and connections solves the seemingly unsolvable problems. And he does all this along with his job which entails construction of large buildings in Canberra, and with the management of his farm where he raises hundreds of deer and other livestock.

Other long-time board members are Sime Franjić and Ivica Sajler from Canberra, and they also are active and prominent members of the community. We are trying to interest young people to participate in the management of the home, because we hope that one day they will take over the reins.

The residents in our retirement home have different life experiences and destinies.

To illustrate the mosaic of our residents, it is best to cover the backgrounds of some of them. Thus, there were two men from Zagreb who left Croatia during the Second World War. One of them, Josip, was a senior officer in the German army, and after the war became a translator, working for the Americans and earning a lot of money. The money, however, were spent on women and drink. He married a German woman, with whom he had a son, and together as a family they immigrated to Australia. But in Australia he continued a similar way of life and his wife and child returned to Germany. He never heard from them again. Towards the end of his life he came to our home, broken and sick, an old man who still dreamt of his youth. He talked about his son whose photograph he had kept in his wallet and would always cry when he showed us the picture of his young child. He behaved arrogantly and demandingly towards the staff at the home.

His friend Zvonko, who came with Josip to Australia, had a similar life. He also lived a dissolute life in Germany. He, in turn, kept a photograph of a Chevrolet in his wallet, which was just one of many expensive cars that he had owned in Germany. He lived from memories, old and sick as he was, and found refuge in the middle of an environment that until then, he had largely ignored. Toward the end of his life he was in the hospital, but he demanded that he be taken back to "his home", where he died. Both friends met with a very sad end, alone and overwhelmed by disease.

In the retirement home we had people of Russian descent. I was very impressed by one particular elderly gentleman, an intellectual, who had an English surname. I thought he had changed his surname upon emigration, until I met his son, who was raised by

his mother, who remained in Russia, even though her family left Russia before the Revolution. After his mother died, he was able to go to England to his aunt, who was married to an English diplomat, who was once ambassador to Russia. As they left Russia before the October Revolution, Igor did not know much about them. After his mother's death, he learned in England that his aunt was actually his mother and his father was her husband. So, they adopted him, and gave him his surname, which was his due at birth. They raised him in Anglo-Saxon spirit, in the Protestant faith, which he passed on to his son. He emigrated from England to Australia as a scientist and worked in a well-known scientific institution in Australia.

Another Russian who was staying in our home also had an interesting life. He left Russia as a child, grew up in Australia, and took on the local way of life. He expressed hostility towards everything that was not Australian, and constantly complained about our staff because they spoke Croatian and the cooks who prepared Croatian homestyle cooking. He never mentioned that he was a Russian by birth, though his surname betrayed him. He was ashamed of any connection with Russians, he could not stand mention of people's ethnic origins, and expected the same approach from all of us. When we told him that there were other choices and he could leave our home and find other accommodation, he would say that the rest of us needed to change because he was in the right.

We also accommodated those who were homeless. Thus, we accepted a Croat, who was found under a bridge in Sydney, which was his temporary home. He had been sent to a shelter, where he stayed until he came to us. As he had no documents, we needed to establish his identity. At the refuge, he was mistreated, but recovered when he came to us. He had difficulty speaking, but we still managed to find out that he came from a large Zagorje family in which there were nine brothers, and some were still alive. When I suggested we find his brothers, he flatly refused. Who knows what was hiding behind this sad story of another Croat, lost in a foreign world? Later we contacted through the Croatian Embassy (thanks to Mirjana Piškulić), his family in Zagorje.

Our retirement home has its own chapel where Mass is delivered every Saturday. We furnished this chapel ourselves. The benches were made by a Croatian carpenter in Sydney and paid for by one of our tenants, Mato Jurić, a native of the Bosnian Posavina, who was a very devout Catholic. In Croatia, after the War World II, following the Death March, as a 15-year-old boy he was sent to Goli Otok, an island prison, from which he managed to escape and migrate to Australia, where he died. Our employees contributed to the payment of the altar and everything else that was needed for the church.





Picture 56. The visit of Bishop Marin Barišić, from Split, to the Home for Elderly people 'Croatian Village from left: Karmela, Iva, His Eminence Bishop Barišić, Vanda and Fra Anto.



Picture 57. Employees at the "Croatian Village" and members of Croatian Women's Association, undertaking voluntary work in the village. From left: Karmela, Ljubica Vanda, Tereza, Nada, Ana and Nevenka. At rear, standing, is Jack, a resident of the Village.

We also had several of our grandmothers at the home, who came to Australia to be with their children, but could not live with them. They are very well adapted to life in a retirement home, better than the men. They spend time together, and never get bored.

Only when one is confronted with the harsh reality of the fate of our people in different homes and countries, such as in the retirement home, can one appreciate the extent of the tragedy of our people in foreign countries.

On 18 January 2003 a terrible fire broke out in Canberra, destroying a large part of the city, especially in the suburbs around the location of our retirement home. The fire started in the Australian Alps, which are located three hours' drive from Canberra. From the south, a thick smoke which got bigger and bigger, approached, and soon burning leaves were falling from the sky. Nobody knew what was coming, and the local government of Canberra was not prepared for a fire of this magnitude. I was at home, about ten kilometres away from the retirement home, and I headed towards the retirement home as soon as I saw what was happening. The route on which I drove quickly caught fire. As Canberra has a lot of trees, including eucalyptus and pines, the fire quickly spread. When I arrived at the home, we started preparing for evacuation. Panic set in across Canberra, which had insufficient fire-fighting vehicles and supplies for fire-fighting of this scale. On television and radio, the authorities gave regular instructions on what we needed to do. But it was not much help.

Marko and Iva, board members, managed to make it to the home, through detour barriers along the way. We drove our little bus in front of the home, prepared some food and waited. And the fire came to within less than a kilometre of us, but although we were spared it continued to race towards the heart of Canberra. In the evening the power went out, so we lit candles. The phone lines were burned so that we only had one line from Telecom, urgently established for institutions like ours. The Ministry for the elderly was constantly in touch with us.

And so, we spent three days and three nights like that in the home, until finally the danger had passed. Only on the third day did all telephone lines work again, and the electricity was back on that afternoon. We had prepared all the taps and hoses to help water down the fire, but the pressure was so poor that we would not have been able to have much of an impact on the fire.

We were worried about how the elderly people would handle things. We were even joined by elderly residents who lived in nearby houses. However, they were generally calm. In the end, all was well despite the great danger that threatened, and we found out that the other retirement homes had to evacuate their residents into a nearby school.





Picture 58. The Ambassador of Republic of Croatia Hon. Dr. Mladen Iber with Ljubica, Draga and Vanda in the chapel of Croatian Village in 2001.

In Canberra, more than five hundred houses were burnt down, including six Croatian ones. The house of our committee member Šime Franjić, whose family barely survived, burned down. Three people were burned in their homes.

That Saturday morning, my two daughters who live in Canberra had travelled to Sydney, where they were to meet their sister, who was to arrive from Nelson Bay, where she lives with her family. The three of them were supposed to meet with their cousin, the daughter of their uncle Ivan, who arrived that day in Sydney on business. For them it was a very important meeting because they had never met before. Their cousin Branka lives in Canada with her family and they had never met. As the eldest daughter Stela lives in the part of Canberra that was being threatened by the fire, as soon as she heard what was going on, after meeting with Branka, she headed back to Canberra, a distant three-hour drive. While she was on the road to Canberra, a few houses in her street caught on fire. Only a few houses on her street were spared, and one of those was hers. Her house was saved with the help of a volunteer firefighter, who lives on a farm, so he knew what to do in these circumstances.

In Canberra we have two Croatian clubs where members of our community meet. On Sundays they play *boče* and organise celebrations, mostly gathering together the young people. Older members of the community prefer to hang out around the church.

That's why today we look with pride at our senior citizens' home, which is the result of efforts by the community, and in which the elderly conclude their lives surrounded by their acquaintances, speaking their mother tongue and eating their favourite food, as they quietly await the call of God.

#### THE ARRIVAL OF NEW IMMIGRANTS IN CANBERRA

When I mention contributions to the liberation of Croatia, I think about the new immigrants who came to Australia after the sixties, and who hesitated to approach us Croats who were here for a long time. Specifically, in obtaining Yugoslav passports they had been warned to keep away from our communities, which were presented to them in a bad light. As they intended to visit their homeland, they kept away from the community because they were afraid of being called to "information meetings" carried out by the secret police when they visited Croatia. New arrivals told us that they were surprised about how much the Yugoslav Secret Service knew about us and expected to get more information from them about our community.

But slowly the newly arrived Croats began to approach us, and soon they became contributing members of our community. We helped them to find their way as soon as possible in a new country, and they eventually became active in the community. Their contribution is very large, especially during the War in Croatia.

However, some Croats were trying to undermine our activities or represent us as terrorists. This is evident in the protests in Sydney in 1988, because every 29th November Croats protested in front of the Yugoslav representative in Australia. On that occasion a Yugoslav consulate shot at people and wounded young Tolić, who was participating in a peaceful protest with his family.

Following this incident, in the Novi List of 10 December 1988, an interview with an Australian reporter of Croatian origin was reported. He said: "The majority of Serbs and Croats distanced themselves from extremist organisations and gathered mainly in Yugoslav clubs declaring themselves as Yugoslavs, and every voice of someone Serb or a Croat in Australia is identified with renegades of the extreme orientations in the sphere of political immigration".

Such pronouncements did not help us, but rather had the opposite effect.



## VII. HOW THE CROATIAN COMMUNITY FUNCTIONED IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

### BEFORE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GALBALLY REPORT

Many new immigrants who came to Australia from all over Europe had a higher education. A lot of them were from the Baltic states, Poland and the Ukraine, and quickly began to fight for their rights in Australian institutions with the help of the media, and their own associations, which published in their native languages. For us Croats who emigrated for economic and political reasons, it was much harder to achieve our rights, because there were few intellectuals among us, and the Yugoslav secret police in Australia was strong and showed us in a bad light. Serbs were active, although there were a lot fewer of them, but they were declared allies by Britain and America, who fought under the leadership of Draža Mihailović. That they succeeded, was proven by their participation in the annual procession of war veterans, to celebrate Australia's largest holiday 'Anzac Day', held on April 25 across Australia. Australian veterans join other selected nations who fought on the side of the Allies, for example, the Poles, but they are also regularly joined by *Chetniks*. Many have protested against the participation of Chetniks in that parade, but nothing has been achieved because the Serbian lobby is strong.

On 29 November 1977, (the Yugoslav day of independence), the Croats opened their own embassy, led by Mario Dešpoja, a native of Zadar. The entire Croatian community throughout Australia supported the establishment of the Croatian Embassy which was *symbolically* opened exactly on the day when the Croats usually protest in front of the Yugoslav representatives.

After the founding of the Croatian Embassy, the Croatian community received a lot of publicity, and a lot of negative reaction, so the Australian Parliament passed a law allowing it to close our embassy at any time ("The Diplomatic and Consular Mission Act"). The Croatian embassy remained open for three years.

At that time Australia was ruled by the Liberals, led by Malcolm Fraser. In 1978, it was determined that the most distinguished Australian lawyer, Frank Galbally, would undertake a study of immigrants to examine the situation of immigrants and their needs, and to recommend ways of dealing with their status which until then had been unfavorable.



Picture 59. In the Capital City of Australia, on 29<sup>th</sup> November 1977, on the anniversary of the establishment of Yugoslavia, the Croatian Embassy opened. This event drew the world's attention to the fight for the independence of Croatia and can be singled out as one of the most significant acts of Croatian political emigration before the establishment of the independence of Croatia in 1992.

#### FOLLOWING IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GALBALLY REPORT

After fifty years of discrimination, the situation slowly began to change for the better for those who were not of the Anglo-Saxon race. Since the Japanese had bombed Northern Australia during World War II, in preparation for invading Australia, Australian authorities began to seriously think about the future. Until then, Australia had received only English immigrants, but after that bombing, became aware of its geo-strategic and demographic situation and introduced a policy of "populate or perish". Since English immigrants were arriving in insufficient numbers, there were also insufficient numbers of workers. Therefore, the politicians agreed that the only way



to address this was to bring in more immigrants from other countries, and due to the consequences of the Second World War, there were many of them. This is how the mosaic of the Australian population began to change in a major way, and the consequences of such a policy could no longer be ignored. The former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser was a major proponent of multiculturalism and his policy received the support of 75% of the population of Australia. Finally, the policy of discrimination was officially abolished at the end of the seventies.

The main reason for the emergence of new problems was the fact that Australia is a country of immigrants, who, together with accepting their responsibilities, also demanded their rights, equal to those of other Australians.

Frank Galbally conducted a thorough investigation in his 1978 report "Review of Post Arrival Programmes and Services to Migrants". The review considered whether migrants should be afforded privileges and rights equal as those of Australian citizens. It was a significant milestone for all Australian immigrants and also affected the Croatian community. The main proposals, which Galbally presented to the Australian government, were summarised by the following recommendations:

- Equality in Australian society
- Introduction of courses of English language for adults [AMEP]
- Special charitable centers
- The introduction of a new television channel (SBS) and radio programming
- Establishment of the Institute for Multicultural Affairs (AIMA)
- Ethnic schools within communities to promote the language of these communities
- Creation of a center to provide the necessary assistance to immigrants (MRC)
- Establishment of an office for multicultural affairs in the Prime Minister's Office (OMA)
- The introduction of translation services at the Ministry of Immigration.

With this new approach to solving the problems of migrants, Croats were given a new chance to assert their rights. Across Australia, we gathered in the newly established organisations because it was the only way to affirm our rights. So, we were free to be able to work for our homeland to seek its recognition and the right to our independence.

Croats in Australia slowly began achieving their rights. Unfortunately, many newcomers did not become involved in our community, especially those who came 'on

exchange' and those that declared themselves Yugoslavs, so it was those Croats in Australia who had already been here for a long time and spoke English well, who mostly worked towards our affirmation as a nation. Thus, under these circumstances, I was one of the few Croats in Canberra, who could actively participate in the new organisations. To illustrate the importance for us, as Croats, to be present in the Capital of Australia, on as many committees as possible, I will describe some positive results and achievements, through various government committees.

### OUR COMMITMENT TO THE RECOGNITION OF CROATS AS AN ANCIENT NATION

After the founding of the Croatian Embassy, Croatian organisations throughout Australia were better organised. In early 1980, when the Galbally Report was adopted and applied to all ethnic communities, the status of Croats in Australia improved. Croatian organisations in all major cities sought recognition of the Croatian language as a separate language. It was a long and difficult process with no prospect of success. If Australia officially recognised the Croatian language, it would at the same time mean the recognition of Croatia as an independent nation.

In Canberra, we also worked towards achieving this goal. I could dedicate myself to this task as I had the support of my family, mainly my husband Milko, who was also involved in the work of the community. I represented the Croatian community and was accepted in the new circles. At the time, Tito was respected and recognised worldwide, and the Embassy of the SFRJ interfered with our work in every way.

After the Croatian Language was finally recognised by the Department of Immigration in 1980, and thus affirmed as the official language of Croatian immigrants, slowly the door began to open to the realisation of our other goals. My duties were related to participation in government and nongovernment institutions, in which I got to the highest levels of legislative and executive authorities I possibly could. We tried to take advantage of every opportunity to point out the situation in the country and emphasise the desire of the Croatian people for secession from Yugoslavia.

The politicians listened to us because there were many of us in their electorates, but some were also friendly towards us. This was evident during the Homeland War and the fight for the recognition of an independent Croatia. Given the fact that we were residents of the capital city of Australia, the seat of Australian political life, it was easier for us to establish contacts with the authorities.



Following implementation of the Galbally Report, we had the opportunity to participate in the work of several Boards and contribute to decisions that were valid for all ethnic communities. Our main priority, of course, was the Croatian community.

The duties that I performed outside of the Croatian community included:

- Ethnic Communities' Council – ACT (Council of Ethnic Communities), member from 1980, Vice President from 1982 to 1992
- Commonwealth / State Task Force on Women of Non-English-speaking backgrounds (The federal task force to address the problem of women who are not of English origin), 1982 to 1992
- Management Committee of the Migrant Resource Centre Inc. (Management Centre helping immigrants), member from 1983 to 1986
- Legal Aid Review Committee (Forum for resolving legal aid cases), member from 1982 to 1991
- Women's Committee of the Ethnic Communities' Council of the ACT (Committee for Women at the Council of Ethnic Communities ACT), head of the Committee from 1982 to 1992
- Community Employment Programme (Programme for the promotion of employment in charitable organisations), member from 1983 to 1986
- Management Committee of the Adult Migrant Education Program (Management Committee for the education and training of adult immigrants), member 1983 to 1986
- ACT Women's Consultative Council (Advisory Council for Women ACT), member 1982 to 1986.

In performing the duties specified, I represented the Croatian community and could bring forward our problems. Through the Council of Ethnic Communities I achieved appointments within other organisations, which mainly included members from countries where communism ruled; for example, from the Baltic states, and who sympathised with the Croats and provided us with their support.

What helped our work in the wider Australian public arena was that we were recognised by the Council of Ethnic Communities as an independent community. According to the Statute of the Council, Yugoslavs could not be members of the Council because the criterion for membership was nationality of ethnic representation, and not state citizenship.

## THE COUNCIL OF ETHNIC COMMUNITIES IN CANBERRA

In 1978, after the Galbally Report, an umbrella body that provided immigrants with assistance in achieving their rights was established. And so, on 15 June 1978, under the leadership of Dr. Heinrich Stefanik, the Council of Ethnic Communities in Canberra was founded. Later, the president of the Council, Vic Rebikoff, actively facilitated the involvement and the wider acceptance of the Croatian community, amongst others, in Australia. The Council's original members represented the following nations, registered as:

*Austria; Bangladesh; Croatia; Cambodia; Canada; Czechoslovakia; Chile; China; Estonia; Finland; Germany; Hungary; India; Indonesia; Israel; Japan; Korea; Kurdistan; Latvia; Lebanon; Lithuania; Macedonia; Malaysia; Malta; Mexico; Netherlands; Pakistan; Philippines; Poland; Portugal; Russia; Scandinavian countries; Serbia; Slovenia; Spain; Turkey; Ukraine.*

Although the Serbs were members of the Council, they seldom came to the meetings because they were bothered by our presence.

In July 1979, the Ethnic Community Council of Canberra became a member of the newly formed umbrella organisation for immigrants, *Federation of Ethnic Communities Council of Australia (FECCA)*.

As soon as the Council of Ethnic Communities was founded, the Croatian community immediately joined. Even before the establishment of this council, Croats sought to include themselves in the work of the wider community in Canberra. My late sister Jadranka was active in that way, and along with few other Croats joined a voluntary organisation called the "Good Neighbour Council". She met with Ukrainians, Slovaks, Poles and other ethnic community representatives, most of them coming from countries behind the "Iron Curtain" and sharing a similar fate as the Croats. In that organisation there were also volunteer Australians, who in that capacity acquired an understanding of the situation in this part of Europe and offered their support to these ethnic communities.

Ethnic radio was also founded, with the support of the Good Neighbour Council. Both our Croatian Clubs committed to financial support for the introduction of a Croatian radio hour which included not only local news about events in the community, but also news from other Croatian Communities around Australia, news from home, as well as news from around the world. The program also included a segment



on Croatian history. And today there is still a radio program, which is mostly dedicated to events in the community.

Representatives of ethnic communities agreed that it was time to make their voices heard in the wider Australian community. With the significant contribution of immigrants to the building of the "Snowy Mountains Scheme", the biggest project in Australia, and without whom the project would not have been built, the Australian media wrote about the contribution of immigrants.

The Galbally Report contributed to the enhancement of the cultural and social life of immigrants, and the government adopted all 57 recommendations, pledging financial support for implementation. A television station was founded that primarily engaged in ethnic communities' matters and televised the news directly from the home countries of Australian immigrants. The TV station still exists today. But the Croats were not initially included in the program because of the nationality issue.

According to the census in 1976, 57,619 people or 34% of the total population of Canberra were not born in Australia. We do not have statistics on how many Croats were among them, because the Croatian nationality at that time was not recognised.

After the Galbally Report in 1980, there were 23 ethnic schools in Canberra, and the largest was Croatian, with about 220 students. Classes were held every Friday from 18h to 21h, and the parents took care of its successful functioning. My husband Milko was the director of the school for two years, and our son, Tomislav, attended this school.



Picture 60. Croatian Ethnic School, Canberra-Queanbeyan, 1983.

The Ethnic Communities Council collaborated with the "Good Neighbour Council", "Ethnic Broadcaster's Council" and "Multicultural Task Force". Today the Council of Ethnic Communities advocates for more than fifty nations, and the Croatian community was a member from the very beginning. At that time our representative was Faust Šešelja. From 1980 to 1992 I was a representative of the Croatian community on this Council, and sometimes I alternated with other members of the community. I was Vice president of the Council of Ethnic Communities from 1982 to 1992. By participating in the work of this Council, we were able to solve many of the problems that our community encountered at that time.

A conference of the national Federation of individual ethnic councils in Australia was held annually and always in a different capital city of the Australian states. Conferences were held under the auspices of the Prime Minister of the Australian government.

The first such conference was held in Canberra (Australian Capital Territory) in 1982, then in Sydney (New South Wales), Hobart (Tasmania), Melbourne (Victoria), Darwin (Northern Territory), Brisbane (Queensland), Adelaide (South Australia), Perth (Western Australia) and one year we went to Wellington (New Zealand). There I met with the representatives of the Croatian community in New Zealand, which was also large.

As I was introduced everywhere as Croatian, and not Yugoslavian, the Croatian community as an entity was thus being promoted, and at that time this was a great achievement. So, we affirmed ourselves as a nation, which in the 1990s helped us in seeking recognition of Croatia.

Picture 61. Opening of Annual Meeting of Federation of Ethnic Communities in Canberra in 1992, in the presence of the Prime Minister. I was one of the speakers.





## THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE FEDERATION OF ETHNIC COMMUNITIES COUNCIL – HOBART 1983

At this conference, the guest of honor was a representative of Aboriginal people, Charles Perkins. We knew that he had once played in Adelaide for the Croatian soccer team and we were confident of his support of our struggle for Croatian independence. On this occasion we spoke with him. In his speech at the conference, among other things, he mentioned that the Australian government should reconsider its foreign policy and assist nations that deserve their freedom and independence, such as the Croatian, Polish and Lithuanian people. It meant a lot to us to have the support of a prominent person in Australian public life.

## THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE FEDERATION OF ETHNIC COMMUNITIES COUNCIL – MELBOURNE 1984

Many participants and guests came from all over Australia as well as New Zealand to the conference in Melbourne. Among the guests, there was a university professor from the University of Western Australia, Ralph Pervan. We had heard that he was of Croatian descent, but not an active member of the community. Although he was born in Australia, he spoke Croatian very well. We had intended to talk to him in order to hear his opinion of Croats in Australia, as we hoped to attract him into our community. But unfortunately, we did not have an opportunity to do so.

During the three days duration of the conference, a performance attended by members of the local ethnic communities was held every night. On one of these events, our folk dancers from Melbourne performed, and their performance thrilled the attendees. Professor Pervan sat as the guest of honor in the front row. After the performance, he retired to his hotel, where he had a heart attack and died the same evening. Those who were sitting with him in the front row and with whom he had primarily spoken said he was so moved by the performance of our folk dancers that tears flowed. Blood is thicker than water.

The annual congress was attended by Dr. James Jupp, a professor at the Australian National University in Canberra. He was compiling an encyclopedia about Australian immigration ("THE AUSTRALIAN PEOPLE – An Encyclopedia of the Nation, Its People and Their Origin, 1988"), and we approached him asking whether he needed contributions about the Croatians in Australia. He said yes and asked us to

participate. Data was collected from all Croatian communities in Australia and we were credibly presented as people and communities in this Encyclopedia. In particular, significant contributions to the encyclopedia came from Prof. Luka Budak, Father Gracijan Biršić and Neven Smoje. But there were also those who did not portray Croatians in the best light.

At the conference, I gave a speech on the state of migrant women in Australia.

Why is it important that we got a special place in the Encyclopedia? We need to take into consideration that since the 1970s Croats were constantly in the news, always in a negative context. The Australian public knew nothing about our history and their opinion about us was derived through the media. Pressure against the Croats was so strong that in 1973 the Labor government established a special Senate Committee on the Human Rights of Australian Immigrants. The Committee, led by Senator Michael Twomey, spent six months investigating Croats and concluded that *"those who are condemned are no more rebellious than other members of the community"*, and *"by any public evidence it could not be determined that they could be associated with the violent incidents for which they were accused."*

In this encyclopedia of the people of Australia, there are twelve pages dedicated to the Croatians, a little more than five pages for Serbs, and only one page for Yugoslavs.

#### CENTRAL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE FOR IMMIGRANT ASSISTANCE

In this committee the Croatian community association assisted in organizing several Seminars on Croatia. In 1984 there was a particularly successful seminar under the name "Other people – other culture". On this occasion Drago Ljubić, Mario Dešpoja and I gave lectures about our culture and history, and after the lecture we organized a party, prepared by the Croatian community. The seminar was visited by people of different nations, and for some it was the first they had heard of Croatia. From the questions asked at the seminars, we could conclude how little was known about us in Australia.

#### THE ACT GOVERNMENT ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR WOMEN

This council was not inclined towards Croats. They even voted against giving financial aid to the Croatian community for the creation of a social worker position within the community. The Council was also a board member on the 'Programme for the





Picture 62. Members of the Migrant Resource Centre in 1984. (Vanda is sitting, first on the left).



Picture 63. The Chief Minister of the Australian Capital Territory and members of the Women's Advisory Committee for the Australian Capital Territory Government (Vanda is second in the middle row).

Promotion of Employment at Charities'. So, it had an important role within the community. I represented the Council of Ethnic Communities ACT. I soon realized that their knowledge of the Croats was based on Yugoslav propaganda, so I took this opportunity to explain the position of Croats.

At that time the Croatian language was taught at Macquarie University in Sydney, but the University wanted to abolish the course. I asked the Advisory Council to express in writing their support for teaching the Croatian language. To my surprise, the Council was happy to do so, and the Croatian language is one of the subjects at the University to this day.

### COMMITTEE FOR ADULT MIGRANT EDUCATION

This Committee was established by the Ministry of Education and we had access to all publications that the ministry issued. For schools, there was a brochure issued in 1983 called "Cultural background of Yugoslavia". We saw from this brochure the negative light in which Croats were being portrayed, so we wrote a letter of protest to the Minister for Education, to which a senior official of the ministry, Barrie Smilie, responded. He sent us a letter asking us to outline the details of the inaccuracies and corrections for this brochure. We wrote him a letter of six pages, in which we put forward facts from the history books, including from the book by President Tudman "Nationalism in Contemporary Europe". We reviewed and outlined the important facts from Croatian history. After several meetings and correspondence, our recommendations were adopted and a new brochure was issued to all schools in Australia (see letter on p. 158).

Supplement: Migrant media in Australia reported on all activities in Croatian communities.





## VIII. THE LARGEST PROTEST EVER HELD IN AUSTRALIA

**D**uring the Homeland war, the entire Croatian community in Australia protested in major cities to draw attention to the situation in the country. Younger generations of Croats, born in Australia and still students, were involved in organising the protests and this contributed to the authenticity of the request for recognition of Croatia. In Canberra we protested in front of the embassies who we believed could have an impact on the determination of the fate of our country.

As agreed by Croatian organizations in Australia, we organised a protest in Canberra whose purpose was to seek international recognition of Croatia. All members of the Croatian community committees were active and in constant contact with the Australian politicians who were inclined to lend their support. Our president, Drago Ljubić, was especially active in organising the event, as was Doris Božin, who, as a lawyer, had contacts in Canberra.

Leaders of all the Croatian associations of Australia decided to invite Croats throughout Australia to this protest to be held in Canberra on August 31, 1991. Also invited were representatives of other ethnic communities in Canberra, especially those who have had a similar fate to our own. The response was tremendous, beyond all expectations. That day around 30,000 people gathered in Canberra from all over Australia. The protest was held before Australia's Parliament House, and the main speaker was Tomislav Bošnjak, after whom some Australian parliamentarians also spoke. From the Australian Government we sought international recognition of Croatia.

It was the biggest protest ever held in Australia. Numerous media reported on the march, and the resonance was enormous. The protest was in fact the continuation of a well-organized campaign that began with "Stop the War in Croatia", which Croatian communities organized around Australia. The song became so popular that for seven weeks it was seventh most popular song in the Australian music charts. All profits from that song went towards help for the homeland.



Picture 64. Demonstration in front of The Parliament of Australia, during which participants demanded recognition of Republic of Croatia, Canberra 31<sup>st</sup> August 1991.



Picture 65. Demonstration on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1991. The procession is going toward The Parliament of Australia. Photo is taken in front of the Prime Minister John Howard's residence, where it was not permitted to stop.



## IX. DR FRANJO TUĐMAN OPENS CROATIAN EMBASSY IN AUSTRALIA

VANDA BORAS PODRAVAC *A Diary from the Croatian Diaspora*

**T**he Croatian embassy in Canberra is the first Croatian Embassy in the world built and financed exclusively by the resident Croats.

When Croatia was finally recognized, all members of the community were happy because they had all contributed effort towards its recognition. We were especially happy with the announcement that Dr. Franjo Tuđman would visit.

That indescribable feeling of ultimate recognition after so many years of unsuccessful struggle for Croatia left no one feeling indifferent.



Picture 66. A warm welcome to the First President of the Republic of Croatia, Dr. Franjo Tuđman, in Canberra, June 1995.



In the struggle for Croatian Independence, during the Homeland War (1991-1995), Australian Croats expressed their support of the Croatian nation, with public support throughout Australia, and with financial as well as humanitarian contributions of incalculable value.







Picture 67. During the Australian visit of the President of Croatia, Dr. Franjo Tuđman, Croatian flags waved officially for the first time in Canberra, June 1995.

The Croatian Women's Association invested a lot of effort into organizing the reception for our President Dr. Franjo Tuđman, who on June 21, 1995, personally opened the first Croatian embassy in the world, which was built solely by Croatian immigrants. The members of the women's society ordered T-shirts with the Croatian coat of arms, and objects made of glass and ceramics to mark the significant day, and proceeds from the sale were sent to the homeland.



Picture 68. Monumental building of The Croatian Embassy, which was built by Croatian immigrants, through their own means and work.



Picture 69. At the reception during The Croatian World Congress, at the residence of President Tudman in 1994.



Picture 70. With Mrs. Ankica Tudman, the President's wife, during her visit to Australia, in 1995.

This event was the culmination of many years of effort by the Croatian community in Australia, and the recognition of Croatian independence meant that effort was not in vain. We finally came to the day we had all dreamt of, for which we fought, and believed would be realized during our lifetime.



## X. AUSTRALIAN AWARDS TO MERITORIOUS CROATIANS

All the efforts of the Croatian community yielded results. We were finally beginning to be accepted in Australia. The Australian public can now see how the Yugoslav propaganda against us was unjustified. We were all known, not only for soccer and volunteering in our communities, but also by contributing to the general Australian community. Finally, after more than a thousand years, we had our own state, our own identity, and our own name to present to the world.

Croatia's future generations will carry that name with pride.

Each year Queen Elizabeth bestows awards to Australians who have especially contributed work to the Australian community. Medals are awarded based on recommendations coming from the Office of representatives of the Queen in Australia (the Governor-General). The process takes about two years as it collects all the data and documentation on people who are to receive awards. More recommendations are rejected than approved. For their good work of the Croatian community and their contribution to the overall welfare of immigrants, medals have been received by members of the Croatian community.

THE MEDAL OF THE ORDER OF AUSTRALIA has been awarded to:

- Dr. Konstantin BOSNIĆ
- Ljerka DRAPAC
- Michael FURJANIĆ
- Dr. Tomislav GAVRANIĆ
- Frank HESMAN
- Milan KARAMARKO
- Nedjeljko MARUNČIĆ
- Vanda PODRAVAC
- Vinko ROMANIK



Picture 71. Celebration of consignment of Order of Australia Medal, in Croatian Club in Deakin in 1988. Attending: from left Drago Ljubić, Bob McMullan / Labor Member of Parliament for Canberra, Phillip Ruddock, Minister of Immigration, Vic Rebikoff, President of Ethnic Communities Council for Australian Capital Territory, Wayne Berry, Local Minister of Canberra.

Picture 72.  
Vanda's Relief  
among the other  
200 Australians  
of merit, taken  
in front of the  
Parliament House  
of Australia, on  
the occasion of  
the 200 – year  
anniversary of  
the foundation of  
Australia.



The greatest recognition for contributions to the Australian community, however, was the recognition of individuals or the communities they represented, on the bicentennial anniversary of the foundation of Australia. In the area in front of the Australian Parliament in Canberra, among the two hundred images of meritorious Australians was a relief of one Croatian – Vanda.



## XI. THE END OF AN ARDUOUS ROAD

With the creation of the Croatian state, many Croats living abroad considered a permanent return. Some did go to Croatia, but they could not adjust to the new environment after a long stay in Australia and returned.

This did not discourage others to at least visit their homeland, their native country which they had unwillingly left. So Milko and I decided to visit Croatia in 1993. I had already visited Croatia in 1992, for a short time, under difficult circumstances, having come to the funeral of my oldest sister. For Milko, it was his first visit after 48 years.

During the trip we were nervous. The travel seemed endless to us. When we finally arrived in Zagreb, after leaving the aircraft, Milko began crying frantically and fell prostrate to the ground and started kissing it.



Picture 73. Encounter of brother and sister, after 50 years, in Fužine; Milko and Đurđica in 1993.

He was deeply moved by his meeting with his sister, who had been but a child of four years when he had left, and now when they finally reunited, was an old woman who was already a grandmother. In Croatia Milko developed a high fever, and so we stayed with my cousin who was a doctor, she checked and found no cause for the fever. After a short time in Croatia, he wanted to return to Australia to be with his children and



Picture 74.  
Family Podravac  
in 1993.



Picture 75. Weekend house on the coast in Malua Bay, where Milko and Vanda intended to live their late life in good health watching their grandchildren grow.





Picture 76. Milko's grave in Canberra.

grandchildren. He could not recognise himself in his own country, which he loved so much.

After returning from his homeland to Australia, Milko did not recover and in the beginning of 1996 he died.

I, in turn, visit my homeland each year, while my health allows (as our Senj natives say, "while my 'šufit, [attic/head] and legs still work"), and I always stay in Senj, the city that is dearest to me.





APPENDIX:

SELECTED LETTERS TO AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTIONS  
FROM THE RICH COLLECTION OF CORRESPONDENCE OF  
CROATIAN ASSOCIATIONS THAT FOUGHT FOR CULTURAL  
AND LINGUISTIC SELF-RELIANCE AND SPREAD THE TRUTH ABOUT  
THE RIGHTEOUS STRUGGLE OF THE CROATIAN PEOPLE  
FOR FREEDOM AND INDEPENDENCE





Croatian Women's Association,  
25 Garton St.,  
FARMER A.C.T. 2607

4 August, 1980

The Hon. Ian McPhee, M.P.,  
Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs,  
Parliament House,  
CANBERRA A.C.T. 2600.

Dear Minister,

On the 25th of June, 1980, after a number of unsuccessful telephone calls to your department, I sent a letter (copy attached) by registered mail (receipt number C 716965, Woden) to the Head of the Translation Unit specifically to complain about the propriety and quality of their translation of a pamphlet distributed by the Post Natal Care Unit to Croatian women hospitalised in the Calvary Hospital (see attached).

The Ethnic Communities Council of the A.C.T. has subsequently (letter of 13 July, 1980, attached) raised this matter on behalf of the Croatian women with your colleague, the Minister for Health. To date I have received no acknowledgment that my letter has been received, nor have I been invited to discuss with persons responsible for the unacceptable translation where significant differences occur between colloquial Serbian and Croatian.

Withdrawal from circulation of the offensive translation was an immediate response by Hospital staff when the vulgar nature of colloquialisms for the Croatian reader was pointed out. They agree that such a standard of language would not be used in English or intentionally in any other community language.

The second point of my original letter was to draw the attention of your Department that their credibility is brought into question every time they mistakenly decide that "Serbo-Croatian" is the most appropriate medium of communication with Australians who identify as Croats.

In the A.C.T. where the majority of former Yugoslav citizens are of Croatian ethnic background, the Croatian language would appear the most logical language into which translation from English should be made for hospitals, schools and government departments and agencies. There is serious inconsistency in practices between the States and the Commonwealth and within the Commonwealth Government. All States recognise Croatian as a separate language, as does the Office of the Public Service Board (photocopy of advertisement attached). When will your Department recognise, as the Yugoslav Constitution does (see attached), that Croatian is a legitimate separate language officially recognised as a medium of communication with a major ethnic group?

- 2 -

On behalf of the Croatian Community of Canberra and Queanbeyan I seek your assistance that:

1. The accuracy and propriety of translation made by your Department will be closely monitored
2. The Croatian language will be recognised and used by your Department for communication with Australian of Croatian background.
3. Replies will be received to our letter of 24 June 1980 and ECC's (ACT) letter of 13 July, 1980.

Yours sincerely,

*Vanda Podravac*

(Vanda Podravac)  
PRESIDENT

VANDA BORAS PODRAVAC. A Diary from the Croatian Diaspora

Letter from the Croatian Women's Association, addressed to the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs on August 4, 1980, with a request for recognition of the Croatian language in Australia.



MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION  
AND ETHNIC AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENT HOUSE  
CANBERRA, A.C.T. 2600

Ref 79/78469-1966b  
CIT/ES

15 OCT 1980

Mrs Vanda Podravac  
President  
Croatian Women's Association  
25 Gattton Street  
PARRER ACT 2607

Dear Mrs Podrovac

I am writing with further reference to your letters of 4 August and 22 September 1980 concerning the translation of a pamphlet on post-natal exercises, and the use of the Croatian language for communication with people of Croatian background in Australia.

I understand that the first mentioned of the matters which you have raised has been the subject of subsequent correspondence and discussion between yourself and officers of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs. I therefore propose to deal only with the matter of the use of the Croatian language.

It is noted that the official language of the Socialist Republic of Croatia is the Croatian literary language and that this is one of the four official languages of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

You will be pleased to know that the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs is now preparing translations in both the Croatian and Serbian languages and no longer uses the expression "Serbo-Croatian" in translations.

I have arranged for all departments and authorities involved in preparing material in community languages to be informed of this with a request that they no longer use "Serbo-Croatian" as a general expression to cover the Croatian and Serbian languages.

2.

My predecessor, the Hon. M.J.R. Mackellar, made a statement in the House of Representatives on 27 September 1979 on the implementation of the Galbally Report. Translations of that statement were printed in ten community languages including Croatian and Serbian.

Recognising that language is a vital and integral facet of one's culture, I fully subscribe to the principles that guided those who framed the Galbally Report when they said: "every person should be able to maintain his or her culture without prejudice or disadvantages and should be encouraged to understand and embrace other cultures".

Yours sincerely

Ian Macphie

Letter from the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Federal Government of Australia, Ian Macphie, announcing the recognition of the Croatian language as a unique language of the Croatian people 15.10.1980.



22/9/1980

Dear Mr. Voekel,

Thank you for your letter dated 4 August, 1980. Your reply was for us, to some extent, disappointing. It is evident that you are not aware of the importance of the issue we raised to the Minister.

As you have anticipated in your letter, the Head of the Translation Unit, Mr. McGrath, had contacted me by telephone on 28 August 1980. He still did not mention the reason for not replying to our letters. We consider that to attend to correspondence is an act of courtesy and also the duty of Public Servants. Mr McGrath proposed to arrange a meeting between the translator of so called "serbo-croat" language and a representative from our community. I was astonished by this suggestion.

We have raised the issue (with all relevant documentation) at the Ministerial level and the result would come from a lower Public Servant. Does this indicate that you do not have a competent officer to deal with such an important matter? or - is it that you do not place any importance to the whole problem about croatian language? If this is the case we would have to pursue the whole issue outside your own Department.

Apparently, you are not aware that all translations made by your Department are strictly in the serbian language, and distributed amongst Croatians - who are the largest migrant community from Yugoslavia - what a paradox!!

The reasons for this happening could be as follows:

1. that the translator is making the translation purposely
2. that the translator has no knowledge of the croatian language. In that case she should not translate for the croatian community
3. that the Department of I and E.D.'s policy is to impose on us a language we do not accept. This is contrary to the Act of Discrimination and to the Australian Constitution.

Our issue is a cultural issue about a language that has been existing for the last 1300 years. Do we have to repeat that serbo-croat language does not even exist in Yugoslavia? Do you care about the quality of your service offered to migrants?

After all, the service you provide is reflecting the image of your Department. Or is it that you do not care what migrants think about your Department? - although - your Department does exist because of migrants.

The Public Service Board and all states are recognising the croatian language as an individual language. We expect you to follow their example.

We would like to discuss the problem with your Department, with officers responsible for making decisions about our language.

Yours faithfully,

V. Podravac

(V. Podravac)

Copy sent to:  
Minister of I and E.A.  
E.C.C.

Letter sent to the Secretary of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, D. Volker, objecting to the merging of the Croatian language and translations with Serbian language, and requesting that correspondence with the Croatian associations should be handled by senior Ministry officials and not by lower level staff.

Department of  
Education & Youth Affairs

Enclosed please return:

84/1068

Reference:

PO Box 826  
Windsor ACT 2606  
Telephone 89 1233  
Telex 98000  
Education Canberra

B H Smillie

Ms Wanda Podravac  
25 Garton St  
FARRER ACT 2607

24.85

Dear Wanda

I refer to our recent telephone conversation in which you very kindly agreed to read and make any necessary comments on the draft of the Department's Cultural Background Paper on Yugoslavia.

A copy of the draft together with one of the present edition for the purpose of comparison is enclosed. The draft for the Revised Edition has been prepared for the Department of Education by Dr Robert F Miller, Department of Politics, Research School of Social Sciences, ANU.

As you know, the intention is that the use of this series of booklets on various migrant and refugee source countries will improve people's understanding of the cultural backgrounds of these people. Most users of the series are teachers.

Even though, in such a brief but comprehensive document a certain amount of generalisation is probably inevitable, the Department attaches great importance to objectivity and factuality in these papers. Comment on the draft is accordingly being invited from people like yourself who are considered appropriate representatives of the ethnic community in question, as well as from the Department of

-2-

Foreign Affairs and from the relevant embassies.

If any inaccuracy or dated information is in evidence when you read this draft we would welcome your bringing it to our attention by 30th April, 1985.

Your help is invaluable and is deeply appreciated.

Yours sincerely

*Barrie*

Barrie Smillie

(Tel. 897852)

Response to the protest letter sent to the Ministry of Education regarding the publication of a brochure entitled "Cultural Background Paper on Yugoslavia", in which Croats are called Yugoslavs. After this complaint, the new edition of the same brochure was corrected according to our request.





COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA  
DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION AND ETHNIC AFFAIRS

Acting  
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY  
CANBERRA, A.C.T.

14 AUG 1980

Dear Mrs Podravac,

In the absence of the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs I have been asked to reply to your letter of 4 August 1980 concerning the translation of a pamphlet on post-natal exercises, and the use of the Croatian language for communication with Australians of Croatian background.

On the matter of the translation to which you have referred it frequently happens that people familiar with a particular language hold strongly differing views as to which translation of a given expression into that language is the most appropriate. It is understood that some of the expressions used in the translation were based on Serbian rather than Croatian usage. However, every effort was made by the translator to avoid the use of expressions which could be regarded by either Serbian or Croatian speakers as "offensive" or "vulgar".

In view of your comments I have made arrangements for a senior officer in the Translation area of this Department to telephone you with a view to arranging a meeting at which your objections to certain aspects of the translation can be discussed.

With regard to the question of the language to be used for communication with Australians of Croatian background you will be interested to know that the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs has received other representations on this matter. In view of the representations the Minister is currently reviewing Commonwealth practice in relation to the languages to be used for the publication of information material produced by Commonwealth Departments and Authorities.

Yours sincerely,

D. VOLKER

Mrs. Vanda Podravac,  
President,  
Croatian Women's Association,  
25 Gatton Street,  
FARRER. A.C.T. 2607

VANDA BORAS PODRAVAC. A Diary from the Croatian Diaspora

25 Gatton St.,  
FARRER A.C.T. 2607

14/9/80

Your Grace,

Thank you for your letter of 2 September, 1980. The contents have been circulated to members of the Croatian Cultural Women's Association and some other figures in our community. These people have again urged me to write to you on the issue of the use of the Croatian language in the celebration of the Holy Sacraments.

Your letter expressed the wish to see our community members and more particularly our children, integrated into their respective local Australian Catholic churches. The need for and desirability of integration into the Australian society is an issue which generates mixed feelings amongst members of our community. Irrespective of individual opinions, we as a community recognise the inevitability of integration. The question therefore is really one of degree; while your wish is that integration should occur here and now, commencing with our children, our wish is not to have integration thrust upon us but to have it come about through either our own free choice, circumstances or in the passage of time.

If our differences were theological, I believe our community would have been far more hesitant about resurrecting this issue after your initial letter. However, as we see it, the issue appears to be one of language, culture and integration and for that reason our community respectfully asks that you consider your stance.

I again take the opportunity to extend an invitation to you on behalf of our community to celebrate a Mass with us and to discuss this issue further with our community leaders.

Yours faithfully,

*V. P.*

(Vanda Podravac)

A letter sent to Canberra Archbishop E. Clancy in connection with earlier correspondence of 27 June 1980, in which the Croatian community protests against his decision prohibiting our children from being christened by Australian Croatian clergy. Our community did not agree with that decision.



AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY  
HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY CANBERRA

21 April 1980

Dear Mrs Podravac,

Thank you for your submission on behalf of the Croatian Cultural Women's Association to the Inquiry into Migrant Services and Programs in the ACT. A copy of your submission has been circulated to all members of the Standing Committee on Education.

I will advise you of a convenient date to meet with the Committee in the near future. A Report is expected to be finalised later in the year and I will send you a copy of the Report as soon as it is available.

Yours sincerely,

*Virginia Walsh*  
(VIRGINIA WALSH)

Clerk to the Standing Committee  
on Education

Mrs Vanda Podravac,  
25 Gatton Street,  
FARRER ACT 2607

*Colgoor Poston has held Virginia Walsh 1980*

VANDA BORAS PODRAVAC, A Diary from the Croatian Diaspora

Acknowledgment of the receipt of a submission by the Croatian community from the Standing Committee on Education, ACT Government, regarding inadequate services and programs for immigrants, on the basis of which the new laws of the local government were proposed.

AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY  
HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY, CANBERRA

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Dear Mrs Podravac,

INQUIRY INTO MIGRANT SERVICES AND PROGRAMS IN THE A.C.T.

Attached is a copy of the First Report completed by the Standing Committee on Education in its Inquiry into Migrant Services and Programs in the A.C.T.

In this Report on education the Committee has identified the areas where there are problems in the provision of educational services to immigrants. These include:

- . insufficient teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL);
- . existing bilingual programs in schools have no guarantee of continued staffing;
- . organisational problems in the administration of English classes for adults;
- . lack of support for the work of ethnic community schools.

The Committee has made a number of recommendations which are designed to overcome some of these deficiencies.

The Committee intends to produce further reports relating to this Inquiry and these will cover such matters as health and welfare, community services and the media.

On behalf of the Committee I would like to thank you for the interest you have shown in the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

*Maurene Horder*

(MAURENE HORDER, MHA)  
Chairman

Mrs V Podravac  
25 Gatton Street  
FARRER ACT 2607

Response from the Standing Committee on Education, ACT Government, to the Croatian community outlining some of the immigration programs and services that were to be implemented.





THE ETHNIC COMMUNITIES COUNCIL OF THE A.C.T. INC.

Griffin Centre, Bunda Street, Canberra City, A.C.T.  
P.O. Box 394, Civic Square, A.C.T. 2608  
Tel: 49 8994

12 September 1988

The Minister  
Immigration, Local Government  
and Ethnic Affairs  
Senator Robert Ray

Dear Mr Ray

I understand that the Croatian Community Welfare Centre Incorporated in Canberra has submitted (on 30th May 1988) an application for a Grant -in- Aid Worker for a period of three years.

The Croatian Community is the largest in the ACT, and its needs for adequate services in the welfare area is overwhelming.

We are aware that the Centre is coping with very limited resources, and taking into account the quantity of work they encounter, their achievement and results are remarkable considering it is achieved by voluntary workers only.

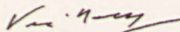
Their need for additional assistance is ever increasing, especially with many members needing more help because of age, destitution, loneliness and sickness. Their problem is accentuated by the lack of understanding of our social security entitlements and employment structure (including re-training opportunities, etc), and legal system.

All these problems are enhanced because of the lack of knowledge of the English language, a huge difficulty many community members are experiencing.

The Ethnic Communities Council of ACT, is fully supportive of the community's application for a Grant -in - Aid Worker and I trust that a favourable decision will be made by your Department.

If necessary, I am willing to discuss it further with you in detail.

Yours sincerely

  
Vic Rebikoff  
PRESIDENT

# 60 minutes

8th September, 1992

V Podravac  
25 Gatton St  
FARRER ACT 2607

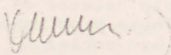
Dear V Podravac

Thank you for writing to 60 MINUTES.

Unfortunately, we were unable to use any of your comments in our mail segment. However, I assure you that all letters, critical or complimentary, are read and appreciated.

We hope you continue to watch and enjoy 60 MINUTES.

Yours sincerely



Joanne Holmes  
Unit Assistant

**Nine Network Australia Limited**

A.C.N. 009 071 167

PO Box 27 Willoughby NSW 2068 Australia  
Studio 24 Artarmon Road Willoughby NSW  
Telephone (02) 906 9999 Fax (02) 436 0527 Telex AA74420

The "60 Minutes" TV program response to a sharp objection to the airing of false statements about the War of Independence in that program.



Office of the  
Leader of the Opposition



BLSR

9 February 1995

Mrs Vanda Podravac OAM JP BA(SS)  
16/170 Clive Steele Ave  
MONASH 2904

Dear Mrs Podravac

Mr Downer has asked me to thank you for your letter advising him of your concerns.

He regrets that he was unable to address the matters you raised before stepping down as Leader of the Opposition.

He was interested in what you had to say and appreciated your informing him of your views.

Yours sincerely

Brian Loughnane  
Principal Private Secretary

Parliament House, Canberra, A.C.T. 2600 Phone 277 4022



MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND THE ARTS  
MINISTER FOR TOURISM  
THE HON MICHAEL LEE MP

Mrs Vanda Podravac OAM JP  
16/170 Clive Steele Avenue  
MONASH ACT 2904

12 DEC 1994

Dear Mrs Podravac

Thank you for your letter to the Minister for Communications and the Arts of 10 November 1994 concerning the appointment of the SBS Croatian Program Head.

The SBS is an independent statutory authority with responsibility under the *Special Broadcasting Service Act 1991* for its own programming and management decisions. Accordingly, it is inappropriate for the Minister to seek to influence the SBS' decisions on this matter.

Section 55 of the SBS Act requires the SBS to endeavour to achieve and maintain high standards as an employer in relation to such things as non-discriminatory employment practices. SBS has advised that broadcaster/journalists are recruited through a thorough, fair and open recruitment process based on merit, to ensure that the best qualified persons are selected for the benefit of SBS Radio listeners. SBS notes that programs on SBS Radio are language based and cater for all speakers of a particular language irrespective of homeland.

A copy of your letter has been provided to the SBS Chairman for his information.

Yours sincerely

Paul Elliott MP  
Parliamentary Secretary



Parliament House Canberra, ACT 2600 Tel: (06) 277 7480 Fax: (06) 273 4154  
Recycled Paper

Reply from the Office of the Minister for Communication and the Arts to a letter from the Croatian community in which we complain that a Yugoslavian who does not know the Croatian language was chosen for the position of SBS Croatian program head.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Vanda Boras Podravac comes from an old Senj family. She was born in Otočac on July 27, 1930. She attended school until the middle of the fifth grade of the high school in Senj, when the KPJ (Communist Party of Yugoslavia / Komunistička partija Jugoslavije) expelled her from schooling for a period of two years. Later she continued her education, but in the sixth grade this was again interrupted when she suffered further political persecution.

She left Croatia for Argentina in 1954, where she lived until 1961. In Argentina she married Milko Podravac from Virovitica, and in 1961 the Podravac family, which then consisted of four members, moved to Australia.

In Australia, she first lived in Sydney and worked for the famous publishing house Reader's Digest. The family moved to Canberra in 1968, and still lives there today. In Canberra she worked in the civil service until her retirement in 1989. At the University of Canberra, she studied Social Sciences as a part-time student and graduated with a degree in sociology and administration.

After her arrival in Canberra, Vanda became involved in advancing the interests of the Croatian community. She held various roles within the community and also within broader Australian community organisations until 1996, when her husband, Milko, passed away. Today she is a member of the Board of the Croatian Retirement Village and is one of the founders of this organisation.

Three of her children live in Canberra along with their families, and one daughter lives with her family in Nelson Bay, 400km from Canberra.

Every year, during the Australian winter and Croatian summer, she regularly resides in Senj, in her apartment bought for that purpose ten years ago.

The author is exceptionally proud of her role in the story that can perhaps be better retitled as 'How did Croats in Australia break down the stigma of 'helpless immigrant'

in the late seventies of the twentieth century?' The Croatian community in Australia, especially in the Australian Capital – Canberra, realised outstanding achievements in affirming ethnic rights thanks to the Liberal Government of Malcolm Fraser (1978), which accepted more than 50 recommendations by Frank Galbally on the status of immigrants. Major Galbally's proposals to the Government were: the equality of all migrant ethnic groups within Australian society; the introduction of a new television channel (SBS) and radio programs for these newcomers; ethnic schools in communities promoting the language of these immigrants etc. After the Australian Government adopted the Galbally Report at the beginning of the 1980s, the status of Croatians in Australia was even better, with the author taking on the role of Vice President of the Council of Ethnic Communities.

The author was active in the Australian Croatian community in the following societies and projects: Croatian Women's Association – President 1977 to 1983 and 1990 to 1993; Croatian Community Committee – spokesperson, secretary 1980 to 1992; Croatian Retirement Village, a retirement home – one of the founders in 1989, as well as a member of the Management Board from 1989 until today.

Outside the Croatian community, the author participated in the work of wider Australian community organisations: Ethnic Communities' Council – ACT, member since 1980, vice-president from 1982 to 1992; Commonwealth/State Task Force on Women of Non-English Speaking Backgrounds, (a Working Group tasked with looking at issues faced by women who are not of an English-speaking background) from 1982 to 1992; Management Committee of the Migrant Resource Centre Inc. (a body that provides assistance to immigrants), from 1983 to 1986; Legal Aid Review Committee, (forum for resolving legal assistance matters) member from 1982 to 1991; Women's Committee of the Ethnic Communities' Council of the ACT, (forum for giving a voice to women within migrant communities) Chair of the Committee from 1982 to 1992; Community Employment Program, (program for promoting employment through community projects) from 1983 to 1986; Management Committee of the Adult Migrant Education Program, (Committee for issues in relation to training of adult migrants), member from 1983 to 1986; ACT Women's Consultative Council, (consultative forum for women of the ACT), member from 1982 to 1986.

The author, Vanda Boras Podravac, along with several other Croatian community figures, received the Australian Medal of the Order of Australia in recognition of her work.



## DISCUSSION

A respected Croatian from Australia, Vanda Boras Podravac, has enriched the historical literature of Croatian emigration after the Second World War with an interesting, sincerely written, reliable and exhaustive book of autobiographical character, titled *A Diary from the Croatian Diaspora*, with the subtitle *The Suffering of the Croatian People in the 20th Century, Viewed through the Prism of a Croatian Family*. The subtitle brings home the hardships and tragedies of Croatian emigration because it tells the story of the destiny of a real family. Thus, through showing the journey of her family, Mrs. Boras Podravac rightly wants to highlight that there have been hundreds of thousands of expelled and refugee Croatian families from her home country who would have similar stories to tell. The author simply says, "I tried to show all that we experienced in the homeland and abroad during these 45 years of our calvary in the twentieth century. Little was known of this, and even less recorded".

The perspective from which the author approaches this Croatian historical phenomenon is personal and written in first person form. This is what makes this story rightfully subjective, emotional and documentary at the same time. As I had the opportunity to get to know the author as a respected and highly regarded member of the Croatian ethnic community in Australia during the visit to that country as a parliamentarian in 1990 and 1991, I would like to point out that this is a person who has succeeded in achieving several of her visions in the world. Firstly, the vision of a worthy life in political terms, including within the community life of a Western democracy while in a minority community, but also of Australian society as a whole. The second vision our author achieved was a harmonious and existential, happy family life in which her children grew up and became educated, prominent Australian citizens and professionals, preserving Croatian historical integrity and a knowledge of their mother tongue. And as a third vision, I would suggest Mrs. Boras Podravac's achievement of raising four children, while also attaining education to the level of university degree as well as professional success. Consequently, our author and her family fall into the happier spectrum of the Croatian diaspora. Many Croatian emigrants have foundered in their new homeland, becoming disillusioned, lonely and depressed, with fallen ideals and surviving on the edge of existence. I have met such compatriots and can sympathise with their destiny.

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The perspective from which the author approaches this Croatian historical phenomenon is personal and written in first person form. This is what makes this story rightfully subjective, emotional and documentary at the same time. As I had the opportunity to get to know the author as a respected and highly regarded member of the Croatian ethnic community in Australia during the visit to that country as a parliamentarian in 1990 and 1991, I would like to point out that this is a person who has succeeded in achieving several of her visions in the world. Firstly, the vision of a worthy life in political terms, including within the community life of a Western democracy while in a minority community, but also of Australian society as a whole. The second vision our author achieved was a harmonious and existential, happy family life in which her children grew up and became educated, prominent Australian citizens and professionals, preserving Croatian historical integrity and a knowledge of their mother tongue. And as a third vision, I would suggest Mrs. Boras Podravac's achievement of raising four children, while also attaining education to the level of university degree as well as professional success. Consequently, our author and her family fall into the happier spectrum of the Croatian diaspora. Many Croatian emigrants have foundered in their new homeland, becoming disillusioned, lonely and depressed, with fallen ideals and surviving on the edge of existence. I have met such compatriots and can sympathise with their destiny.

The life journey of Mrs. Boras Podravac is impressive, as is the history of her family in Croatia. It is the history of suffering, discrimination, carnage, persecution, and fleeing to foreign lands. And all this for one reason (today so understandable) – and this is national consciousness and the desire to live in a free state. In that regard this book reflects the story of all liberated Croats who fled Yugoslavia.

Readers certainly know that during the 20th century Croatia was part of four different states (Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Kingdom of Yugoslavia puppet Independent State of Croatia, Socialist Yugoslavia and Independent Republic of Croatia) and three economic-political systems (constitutional monarchy, socialist federation, parliamentary democracy), all of which contributed to the permanent instability in social cohesion and the incompleteness of modernisation processes in all areas of life, as well as to emigrations from the region. In this sense, the history of Croatia is one of discontinuity and the effort to overcome these discontinuities, and to reconcile, on the foundations of the Homeland War (1991-1995), a unified Croatian people that includes emigrants.

Despite the instability and fundamental social challenges they faced, the perseverance and adaptability of our people both in the homeland and in the Croatian ethnic communities around the world have impressively been able to bridge the fractures and significant social paradigms. Indeed, Croatian emigration promotes cultural richness – for both the emigrant, i.e., the exile, and for their new home in the free world, in other words, the nations in which our emigrants contributed to cultural development across the world.

The book *A Diary from Croatian Diaspora / Struggle of the Croatian People in the 20th Century, viewed through the prism of a Croatian family* by Vanda Boras Podravac, is a memoir that chronologically follows the fate of the Boras and Podravac families and then the author herself. The book is divided into eleven chapters that are, in fact, eleven life stages. These are: I. Life in the Homeland, II. The harsh reality of persecution, III. The final destination Argentina, IV. Emigration Second Time, V. Beginning in the New Homeland of Australia, VI. Duties and work of organizations in the Croatian community, VII. Work of the Croatian Community in Australia, VIII. The biggest protest ever held in Australia, IX. Dr. Franjo Tudman opens up the Croatian Embassy in Australia, X. Australia's Honor to Croats and XI. The end of a difficult journey.

Vanda Boras Podravac's *Diary* begins by essentially defining the emigrant's destiny, which she calls 'wandering' – *my interpretation of this wandering is deciding how to find a better life for herself and her family*. I think the definition is too narrow because the entire book attests not only to the search for a better life, but also the search for free-



*dom*, especially in a national sense, including all forms of human freedoms and rights, not just at the individual level, but also as a people. This is subsequently confirmed by the author's description of the *price she had to pay – clearly an enormous loss – the loss of family and home, and the requirement to adapt to a new environment, while simultaneously living across two cultures while never really belonging to either*. So, it is a big sacrifice, at a high personal cost, which included:

1. *Adapting to a new environment*, which means a complex process of acculturation, integration and ultimately – assimilation into the Australian multiethnic community without losing the national self-identification or forgetting the mother tongue – of the Croatian language.

2. *Simultaneously living across two cultures*, which is a difficult goal, achieved only by persistent, aware and judicious people. This includes biculturalism and irregular bilingualism. I met many ageing Croatians in Australia who had not been successful in going through the inculturation process. In terms of language, they functioned through double bilingualism.

3. *Loss of the homeland as the core of our essence*, as the cognitive reality that defines us emotionally, culturally and historically as civilised and historically rooted individuals. Under the communist regime this translated into exile and bans on visits to the homeland, which, over time, for emigrants in the *diaspora*, grew ever more *distant*, ever more *beautiful* and ever more *unreal*. As the years passed, unrelenting, one after the other, it also meant the end of direct contact with the closest members of the family. For example, the author describes how her husband, as an old man, finally visits a free Croatia and meets his own sister whom he left behind in his homeland as a four-year-old child and could not visit for almost fifty years. He returns to his family in Australia and under the weight of the historic baggage – he dies. Our author and her husband, in fact, all the members of the Boras / Podravac family apart from children, are victims of communist violence, a national Croatian tragedy. The children are fortunate! Born in free countries, educated at high schools, raised in a state of high democratic values, living standards and potential for achievement, will not have to endure (or even be aware of) the terrible trials and suffering which their parents and their family members went through on both their mother's and father's side.

A Croatian refugee, a brave young lady, wife and mother becomes a university-educated Australian, with the promise of new horizons ahead. But she has never forgotten her Croats. What's more! She is proud to point out which Croatian society she was active in!

The struggle for recognition of Croatian ethnic identity in Australia was not easy. The country recognised Yugoslavia, and through its diplomatic and domestic Serbian

networks Croats were stigmatised as fascists, with no recognition of their right to their own mother tongue, or their own ethnicity. Vanda fled from an anti-Croatian regime only to be confronted by the same in *the free world*. Not until 1980 did Croats have the right to call their mother tongue by its real name.

When the 1990s arrived, along with aggression against the Republic of Croatia and the Homeland War, Vanda became involved in a two-pronged approach to aiding the struggle: by organizing material assistance and by pressuring the Australian Government to recognise the independence of the Republic of Croatia.

About that she wrote. *We were persistent in our demand to have Croatia's recognition by Australia. A community subcommittee was established, with the aim to contact Australian parliamentarians and all embassies that could eventually help us in our demand for recognition of Croatia. We tried to arrange meetings, with local politicians, to have Australian Government recognition, but the government was waiting instead, to see what the reaction of other countries was. Some politicians were interested in our case, and among them, who were helping us were Senator Brian Harradine from Tasmania and Paul Filting from Perth. A number of parliamentarians established a group with their colleagues and gave it the name "Parliamentarians for Croatia and Slovenia Recognition".*

The day finally arrived when the Republic of Croatia received international recognition. Australia had a new Croatian Ambassador. The grand building of the Embassy of the Republic of Croatia was built with love and pride in Canberra by the Croatian community. On June 21, 1995, the Embassy was personally opened by the first President of the Republic of Croatia, Dr. Franjo Tudman.

Mrs. Boras Podravac has a high standing in Australia. In recognition, she was awarded *the Medal of the Order of Australia*, conferred by Queen Elizabeth II, in recognition of outstanding achievement and service. The award has also been conferred upon the following Croats: Dr. Konstantin Bosnić, Dr. Tomislav Gavranić, Frank Hesman, Nedjeljko Marunčić, Vinko Romanik, Ljerka Drapač, Michael Furjanić and Milan Karamarko.

Finally, I would like to emphasise that the book Vanda Boras Podravac wrote, is presented in nice and straightforward language. Her thoughts are smooth and mellow, and the writing style is a blend of epistolary prose and memoir. The book's greatness is in its historical dimension because it is an authentic testimony that goes beyond the story of any one individual or family, representing instead the paradigm of the Croatian people in one tragic time in history.

By Đuro Vidmarović



## SUMMARY IN CROATIAN

Vanda Boras Podravac: *Dnevnik iz tudine / Stradanja hrvatskog naroda u XX. stoljeću gledana kroz prizmu jedne hrvatske obitelji*, Hrvatska matica iseljenika, Zagreb, 2010.

Vanda Boras Podravac: *A Diary from the Croatian Diaspora / The Suffering of the Croatian People in the 20th Century as Seen Through the Prism of One Croatian Family*, Croatian Heritage Foundation, Zagreb, 2018

Autentično svjedočanstvo hrvatske emigrantkinje XX. stoljeća Senjkinje Vande Boras Podravac (1930.) dojmjliva je priča o stradanjima hrvatskoga naroda i prilagodbi životu u novim sredinama, od Buenos Airesa do Canberre.

Rastanak s najmilijima 1954., život u progonstvu, roditeljstvo daleko od zavičaja, borba za etnička prava Hrvata u domicilnim multietničkim društvima svijeta 60-ih i 70-ih godina prošloga stoljeća, sudjelovanje hrvatskoga iseljenništva u ostvarenju sna o neovisnosti Hrvatske 90-ih, prvi posjet oslobođenoj domovini nakon 38 godina progonstva tek su neke teme zabilježene u *Dnevniku iz tudine* ove hrabre majke četvero djece.

Autorica, sociologinja i aktivistica civilnih udruga Hrvatske zajednice u Australiji, nastoji postići dokumentarističku uvjerljivost emigrantskih pustolovina koje su iza 'željezne zavjese' ostavljale jedan nepravedan svijet, a uvodile nju i njezinu obitelj u svijet novih izazova na drugim meridijanima, s nizom drukčijih prepreka poput jezičnih barijera ili pak kulturoloških razlika u stilu života.

Autorica nastoji svojim radnim angažmanom, i uključivanjem supruge i djece u institucije nove sredine, postići nužnu adaptaciju i bijeg iz iracionalnih i traumatiziranih izbjegličkih stanja u koordinate stvarnosti, što joj srećom i uspijeva.

Za svoj rad autorica je primila odličje Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM).

Međutim, često je u svojem imaginarnom svijetu! Hrvatska je s njom kao misao i san, ali i kao unutarnja snaga koju Vanda objavljivanjem ovoga *Dnevnika iz tudine* i na hrvatskome (2010.) i na engleskome jeziku (2018.) nastoji prenijeti svojim unucima koji odrastaju u blagostanju, sretni i zdravi, u Australiji.

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## Cover

- Senj, Croatia, Nehaj – A mighty fortress above Senj, raised in 1558 by Captain Ivan Lenković in the face of Ottoman incursions
- Rijeka – An overseas ship leaves the major port of departure for Croatian emigrants in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (photo credit: Museum of the City of Rijeka)
- Sydney, Australia, Harbour Bridge

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This authentic testimony by Vanda Boras Podr...  
tive of Senj and a twentieth century Croatian...  
touching story of the suffering of the Croatian...  
to life in new and distant worlds, from Buenos Aires to Canberra. Separation  
from those dearest to her in 1954, a life in exile, parenthood far from her native  
home, the struggle for the ethnic rights of Croats in the multi-ethnic soci-  
eties of the 1960s and 1970s, the participation of the Croatian emigrant com-  
munities in achieving the dream of Croatian independence in the 1990s and  
the first visit to the liberated homeland after 38 years of exile are just a few of  
the themes recorded in *A Diary from the Croatian Diaspora* by this courageous  
mother of four. The author, a sociologist and an activist in Croatian associations  
in Australia, tellingly documents her emigrant adventure, that saw her leave an  
unjust world behind the Iron Curtain and bring her family into a world of new  
challenges on many fronts, facing a number of different obstacles such as the  
language barrier, and cultural and lifestyle differences. Through her work and  
the involvement of her husband and children, navigating the challenges of her  
new life, the author endeavours to leave behind the trauma of being a displaced  
refugee and to make the successful transition into a new life, in which she hap-  
pily succeeds. In recognition of her work, the author was awarded *The Medal  
of The Order of Australia (OAM)*. In her imagination, however, Vanda is often  
back in her homeland - Croatia is with her as a concept and a dream, and as a  
source of internal strength which she, through the publication of *A Diary from  
the Croatian Diaspora*, aspires to pass on to her grandchildren, growing up in  
prosperity — happy and healthy — in Australia.



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