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Research Article

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# “Nobody asked me how I felt”. Childhood Memories of Exile among the Croatian post-WW2 Diaspora in Argentina

Nikolina Židek\*

This paper focuses on childhood memories of exile over time. While researching commemorative practices of the Croatian post-WW2 émigré community in Argentina, we mainly find adult (and predominantly male) voices on the trauma of the military and political defeat. It is therefore essential to analyse how the 1.5 generation—those who arrived in Argentina as children—narrate their childhood memory of exile. This research employs qualitative methodological tools of discourse and narrative analysis, studying personal testimonies, gathered through semi-structured interviews with members of the 1.5 generation, combined with written, photographic, and audiovisual material. The results of the research show that child memories are not exclusively personal or biographical, but overlap with family and collective memories of the émigré community, especially when it comes to making intellectual sense of their exile experience, even seven decades later. Even though the majority felt uprooted from Croatia and accepted Argentina as their home, in order to make sense of their (personal and family) suffering, they merge their community history with official history, and justify the reasons for their parents’ struggle, without any critical questioning of their parents’ role in the Second World War. This subsequently gives way to a monolithic narrative that is perpetuated through generations.

**Keywords:** Croatia, WW2, 1.5 generation, memory, diaspora

## Introduction

The Independent State of Croatia (NDH, *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*) was a Nazi puppet-state of Germany and Italy established in April 1941, headed by Ante Pavelić, the leader of the Ustasha movement. It was destroyed by Tito’s Partisans during the Second World War and its territory was then absorbed into socialist Yugoslavia. After its defeat, the NDH Army, together with other defeated troops from the territory of Yugoslavia and thousands of civilians, fled the country and surrendered to the British Army, being pushed back to Yugoslav Partisans in Bleiburg, Austria, on 15 May 1945. They were repatriated back to Yugoslavia by the Partisans and either executed en masse or transferred to

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labour camp. Those who escaped from fate in Bleiburg, and from Yugoslavia, were first retained at the Western allies' Displaced Persons (DP) camps in Germany, Austria and Italy. The largest Croatian DP camp in Italy was Camp no. 8 in Fermo, functioning from 1945 to 1948.

They eventually found safe haven abroad, with Argentina being one of the leading destinations, since the immigration policy of the first Perón Government (1946-1955) favored Catholic and anti-Communist immigrants who complied with ethnic, economic, religious and ideological standards that allowed them to quickly assimilate into Argentinian society and serve the country's increasing industrialisation.<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that approximately 17,000 Croats entered Argentina between 1946 and 1951, and 10,000 remained in the country<sup>2</sup>—among them the NDH political and military leadership. A whole Croatian émigré community of men, women, and children settled and found a new life in Argentina.

This paper focuses on the exile experience of the 1.5 generation<sup>3</sup> —those members of the Croatian diaspora community in Argentina who arrived in the country as children. Since they were too young at the time, they could not grasp the historical and political complexity of the experience and claimed trauma from their personal experiences. The study forms part of ongoing research on the Croatian post-World War II émigré community in Argentina. While my previous work was mostly focused on the political activity and commemorative practices of the Croatian diaspora over time, seeking to analyse the intergenerational transmission of memory and its instrumentalization in the construction of identity,<sup>4</sup> this paper is focused on the specificities of children's memory over time. After outlining the basic theoretical concepts applied to this case study, the paper covers the methodology applied in the research and presents the memories of the then-child migrants, today 70- and 80-year-olds.

### **Theoretical Background**

The trauma of defeat, the Bleiburg surrender, the post-war killings and the exile served as a unifying force for the Croatian post-World War II diaspora in Argentina. The uprooting from their territory of origin—inherent to all diaspora communities—has been elaborated among émigrés and their descendants through a collective memory, built and transmitted from one generation to another through an active political and community life, the family, the Croatian

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<sup>1</sup> Senkman, Leonardo. 1992. Etnicidad e inmigración durante el primer peronismo. *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe* 3(2), 5-38.

<sup>2</sup> Sinovčić, Marko. 1991. *Hrvati u Argentini i njihov doprinos hrvatskoj kulturi: pregled hrvatskog tiska objavljenog u Argentini od 1946. do 1990.* Buenos Aires: Published by the author, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Suleiman, S. R. 2002. The 1.5 generation: Thinking about Child Survivors and the Holocaust. *American Imago* 59(3), 277-295.

<sup>4</sup> Židek Nikolina. 2019. Day of Unfinished Mourning: Historicizing Commemorative Practices of Bleiburg among the Croatian Diaspora in Argentina. *Memory Studies Journal*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698018823225> (accessed: 8 October 2020); Židek, Nikolina. 2019. *Homeland Celebrations far away from Home: The Case of the Croatian Diaspora in Argentina*, in *Framing the Nation and Collective Identity in Croatia: Political Rituals and the Cultural Memory of Twentieth Century Traumas*, edited by Pavlaković, Vjeran and Davor Pauković. London and New York: Routledge, 211-224.

Catholic Centre and school, focusing primarily on victim and nationalist, but also on anti-communist and anti-Yugoslav, identity.<sup>5</sup>

In order to preserve its identity, the diaspora community had to maintain collective memory, defined by Assmann as “the faculty that enables us to form an awareness of selfhood (identity), both on the personal and on the collective level”.<sup>6</sup> Halbwachs introduced the concept of collective memory as a social construct, shared among the members of a certain group in a delimited space and time,<sup>7</sup> insisting that “while the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember”.<sup>8</sup>

Assmann divides Halbwachs’s collective memory into communicative and cultural memory. While communicative memory lacks material or formal symbolisation, and relies on interaction and oral transmission, cultural memory “is shared by a number of people” and “conveys to these people a collective, that is, cultural, identity”.<sup>9</sup> It is institutionalised, and it seeks the support of external symbols, forms and institutions of preservation and re-embodiment to be transferred from one generation to another. Welzer et al. point to a subcategory of family memory in Assmann’s communicative memory “whose criteria of truth are regulated on the bases of bonds of loyalty in a group or a felling of ‘us’ (*wir-gruppe*)”.<sup>10</sup> Family memory also tends to be inconsistent and it

*“is not a monolithic, stable entity, but an ongoing process shaped by the multidimensional cadres sociaux of family members. This produces a variety of ‘viewpoints’ on mnemonic contents and meanings which, depending on the particular family structure, can lead to a continual renegotiation of the past.”<sup>11</sup>*

In this line it is important to analyse “the way that we take up and synthesise firsthand and secondhand experience in developing self-narratives, how collective frames of memory are adopted and applied in everyday remembering processes, and how we make sense of and operationalise institutionalised and objectivised memory”<sup>12</sup>. Welzer refers to this secondhand experience as the re-narration of stories through generations, referring to stories that are remembered and re-narrated by every single member of a family differently, and especially the stories that are re-narrated by members of the family from different generations when on their own.<sup>13</sup> The same applies in “communicative

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<sup>5</sup> For a more thorough context of the historical narrative and collective memory of the Croatian post-WW2 diaspora in Argentina, please see the author’s previous work: Židek, *A Day of Unfinished Mourning*, and Židek, *Homeland Celebrations far away from Home*.

<sup>6</sup> Assmann, Jan. 2008. *Communicative and Cultural Memory*, in *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, edited by Erll, Astrid and Ansgar Nünning. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 109.

<sup>7</sup> Halbwachs, Maurice. 1992. *On Collective Memory*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 84.

<sup>8</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 48.

<sup>9</sup> Assmann, *Communicative and Cultural Memory*, 110.

<sup>10</sup> Welzer, Harald / Moller, Sabine and Karoline Tschuggnall. 2012. *Mi abuelo no era nazi: El nacionalsocialismo y el Holocausto en la memoria familiar*. Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Erll, Astrid. 2011. Locating Family in Cultural Memory Studies. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 42(3), 306.

<sup>12</sup> Pickering, Michael and Emily Keightley. 2013. Communities of Memory and the Problem of Transmission. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16(1), 119.

<sup>13</sup> Welzer, Harald. 2010. Re-narrations: How Pasts Change in Conversational Remembering. *Memory Studies* 3(1), 6.

situations concerning stories in which the historical events converge with familial biographical events, where there is inevitably a personal involvement related to the identity of the narrator and the re-narrator of the story".<sup>14</sup>

Generations are key in the transmission of memory, and they are constituted by a group of individuals of the same historical and cultural region within a social whole determined or delimited by space and time and formed by common experience, which then turns into collective behaviour and attitudes.<sup>15</sup> The models of social remembering and past experience are incorporated in the present: either as consciously recognised models/patterns of behaviour or as implicit or virtual patterns—where the traditional material is adapted to the new situation and in this process new elements of the material are discovered. We first identify two generations of survivors: the adult survivors and the child survivors or the 1.5 generation, defined as

*"too young to have had an adult understanding of what was happening to them, but old enough to have been there.... Unlike the second generation, whose most common shared experience is that of belatedness... the 1.5 generation's shared experience is that of premature bewilderment and helplessness... if all those who were there experienced trauma, the specific experience of children was that the trauma occurred (or at least, began) before the formation of stable identity that we associate with adulthood, and in some cases before any conscious sense of self."*<sup>16</sup>

For the child survivors, the trauma they experienced at an early age "often becomes the historically oldest stratum of consciousness, which tends to stabilise itself as the natural view of the world".<sup>17</sup>

The generations of survivors are inevitably marked by the common experience of trauma. But this trauma can also mark the "post-memory" generations, whether children or even grandchildren, who have not lived the trauma themselves but received it, transmitted to them through their upbringing in such a way that they live the memory as if it were their own.<sup>18</sup>

The generations coexist and overlap in a continuous process where the transmission of memory occurs.<sup>19</sup> In this memory transmission, the past is continuously reinterpreted. Thus, "the narrations of memory are never transmitted, but rather constitute an occasion for an endless line of re-narrations that are constantly reformatted according to generational needs and frames of interpretation".<sup>20</sup>

It is therefore essential to analyse how the 1.5 generation narrated their childhood memory of exile, how they were marked by their own trauma and by

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<sup>14</sup> Welzer, *Re-narrations*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Mannheim, Karl. 1952 (1928). *The Problem of Generations*, in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, edited by Kecskemeti, Paul. New York: Oxford University Press, 276–322.

<sup>16</sup> Suleiman, *The 1.5 generation*, 277

<sup>17</sup> Mannheim *The Problem of Generations*, 299.

<sup>18</sup> Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Post-Memory. Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Mannheim, *The Problem of Generations*, 292.

<sup>20</sup> Welzer, *Re-narrations*, 16.

the trauma of their community. By drawing from the literature on narration and re-narration of the family memory, the purpose of this study is to delve into the memories of child survivors who are now elderly people and detect continuities and discontinuities in the intergenerational transmission of memory.

### **Methodology**

This research employs qualitative methodological tools of discourse and narrative analysis, as well as ethnographic observation. I studied personal testimonies, gathered through semi-structured interviews and informal conversations, complemented with written, photographic, and audiovisual material. Fifteen semi-structured interviews were carried out with members of the 1.5 generation from Buenos Aires, Rosario and Comodoro Rivadavia: eight men and seven women. Few informants gave full interviews in Croatian, while most were given in Spanish, but using Croatian words whenever talking about their memories or events or concepts related to Croatia. During the interviews some of the interviewees shared photos or other visual material with the interviewer. These were complemented with the 1.5 generation members' written memoirs of their childhood and exile, whether in books authored by themselves, testimonies in books and journals, speeches given at certain occasions, or posts on their Facebook walls. They were born between 1930 and 1947. During the field research and in the before, I also personally attended the Croatian community gatherings and engaged in informal conversations with members of the Croatian diaspora community.

### **Childhood memories of loss and exile**

Specific events and issues and the meaning assigned to them were essential for the present analysis: the family history, life before the exile, the event of exile and the refugee period, the settlement in Argentina, relations with the Croatian émigré community and the evaluation of the further course of their life and that of their family, as well as their parents' role in World War II. Finally, they were asked to imagine what their life would have looked like if they had not abandoned Croatia.

By way of introduction, the interviewees were first asked to tell their family history—where they came from and their social status. Some simply stated that they belonged to the middle class,<sup>21</sup> or that before Argentina their father “never held anything heavier than a pencil”.<sup>22</sup> For some it was a source of special pride, stating: “I suppose you know about my family, from Croatian high society.”<sup>23</sup> Another interviewee stressed his noble lineage, adding that his father studied in the Netherlands and spoke eight languages fluently. He showed his family tree, representing only male members.<sup>24</sup> Others only stated where their parents came from.

Although they were not explicitly asked about their parents' participation in World War II, all of them made some reference to the fact that they belonged to

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<sup>21</sup> A. (1934), interviewed on 30 July 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Ozanic, Dunja. 2006. *Guenechen*. Zagreb: Mozaik knjiga, 40.

<sup>23</sup> B. (1942), interviewed on 14 November 2017.

<sup>24</sup> C. (1940), interviewed on 27 August 2018.

the NDH troops or political leadership. For some it was secondary information that they mentioned during the conversation, using the word “soldier” or sentences such as: “my mother and father were *ustasha*, that is why they had to leave”,<sup>25</sup> “both my brothers-in-law were *ustasha*[...] my brother was also *ustasha*, he got stuck at Bleiburg, during the withdrawal”.<sup>26</sup> Some gave more factual data: “he was a mechanic in the Army for eight years, and then he worked as an official’s driver”.<sup>27</sup> One woman said: “my dad was in the army...”, but later she stated: “When I went to Croatia, my cousin told me that he watched the Šakić<sup>28</sup> trial on television and that he heard that my dad was to blame, but I don’t know what for.”<sup>29</sup> One, whose father was a top official, did not specify his father’s function: “My father was very intelligent and capable. He spoke seven languages fluently, he held important positions in the NDH”.<sup>30</sup> Other children of top officials were more specific: “Dad was a lawyer and later he got into politics, he worked in the Government, he was the Secretary of the XXX Minister [...]”<sup>31</sup> or “My father was XXX, he was offered this post by Pavelić’s right hand and he could not say no.”<sup>32</sup> Another son of the former diplomat stated: “My father was not very fond of Pavelić, [...] not all of the officials supported Pavelić. As always, there were some fanatics, and there were others who simply held certain positions”.<sup>33</sup> The last one was explicit: “We were a historic family, freedom fighters, a void that I never achieved to fill, because first we were *ustasha*, the Nazis’ allies”,<sup>34</sup> and gave the exact position his father had occupied.

Older members of the group remember life before the exile and describe it in their own voice:

*“The life we had in Croatia was totally different from the one we had in Argentina. In Croatia we had a big house, a huge garden, a lot of people working for us. I remember our vacation in Split, the St Nicholas feast, our house in Tuškanac, we had a chauffeur, a gardener, a cook and a governess.”*<sup>35</sup>

Another remembers the exact address of his house in Zagreb and the exact route to school, and especially the air raids during the war, stressing that at first they were afraid and that later they got used to it and were even thrilled when they interrupted classes and exams. He also remembers sleeping with a suitcase by the bed and going to the basement during the air raids where “children played, mothers prayed, and fathers talked about politics and strategy”. He concludes that he remembers vacations at the seaside and concludes “how could I have had such a happy childhood in that context?”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> D. (1945) interviewed on 1 August 2018.

<sup>26</sup> E. (1935), interviewed on 10 September 2018.

<sup>27</sup> F. (1945), interviewed on 24 August 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Dinko Šakić, the *ustasha* commander of Jasenovac concentration and extermination camp, extradited from Argentina and tried for war crimes in Croatia in 1998.

<sup>29</sup> G. (1942), interviewed on 31 July 2019

<sup>30</sup> Vrancic, Antonio. 2018. *Marcapasos*. Buenos Aires: Dunken, 46.

<sup>31</sup> A. (1934).

<sup>32</sup> C. (1940).

<sup>33</sup> Verlichak, Carmen. 2004. *Los croatas de la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Krivodol Press, 80.

<sup>34</sup> B. (1942)

<sup>35</sup> H. (1938), interviewed on 31 July 2018.

<sup>36</sup> A. (1934).

Before continuing to the next section, we should distinguish two different groups: those who fled the country before the fall of the NDH and those who fled Croatia in May 1945, thus having different paths. The first group, also overlapping with children of top officials, left Croatia earlier and did not pass through the DP camps, living in different places before arriving in Argentina. The group that abandoned Croatia in May 1945 spent several years in DP camps, mostly in *Campo Fermo*, therefore this group will be called *Fermaši* (the Fermo people), as they called themselves.

From the first group, two were old enough to remember the moment of leaving Croatia in December 1944. One said: “I was six years old when I left Croatia with my mother, my brother and our loyal governess. Truth be told, at that time I did not understand what was happening”.<sup>37</sup> Another, who was 10 at the time, remembers the exact moment:

*“The exit from Croatia occurred on 23 December 1944, just two days before Christmas. That day was awkward. My dad came home early, he and mum talked behind the closed doors for a long time, and when they got out of the room, they told us that we were going on a trip for a couple of days. We associated that with vacations. We got out at midnight with Germany as our final destination. We took bizarre things with us, as absurd as a big radio that accompanied us all the way to Argentina and a large cast-iron pot that my mother always used for cooking.”*<sup>38</sup>

The other two left in 1942 and 1943 respectively. One, even though he has no memory of his own, claims: “I left in January 1942 from Hotel Esplanade. It was a long trip by train; we took 19 suitcases, my mother, my father, us three children and the nanny. I was crying all the way.”<sup>39</sup> The last one from the group just established the route, since he was 1 year old at the time.<sup>40</sup>

From the Fermo group, an interviewee born in 1935 remembers that they left twice, first in December 1944 and returned around Easter, and then again in May 1945:

*“This is where our Way of the Cross<sup>41</sup> started. At one moment, we were surrounded and I saw that there was one of them behind every tree wearing five-pointed star on their caps, waiting for us to return. Suddenly, a jeep came with English soldiers who negotiated with them and took us under their protection.”*<sup>42</sup>

Another woman, who was 15 at the time, remembers the traumatic experience of her family fleeing Croatia. First, she was separated from her father and her male cousin, who, as she found out later, were executed in Zagreb. Later, she was separated from her grandmother, her mother and her sister, who were taken by a bus and also executed.

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<sup>37</sup> Vrancic, *Marcapasos*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> A. (1934).

<sup>39</sup> C. (1940).

<sup>40</sup> B. (1942).

<sup>41</sup> The Way of the Cross is usually used as a metaphor among the diaspora community for the post-WW2 killings and death marches of the NDH troops through Yugoslavia.

<sup>42</sup> E. (1935).



*“Almost 60 years have passed, but those days are branded into me. Not a day goes by without me remembering them. And I still wonder why I was the only one who survived.”<sup>43</sup>*

Those who were born in the 1940s and whose parents left in May 1945 first re-narrate the stories of their parents:

*“They told me that we escaped in a car, I was a baby. All of the four tyres exploded, and we were surprised by a patrol. They let us pass because they saw that I was a baby, even though my father hid a pistol under my crib to defend us.”<sup>44</sup>*

Another tells the story of her mother:

*“My mom was pregnant, and she escaped with her brother. One morning when she woke up, she found her brother with his throat cut, so she wandered around and she bumped into a truck with soldiers and families who were going to Austria and then to Italy. She joined them and ended up in Italy. She went to various camps, and they ended in Campo Fermo as refugees under the English flag. [...] And my father eventually came to Fermo.”<sup>45</sup>*

Interestingly, and in line with Welzer,<sup>46</sup> her brother tells the story differently, starting his family history from the moment when the parents met: “My parents met in Fermo, and they got married there. My sister was born first, and one and a half year later I was born”.<sup>47</sup>

Refugee life remained very vivid in their memory, whether firsthand or secondhand:

*“My mother was taking care of my baby brother, so she left me alone, I felt so free. My dearest memories are from the time when we were in Tirol. My first language was German, it was the language of play and these are the memories of my biggest happiness. When we came here, that came to an end.”<sup>48</sup>*

Another, who was also in Austria, remembers that at first they were hungry, and that they lived in several houses (a hotel and private houses).

He recalls going to school and having Austrian friends. He also remembers being taken sailing on a boat by American soldiers, and that he learned to ski, skate, and sled during this idyllic childhood.<sup>49</sup> His real trauma was consciously leaving Tirol, when he was ten years old, remembering that he was devastated when he said goodbye to his friends.<sup>50</sup>

The last from the same group was living with a German family with his mother and sister:

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<sup>43</sup> I. (1930) in Verlichak, *Los croatas*, 41-42.

<sup>44</sup> J. (1944) in Verlichak, *Los croatas*, 79.

<sup>45</sup> F. (1945), interviewed on 11 August 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Welzer, *Re-narrations*.

<sup>47</sup> K. (1947), interviewed on 24 August 2018.

<sup>48</sup> B. (1942).

<sup>49</sup> Vrancic, *Marcapasos*, 49-66.

<sup>50</sup> Vrancic, *Marcapasos*, 67.

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*“It was a lovely house with a big garden. The lady was a beautiful German woman, she had two children of the same age as my sister and me, so I learned German very well, and me and my sister played with them. I was fascinated by the father, he was a very tall man, an Aryan, wearing a black uniform and high shiny boots, and he wore SS insignia, he was an SS colonel. Later I realised what it meant to be an SS colonel, but it was in contrast with his affection and generosity, how he treated us, his wife... it was an ideal family”.*<sup>51</sup>

Later the family reunited and went to Bavaria, where they stayed with another German family, until they eventually managed to come to Argentina.

The memories of the Fermo group are quite different:

“We were going from one camp to another, eight days here, three months there, 4 months in a third place... The boys composed a song: ‘*Attenzione, attenzione, eat your macaroni, hop on the wagoni, and go to Bologna*’.”<sup>52</sup> “At a train station, the soldiers did not allow people to approach us, we looked like lepers[...] When we arrived they shaved our heads and disinfected us with a powder, I think it was DDT.”<sup>53</sup> “The first night was horrible, we arrived in a terrible state, they washed us with kerosene”.<sup>54</sup>

But soon they recovered:

*“It was like a small town, all the intelligentsia gathered there and immediately founded a school, choir, theatre, a chapel, we were not lacking anything. We stayed there for two years. I had a good time, I went to school, my teacher organised school plays and everything. I used to say to my sisters, you can say what you want, but I was happy, I had friends, I did not worry about anything! [...] Everything was nice, there was no fights. There was unity.”*<sup>55</sup>

Another also states, “There was solidarity beyond everything”.<sup>56</sup> One particularly remembers boy scouts and how in the summer of '47 the British Army took them camping by the Adriatic Sea:

*“At dusk we gathered in front of a flagpole where we hoisted the Croatian flag. The sun was setting on the horizon. The only sound was the sound of the waves. While two classmates slowly lowered our flag, Master Pedro sang the Croatian anthem *Lijepa Naša Domovina* (Our Beautiful Homeland). We all began to sing, moved by an invisible energy, possibly what our elders call patriotism. One hundred children's voices rose from the beach and dispersed in the immensity of the Adriatic Sea. Croatia was on the other side.”*<sup>57</sup>

These are the personal memories of those who were old enough to remember. Apart from happy memories, several remembered the English incursions into the camp.<sup>58</sup> Those who were younger mix personal with family memory: “Mum was alone with the four of us, we were in camps for four years. I remember the

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<sup>51</sup> A. (1934).

<sup>52</sup> E. (1935)

<sup>53</sup> L. (1939) in Sprljan, Cristian N. 2014. *Campo Fermo: historia de los refugiados croata en Italia: 1945-1948*. Córdoba: Brujas, 20.

<sup>54</sup> M. (1938) in Verlichak, *Los croatas*, 48.

<sup>55</sup> M. (1938) in Verlichak, *Los croatas*, 48.

<sup>56</sup> M. (1938) in Verlichak, *Los croatas*, 48.

<sup>57</sup> L. (1939) in Sprljan, *Campo Fermo*, 34-35.

<sup>58</sup> E. (1935), F. (1938) in Verlichak, *Los croatas*, 49-50.

trains, we got on and off fourteen times, the Americans were moving us here and there.”<sup>59</sup> Another also draws from her mother’s memory: “My mom was very skinny, and she survived by washing the napkins and the underwear for the soldiers, and they would give her one spoonful of soup from their plate.”<sup>60</sup>

Another stated:

*“I have photos from Fermo, because there were photographers, and I was the first baby born there, I was everybody’s toy. When I was nine months old, I fell on the stove with my face. I don’t remember that although I had scars when I was little. I also had an infection, and I was hospitalised, and they did not let my mom see me, she was crying, and I was crying too, according to what she told me ... The men had a blast, they did not do anything, just playing cards, singing, joking around, and going to the beach, while women were taking care of the children.”*<sup>61</sup>

All of the interviewees also present either firsthand or secondhand memories of the arrival in Argentina, combined with their interpretation of historical facts. Some stated that when Evita Duarte de Perón, the First Lady of Argentina at the time, visited Italy in 1947, Argentina opened its doors to the emigrants,<sup>62</sup> or said that Evita sent ships with cereals to Italy for the refugees and then created quotas for “a bunch of immigrants to come”.<sup>63</sup> Others were more dramatic: “A woman named Evita, travelled around Europe and visited refugee camps, and she felt pity for them[...] This woman interceded before her husband, the Argentinean president[...] she kneeled before the General”.<sup>64</sup> Another interviewee said: “We did not have to wait because Perón was happy that the workforce was coming”,<sup>65</sup> although they all spent around 2.5 years in DP camps. The last one ascribed the merit to his uncle: “My uncle was a charming man, he was a playboy, so Evita was surely fascinated by him, and she and Perón grew fond of my uncle, so Perón asked him to travel to Europe and bring distinguished families to Argentina.”<sup>66</sup> This contradicts the known historical facts about the immigration policies of Perón’s Government (1946-1955),<sup>67</sup> as well the role of Croatian priests in Argentina in obtaining permits for Croats in DP camps at the time.<sup>68</sup>

All of the interviewees knew the exact date of their arrival to Argentina. Their arrival was the beginning of a new life, which meant “political fugitives automatically turning into economic migrants: we did not have any money”.<sup>69</sup> Many of them mention their first stop, the Immigrant Hotel, and a house in Monte Street, bought by a Croatian priest,<sup>70</sup> where all the Croats who needed

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<sup>59</sup> G. (1942).

<sup>60</sup> D. (1945).

<sup>61</sup> F (1945).

<sup>62</sup> F. (1945).

<sup>63</sup> K. (1947).

<sup>64</sup> Ozanic, *Guenechen*, 78.

<sup>65</sup> E. (1935).

<sup>66</sup> C. (1940).

<sup>67</sup> See the beginning of the article.

<sup>68</sup> Sinovčić, *Hrvati u Argentini*, 23.

<sup>69</sup> B. (1942).

<sup>70</sup> Sinovčić, *Hrvati u Argentini*, 43.

accommodation stayed until they found work and accommodation on their own.<sup>71</sup> Others mention that fellow Croats helped them by chance<sup>72</sup> or that help came from the Croats who had arrived in Buenos Aires earlier from Fermo, while others had families that had settled in Argentina before the war.<sup>73</sup>

Settling in Argentina and starting from scratch was a reality, and for some it was an especially traumatic experience:

*“We had to change our surname.<sup>74</sup> Before we were everything and suddenly, we were nothing. [...] If someone told my family my father was going to end up sweeping hotel rooms in Buenos Aires, they would have thought he was crazy. [...] My father was very austere, and we suffered his austerity a lot. We changed our surname back when I was 15. I was most affected by the classlessness, I did not have bad living conditions, but they were limited.”<sup>75</sup>*

One woman born in 1942 arrived in Argentina in 1955 and met her father after 10 years. She said:

*“I was expecting that America was going to be something else, something beautiful. I thought that fried chicken was going to fall from heaven. I remember that dad was waiting for us at the Retiro train station, and he was a stranger to me. We were travelling through all the beautiful neighbourhoods with beautiful houses and I was wondering which one of these houses was ours. But then we got off at the last station and had to take the bus. And then we came to our street, it wasn't paved and our house was very modest, we did not have light, it had adobe floor[...] To come all the way from Borovo, to leave everything, our friends, our family[...] we had parquet flooring in school and central heating back home. I started to cry.”*

(She started to cry during the interview.)

*“When they [the adult men] came here, if one immediately bought a decent house, the others would tell him: what kind of a Croat are you, are you thinking of staying? And we were used to having nice housing. It was really hard for me, but nobody asked me how I felt.”<sup>76</sup>*

Some went to Patagonia, where there was work and a Croatian colony: “My mum and another Croatian woman were handwashing for all the *paisanos*... she sewed shirts and underwear, and washed the laundry, and did everything manually”.<sup>77</sup> The family set up a restaurant where the children also helped out. In their free time they went to the beach and played with other Croatian children. Later they came back to Buenos Aires, where their parents always worked with Croats.<sup>78</sup>

They all spoke Croatian at home and learned Spanish on the streets with other children before school. They started to integrate in the society when they started

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<sup>71</sup> D. (1945).

<sup>72</sup> D. (1945).

<sup>73</sup> A. (1934)

<sup>74</sup> Owing to both substantiated and imagined fear of forcible extradition or assassination by the Yugoslav intelligence services, many political émigrés used false surnames in order to conceal their real identities.

<sup>75</sup> B. (1942).

<sup>76</sup> N. (1942) interviewed on 27 November 2017.

<sup>77</sup> F. (1945).

<sup>78</sup> K. (1947).

school. Those who were older had to start school immediately, without previously speaking Spanish: while some temporarily resorted to the earlier knowledge of Italian learned in the camps,<sup>79</sup> others had to improvise:

*“During the first break I was in the courtyard leaning against the wall and the whole school started to interrogate me. I was so desperate I only repeated the only thing I knew in Spanish: ‘no comprendo el español’. At a certain point I got so desperate that I started to answer in Croatian [...] Later I integrated because I was good at football, nobody could score a goal with me as a goalkeeper. Everybody started to like me!”<sup>80</sup>*

Those who did not pass through DP camps also had a different fate in Argentina. Two were enrolled in German schools, and one went to an elite school due to his father’s earlier connections. But he lived far away, so he would get off the bus earlier and walk to school, because all of the rest would come with chauffeurs: “I had a lot of friends, but I was living in the outskirts, and they were living in Recoleta.<sup>81</sup> It was a bad period, ten not-so-nice years. I lived two very different realities.”<sup>82</sup>

One recalls that “one day my mum got into a row with the teacher because she said we were Yugoslavs, and she could not believe that she didn’t know where Croatia was, so she took me out of that school.”<sup>83</sup> Dozens of Croatian girls became boarding pupils at the School of Christ the King in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, where Croatian Sisters of Mercy of St Vincent de Paul worked.<sup>84</sup> They were happy because they reunited with other *Fermašice* (Fermo girls).<sup>85</sup> Others were sent to other boarding schools run by Croatian priests, in Chovet and Mar Chiquita, because their parents could not take care of them and work. They soon learned Spanish: “When I understood everything, in March 1949, I was so happy”.<sup>86</sup>

With a few exceptions, most of them had a normal childhood, but with a great burden: “I had a very patriotic upbringing. My parents would repeat: ‘never forget that you come from a very well-known family’. But what did that mean 10,000 km away from Croatia, a country that had ceased to exist?”<sup>87</sup>

On the other hand, most of their parents never fully integrated into the society: “My father learned Spanish like all the adult Croats: half-way. [...] When he was sick and dying, he only spoke Croatian.”<sup>88</sup> Others had similar stories: “Mum didn’t learn Spanish, she needed help for everything.”<sup>89</sup> “We only spoke Croatian at home, and we were living in a Croatian block.”<sup>90</sup> This lack of integration was

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<sup>79</sup> E. (1935).

<sup>80</sup> A. (1934).

<sup>81</sup> An elite neighbourhood close to the city centre.

<sup>82</sup> C. (1940).

<sup>83</sup> F. (1945).

<sup>84</sup> One of the interviewees works at the school and showed the author of this article the school registry books from 1948 to 1966.

<sup>85</sup> E. (1935).

<sup>86</sup> E. (1935).

<sup>87</sup> B. (1942).

<sup>88</sup> K. (1947).

<sup>89</sup> G. (1942).

<sup>90</sup> D. (1945).

also aided by the fact that they worked for other, wealthier Croats who had established knitting factories.<sup>91</sup>

This sometimes even led them to self-isolation:

*Dad was the only exile; he was listening to Radio Zagreb all the time. He did not integrate at all. [...] I was the only one who completely integrated in the society. My dad was completely disconnected from society, apart from the family ties. He was low-spirited and not very active, so he did not think he could start anew, with a new language and with his profession as a lawyer.*<sup>92</sup>

It also went hand in hand with activities within the Croatian community. While members of the first generation were involved in political activities, the group of Fermo children regularly went to the Croatian House (*Hrvatski dom*) activities and participated in the choir, theatre or folklore group. They frequently talk about the *Dom*, and mention having been members of the Croatian Youth (*Hrvatska mladež*).<sup>93</sup> All of the interviewed women met their future husbands there, and their in-laws also married Croats from the Youth, which points to the dynamics of homogenous community formation based on endogamous (voluntary and forced) marriages. While most of them described this as a normal situation (“we knew each other since we were children from family get-togethers”<sup>94</sup>) one told her traumatic experience, and the other of her brother-in-law:

*“I could not bring anyone home if he wasn’t a Croat [...] But the boys from the Dom were like brothers to me [...] and I ended up marrying one of them. At the church wedding, I wanted to run away. But then I thought, no, it would be a disgrace for our parents, I won’t do it. I will get a divorce some day.”*

She then continues the story reinterpreted from the current times of struggle for women’s rights in Argentina:

*“You know that babies can be born out of rape? This is how my son was born. He is now 51 years old. I said I would get a divorce one day, and I did. [...] My mom said that it was a disgrace for the family and that I was a bad daughter.”*<sup>95</sup>

Another one mentions that her brother-in-law was also forced into marrying a Croat: “they hooked him up with a mentally ill girl, he was in love with her sister, but they made him marry the sick one”.<sup>96</sup>

The group of four children of top officials had a different story to tell. Two of them had fathers who were very active in the community, but the sons did not participate directly because they lived far away from Buenos Aires:

*“Dad never got into contact with the Yugoslavs<sup>97</sup> from Rosario. He would get together with five to ten ‘Croat Croats’ who had no relations with the Yugoslav Croats. And my dad went to Buenos Aires whenever he could. He always went*

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<sup>91</sup> Sinovčić, *Hrvati u Argentini*, 46.

<sup>92</sup> A. (1934).

<sup>93</sup> K. (1947), F. (1945), N. (1942), D. (1945)

<sup>94</sup> F. (1945).

<sup>95</sup> D. (1945).

<sup>96</sup> F. (1945).

<sup>97</sup> Referring to the earlier wave of immigrants who came before the Second World War.

*for the National Day.<sup>98</sup> We spoke Croatian at home but our activity with the community was through my father, who travelled to Buenos Aires.”<sup>99</sup>*

Another stated:

*“I felt that my father put Croatia ahead of his family... This created a barrier between us, everything that had to do with politics and Croatia. This is why I refused to accompany him in his permanent political activity in favour of Croatia.[...] We never talked about what he wanted to achieve with his activity in Argentina in favour of Croatia, for the rest of his life[...] And he did not introduce us to the Croatian community he attended. He respected our freedom and our idiosyncrasy, I would say with disillusionment and a bit of pain... My repudiation was extended to the study and use of Croatian language. We spoke German at home.”<sup>100</sup>*

Two fathers broke ties with the NDH leadership either during the Second World War or later, and lived disconnected from the community in Argentina:

*“My father saw Pavelić once on the subway. As soon as he saw him on the train, he got out. [...] We had contact with some of my parents' Croatian friends, but we did not have a community life. There was a break between the past and the present. [...] My father was the biggest critic of Pavelić. [...] One of the few ustasha leaders who regretted that we did everything bad, my grandfather, too. It is a source of pride for me. [...] My father wrote that he was sorry for the atrocities that he committed, my grandfather, too.”<sup>101</sup>*

When asked about his family's reaction to his grandfather's execution in Tito's Yugoslavia in 1947, he stated:

*“We saw it as 'sudbina' (destiny). If my father or my grandfather had arrested Tito, they would have shot him, too. These are the laws of the war. [...] If you are a revolutionary, you have to accept that you can lose.”<sup>102</sup>*

Another stated that his father

*“divorced from the Croats definitely in 1955 when “La Razón” daily published the list of Pavelić's Government in exile, appointing my father as XXX. He immediately went to Uruguay, where Pavelić was at that time, and told him he did not want to have anything with him or Croatia [...] When he came back, he told us: “The past does not exist. It is forward from here.”<sup>103</sup>*

Most of them continued to tell their life story of how they got an education, started working in their respective profession, formed a family and had children, and skipped forward to the day when Croatia became independent in the 1990s:

*It was a moment of euphoria, we could not believe that that was happening, and then I remembered that I was telling my father that it wasn't possible, and I*

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<sup>98</sup> 10 April 1941, the day of the foundation of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH).

<sup>99</sup> A. (1934).

<sup>100</sup> Vrancic, *Marcapasos*, 42.

<sup>101</sup> Referring to his articles for *Hrvatska revija* (Croatian Review).

<sup>102</sup> B. (1942).

<sup>103</sup> C. (1940).

“Nobody asked me how I felt”.  
Childhood Memories of Exile among the Croatian post-WW2 Diaspora in Argentina

*started to cry, because he didn't live long enough to see it. So, I regret having doubted his dream that Croatia was going to be independent again.*<sup>104</sup>

Another was also sorry that his father “died a year before the *new* independence of Croatia. He did not know that his wish came true”.<sup>105</sup> For another from the same group

*“it was a vindication. That the fight of my family and all that we have suffered was not in vain. That we, the Croats, partly ustasha and my family, returned to history again, before we were excluded from history, we were condemnatio victi.”*<sup>106</sup>

Another, who was born in 1945, said:

*“I got back my country, my identity. I was something. I belong to something again, I have a country, a Nation. Before, Croatia was only a Yugoslav province and nothing else. My parents suffered their whole lives because of that, and my husband always said that he was proud of being born in a free and sovereign Croatia.”*<sup>107</sup>

For many it was the first time they got a passport, because they had been stateless until then. When they travelled to Croatia, some were old enough to remember and reconstruct their childhood memories from the 1940s:

*I had low blood pressure when I was a child, so I had to stop and bow my head on my way to school. I always did that at the same place. Whenever I go to Zagreb, I stop at that place.*<sup>108</sup>

A man who was born in 1938 said that he “has not been home for 60 years”.<sup>109</sup> Others accompanied their parents: “My dad has not been in Croatia for 50 years. When he said goodbye to his cousin again in 1997, the farewell was so sad. They were very old then”.<sup>110</sup> Another had a very emotional get-together with his nanny, who had been like a mother to him, finding her house full of his photos.<sup>111</sup> One woman who was born in 1945 was proud because “Nobody believed that I was not from Croatia judging from my accent.”<sup>112</sup>

Although many travel regularly to Croatia, they could not live there because their life is in Argentina, where they had formed families.<sup>113</sup> When asked about their national identity, all of the interviewees stated that they feel Croatian, but that their home is in Argentina. But when asked how they imagined their life without the exile and refugee experience, the answers were varying.

One man from the group of the children of top officials said:

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<sup>104</sup> A. (1934).

<sup>105</sup> Vrancic, *Marcapasos*, 46.

<sup>106</sup> B. (1942).

<sup>107</sup> F. (1945).

<sup>108</sup> A. (1934).

<sup>109</sup> O. (1938).

<sup>110</sup> N. (1942).

<sup>111</sup> C. (1940).

<sup>112</sup> F. (1945).

<sup>113</sup> F. (1945), N. (1942), D. (1945), A. (1934).



*“I would have had social and cultural continuity, I would have attended a good school, and I would have learned Latin as a child. Instead, I had to learn it at an old age. [...] My family was very cultured, and everyone played some musical instrument. I think that it would have been a very happy life.”*<sup>114</sup>

Another from the same group considered that it would not have been much different:

*“I would have studied at a university, because it was a family tradition, it would not have been much different. We lost our roots and we gained another culture. [...] But when I visited my aunt in Vienna, I realised that it is a different life. Argentina is in a permanent state of decadence, compared to Europe it is pitiful.”*<sup>115</sup>

Others also mention that “it would have been a lot better, we would live in Europe, and here we are far away from everything.”<sup>116</sup> Another sees his entire perspective differently: “I don’t know if my parents would have met, because they met in Fermo”.<sup>117</sup> The last interesting comment was a more general one: “It would have been a lot more normal, and a lot less difficult. Easier, but less enriching”.<sup>118</sup>

### **Research Results and Conclusions**

The memories of the 1.5 generation, the children, were not present in the collective narrative of the Croatian émigré community in Argentina, therefore this research aimed to analyse how the exile affected their lives and how they were impacted by their parents’ decisions, although conditioned by extreme circumstances. The traumatic experience left a strong mark on the 1.5 generation and shaped their lives. The testimonies are additionally a useful tool for the reconstruction of the formation and functioning of the community of Croatian émigrés in Argentina, at least during its first decades.

On the one hand, they have their own memories, seen through the eyes of children even seventy years later. Where they do not remember due to their age, or when narrating the history of their family, they resort to and appropriate their parents’ memory as if it were their own. Since they were too young at the time of the NDH defeat or the postwar killings, and even in the refugee period until they settled in Argentina, when they talk about concrete historical and political events they tend to reproduce the exact wording that can be found in the political speeches and writings of the first generation diaspora members. Thus, child memories, although diverging, are inseparable from their parents’ and those of their community, especially when it comes to making a rational and intellectual sense of their exile experience. In drawing a parallel between the two generations, and relying on previous research, we can conclude that the most traumatic moment for children was the moment of exile in itself and their refugee experience. Their authentic childhood memories are alive and emotional, whether sad or happy, and most of them showed genuine reactions and emotions

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<sup>114</sup> B. (1942).

<sup>115</sup> H. (1938).

<sup>116</sup> F. (1945).

<sup>117</sup> K. (1947).

<sup>118</sup> A. (1934).

to personal memories, whether by crying when recalling traumatic moments or becoming enthusiastic when they talked about their happy childhood moments. Another observation comes from the gender perspective: female interviewees' stories are more descriptive and emotional, while male memories are more focused on listing events.

Even though many of the interviewees generally felt uprooted from Croatia and accepted Argentina as their home, when they narrate their personal life story the milestone moments are their arrival in Argentina, the family settling in the country and Croatian independence, while their adult life is not considered something worth telling. Their national(ist) sentiment resurges when their parents die, overlapping with the independence of Croatia in the 1990s, which they perceive as a continuation of their parents' struggle during the Second World War, a perception opposite to that of the Republic of Croatia. Thus, in order to make sense of their family and community suffering they attempt to merge their community history with the official history and justify the reason for their parents' struggle, without any critical questioning of their parents' role in the Second World War, even when they are fully aware of their actions. This subsequently gives way to a monolithic narrative that is perpetuated through generations, each one reinterpreting the past in the present moment and making it useful for their identity reinforcement.

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