

# The Experiences of Croatian Ontario during

BY MARY VALENTICH

*Cet article soulève des questions relativement à l'intégration des immigrants au Canada en se basant sur les expériences des femmes croates arrivées au pays après la Seconde guerre mondiale et qui vivent à Cooksville en Ontario.*

In 1994 I interviewed three women in their 80s and one 90-year-old man who had lived in Cooksville, Ontario, prior to World War II. I also interviewed three other elderly women who were familiar with the Croatian community prior to and after World War II., by virtue of either having visited the area prior to World War II. or having lived there since the 1950s. Three adult daughters and one adult son also contributed their perspectives on their mothers' lives.

My own parents lived in Cooksville from 1939 to 1946. I was born in Cooksville in 1941 and as a child, believed that Cooksville was almost entirely Croatian! Over the years, I watched with sadness the village of my childhood disappear as residents moved away or died; as familiar houses gave way to parking lots and commercial ventures; and as Mississauga swallowed up traces of the earlier era. There are thousands of Croatians living in Mississauga now, but they are relative newcomers and typically have no personal connections or even knowledge of their cultural brothers and sisters who broke new ground more than half a century earlier.

My purpose in writing this article is to capture fragments of the lives of those people who provided a foundation for myself and my peers. There is an excellent history of the

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Croatians in Canada (Rasporich) and a developing literature on diverse aspects of Croatian life in Canada. The attention given to Croatian women immigrants is, nonetheless, modest. Thus, my intent is to focus on women's lives, first as they lived in Croatia and then, in Cooksville. A consideration of their experience may yield insights into the factors pertaining to the integration of immigrants into Canadian society.

## Why did these women emigrate?

Economic hardship was certainly the key reason for most of the Croatian men coming to Canada prior to World War II. Women also came for a better life, but unlike women from some other countries, for example, Finland (Lindstrom-Best), Croatian women tended not to head off for foreign lands on their own. Most were expected to marry someone in their area and then, with their dowry, move into his home.

When their husbands left for Canada or Australia, they were often absent for years and sometimes silent for extended periods. For women and children left behind the absence was painful and even shameful in that they felt abandoned, like damaged goods. The despair of some of these women as they waited was overwhelming. One woman said she would have given anything to end this period and get away anywhere; she even explored the idea of placing her son in a seminary, but the priest was so pompous that she decided she couldn't sacrifice her son to the Church! One can imagine her joy when the letter from her husband finally came and she was invited to join him in Canada. Her story is not unusual, nor the outcome—the initial surprise at seeing an older man and then recognizing him as her husband, a near-stranger, with whom she ultimately joined forces not only in family life but in several business ventures.

Most women, reuniting with their husbands after several years of separation, acknowledged the strains on the relationship, but anything was better than being left behind. They longed to seek their fortunes in Canada. As one woman commented: they were young and prepared for risks.

Perhaps that is how my mother also felt when she arrived in 1939 to marry my father. Their marriage had been arranged by her family and my father's in a neighbouring village. She had seen my father once when she was a child and the families were linked as *kumovi*. Her older sisters were all married; when my father wrote, asking for a bride, she ac-

# Women Living in Cooksville, the 1930s and 1940s

cepted that it was her turn. Though the gathering of family and friends on the night of her departure was meant to be celebratory, her elder sister described the party and the procession to the local train stop in funereal terms. This was goodbye forever. But it was an adventure, too. My mother was 21 and travelling to Zagreb, Paris, Cherbourg, and then Canada, with Croatian women in similar circumstances. When she arrived in Toronto, she was met not only by my father, but by Croatian women and men who welcomed her and gave her a place to stay until she and my father made their decision to marry. The importance of having even a small community of Croatians as a base enabled her to make the transition to her new life.

Given that the ratio of single Croatian men to women in Canada was very high in this period (Rasporich), it was not uncommon for men to write back home to find brides. Croatian parents in Croatia, and later in Canada, worried about the prospects their children would have for marriage and did what they could to find them the right partner. One woman in her teens came to join her father in 1938. She was eager to achieve her ambitions in sewing and designing clothes. She did find work in the Spadina Avenue clothing district of Toronto and she enjoyed socializing, dancing, and theatricals. Her father sought diligently to find the right suitor for her, but she resisted his choices and found her own fellow; she was all of 17.

In that era many men came to Canada with the idea that when they had made enough money, they would either return to Croatia or else bring

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their families to Canada. The women who arrived during the 1930s and 1940s came with a sense of permanency. Most knew there was no going back; they needed to make the best of their existing marriage, or else to choose a husband well.

After settling in Cooksville, these women kept up close connections with their families in Croatia through letters and gifts of money. Even though economic times were difficult in Canada prior to World War II, these women and their husbands supported elderly and infirm parents. Funeral and burial costs usually fell to those in Canada and after World War II, collecting clothes and packing boxes to be sent to relatives was a regular activity in most Croatian homes. The ties to their homeland were a given; it was only a matter of how much support they could give. However, no one from this early group of immigrants went back solely to visit until the 1960s when they had achieved material success and

were still healthy enough to travel. In the intervening years, these women focused on improving their lives in Canada.

## **Women as workers**

The elderly women interviewees in this study easily reminisced about their lives as workers. They had known primarily farm work in Croatia, but came prepared for anything. Not surprisingly, in Cooksville most Croatian women and men with yards had gardens to supply them with fresh vegetables and fruit. Croatians may not have known that during the 1860s Cooksville had been a grape-growing and wine-making centre, but they readily revived this tradition. They developed vineyards and enjoyed quiet moments sitting in grape arbours. It was also not uncommon to keep chickens if one had space. Several of them, as newcomers, worked on the large farms that were within walking distance and provided a pleasant setting where women could meet other women and bring their children. I recall happy afternoons on grassy hillsides with my mother close by, on a high ladder picking cherries. Farm work was familiar, English language proficiency was not necessary, and husbands were not threatened by this kind of seasonal employment. (Some husbands did believe that having their wives work outside the home was shameful.)

The men had gravitated to Cooksville during the 1930s because there were opportunities to work at the brickyard, despite occasional layoffs. The husband of one of the interviewees had transferred from the brick



Croatian Peasant Party Picnic, Cooksville, Ontario. Approximately 1937-38. Photograph supplied by Catherine Penich Zoretich.

company in Port Credit to the Cooksville operation. He and his wife had lived in one of the company houses on the grounds of the plant. This is apparently where the "old Croatians," the first generation in Cooksville had lived, possibly four or five couples along with several men who roomed with them. It was a hard life. This woman recalled that her life was an endless cycle of cooking, eating, and cleaning up. There was little socializing; work was all-consuming.

During the 1930s, this woman and other Croatian families began to move into the village proper, buying or renting houses. A few purchased farms and, in due course, there were a few trucks owned by Croatians. Shortly after her arrival in 1939, my mother recalls riding on a bench or *klupa* on the back of a truck from Cooksville to Welland for the July 1 picnic. She said she would never for-

get bumping along for so many miles with the wind blowing on them all the time. The Croatians enjoyed their picnics in the woods, where they could temporarily recreate life in the old country.

For women, the major employment was to *keep boort*, that is, to run a boarding house, usually in collaboration with their husband. There was no language problem, the woman could look after her children at home, and they were not shaming their husbands by going out to work. Further, the washing, cleaning, and cooking was traditional women's work for which they were well prepared. They could even earn some cash by selling beer or wine to the men who liked to relax in the evenings with some card games, sociable drinking, and singing.

The financial independence that these couples and, on occasion widows, achieved was highly valued. But

not one woman could say anything remotely positive about the work, which was an unceasing grind of packing lunches for four to ten men, and preparing breakfasts and dinners with Croatian specialties in abundance. They spent hours cleaning rooms and wishing that the men would hit the spittoons more often. On Mondays they washed blackened clothes. One daughter recalled her mother using gasoline in the yard to take out the grime. On Tuesdays they ironed; the men would fuss if the white shirts with their collars weren't properly starched. Although there were washing machines, ice boxes, and coal stoves, water for washing and bathing needed to be pumped, carried inside, and heated. The metal tubs used for washing clothes also served as bathtubs. Women saw their work as slavery from which there was a minor reprieve on Saturday evenings when

the men might travel to Toronto for some adventure. One woman recalled that on Sunday afternoon, instead of visiting, all she could do was gather her children around her and sink to the floor in tears and tiredness.

There was also the shopping to be done. One woman recalled the hilarious picture she, my mother, and another woman made as they returned home from a farm loaded with bags of live chickens squawking and protesting their fates. Usually, the local store would deliver groceries to their homes, thereby making daily food preparation manageable. The men wanted their familiar cheese and apple strudels, big pans of rolled cakes with walnuts or poppy seeds, pies, and of course, homemade noodles for their daily soup.

The lack of privacy in a boarding house situation troubled the women. Family troubles were visible to all and the women felt very protective of their little girls. One daughter recalled not being able to take dancing lessons or wear shorts until she was an adult. The women acknowledged that a boarder might become amorous, but this was unacceptable behavior and the man was quickly put in his place. Overall, the women recognized that their work was needed, but yielded little satisfaction. The men were tired and dirty after their work and it didn't take much to get one man complaining and that would start another one off.

The boarding house scene in Cooksville began to disappear after World War II. Fewer men needed such arrangements and most women could only last a limited number of years as *boorting house bosses*. Some sought an escape. My mother urged my father to buy a farm in another community; others worked in the local fireworks factory until serious accidents made them afraid; a couple of women, together with their husbands, started retail ventures. One of these, Trdaks, is still standing after 50 years and now sells western-wear clothes. World War II brought work

in the small arms factory in Port Credit and the airplane plant in Malton. The women in this study felt they more than held their own with women of other nationalities and they were frustrated when these sources of income disappeared after the war.

Their options for employment were very limited. They did not speak English well, only a few learned to drive—often a tractor before a car or truck—and their children were at home with no extended family to provide care. Also, when Croatian couples showed some ambition by establishing retail ventures, they had to deal with skepticism and disfavor from others who suggested these go-getters saw themselves as “better” than the rest who continued with manual labour. These petty jealousies subsided but conformity was an expectation of this small Croatian community. Difference was looked upon with suspicion.

#### **Croatian women as wives and mothers**

The need for economic survival certainly resulted in women gaining greater independence as farm workers, *boorting house bosses*, and factory employees with wages. However, within the family unit, men were still seen as having the upper hand in decision-making. The major constraint on a Croatian woman's independence and freedom was her husband's character; some men were more domineering than others. Others, like the one who looked after me when both my parents were working, were quiet, gentle men who rarely raised their voices. While the women did not present themselves as subordinates, the sons and daughters saw their mothers as subservient to their husbands. The women in the study were widows of many years, but all spoke of their husbands with feeling—about the kind of man he was, what it was like without him, and how they managed their lives together. Whether he was caring, domi-

neering, abusive, or protective greatly influenced the nature of the marriage. However, the women thought their marriages in that time period were no different than marriages are now—some were happier than others. For the most part, these women felt they were working together with their husbands to achieve mutual financial and other goals. They were aware of instances of abuse by husbands, usually coupled with heavy drinking. One woman in this situation had little recourse other than to duck the blows. Another, whose husband threatened her once, marched to the police station and complained about her husband's behavior.

The women did suggest that tension arose around childrearing practices. Women had the greatest daily responsibility as men typically did not get involved in child care. Yet fathers were often the disciplinarians wielding the razor strap. Fathers also typically controlled the family's money. They loved to lavish the occasional treat on their children, often the boy(s). Mothers could only prepare the special foods their children grew to love. They tended to shield the children from father's anger, but both expected obedience as well as affection. Children were given a central place in the family, but they were expected to respect their parents, to do well in school, and to engage in a lifelong intensive relationship with their parents that involved reciprocity and caring. Most women spoke with satisfaction and pride about raising well-behaved, responsible children despite their meager financial resources.

At least two couples during this period remained childless; the others had one or two children. The women accounted for these small families as possibly resulting from the long separation between husbands and wives during childbearing years, and the difficult economic times. Some women were aware of condoms and abortions; others indicated that these topics were taboo in the past and even in the present.



"Polish-Croatian Picnic" Proceeds for Canadian Red Cross, Cooksville, Ontario, 1940.  
 Photograph supplied by Catherine Penich Zoretich.

With ten children at most in the Croatian community during the war years, and with many male boarders hungering for their own children, we received much attention. While children could be indulged with treats, they were still expected to act properly and not bring shame on their families. Some adult daughters reported that their parents forbade them to socialize with Canadian children (*Englesi*) and made them wear unfashionable and modest attire.

### Social life of Croatians in Cooksville

Croatians did socialize at picnics, weddings, parties or *zabave* at the rented Orange Hall or at their houses. Women did not have much time to relax at these events as food preparation, except for roasting of pigs and lambs—the task of the men—fell to their small group. The community relished its fun, traveling to picnics in other centres, or inviting guests to their own.

Lodge 10 of the Croatian Fraternal Union based in Pittsburgh was an important anchor for most of the Croatians in the area. A former treasurer recalled that in 1945 there were approximately 45 families who were members. The *Seljacka Stranka*, the Peasant Party of Croatia, was another organization that united the Croats through meetings and social events. Women in this study observed that wives got pulled into

politics through their husband's involvement. As a toddler, I recall being carried on my father's arm at a meeting in a basement, taking in the smoke and speeches. Ivan Skacan, a key officer of the Croatian Peasant Party lived in Cooksville and advocated that Croatians and others support Canada and its allies during World War II (Rasporich). The photograph of the Polish-Croatian Picnic in 1940, a fund-raising event for the Canadian Red Cross, shows how concerned these groups were to demonstrate their loyalty to Canada.

None of the women in this study spoke of experiencing discrimination. They described their contacts with the *Englesi* as friendly, but limited mostly to business transactions. I only learned the term "honkie" from one of my adolescent peers on a visit to Cooksville in the 1950s.

### What can we learn from these women?

These women and their families demonstrated that, for the most part, they had no difficulty in finding their place—economically and socially—in evolving Canadian society. They simply wanted work at reasonable wages; as long as they felt that their children would be able to progress, they were ready to work at any jobs that were available. They followed a very typical pattern of the less well-educated immigrant, starting at the lower-status, manual

labour jobs that were not seen as desirable by those with greater education or more years in Canada. As Canadian immigration policy orients itself increasingly toward the more educated immigrant, with resources, we may be losing out on the strength that comes from those who are driven to succeed. These early immigrants knew no boundaries to their toil. Is the motivation to succeed a more important variable than fluency in English or French, a degree, or financial resources to start a business?

These immigrants were not caught up in endless debate about who they were and where they belonged. Nor did they find it strange to mix mostly with other Croatians. Their support systems were within the Croatian community—for food and housing during the Depression years, for socializing and searching for marriage partners, and for advice. Currently, there is some tendency to see this behavior of immigrant groups as ghettoization. I think this is an inaccurate and demeaning assessment of people's needs for continuity with their culture and for shared meaning. Rather than disparaging this clustering, we should encourage it. As an immigrant group feels more confident about its chances for survival without losing its culture, it begins to open its doors, to share its richness with other groups, and to welcome interaction on a personal and collective basis.

These women identified themselves as Croatians. How could they think otherwise, given that they were born in Croatia and spent their formative years there? Did this allegiance, which lasted their lifetime, mean that they were any less Canadian? I think we need to re-examine our notions of cultural identity and citizenship. These women and their families were very concerned about Canadian citizenship and sought it proudly. This was their home and they wanted to identify as Canadians. But, this developing allegiance did not mean that they were going to give up being Croatian. Whether persons choose to hyphenate or to use two labels to describe their identity is irrelevant. The children of newcomers will see themselves more as Canadians. We will recognize the ideals of a multicultural society if we give immigrants permission to evolve their own ethnicity within the web of many ethnicities that characterize Canada.

What resources might have helped these women and their families achieve their goal of a better life more readily in Canada? During the Depression years there was certainly a need for financial assistance, without judgmental attitudes on the part of those who were in charge. One woman recalls getting "relief" but the inspector denied her request another time because her house looked too clean and orderly. English-language classes would have been very helpful. Child care would have been useful as long as the women themselves could have been involved; they would not have left their children with someone "foreign." One can appreciate the importance of drop-in child care centres with caretakers of similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds where children and their parents can be understood in their own language.

Other services such as shelters for battered wives and treatment for the husbands, in one's own language, were needed then and now. The most promising direction is to make

increasing use of those individuals within the cultural group who by virtue of their understanding, empathy, and interpersonal skills can provide a bridge between the troubled family and the available community resources. Canada could be much more flexible in recognizing the credentials of professionals such as physicians and social workers who come from other countries but are effectively barred from practicing despite fluency with English or French. Surely, we can find ways for these individuals to provide their knowledge and expertise to immigrants and refugees and simultaneously re-engage with their own profession?

These women's experiences demonstrate the critical importance of enabling the Croatian community to serve as a base for newcomers. While current immigration policy tends to downplay familial and regional connections, these were fundamental supports in the past, especially for women who traditionally had less access to the wider society. While the women in this study saw themselves as having successfully integrated into Canadian society (without losing their Croatian cultural identity), they would have welcomed the opportunity to learn, in this instance, English soon after their arrival. Language instruction and acceptable child care provisions, then and now, are crucial to opening the doors for women.

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Acting Assertively at Work.

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