

Tvrtko Andrija Mursalo

Hrvati na jugu Afrike (1757-1997) [Croatians in the South of Africa]

Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Matice hrvatske: Hrvatska matica iseljenika 2003.
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Portrait with Keys is a poetic work by Ivan Vladislavić dedicated to Johannesburg, written in English and published in the Republic of South Africa in 2007. It's author, well-known South African writer, born 1957 in Pretoria, who has received many awards (Olive Schreiner Prize, the CNA Award and Sunday Times Fiction Prize)¹ is often asked about his name as it is not a name normally associated with South Africa. He explains as follows: "The name is Croatian. My grandparents on my father's side were Croatian immigrants. My father was born in South Africa and on my mother's side my background is Irish and English, with a dash of German. I am second generation South African, on both sides."² The book under discussion here, *Hrvati na jugu Afrike* (Croatians in the South of Africa), tries to explain the complicated fate of the migrant Croatians and trace the process of gaining South African identity through their descendants, as was the case with Vladislavić.

In 1981, a monograph by Tvrtko A. Mursalo, a Croatian author who lived in South Africa was published in Johannesburg. The book was written in English under the title *In Search of a Better Life. A Story of Croatian Settlers in Southern Africa* and targeted two groups of readers. The main group of readers were the descendants of Croatian immigrants who settled in the south of the African continent. The author wanted them to remember their country of origin and its complex history, but he also wanted to write a history of Croatian settlement in South Africa. The aim of the book was, therefore, to reconstruct the national roots of the Croatian settlers while at the same time helping them to define their identity. The other group of readers targeted were South Africans of all other nationalities. The book acquainted South Africans with the contribution made by Croatian immigrants in the development of South Africa. It also traced the history of the

¹ He has published five books of fiction: *Missing Persons*, *The Folly*, *Propaganda by Monuments*, *The Restless Supermarket*, *The Exploded View*.

² <http://web.wits.ac.za/NR/rdonlyres/7C339AC9-4656-4B3E-9E3D-E6F2F26E6044/0/vladislavic.pdf> (checked 9-01-2008).

formation of the Croatian diaspora, its activities in the past and present. The book sold well, in fact, the first edition is now out of print, so we can assume that it attracted attention and fulfilled its task.

The book under review here is Tvrtko Mursalo's second book: *Hrvati na jugu Afrike* (Croatians in the South of Africa), published in 2003. In this book, Mursalo takes a completely opposite stance to his first book. The book is written in Croatian and was published in Zagreb by a prestigious publishing house associated with the cultural institution, *Matica hrvatska* (founded in the 1830s). The readers targeted are Croatians across the world. It not only informs the Croatians in Europe about South Africa, it also provides a history of the Croatian diaspora in Africa. Moreover, the book also shows that a large number of Croatians have an affinity both with their mother country and South Africa.

Tvrtko Andrija Mursalo, the author of both books, was born in Sarajevo in 1930. Political circumstances and events in his country during the Second World War (the fascist Independent State of Croatia) and thereafter (the creation of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) forced him to leave his home country. Mursalo started to study engineering at the University of Zagreb but finished his studies in London. From there he left for South Africa where he worked as an engineer. He is a lifelong fellow of the Institute of Materials in London; in 1986, he was awarded the John Tallant medal for his scientific research in the field of rubber technology and his contribution to the development of the rubber industry in South Africa. During the civil war in the 1990s and after the collapse of Yugoslavia and the creation, among others, of the Croatian State, Mursalo fulfilled the function of honorary consul of Croatia in South Africa. Even though he spent most of his life in South Africa, far away from his home country, it is evident that he feels attached to both countries and fulfils the role of a natural link between them.

This exhaustive book of 214 pages painstakingly reconstructs the history of Croatian immigration to the south of the Africa continent over a period of more than 200 years, from 1757 till 1996. In writing this monograph, the author made use of archives in The Hague, Cape Town and Johannesburg. Two dimensions of history are interlaced in the book and these can be defined as "major" and "minor" history. The "major" history deals with the white settlement in the south of the African continent. The "minor" history is about the Croatian role within that settlement: the history of individuals leaving Croatia to go to the Cape from the 18th till the end of the 20th century, in search of a better life.

Mursalo shows us the more or less successful efforts by Croatian settlers to put down roots in Africa, and how this was influenced by various events of a political, historical, economical, national, religious and ideological nature. In this way, the author tries to illustrate the continuity of this process to his public and at the same

time showing the number and quality of changes in the portrayal of Croatian settlers.

These two approaches to history intertwined into one story, resulted in an interesting project of a specific character. We need to remember that this history of immigration was not written by a professional historian, working with the appropriate methodology and research skills, but by an immigrant and engineer. What is more, the book was written 10 years after the formation of the Republic of Croatia, in other words in a period when the national and ethnical identity of the Croats was once again in the process of (re)construction. This inevitably had a decisive influence on the form of the book under review. Tvrtko Mursalo's pioneering contribution, however, should not be underestimated, as he has collected material that can be of use to historians in describing the historical process of Croatian settlement in the area now known as South Africa. This book is certainly the first step in establishing the foundation for further detailed research.

The story is constructed chronologically. It starts with the successive stages of colonization of southern Africa by white settlers, beginning with the arrivals of the Dutch in the middle of the 17th century. The first individual immigrants of Croatian nationality, mainly sailors from Dalmatia, arrived in the Cape only a hundred years later, in the middle of the 18th century, serving as foreign mercenaries for the Dutch VOC (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* – Dutch East India Company). This was because by this time the VOC no longer took religion or nationality into account when hiring people. This was the case in the 17th century when all employees of the VOC had to be Protestants, effectively excluding Croats, who were all Catholic. When the VOC was liquidated in 1799 this type of immigration ended. The next, rather modest, stage of Croatian settlement was at the beginning of the 19th century. Croatian immigrants settled in the Cape colony, encouraged by the colonial politics of the British, who sought to reinforce the white settlement of Africa and at the same time counterbalance the Dutch-speaking community. The main immigration wave, Croatian as well as other nationalities, took place in the 1860s with the discovery of diamonds in the vicinity of the Orange River and later in Kimberley, where most of the Croats settled in the years between 1872 and 1890. The influx in the 1870s was the result of the discovery of gold in the eastern Transvaal and the building of the railway between Pretoria and Delagoa Bay. Officially, the Croatian immigrants arrived from Italy and the territories ruled by the Habsburg Monarchy, as there was no independent Croatian state in the 19th century. These immigrants were poor, poorly educated, quite often illiterate and unable to speak English. They went to Africa mainly for economic reasons: to seek a livelihood. On arrival in Cape Town, some stayed in the city, never reaching the

diamond or gold mines because of the distance and lack of financial means. They found jobs as farm labourers, working for low but regular wages. Mursalo writes that in 1875, according to the census register, 85 men and 15 women of Croatian origin arrived in Cape Town. The most persistent and determined, like Marko Baleta, for example, made the journey from Cape Town to Kimberley, an expedition of almost thousand kilometres, by foot. There is no doubt that the growth of the Croatian immigrant community, was the highest during the gold fever at the end of the 1870s and 1880s. Croats came not only from Europe, but also from the USA, Australia, Canada and Egypt. Mursalo estimates that around 1886, Croats in South Africa numbered more than two hundred, a number which increased considerably over the next ten years. At the turn of the 19th and 20th century, Croats worked in the diamond and gold mines, on farms (after some time even possessing their own farms), were employed to build the railway, others worked in bars, obtaining permits to run primitive cafeterias colloquially called *kaffer eating houses* for local black people. A very interesting document illustrating the settlement of that period is a diary written in plain Croatian by Pavle Midas. Mursalo's text shows that some of the Croatian immigrants who made their fortune returned to Europe. The majority, however, stayed and obtained citizenship.

Until the end of the 19th century, the migration of Croats to South Africa was mainly for economic reasons, whereas at the turn of the 19th century this took on a more political character, related to the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). Most Croatian immigrants sympathized with the Boers and even actively fought on their side. According to the author, this was because - being representatives of a "small" nation under foreign rule since the 12th century - it was easier for them to identify with the Boers than with the British colonizers, who represented an empire and were looked upon as the aggressor in this war. The documents used by Mursalo show that about thirty Croats fought on the Boers' side in the war, apart from that, many served as police officers or guards for the Boers. After the British victory, about sixty-five Croats who had sympathized with the Boers were deported to Croatia. During the first years of the 20th century, there was a restriction on Croatian immigrants. The Croats who had failed to obtain a residence permit for South Africa left and settled in Mozambique or Rhodesia (nowadays Zimbabwe). In the period between the turn of the 19th century and the beginning of the First World War, Rhodesia took in Croatian artisans, bricklayers and stonemasons.

From the census of 1911, it can be concluded that 1 504 people from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy territories were living in the Union of South Africa. There were many Croats in this group, some of whom already had South African citizenship. Most Croats lived in Johannesburg, but they were also found all

over the country (Bloemfontein, Cape Town, Durban, Stellenbosch, Simonstown, Pretoria, Pilgrim's Rest, Namaqualand). Sixty percent of them found a job in the gold mines, the rest of them followed other professions - architects, conductors of orchestra's, bakers, sailors, hairdressers, cooks, clerks, butchers, bricklayers, carpenters and fishermen in the coastal areas.

The Croatian immigrants experienced difficult times during the First World War as they were originally from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy that fought against the Union of South Africa in the war. Therefore, they were treated as potential enemies and, in the period 1915-1919, more than 300 of them were sent to Fort Napier in Natal and to Standerton near Johannesburg as prisoners of war, according to the law of 26 September 1914. This law excluded the Croatians who had fought in the Anglo-Boer War, those with South African citizenship, the sick and those older than fifty-five. This caused a problem for the families of the prisoners, especially their wives, who came to the African continent shortly before the outbreak of the war, and had no knowledge of the country or the English language. The internees and their families received humanitarian help from the American, Russian, Swedish and Greek consulates.

At the end of 1918, the status of Slavic people arriving from the territories of the former Habsburg Monarchy changed as the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy collapsed after the end of the war. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was founded. In the 1920s, Croatians immigrated to North Rhodesia (nowadays Zambia) and South Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) where they worked in the copper mines. In comparison to the former decades of migration, after the 1920s more educated and enterprising Croatians came to South Africa. Three hundred forty-nine Croatians settled between 1923 and 1933. The first honorary consul of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (the official name of the Kingdom after 1929), Danilo Štrekelj, was inaugurated in 1930. George Anton Sinovich (Sinović), the descendent of a Croatian immigrant, fulfilled this honorary function in the years 1937-1945. In 1929, the Croatian Cultural Club called "Stjepan Radić" was founded in Johannesburg. The club has prints of documents and photos from the private collections of Croatian families illustrating the interwar years, as well as the years after the Second World War right up to today. There are also pictures of magazines published by Croatian immigrants, photographs of dance groups in traditional folk costumes and soccer teams.

The period of the Second World War was again a politically complicated time for the South African Croatians. In 1941, when the Kingdom of Yugoslavia joined the war, on the territory of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the fascist Independent State of Croatia - collaborating with Hitler - under leadership of Ante Pavelić, was founded. Italians and Germans were interned in Africa, most of the

Croatians, however, escaped this fate thanks to the influence of the above-mentioned honorary consul G.A. Sinovich. Throughout the war, citizens of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia continued to arrive, most of them Serbians; often former royal servants who had worked in the diplomatic or state service. After the end of the Second World War and changes on the political map of Europe, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was replaced by the SFRJ (Socijalistička Federativna Republika Jugoslavije - Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) under the communist party, led by Marshal Josip Broz Tito. According to the figures presented by Mursalo, the next wave of immigration in the years 1939-1950 consisted of 263 Yugoslavian citizens among which several Croatians. Later statistics, from the years 1961-1978, show that another 1 671 Yugoslavians, half of them Croatians, went to South Africa. In the 1980s, there was a small immigration wave of Croatians from Bosnia. The collapse of the Yugoslavian Federation after the Balkan war in the 1990s led to the creation of several independent national states. This last immigration wave to South Africa consisted mainly of educated young doctors, dentists, engineers and entrepreneurs. This period was also characterized by an increase in activity of the Croatian institutions in South Africa. On the 17th of July 1990, Tvrtko A. Mursalo, the author of the book under discussion, became the representative of the Croatian Republic for economic and cultural affairs in South Africa. This gesture signalized new diplomatic relations in a changed political environment. A year later, the diplomatic post of the Croatian Republic was officially opened. Since 1995, there has been a Croatian embassy in Pretoria, with Tvrtko A. Mursalo, nominated by president Tudjman, as its first ambassador. Nowadays, according to different estimates, there are about 8 000 Croatians in South Africa (7 000 according to South African sources). Small groups of Croatians live in different states in southern Africa (60 people in Zambia, 120 in Zimbabwe, 40 in Botswana and a small number in Namibia, Swaziland, Lesotho and Mozambique).

The last four chapters of the book are dedicated to the various activities of Croatian clubs and societies in the South African diaspora. For example, the author mentions a folk music group founded in 1902 in Johannesburg and includes photographs of a picnic on the shores of the Florida Lake near Johannesburg in 1912, where a 150 Croatians met. The interwar activities of the Yugoslavian tennis club are discussed, as well as the activities of a soccer club, called "Croatia F.C.," founded in 1962. An interesting account is given of the establishment of a Croatian Catholic community (since 1969 the Croatians officially have their own priest in South Africa). There are also sections dedicated to describing cultural-educational activities, for example Croatian language courses for children and adults, presentations of Croatian films, the launching of Croatian magazines in South Africa. At the end of the book, the reader can find lists of the names of Croatians who lived in South Africa up until the First World War, providing a very

interesting complement to the historical narrative. In the census of 1912, the name Josip Vladislavić appears. He came to Johannesburg from the isle of Brač and was most probably the grandfather of the writer Ivan Vladislavić, whose forefathers are known to have come from the same island.

Tvrtko A. Mursalo's book fills a gap and is certainly useful. However, the reader must be aware of its limitations and the fact it contains several points of view. First of all, it can be seen - as the author initially intended - as a collection of documents, in many cases reconstructed, witnessing the history of the Croatian diaspora. In this respect, the book is an attempt to document the modest but long-lasting participation of Croats in building the history of South Africa, and the author successfully achieves this goal. Another, more modern, way of looking at the book is from the post-colonial perspective. Mursalo's monograph can also be read as part of a range of works that are in some sense colonial. In writing about the history of Croats on the African continent, he gives very little information about the black population of those regions. Above all, his starting point is the history of the white conquerors and colonizers, beginning with the Dutch, followed by the Boers and British. There is a lack of in depth reference to the black or Coloured inhabitants. It seems as if Mursalo largely looks at South Africa as a territory colonized by Europeans and in this context the arrival of the Croats automatically becomes a part of this colonial historical project. At the same time, the author creates a specific frame of reference between the centre/periphery - the culture of the Croatian diaspora at the periphery and the European colonial powers at the centre. In this sense, the Croatian immigrants from Europe fulfil a double role. On the one hand they were the colonized (after all they were refugees or immigrants from the territory of the Habsburg Monarchy, they did not have their own Croatian state, and also in Africa they were perceived by the British as the "worse whites"). On the other hand, they were also the colonizers who came to the south of Africa in search of a better life, obtaining a certain status by the mere fact of being white and thereby enlarging white domination. Mursalo's rhetoric is a clear example of European domination and a Croatian centred point of view, adapted and subordinated to the colonial discourse in the south of Africa. Reading this book from a postcolonial perspective reveals the ambiguity of the Croatian diaspora: the Croats as colonizers as well as the colonized. Although this aspect was not intentional, this important way of reading should not be neglected.

Interest in the fortunes of the Croats in South Africa has increased over the last ten years, also among professional researchers from the University of Zagreb. Before Mursalo's book appeared, two other works dealing with a similar topic were published in Croatian. The first one, written by Ivan Hertrich, is entitled *U potrazi za Hrvatima. Kroz Južnoafričku Republiku* [In Search for Croats. Through the South African Republic], published in 1996 in Zagreb. The second book *Južna Afrika*

i Hrvati [South Africa and Croats] is written by Ante Laušić and Josip Anić, published by the Institute for Migrations and Ethnic Studies (Institut za migracije i narodnosti) at the University of Zagreb in 2000.

Tvrtko Mursalo's *Hrvati na jugu Afrike* can take its rightful place in the dynamic field of research that has developed in recent years.

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