

# e-migration / e-migracija / e-migración

an evolving story

## PART I

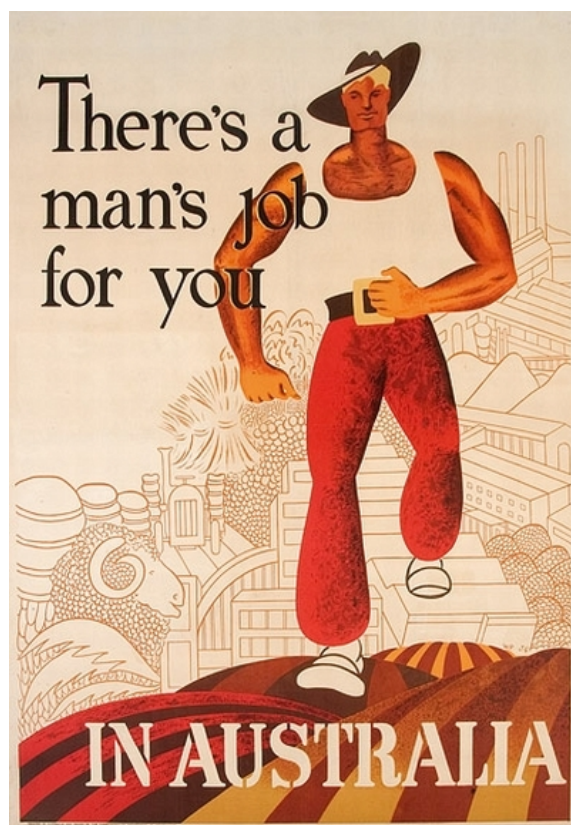
by: Sonja Leboš, curator

For two years now, my colleague and friend Anita Bacic and I have been thinking about the village Blato on Korčula, and the stories of emigration from it. Through the history of Blato, I have been thinking and researching the emigration from Croatia, but also pondering over migrations on a larger, global scale. Following the thoughts of Donna Haraway: 'The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular', I see the history of emigration from Blato as part of a bigger picture, the piece of a larger conundrum, puzzling us about people who left their countries, their homes, very often their wives and small children (sometimes leaving them completely behind and starting new families), while trying to find a *better life*.

Recently, quite a number of artistic and curatorial projects have been exploring the stories of emigration from Croatia and Yugoslavia to Germany and other countries in Europe. But unlike the story of “gastarbaiters” (that was the name for workers who were temporarily employed in Germany), the stories of “diaspora,” or the people who emigrated across the oceans, have been tackled artistically (according to my knowledge) only by Kristina Leko in her large dispositif 'Amerika' that magnified the destinies of women and their families who emigrated to the US during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Renata Poljak in her poetic work 'Partenza.' Like many other of Leko's work, 'Amerika' was an amazing ethnography, collection of stories, films and objects, organized in the exhibition that I personally experienced as a kind of fantastic expanded cinema model. For the first time, through pictures, narratives, and objects, I encountered the fact that in between two world wars many families left the Croatian islands and sailed the Atlantic Ocean on small boats to reach the American dream. Some of them got stuck in Puenta Arenas, in Chile. Some of them reached California.

The stories of emigration kept lingering in the back of my head until in 2014 when colleagues from Budapest initiated explorations of Blato, and reasons why Blato, a beautiful place in the fertile valley on the island of Korčula, went through a large wave of emigration in the 1920s. Colleagues from Budapest lost their interest in Blato, mostly for personal reasons that are not interesting for this essay, but Anita Bacic became interested in grey)(area's project and came to visit in 2014. Again in 2015 Anita and I spent many days researching in the local library in the city of Korčula, the municipal archive in Vela Luka, as well as in the branch of the Croatian State Archive in

Žrnovo, near the city of Korčula. While reading about the experiences of people who sometimes ended up on the other side of the world, living in circumstances that were harsher than those they had left in their homeland, we became fiercely interested in that obvious crevasse: there were two sides of the coin that was tossed by the decision to leave one's home. On the one side of the coin there was a story of a new and promising landscape, fertile land and all possible benefits for those willing to emigrate. When the coin was flipped, what waited on the other side was quite often a completely different picture, far from the promised land that waved from the posters whose purpose was to attract settlers to still uninhabited regions of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the US. How did those countries attract the settlers – what were the visuals that they offered? In her research, Anita found posters that were used by the Australian government to attract new settlers in 1948. The images of brawny men somehow reminds us of the images of brawny men on the other side of the ideological spectrum in the world where the Cold War was just warming up: socialist realism.



Poster inviting new settlers to Australia in 1947<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> W. P & J. G & Australia. Department of Information. (1947). *There's a man's job for you in Australia* Retrieved October 26, 2017, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-136976103>

In 2016 I met Toni, who moved to the city of Korčula from New Zealand. She was born in the second generation of Croatian newcomers to New Zealand. As a child, she listened to the stories of Korčula, where her granny had come from. For decades, nobody from her family visited Korčula, but in the stories that Toni was listening back in New Zealand, Korčula became an almost mythical place. When she came back, she discovered her personal myth, fell in love and decided to live on the island her grandmother left a long, long time ago.

Anita and I kept thinking. In 2016 we applied for a residency in Parramatta, Sydney. Dense as a life of a freelancer is, at the end of 2016 I was invited to deliver a lecture in Chicago in April 2017, so it was impossible for me to pre-finance two long-haul flights.



**Anita Bacic at the residency in Parramatta in early 2017**

But Anita went to Parramatta and worked extensively there on the questions of migration. Among other things, she connected with members of Croatian community in Sydney. Many were from Blato.

In July 2017 Anita took me for an amazing walk through Blato. She equipped me in a way that I felt almost like a cyborg. I was equipped with a recorder that hung from my chest, recording the conversation that was about to start via the headphones that were put into my ears through which I was to converse with a man talking to me directly from Sydney. We rang John\*, who has been living in Sydney since 1957, to guide me through his memories of Blato. The conversation that spatially covered more than half a planet away, with the delay of just a few seconds, started in front of the Post Office on Blato's main street, the spot where Anita and I quite often use as the starting point. I greeted John, who was sitting in his home in Sydney, and he greeted me. The adventure started. Anita gave me an encouraging look, and I felt as if the journey in time had just started. We were so excited, it was somehow beyond *work* what we were doing, it was also a kind of mythical

*experience* for both Anita and I, launching a process at the same time incredibly eye-opening and pregnant with other people's memories and feelings entangled with the streets of the city they left under different, but mostly traumatic circumstances (because what is leaving home for a distant country than a trauma?!).

I strolled along the main street of Blato, flanked by a large linden tree-lined alley, allegedly the biggest after the Unter den Linden Avenue in Berlin. "On my right side is a park, built in the 1950s, on my left side is a soccer court," I was telling John. "My father-in-law used to play soccer here." I sat down on a bench in excitement "Oh, really? Did he ever tell you why he left Blato?". What a poor ethnographer that made me. Instead of letting him telling me the story, I jumped with the question that should have made my point. Fortunately, John was wiser than me. He just kept silent, and said, "Just keep walking." I kept walking, a little confused, a bit ashamed. I told him about the primary school that I was approaching, but John didn't attend that school: he left at the age of seven. So I learnt that this unknown man I was talking to across the planet was 17 years older than me. He was born in Blato in 1950, five years after WWII was officially finished. John instructed me to turn right at the end of the park. I told him that there was Sokolana on my left side, where after WWII the cinema used to be (something that I learnt from grey)(area research about the cinemas of the island). John told me a story about his older sister, and a projectionist who used to fancy her so that he allowed John to enter the cinema without a ticket. John found very important to emphasize that there was nothing going on between the projectionist from Blato's cinema and his sister, because "She was only fourteen." I understood why that emphasis was important. If I learnt something as an ethnologist, it was how much of the family honor was kept by its female members. Here I interrupted him with another stupid and impatient question, "Was the ticket expensive?" John kept silent again, so I knew that my question was out of line, again. And again, my ethnography failed. I walked towards the church, and sat down under a big tree. John told me how they, the children of Blato, in the 1950s used to wait for newly married couples who would then throw candies at them. "So people were allowed to marry in church, right?". The brave ones did that, was John's answer. Obviously, he couldn't conclude that at the age of five or six, but it was something that somebody taught him. But, it is not being in my focus now. Suddenly, however, the connection was lost.

I called Anita via my mobile, and she came to get me cyber - equipped again.

We called John and explained to him that the connection was lost. I continued walking, this time with Anita by my side, and we came to the old house of John's family. Next to that house, he bought another house. Though in these 60 years he has visited Blato only twice (once in the mid 1990s and once in 2010s), John owns two houses in Blato.

I was sitting in front of one of the houses, a magnificent baroque *kaštelet*-like mansion, while John was telling me about the life of his family in the 1950s. John's father did not own any piece of land.

Before the war, he worked on the land of other people. After WWII he got a piece of land to cultivate. That piece of land was seven kilometers from Blato, up the hill. “Imagine us, walking up the hill, in the heat, without a donkey, because only those who were better off had a donkey. We had to walk seven kilometers early in the morning, there, in the fields, sometimes we would have only bread and water, working all day, coming back on foot, another seven kilometers, in the evening.” And then it hit me. Though I read a lot about the poverty that forced people to leave Blato, first then, while I was sitting in the shade of the old mansion, I realized how misplaced my questions were. John's family was hungry and life was difficult: the industry in Blato still hadn't put bread on the table, that was the reward for those who were obstinate and who stayed. Of course that the cinema ticket was expensive! EVERYTHING is expensive when you are poor. I felt ashamed, I could almost taste my own ignorance in the heat of that July afternoon.

John told me a story of his aunt, a woman who spent most of her life as a goat keeper. She did learn how to read and write, but did not use those skills, she mostly communicated to her goats, which were her only companions. “I saw her when I came in the 1990s, her eyes were...I do not know, you know, the eyes of those innocent people, like those people who lived in ancient times”, John was explaining. I could hear, and almost understand, the religious reverence that is so intrinsic for Dalmatia.

Then technology failed us. The connection broke. Anita sent a message to John that we would call him to say goodbye. We did, in hope to talk to each other in person soon. Then Anita checked the recorder. The technology failed us there too. The conversation was not captured. So now it keeps lingering only in my mind, and it will come back lively to my mind with each new step with which my body will memorize the amphitheatrical structure of Blato that echoes the stories of its present and past residents. That is also why I felt it was necessary to retell it: for me and for all who might read it.

*Post scriptum, August 14, 2017*

This essay was started in July 2017 and it is still evolving at this moment, in August 2017. At this particular moment the present president of Croatia is in Sydney, visiting among other things, a Croatian population in New South Wales, 100 000 people. She said in the news that I heard on the radio, today, August 14<sup>th</sup> 2017, that many members of that Croatian population were *businessmen* and that they can be used to *invest* in Croatia. One of those people she was talking about was maybe someone like John, who came to New South Wales with his parents at the age of seven. As he told me, they came to a house that did not have a floor, it was just compressed soil. There was no fridge. It all came later, much, much later. The conditions in Australia were not much better than in the country that was left behind. John's family actually was a new generation of white settlers who

literally helped build Australia as it is today. Next time when I talk to John I have to ask him if he feels like a *businessman* and whether he feels that the second house he bought was an *investment*. The present president of the Republic of Croatia also talked about language. The Croatian language was acknowledged in Australia before it became acknowledged in the Republic of Croatia. Because “Croatia wasn't free then”, said the present president of Croatia.

How and why the Croatian language became acknowledged as an independent language in Australia, before anywhere else in the world, is also a story that is now becoming a part of my research endeavors within this project that I decided to title “e-migration / e-migracija / e-migración,” marking therefore my interest in the confluence of three languages on the subject of Croatian diaspora: English, Croatian, and Spanish. Languages also mastered by the present president of the Republic of Croatia. We, namely, studied at the same faculty at Zagreb University, gaining very, very different knowledge and skills.



**Frontpage of Croatian Herald, conservative newspaper  
printed in Victoria, Australia, in Croatian.**

**It quotes the present time president of the Republic  
of Croatia who is inviting Australians of Croatian background  
with the words: “The door of Croatia is always open for you”.**

\* **Not his real name**