

CHAPTER FIVE: EASTERN EUROPEAN POLITICS: THE LEGACY OF CROATIAN GARDENS IN AUSTRALIA.

*And as a Croat I am brother of all men,
And where I go Croatia is with me.*¹

Drago Ivanisevic, Croatian poet.¹

Croatians in Australia bring a heritage of political commitment in the form of strong ties to their landscape and their cultural practices. They have a deep affiliation with their land where many Croatians, who leave their homeland, maintain the custom of taking some of the soil inherited from their ancestors and keeping it close to them until it becomes the soil of their graves.²

The turbulent political history of 20th century Croatia has contributed to a Croatian presence in Australia. Croatia's history is one which has been long dominated by political unrest. Although the late 20th century has witnessed a tragic war in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the states adjoining Croatia, it can be said that Croatia has always been involved in a struggle between Eastern and Western Empires and States. From the 14th century on Croatia has been the focus of conflict, whether it has been resisting the Ottoman Empire from the 15th to the 18th century or the Venetian expansion up to the end of the 18th century or struggling for independence from the Hapsburgs in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The history of Croatian migration to Australia long precedes the 20th century political issues. Early migrants were drawn to Australia by the stories of gold in the 1850s. A number of Austrian frigates had visited Sydney and Western Australia in the second half of the 19th century manned by Croatian sailors who brought back colourful stories of wealth and adventure. Initially the migrants came to the goldfields in Victoria and Western Australia, but soon moved onto the land, establishing vineyards and the dried grape industry, as well as cherry orchards and market gardens on the edge of the cities. Croatians were also a strong presence in the cane fields of Northern Queensland by the turn of the century and in mining, particularly in Broken Hill

Generally Croatian migrants were economic emigrants but political refugees started to arrive in the second half on the 19th century because they were hostile to the Austro-Hungarian rule. This resulted in chain migration to Australia, which continued up to World War I. Most migrants came from Dalmatia and the Adriatic Islands.

Because many Croatians were interned in Australia during World War I, perceptions of Croatian politics in Australia were confused. In the 1920s, the Russian revolution and the new communist movements in Croatia, which was then part of Yugoslavia, had influenced a number of the migrants. As a result, they came to Australia with anti-monarchist and socialist ideas where they found similar attitudes amongst the miners in Broken Hill and on the cane fields in North Queensland. At this time Croatians were often labelled 'red'. Later, after World War II, many Croatian migrants were seen as anti-communist because of their reaction to the post war totalitarian governments of Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

Not all Croatians were political emigrants; many were wine growers who had been forced to give up their vineyards because of the 'wine clause' which allowed the

importation of cheap Italian wine in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This, together with the phylloxera infection in the vines, drove a number of Croats off the land. Many came to Australia in the 1880s and it was this group who established the successful Croatian vineyards in Victoria and Western Australia.

After World War I the economic and political conditions in the new kingdoms of Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia deteriorated. The effect of the depression on the Croatian economy was severe because the country had a predominantly agricultural base consisting of a high proportion of sub-marginal peasant farms of less than two hectares. Not only were such farms commercially non-viable, they were not even able to supply a subsistence for a family. This, coupled with the political unrest of the 1930s, prompted many to migrate, some of whom came to Australia and established market gardens specialising in glass house tomatoes in areas of Sydney.

During World War II, Eastern Europe was in turmoil, out of which emerged Tito's non-aligned communist state of Yugoslavia. Many Croats became 'Displaced Persons' in this struggle. In post war Australia, the new migration program was being floated and displaced people from Eastern Europe were considered to be highly appropriate migrants for Australia because they were seen as anti-communist.

The new wave of migrants re-vitalised the existing Croatian community in Australia members of whom were now aging. The new Croats formed numerous organisations to help the Croatian community including the establishment of a co-operative society of Croatian farmers in 1958. In Sydney the farmers' society purchased 112 hectares of land near Liverpool thus establishing a strong community of Croatian market gardeners in Western Sydney. There was also a Croatian market garden community on the Northern Beach Peninsula of Sydney.

The Croatian gardeners described in this chapter are examples of the different periods of Croatian migration but their gardens have strong similarities reflecting their Croatian heritage and way of life.

The Landscapes of Croatia

The Croatian landscape is the setting for romantic medieval cities such as Dubrovnik and Split. Croatia consists of three main landscapes: coastal landscapes, wide alluvial plains and a central chain of mountains dividing north from south. The coastal landscape is characteristic of much of Dalmatia and includes numerous coastal islands in the Adriatic Sea. The islands are rocky with dark green pines and occasional small wild orchids growing between rocky crevices; whereas on the mainland, the coast is characterised by towns with wide palm-lined promenades beside the sea. The towns consist of clusters of two to three storey houses decorated with colourful window boxes, often filled with geraniums when the climate is benign. Between the towns and villages, the coastal landscape consists of hills which are terraced and intensively cultivated. The neat rows of crops and vineyards are interspersed with scattered stands of columnar black pines, grey olive groves and winding avenues of light green Lombardy poplars. The coast of Dalmatia is a Mediterranean garden.

The second landscape is the wide flood plain in the north of Croatia which has been created by the rich delta of the Danube, Sava and Drava Rivers. This is very different

from the coast and is characteristic of Slavonia. The landscape is an intensively cultivated patchwork of small holdings where small streams, bordered by dense hedges, wind through the neat division of fields. Vineyards, orchards, fields and meadows, as well as tongues of forest, pattern the landscape. There is also an unusual banding pattern created by the vineyards and strips of cultivated areas which extend at right-angles across the open valley instead of along the contours.

The mountain landscape across the centre of Croatia contrasts strongly with the richly cultivated plains. On the lower slopes the plains give way to interlacing patterns of forest and cultivated lands gradually becoming more forested up the slopes with occasional small clearings for solitary homesteads. Inland the high limestone mountains become open karst landscapes of windswept alpine grasslands whereas where the mountains meet the sea on the Dalmatian coast, the landscape is harsh and rocky with stunted pines clinging to the rocks. Villages of stone houses and terraced rock walls look like medieval stone fortresses. These are the landscapes that Croatian migrants left behind when they came to the flat, largely arid Australian landscape. With such a long tradition of intense cultivation, it is not surprising that the Croatians who settled in Sydney sought out the few areas of rich soils.

***Croatian Gardens in the Warriewood Valley of Sydney.*³**

Although Sydney is renowned for its harbour surrounded by distinctive sandstone promontories and cliffs, there is also a band of rich clay soil derived from shales which encircles the sandstone. Many of the migrant groups settled in areas within this band of fertile soil. This was the case with the Croatians who settled in a particularly fertile valley on the northern beaches peninsula, known as the Warriewood Valley. From the 1960s to the 1980s this area was the focus of market gardens specialising in glass house grown tomatoes. Today the fertile valley is covered with carparks, large shopping complexes, wide highways and medium density housing. Scattered within this new urban development are large houses and gardens belonging to the former market gardeners from Croatia.

Their houses are second homes built from the wealth accumulated from the market gardens and their subsequent real estate value. Typically, they are 2-storeyed with ornamental brickwork, arched entries and tiled roofs. Most of the gardens are heavily planted with Cocos palms in the front garden, pencil pines evoking memories of Croatia along the side and a mix of tropical and Mediterranean fruit trees in the back. They frequently have shady paved terraces near the backs of the houses on one side of which are large brick barbecues sitting within a large brick arch, a Croatian modification. Apart from the pencil pines, perhaps the strongest evidence of the former Croatian garden is the proliferation of pots of orchids, plants which grow wild on the rocky landscapes of Croatia. Many of the gardeners have tried planting almond, chestnut and walnut but they have not thrived in the seaside location of Warriewood. Other fruit trees associated with Croatia have been more successful, particularly the peach and the plum. Also in some gardens there are aviaries which reflect the practice of keeping homing pigeons which is common in Croatia. Many of the large vegetable gardens have been replaced by lawn because the life style has changed for these Croatian families. In some cases the vegetable garden has been reduced to accommodate larger aviaries. One Croatian gardener in the area has one hundred budgerigars, as well as rosellas, wild duck, golden pheasant, peachface finches and a few chickens. Now the diminished vegetable gardens only grow

selected seasonal vegetables, as the new supermarkets which have encroached over the once fertile valley, supply a vast range of fruit and vegetables from global markets.

The Croatian gardens in the Warriewood valley reflect the success story of many migrant groups. These gardens reflect the relaxed lifestyle of Sydney's northern beaches as much as they reflect the memory of Croatia.

The Croatian Gardens in Western Sydney.⁴

The Croatian market gardens in Western Sydney form a strong contrast to those on the Northern Beaches Peninsula. They are indicative of the harsher conditions in Western Sydney, both socially and climatically. Nina and Andrija S. and Jakica and Marko M. are Croatian gardeners whose stories reflect the different times of migration to Australia and the hard work associated with market gardening.

Nina and Andrija's Story

Nina and Andrija are now retired market gardeners. Their house and garden today are the vestiges of an original large market garden and orchard in Marayong, Sydney. Andrija came from a Dalmatian coastal town, called Orebic. He was only 16 years old when he joined his father who was working as a timber cutter for the mining industry in Western Australia. This was in 1936. Despite the isolation of the timber cutters, Andrija's father heard talk of the unrest and imminent war in Europe in the 1930s and insisted that his son come to Australia.

When Andrija arrived in Australia, he was taken straight to his father's timber camp where it was hot and the air was full of flies. As a young man from Europe he was so appalled by the prospect of living in such terrible conditions that he deliberately cut his foot on his first day at work in the hope that he could return to his homeland. His foot injury did not result in his return to Dalmatia so he resigned himself to timber cutting for the next five years. By 1941 his father had moved east and now owned a market garden at Prospect in Western Sydney. Andrija, now 21, gave up timber cutting and joined his father to learn the skills of market gardening. He married an Australian girl two years later but continued to work for his father until he had enough money to buy his own farm in Hoxton Park.

By 1948, after 12 years in Australia, he took his wife and family back to Croatia to see his mother. Once in Croatia, by now part of totalitarian communist Yugoslavia, he was told that he could not return to Australia and instead he was expected to do military service. Andrija tried to escape with his wife and children, using a small flat bottomed boat. Before they could leave, the boat was confiscated and Andrija was jailed. His wife observed that had they tried to escape in the small boat they would surely have drowned in the rough seas. For the next three years Andrija was either arguing with the authorities from his cell in jail or serving in the army while his wife and children lived with his mother and sister, carrying firewood and green branches for stock feed on the small family farm.

In 1951 he was finally allowed to return to Australia, but by now he had no assets and had to start again. The family lived with his wife's mother for a year, saving enough money from one tomato crop to be able to put a deposit on a seven-acre farm at Seven Hills, Western Sydney. Over the next ten years, the couple maintained two jobs to

pay off the farm. Andrija worked as a wharf labourer, catching the train every morning to the docks, while both Andrija and his wife, Nina, worked to establish ten thousand tomato plants. Nina did most of the farm work. Nina had three children at home and apart from cultivating the tomatoes, she had the problem of watering them with the poor water pressure in outer Sydney. She used to water the plants between midnight and 8 o'clock in the morning, after which she would take the children to school. Nina reminisces how *'I used to drag that hose along. I had an ulcer on one leg and I used to hop on the other leg.'* The whole family harvested the tomatoes and packed them for the market. Because of the hard work, there was little time for a domestic garden.

After ten years of hard work, they bought the place they now have which, at that time, was a six-acre farm. They lived in a tin shed on the land until they built their house. When the house was completed, Nina immediately planted a flower garden. She planted roses along the side of the front garden and Hippeastrum lilies across the front. These plants are still in the garden, the lilies have formed a spectacular display every November for the last twenty years. Andrija has a particular fondness for the roses. He remembers the roses in his mother's garden in Croatia. Even today, roses bring back memories of village life, particularly his memories of collecting water from the village well to water his mother's roses. The other plants which remind him of Croatia are the lavender and rosemary bushes in the front garden. In Croatia, lavender is used to protect clothing from moths and rosemary is used in cooking. Rosemary is also associated with weddings. It is considered that every girl should grow a rosemary bush and by the time it has matured she should be ready to marry.

Andrija and Nina are now retired and have given up the market garden, keeping only a few orchard trees near the house and the vegetable garden. They still have the original front garden as well as a wide side garden to accommodate a tiny orchard of fruit trees. Behind the house are a large garage, a shade house and a small vegetable garden.

Apart from the roses and lilies in the front garden, there is a spectacular grapevine growing over a substantial timber arbour, which is attached to the front of the house. Andrija is proud of this distinctive feature in the garden, however the grapes are only 'table grapes' and are not used for wine. They had a vineyard in their market garden and always made their own wine. Now they buy grapes for wine from the market, using an area under the house for the grape press and to store their cellar. The front garden also has a large fruiting fig growing centrally in the front lawn. The grape arbour and the fig make the house look quite different from others in the street.

The wide side garden is a mixture of fruit trees and vegetable beds. There are peach trees laden with fruit. As in Dalmatia, they grow citrus trees. Nina is particularly proud of the prolifically fruiting Valencia orange whose fruit she uses for marmalade. There are also other fruiting trees which are commonly grown in Croatia, such as plum, quince, loquat and pomegranate. Nina bottles all the fruit from the trees using an old Vacola kit that she inherited from her mother. The walls of the garage behind the house are covered with shelves filled with bottled fruit, marmalade and tomato sauce; all of which surround Andrija's power boat used for fishing, now he has retired.

Nina takes pleasure in the beautifully cultivated vegetable beds along the side boundary. She comments that the soil in Dalmatia is very rocky and there is a problem with water. In contrast the soil in Western Sydney is '*absolutely beautiful*'. Nina has undertaken an interesting example of companion planting to control the pests. She has planted Pyrethrine among the beans and marrows and she intermingles basil with the capsicums. Apart from looking attractive, this planting is as effective as spraying for insect control.

Other attractive beds contain robust zucchini plants growing beside feathery fennel bushes. Nina remarks that '*sometimes my zucchini get away from me and grow too big. Then I pick them and slice them and do them like a schnitzel. I flour them, dip them in egg and breadcrumbs and fry them in oil.*'

In the back garden, a small terrace close to the house has been made into a shade house for benches of cacti, begonias, orchids and geraniums. Nina and Andrija have an interesting collection of flowering cacti which they have accumulated over a number of years. Andrija first saw flowering cacti in Australia and thought they were '*beautiful and exotic*'. Over the years they have collected many different species. They also love geraniums because they remind them of window boxes in the coastal villages in Croatia.

There is another vegetable garden behind the shade house which consists of strawberry beds and beds of a special Dalmatian spinach called Blitva and a Croatian cabbage called Zelje and a number of beds of healthy tomato plants. These vegetables are used in particular Croatian dishes, such as stuffed capsicum, Zelje and Blitva which are special Dalmatian regional dishes.

Stuffed Capsicum

Fry onions and garlic (they used to grow these and now buy them)

Add plenty of fresh tomato (Nina bottles her own tomatoes)

Fry tomato and add teaspoon of sugar

Clean capsicum and remove all the seeds.

In another dish add 500 grams of pork and veal mince and some rice and seasoning, possibly a tablespoon, 'vegeta'

(a seasoning made in Croatia consists of salt and dehydrated carrot, celery, parsnips)

Add some of the tomato mix and add ¼ cup rice mix and stuff into capsicums

Cook. either on top of the stove or in the oven.

If in the oven put grated cheese on top. Serve with mashed potato.

Zelje is a regional dish made of a special cabbage which is very close to Chinese cabbage in colour but not in taste. It is best to have it in the winter time when the frost has been on it because the frost makes the cabbage very sweet. This dish needs the snow to be falling outside.

Zelje

In the winter cut the top off the cabbage and clean it to make sure there are no grubs in it.

Cut the leaves and score the stem so that it will cook faster. Chop up finely and boil. Nina

adds 'moroch' which is like anise or wild fennel. Nina also adds leek and shallots - 'I never waste anything. I pick the green stuff on the leeks'. Sometimes she adds broad beans and potato. When all the vegetables are cooked, drain water off and add oil.

Blitva is another Dalmatian regional dish consisting of special spinach. Nina does not recommend the Australian spinach, which although looking similar to Croatian spinach, has a different taste. Croatian spinach is a very important vegetable in the Dalmatian diet. Nina considers it is very good for nursing mothers. Although she is Australian, Nina loves this dish. She laughingly says '*I am a real Croatian! This dish is as national as corn is for America. For the whole region of Dalmatia - it is a regional dish*'. Nina describes how to cook it in the Croatian way.

Blitva

Pick when young - about 10cms high - wash and then cut up - add chopped shallots and cook with potato in water. When cooked, pour off some of the water, but leave a little water in the pot. Then add oil and salt. Eat the spinach and save juice. Add a little wine and drink it.

Nina and Andrija are part of a strong Croatian community in Blacktown, many of whom are now retired and enjoy gardening for pleasure rather than the hard work of market gardening.

Jakica and Marko's Garden

Jakica and Marco are also retired Croatians. They similarly came from an island along the Adriatic coast but they have a different story of migration. Their island was called Korcula and they lived in a small village called Blato.

Marko was an example of the successful small scale wine and oil producers who were affected by the economics of communism. He was producing at least 10,000 litres of wine a year as well as olives, figs and carobs. With the change to communism, he had to sell all his produce to a co-operative and often would have to wait for over a year before he was paid. This was in contrast to the way things were before communism when he was able to earn a reliable income.

In 1957 he applied to migrate to Australia. Although he paid full fare for his passage, he worked for five years as a construction worker on the Warragamba Dam project. He did not intend to stay in Australia. He came to make money and he sent all his money back to his wife and family in Croatia. In contrast to his successful life as a vineyardist in pre-communist Croatia, he worked in various labouring jobs for twelve years, living in a shared house and working on farms on the weekends for extra money.

In 1969, his wife and son joined him in Australia, so Marko moved out of the shared house and bought his family a home in Blacktown, Western Sydney. As soon as they moved into the house they made a vegetable garden in the back. Jakica said '*We planted cabbage, spinach and tomatoes. These three things are essential. You can't live without them. Whenever you see cabbage in the garden that means it is Croatian from Dalmatia.*'

They also planted an orchard in the lawn near the back of the house. It contains a plum tree, citrus trees, particularly the orange which grew on their island in Croatia and pomegranate and peach trees. The plum tree now dominates the back garden. They used to ferment the plums into brandy. This is a practice in Slavonia, the

northern region of Croatia. In Dalmatia, they make brandy from grapes. On Marko's island of Korcula, they add anise to achieve their particular flavour. In other parts of the region various natural herbs and green walnuts are added to the brandy. Marko has planted grapes for wine on the side of the house. They used to make wine in the cellar under the house but now their son-in-law makes the wine.

Marko however, makes his own vinegar from the wine. There is a shelf attached to the back fence on which Marko places glass jars of wine. The sun ferments the wine for about a month by which time it is bitter vinegar. Jakica uses the vinegar for salads and for marinated fish.

Jakica's Marinated Fish - Brodeto

Slice onion and cook in oil until golden, add a few tomatoes.

Place fish (whole or fillets) on top, add salt and vinegar.

Cook for 10 minutes until vinegar is absorbed, then add more water.

Bring fish gently to the boil and then cook on low flame for one hour.

Add a little sugar and salt.

Cook rice separately in water from the fish on a low heat.

Potatoes can replace rice, however, polenta is the most popular

Behind the orchard trees is a highly cultivated and well ordered vegetable garden with an outstanding crop of tomatoes, eggplant, spinach, cabbage and yellow paprika. The tomato seed has been brought from Croatia and it is not uncommon for Jakica to grow tomatoes up to a kilogram in weight. The spinach and cabbage are the same as those grown by Nina and Andrija and Jakica cooks them in the same way.

There is a generous barbecue area as part of a roofed patio in the back garden. Marko often barbecues fish on the weekends. They eat Australian fish such as snapper, sea bream and whiting but were they in Croatia they would grill small sardines in oil with salt and pepper. Grilled sardines served with plain bread and wine are often served for brunch or 'Marenda'.

Near the back terrace which has numerous pots of orchids, there is a small flower garden of carnations and geraniums. They enjoy these flowers which remind them of Croatia, although their island in the Adriatic was too windy to allow for the colourful window boxes seen in the villages on the mainland. Instead the villages on the islands are characterised by shuttered windows to keep out the sea winds.

The Front Garden

The front garden is an interesting blend of Croatian elements. Marko has built a low stone wall across the front of the garden. It consists of bush rocks cemented together in an unusual way. The rocks are stepped in a similar way to the walls in Marko's village. Dalmatia is known as the country of rocks because the landscape is covered with rocks, large and small and of different types. The houses are built of these rocks and the fields are bordered with rock walls which have been created in order to clear the land for cultivation. As well the coastal villages are characterised by terraced rock walls forming narrow areas for vegetables, grapes and olive trees.

The beds in the front garden are filled with feature roses which not only flower prolifically but are also scented. Jakica and Marko's front garden is very ordered and

manicured. There is a neat privet hedge beside the driveway and two feature palms in the front lawn. The front garden is the display garden, whereas the back garden is not only a productive garden but it is also the place where they celebrate All Saints Day and Christmas and Easter feasts. Jakica prepares a traditional salt cod dish every Christmas Eve.

Xmas Eve Cod dish (Bakalar)

Break up dry salt cod and soak in water for 2 days continually change water but keep the last lot of water. Add salt to make the fish more 'juicy'. Make sure there is not too much water then add potatoes cut into slices. Boil together for ½ hour or until soft. Drain water and set aside. Add garlic, parsley, olive oil, pepper and mix together. Serve with a boiled potato dish on the side. This dish can also be prepared with fresh fish which is fried in oil.

The salt cod dish is followed by sweet fried donuts called Fritules.

Fritules

Mix flour, water, salt and milk. Add pear liqueur, grated oranges, sultanas, Fry the mixture, prepared as round loops, and then roll in caster sugar.

The Xmas Eve feast is followed by midnight mass. All Saints Day is celebrated in November when Jakica takes three days to prepare her special bread called Lumlija. This bread is made of brown flour and spices. All Saints Day is marked by folk singing and there is also a long tradition of Gregorian chants.

Epilogue

The Croatian gardens described in this chapter show how the effect of different political and economic issues in Croatia influenced when people migrated. Andrija came in the 1930s, due to political unrest and economic hardship. Janica and Marko came in the 1950s due to the economic impact of communism. Many of the Warriewood gardeners came in 1968 when Yugoslavia opened its borders and people were free to emigrate. They came to Australia because of the Assisted Passage Scheme for migrants, leaving Croatia's political and poor economic conditions at that time.

The gardens they have created reflect both the Croatian culture and the culture of particular areas of Sydney, namely the relaxed beach culture of Sydney's Northern Peninsula and the farming and working class culture of Western Sydney.

End Notes

1. Drago Ivanisevic as cited in Cuvalo, A. 1991. *Croatia and the Croatians*. Northern Tribune Publishing. Zagreb.
2. Cuvalo, A. 1991. *Croatia and the Croatians*. Northern Tribune Publishing. Zagreb: Croatia as cited in Spinks, S. 1993. 'The Migrant Garden: A Croatian Family'. Unpublished report, UNSW.

3. The story of the Warriewood Valley Croatian migrant gardeners was assisted by the work of Sophie Spinks, a student in Landscape Architecture at the University of New South Wales.
4. My thanks are extended to Wally Lalich for introducing me to Nina and Andrija and Jakica and Marko and for his invaluable assistance in clarifying Croatian culture.