

THE CROATIAN EMIGRATION TO SOUTH-AMERICA

BÉLA SOLTÉSZ

As from almost all East European countries, lots of people from Croatia emigrated to overseas seeking refuge from the tempests of history in the 20th century. However, as compared to the other East European nations, the speciality of the Croatian emigration was that for a long time the main destination was not the United States, but South America, especially Chile and Argentina. In Hungary it is a lesser-known fact that our southern neighbour maintains close bilateral relations with some South American countries, in which about 700.000 Croatian descendants live altogether. In some towns like Punta Arenas which lies on the coast of the Strait of Magellan, or like Antofagasta which is located on the edge of the Atacama Desert, Croatian family names on shop signs or the arms of Croatia on the walls of restaurants and hotels have been an everyday sight since then. The following essay undertakes to shortly present the history of the development of the South American Croatian diaspora, as well as its most prominent figures and its considerable significance in foreign and home policies.

Key words: Croatia, South America, Argentina, Chile, emigration, diaspora, diaspora policy.

The development and characteristics of the Croatian diaspora in South America

The literature specialized on international migration generally divide the motives of migration into push and pull factors. The former include the problems of the country of origin, i. e. the circumstances which urge a group of the population to leave the country. The latter are made up of the opportunities of the target country, the ones which the migrants are informed of before the migrational decision, and which help them to decide to emigrate right to that given country and not to elsewhere. Besides all these, an important role is also played by the networks, that is the channels which forward the information to the future migrants, then get these migrants to their destination. These networks are the emigrational agencies and the bonds of family and friendship between the migrants (Massey et al 2001).

In the case of the Croatian emigration the pull factors had played the main role up to the end of the 19th century, and almost solely the Dalmatian seamen were affected. Taken on Spanish ships, enthusiastic about the fabulous news coming from the New World they arrived to South America in the hope of getting rich quickly. However, their number was negligible, and only a few of their names were taken down by history. The other group which arrived to South America from the area of today's Croatia, emerged from the members of different Catholic orders – especially from the Jesuits. They were not attracted to the overseas by getting rich but by the glory of the conversion of the American Indians. The first significant figure of the South American Croatian diaspora was an 18th century Jesuit, Nikola Plantić from Zagreb, who got to the Jesuitical University of Córdoba, teaching Logic. According to some legends Plantić was crowned as „King of Paraguay”, but this has no historical base. In the 1760s the Jesuits indeed founded a self-governing state from the guaraní Indian missions in the area of today's Paraguay, but according to the researches Plantić had never been there. In spite of this, the legend of the „Croatian King of Paraguay” has become quite widespread among the Croatian people of South America (Zubrinić 1995). Similarly excellent members of the early emigration, the Buratović brothers coming from the Hvar Island, laid hands on an enormous wealth as building contractors in the 1860s, due to the Argentinian railway construction boom beginning at that time.

The situation changed in the very end of the 19th century, when numerous push factors appeared, urging the Croatians to leave their homeland. In the 1860s a phylloxera epidemic swept through the Dalmatian coastal region, and as a consequence of this, a significant part of the farmers remained without a secure job. An Austrian-Italian contract was also responsible for the collapse of the Dalmatian oenology, providing free access for Italian wine to the market of the Monarchy, at the expense of the Dalmatian wine. Parallel to all of these, Argentina and Chile sent emigrational agents to Europe, to look for European farmers for their sparsely populated, remote regions. Thus the emigration of the Croatians – again primarily the Dalmatians, especially the inhabitants of the island of Brač – to South America began. The estimation of the exact number of emigration is hindered, because in the official documents of the time the Croatians appear under the most different names, according to their original citizenship or the internal nomenclature of the immigration organizations. Immigrants with Croatian family names appear for example under the expression „Austrian”, „Hungarian”, „Yugoslavian”, „Slavonic” and „Dalmatian” as well, probably about 100-150.000 Croatian arrived to South America altogether. The Croatian historical science calls them „old emigrants” (staro iseljeničtvo) (Hrvatski Migracije 2007).

On the other hand, the third wave of emigration is well-documented, the number can be put at about 40.000, and the main part of them arrived to South America, predominantly to Argentina, after the Second World War, because of political reasons. At the times of the fall of the Ustaša state South America was not at all such an attractive destination anymore like it had been during the First World War, however the push factors stimulating the emigration, as a matter of course, were strong enough for the people incriminated in the fallen régime, to depart readily to any country which was willing to receive them. That was the way how Ante Pavelić poglavnik, leader of the Ustaše and his 35.000 followers got to Argentina in second half of the 1940s. They were granted political asylum in the South American country by the approval of Argentinian president Juan Domingo Perón (just like some German war criminals like Adolf Eichmann and Josef Mengele). In the Yugoslavian political common talk they got the name „anti-Yugoslavian emigrants” (jugoslavenska neprijateljska emigracija), while the members of the group considered themselves political refugees (Soltys 1998, Ragazzi 2009).

Therefore the three emigratory waves enriched the otherwise colourful ethnical composition of the South American continent with different numbered and differently motivated Croatian population. Nowadays the estimations on the numbers of the Croatian descendants are the following:

1st chart: Estimated number of Croatian descendants in South America

Chile	380.000
Argentina	250.000
Brazil	45.000
Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela and others	25.000
<i>South America altogether</i>	<i>700.000</i>

Source: <http://hrvatskimigracije.es.tl/Diaspora-Croata.htm>

In Chile 2.4% of the population, approximately 380.000 people have Croatian ascendants, and in two regions – Antofagasta and Magallanes – this ratio reaches 5%. According to these data the world's third largest Croatian community lives in Chile – after Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina¹ -, however it should not be forgotten that in the case of the umpteenth generational diaspora the Croatian origin is not accompanied by the knowledge of the Croatian language, neither by primarily Croatian identity, as it shall be supported by examples shown below. In the following I shall present the main social economic features of the three largest Croatian colonies in South America – respectively Chile, Argentina and Brazil –, and also the political events polarizing the colony in the case of Argentina.

¹ According to some data, some more, approximately 400.000 Croatian descendants live in the United States.

Croatian people in Chile, Argentina and Brazil

Franjo Blazević, former Croatian ambassador in Santiago – as well as a Croatian emigrant grown up in South America – explained the history of the rise of the Croatian in Chile with the following reasons: there were no middle layers in the sparsely populated, marginally situated regions (Antofagasta and Magallanes), only a few very rich families, and a lot of poor one. The Croatian – overwhelmingly Dalmatian – immigrants fit in between these two social layers as merchants, due to which they became the main beneficiaries of the economic upswing. In Antofagasta the mining industry, and in Magallanes the sheep-farming became the most important sectors of the economy, while the Croatians made a significant profit out of both the luxury consumption of the rich and the ordinary consumer goods of the poor. Then the children of these upwardly mobile Croatian families went on to Santiago to study in the best universities of the country, and many settled down in the capital. That was the way how such an interesting situation developed that although the ancestors of today's Croatian community in Santiago four or five generations earlier lived in the same place, in Dalmatia – primarily in the island of Brač –, during the intermediate period in the first half of the 20th century the ancestors of one part of the community lived in the hot, desert Antofagasta, while the others lived in the cold, windy Magallanes (Boric 1978, Vrljicak 2007).

In the area of the North Chilean Antofagasta, the rise of the mining of saltpetre and copper let a lot of practical mine-owners get huge fortunes. Several Croatian emigrants arriving at the region destitutely, came up to the circles of the richest of Chile, for example Francisco Petrinovic coming from the island of Brač, or Pascual Baburica from Dubrovnik. The latter became well-known as an excellent philanthropist, noted for founding the Museum of Fine Arts in Chile. While in the north mines were the source of wealth, in the region of the Strait of Magellan in South Chile the export of wool and meat made the pasture owners rich, many of them being Croatian, like the Kusanovic brothers, Vicente and Antonio (Boric 1978, Martinic 2009). Their descendants have played an important role in the political and economic life of South Chile: at present the governor's office in the province of Magallanes is fulfilled by one of their descendants, Liliana Kusanovic. People of Croatian descent also play a prominent part in the cultural life of Chile, their most famous representative is the Premio Iberoamericano-awarded writer, Antonio Skármeta Vranicic, born in Antofagasta, not to mention the also remarkable, recognized linguist Cedomil Goic and the sculptor Lily Garafulis as well.

The Croatian presence strikingly left its mark on the development of Punta Arenas, situated along the Strait of Magellan, where one half of the population spoke or understood the Croatian language between the two World Wars, and several Croatian cultural and sports clubs run in the town, for example the Hrvatski Sokol (Martinic 2009). However, from the 1950s onwards, the Croatian character of the town and the Magallanes region gradually faded. Nevertheless, a 2000/2001 research of Marto Bartinevic, a Croatian descendant from Magallanes, gives an account of the drastic decrease of Croatian family names. In accordance with name-giving traditions of the Spanish speaking countries, the newborns are registered with two family names in Chile as well: the child gets both the father's and the mother's first family name. Thus on the basis of the birth register data the nationality of the ascendants can be traced back to one generation earlier (like in the case of Edmundo Pérez Zujovic, secretary of home affairs in the Christian Democratic Frei-government in the 1960s, being Croatian on his mother's side). During the analysis of the register of Magallanes' telephone directory Barticevic came to the conclusion that while in 1975 16.79% of the telephone subscribers in Magallanes had at least one Croatian originated family name (either on the father's or the mother's side), this decreased to 4.85% to 2000. The reasons for this are the inner migration and the large number of mixed marriages, and also a social economic feature, which distorted the 1975 values – namely the fact that primarily those Croatians who belonged to the more wealthy part of the population owned a telephone in a larger extent in the times when this was a privilege of only a few people. A further interesting information is that Croatian first names have become quite rare (in 2000 only 81 out of 20.269 subscribers), which suggests that the Croatian identity has been prevailed by the Chilean – since at present parents choose almost only Spanish first names for their children. Generally speaking it can be said that 5% of the people living near the Strait of Magellan have „Croatian blood flowing in their veins”, however this is not accompanied by primary Croatian identity anymore (Barticevic 2001).

The effect of the Croatian emigration in South America on majority society was the greatest in Chile, within that in the regions of Antofagasta and Magallanes, because due to the low number of popularity and the opportunities to rise offered by the economic boom, the Croatian community became a determinative participant of the local society considering both its proportion and its economic power. On the other hand in Argentina – although the total number of Croatian people in Argentina reached the two-third of the number of them in Chile – as a consequence of the country's larger area, population and economic power, the Croatian presence has not become stressed. Moreover, in contrast with the Chilean Croatians, the Argentinian ones did not settle down in the sparsely populated areas of the country, but in Buenos Aires, thus the colony was populous and prospering, their number and effect paled beside the huge capital's other – Italian, Spanish, German etc. – communities.

After the Second World War President Perón plunged the Croatian colony into fatal political division with his formerly mentioned decision. During the war the part of the approximately 100.000 Argentinian Croatians, which was actively interested in the mother-country's political situation, mostly sympathized with Vladimir Maček of the peasants' party. However, between 1945 and 1948 35.000 former ustaše and supporter arrived into the country, led by Ante Pavelić. Until 1948 Pavelić hid in a Jesuit monastery in Italy, then with the help of Krunoslav Draganović, a Croatian monk, he got a fake red-cross passport – made out for the name of a fictitious Hungarian citizen, Pál Aranyos –, with which he managed to depart to Argentina. From 1948 to 1957 Pavelić lived in Buenos Aires first under the name of Pablo Aranyos, then Antonio Sedar. In the beginning he was compelled to work as an unskilled labourer, however by means of his relations he quickly became the owner of a building enterprise. From 1950 Pavelić was the leader of the self-founded Party of the Croatian Statehood in Buenos Aires, which called itself a Croatian emigrant government, in spite of the fact that its activity was not supported even by most part of the former ustaše living in Argentina. The final split took place in 1956, when the emigrant ustaše movements founded the Croatian Liberation Movement throughout the world, against Pavelić. Moreover, after the fall of Perón they started the revision of the political asylum of the war criminals living in Argentina, and Pavelić was shot in the back in 1957 by unknown assailants. Probably the Yugoslavian secret service was the one who wanted to kill the former ustaše leader. Pavelić survived the attack, but decided to leave Argentina. Secretly he moved to Spain which was ruled by Francisco Franco at that time, and that was the place where he died two years later as a consequence of complications of his injury (Soltys, 1998).

The political and cultural activeness of the Croatian community was weaker than in Chile, because of the former ustaše – peasants' party fracture line – the Croatian descendants acquiring fame did not have strong Croatian identity. Today the number of Argentinians of Croatian origin is about 250.000, one of their most outstanding representative was Néstor Kirchner Ostoic, the former Argentinian president who died last year, and had German origin on the father's side, and Croatian origin on the mother's side (Hrvatski Migracije 2007).

In comparison with Chile and Argentina, much lesser Croatian people arrived to Brazil, and they quickly spread as well throughout the enormous country. Similarly to the former two cases, the Croatians emigrated here in several waves, and because of this the diaspora was fragmented not just because of territorial, but of economic and political aspects as well. On the other hand with regards to their qualifications and professions, most of the Croatian emigrants showed similar features, they were farmers or craftsmen, so in many cases they became each other's competitors in the labour market. All these circumstances speeded up the assimilation – so in Brazil the approximately 30-50 thousand Croatian descendants have not formed such a noticeable community like in the case of Argentina, and especially of Chile. Smaller Croatian groups arrived to Uruguay and Peru as well, but similarly to Brazil, they quickly assimilated into the majority society (Hrvatski Migracije 2007).

The diaspora and today's Croatia

In the Yugoslavian times the official policy did not care much about the South American Croatians, moreover they definitely looked hostilely at the anti-Yugoslavian Croatians from Argentina. However in the eighties, as the Croatian independence efforts strengthened, the role of the diaspora as a prospective material and political supporter community became more important. In 1987, visiting the Croatian emigrants in Western Europe, Franco Tudjman created the concept of „Foreign Croatia” (Iseljena Hrvatska), i.e. an „imaginary community”, which forms – together with „Home Croatia” (Domovinska Hrvatska) – the Croatian nation ranging all the five continents. During the Yugoslav Wars the Croatian diaspora became the main mediator of the Croatian issue all over the world, and in return the government made several political gestures towards them. In 1991 it was enacted that everybody who was able to justify his or her Croatian descent in some way, had the right to get Croatian citizenship and passport. Croatians living abroad could vote on the elections – predominantly supporters of HDZ² –, and in the Croatian governmental structure the diaspora has been dealt with two times on the level of a separate minister department, although both ministries had short lives (in 1991, and between 1997 and 1999 a department of emigration affairs existed) (Ragazzi 2009).

However, in respect of the emigrant Croatians' personal, economic and political relations towards Croatia, significant differences show up between the Croatians from Bosnia and Herzegovina forming the „diaspora's” predominant part and the Croatians living overseas. Almost 90% of the Croatians living abroad who vote on the elections, live in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while only a very little part of the North and South American Croatians practise their right to vote. Similarly, the governmental steps encouraging repatriation or enterprises and investments have not reached big effects either among the Croatians overseas. This is not surprising: the relationship between the North and South American Croatians and Croatia is now only symbolic because of the geographical and temporal distance (Ragazzi 2009). In the cases of communities like these, diaspora policy has mobilizing force only in identical and cultural questions: if there are no real contacts, the influence of the diaspora on the everyday of the mother-country is insignificant (Sheffer 2003).

Therefore behind the governmental activeness towards the Croatians living abroad (although it rhetorically referred to Croatians living in all parts of the world) there was actually the ambition of the HDZ to gain significant advantage on the parliamentary elections with the votes of the Croatians from Bosnia and Herzegovina (Ragazzi 2009). The Croatians overseas did not feel too much from this: to them the real changes compared to the governmental passiveness of the Yugoslavian times were primarily the reanimation of the Croatian cultural foreign policy, the bilateral cultural relations, language courses, book editions and study tours. The most important organ of communication with the diaspora is the Croatian Heritage Foundation (Hrvatska Matica Iseljenika), which makes efforts to strengthen the Croatian identity among the members of the diaspora with the activities listed above (Matis 2011).

Compared to the Hungarian diaspora policy, Croatia endeavours to maintain the relationship and to get even more closely bound up with the South American emigration with a much more vivid cultural foreign policy. Besides the differences between the two countries' histories, the reason for this is that the South American Croatian emigration is much more populous than the Hungarian (former about 700.000, latter about 200.000), and in some special geographical regions (in Chile the Antofagasta and Magallanes regions) large colonies formed with significant economic power, while in the case of the Hungarian diaspora a similar phenomenon did not take place. Thus the activeness directed at the South American countries is a specific and less known characteristic of the Croatian cultural foreign policy, and due to the opinion-forming effect of the diaspora this activeness is – although its economic projection is negligible – suitable for our southern neighbour to get remarkable political advantages in its relations towards the countries of the South American continent.

² Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica (Croatian Democratic Union), conservative-christian democratic people's party, has been in power since 1990, with only one interruption (2000-2003)

References

(Date of retrieval of internet sources: 14 April, 2011.)

Barticevic, Marco (2001): Vigencia de la inmigración croata en Magallanes de hace un siglo. <http://www.monografias.com/trabajos15/croatas-chile/croatas-chile.shtml>

Boric, Ivo (1978): Emigración croata a Chile. *Studia Croatica*, 1978/70-71, 141-150. o., interneten elérhető a <http://www.bradanovic.cl/emi1.html> oldalon.

Hrvatski Migracije (2007): La diaspora croata. <http://hrvatskimigracije.es.tl/Diaspora-Croata.htm>

Martinic, Mateo (2009): Vicente Kusanović. Pionero colonizador recuerdo de sus reveses fundarios. In *Magallania* (Chile), 2009. Vol. 37(2): 205-226.o., http://www.scielo.cl/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0718-22442009000200013&lng=pt&nrm=iso oldalon.

Massey, Douglas S. et al. (2001): A nemzetközi migráció elméletei: áttekintés és értékelés. In: Sik Endre (ed.) (2001): *A migráció szociológiája. * Budapest*, Szociális és Családügyi Minisztérium. (**The sociology of migration*)

Matis - Croatian Heritage Foundation (Hrvatska Matica Iseljenika) (2011) www.matis.hr

Ragazzi, Francesco (2009): The Invention of the Croatian Diaspora: Unpacking the Politics of “Diaspora” During the War in Yugoslavia. *Global Migration and Transnational Politics Working Paper no. 10*, November 2009. http://cgs.gmu.edu/publications/gmtpwp/gmtp_wp_10.pdf

Sheffer, Gabriel (2003): *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Soltys, Michael (1998): A different kind of multinational. *Immigrants to Argentina from Eastern Europe*. Buenos Aires Herald 1998, http://www.casahistoria.net/easteurope.htm#Croatian_Immigrants_to_Argentina

Vrljicak, Carmen (2007): Congreso Mundial Croata – Los croatas de Chile. <http://hrvatskimigracije.es.tl/Congreso-Mundial-Croata.htm?PHPSESSID=9dfe7120e64e61da5c184f9007dcb61e>

Zubrinić, Darko (1995): Croatian Humanists, Ecumenists, Latinists, and Encyclopaedists. *Croatian History* <http://www.croatianhistory.net/etf/lat.html>

*

Translated by Zsuzsanna Lukács

*

www.southeast-europe.org
see@southeast-europe.org