

# Croatian Language and Culture in the Australian Context from 1945 to the 1990s

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The period from 1945 (the end of the Second World War) to 1990 (the establishment of the modern Croatian state, Republic of Croatia), encompasses the time when the official Croatian community emerged on the Australian continent. Croats had already been present on Australian soil since the mid-19th century, but over time they were lost as a specific ethnic group, recorded under another, foreign, name. Only the establishment of the first Croatian club or association in Adelaide, South Australia, in 1950 followed by Sydney, Melbourne in 1951 and Perth in 1952, marked the beginning of the Croatian community with a Croatian name. All these institutions were founded by newly arrived Croats, refugees from war-torn Europe, from the short-lived Croatian state. Although the state was broken, the Croatian nation-building spirit was not and after the war, it moved to the distant continent of Australia and there planted its seed. This was followed by the struggle for the recognition of Croatian identity, language, and culture. The language was specifically important because there was an attempt to impose the so-called Serbo-Croatian which suited the then Yugoslav narrative of one nation one people. Earlier settlers of Croatian origin in Australia succumbed to this narrative and instead of identifying as Croats and speaking Croatian, they identified themselves as Yugoslavs and called their language “naški”, in the sense of our people, our customs, and thus “our” language. Unlike them, the newly arrived Croats instinctively and declaratively identified themselves as Croats and referred to their language as Croatian, which caused confusion, uncertainty, and even resistance from the local Croatian people who saw these newcomers as a threat to their efforts to assimilate into Australian society as quickly as possible. Through their public appearances, Croats were forerunners of the future Australian multiculturalism which only began to crystallize in the Australian landscape in the 1970s. By defending their rights and their identity, Croats were in fact defending the rights of other ethnic communities in Australia. On the contrary, they were called extremists, terrorists, fascists by Yugoslavia. Local politics—the situation the Croatian people found themselves in after the Second World War in the then communist Yugoslavia was transferred to Australia. Thus, the struggle for Croatian identity, language, and culture also included the fight for the Croatian state.

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This my take on the topic of the Croatian language and culture abroad in the past, present, and future specifically refers to Australia, covering the period from 1945 (the end of World War II) to the 1990s, when on May 30 (the first multi-party elections in then-Yugoslavia) a new post-communist government was elected that began the process of establishing the new Croatian state, the Republic of Croatia.

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This period is important for Australia because it covers the time when an official Croatian community was finally established on that distant continent. This sounds anachronistic because Croats had been emigrating to Australia as early as the mid-19th century, but for distinct reasons, they were not identified as an ethnic group under the Croatian name.

In the introduction to his book *History of Croats in Australia*, Mato Tkalčević (1999) posed the question: “Why must Croats always remain nameless... because upon arrival in Australia they were registered as Austrians, Hungarians, Turks, Italians, Slavs, and Yugoslavs – but never as Croats. The frequent insistence of Croats to be recognized and listed by their Croatian nationality was often seen as ‘being involved in politics’”.

This is not surprising, as Croatia was under various rulers, and as subjects of those rulers, they settled in Australia. In some initial stages, there were societies that carried a Croatian name, such as the Croatian-Slavic Society in Boulder, Western Australia, founded in 1912, but over time, these identifiers were dropped for political reasons. With the creation of Yugoslavia, both the first and the second, the purely Croatian identity was simply erased.

Even Večeslav Holjevac in his monumental work *Croats Outside the Homeland*, when it comes to Australia, completely ignores those Croatian organizations, societies, and community centres that emerged after 1945, and the book was written in 1968!

Only the establishment of the first Croatian home or association in Adelaide, South Australia in 1950, followed by Sydney and Melbourne in 1951, and Fremantle (Perth) in 1952, marks the beginning of the official Croatian community in Australia with a Croatian identity.

All these institutions were founded by Croats, refugees from war-torn Europe, from the short-lived Independent State of Croatia. Although the state was broken, the Croatian nation-building spirit was not, and after the war it moved to the distant continent of Australia and sowed its seeds there. This was followed by a struggle for the recognition of Croatian identity, language, and culture.

Language was specifically important, because there was an attempt to impose the so-called Serbo-Croatian, which fit the then Yugoslav narrative of one nation and one state. This was the case with the Yugoslav community, which was mostly made up of Croats, but instead of promoting their Croatian identity, they promoted a Yugoslav one.

Many were ashamed to say they were Croats because communist Yugoslav propaganda created a negative image of Croats in the world related to events during World War II. It is a well-known fact that the victors write history, and this was the case in the territories of Yugoslavia as well.

Many early Croatian settlers in Australia, instead of saying they spoke Croatian, used the term “naški”, in the sense of our people, our customs, and thus “our” language. Unlike them, Croatian immigrants after World War II instinctively and declaratively identified as Croats and called their language Croatian, which caused confusion, perplexity, and even resistance from earlier settlers, who saw these new immigrants as a threat to their efforts to assimilate as quickly as possible into Australian, then still mostly Anglo-Saxon, society.

Through their public appearances, when it was necessary to take to the streets and demonstrate, the newly arrived Croats were not ashamed to promote themselves and their language as a specific ethnic group, which at that time was not only a curiosity but also an exception in general social behaviour, especially among immigrants. They were, in fact, the forerunners of the future Australian multiculturalism, which only began to take shape in the Australian context in the 1970s.

By defending their rights, their identity, Croats were in fact also defending the rights of other ethnic communities in Australia. On the contrary, they were called extremists, terrorists, fascists, and Ustashe<sup>1</sup> by Yugoslavia.

Given the political situation in which the Croatian people found themselves at the end of World War II, in then-communist Yugoslavia, it was not possible for them to exercise their rights, but they were able to freely exercise those rights in Australia.

By coming to Australia, Croats developed various cultural activities in the early years; alongside folklore and tamburica<sup>2</sup> music, various newspapers, and publications were printed, which often depended on the political situation and conditions in their homeland. The first Croatian language school in Western Australia was established as early as 1955, and similar initiatives were spread across the continent.

A major achievement of the Croatian community in Australia was the official recognition of the Croatian language by Australian authorities and the introduction of the Croatian language into Australian schools in 1979, so-called “Saturday Schools”. This education was introduced throughout Australia, wherever there were Croatian communities, because each of these communities aimed for the same goal in their area.

One of the key successes of the Croatian community was the establishment of Croatian language teaching at Macquarie University in Sydney in 1983, as well as the establishment of the Heritage Foundation in 1984, and about ten years later, the Centre for Croatian Studies. A Croatian lecturer was also employed, selected through a public competition. What is important to emphasize is how it came about that the language is called Croatian.

According to Tomislav Beram (2021): “When the Ethnic Council in New South Wales decided to support the learning of Croatian, Macedonian, Polish, and Serbian languages, the Schools Working Committee within the Ethnic Council decided that it should be ‘Serbo-Croatian’. The Croatian Inter-Community Committee convened a meeting of representatives of the Croatian community, at which a decision was made that only Croats can and have the right to say which language they speak, and that is the Croatian language”.

This is a crucial stance that Croats in Australia took at the time, not only when it came to language but in general. For example, the establishment of Croatian radio programs, because the Yugoslav model, which allegedly represented all ethnic communities from the former Yugoslavia, was being imposed on us.

Only through persistent work and determination was it possible to secure time for a specifically Croatian radio in Australia, independent of the Yugoslav one, and this was possible because from 1950 onwards there existed official Croatian communities on the Australian continent that knew how to stand up in defence of Croatian interests.

We can safely say that if there had been no Croatian clubs and associations, there would have been no awareness of Croats in Australia until the establishment of the Republic of Croatia, and even then it is questionable whether the realization of the Croatian state-building idea would have occurred at all without an active Croatian community in Australia.

Croatian political emigrant organizations were the leaders of that struggle in all its aspects. It was a mixture of political, sports, and cultural activities. Thus, alongside political organizations, sports clubs were established that, in addition to social gatherings, brought Croats together.

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<sup>1</sup> “Ustashe”—a nationalistic movement created in 1929 by Ante Pavelic to combat Serbian hegemonism following the assassination of Croatian leader Stjepan Radic and colleagues in the Yugoslav Parliament a year earlier.

<sup>2</sup> “Tamburica”—a typical Croatian string instrument, a lute, used in folk dances and music.

The Church played a significant role, serving as a cornerstone not only of religious but also of general social life in the community.

Drama groups were established in Perth; in Sydney, film activities also developed, and a film titled “Little Croatia in Big Australia” was made; records with Croatian songs were released, one of them being the song “Long Live Croatia”, which became the unofficial anthem of Croats in Australia. With the introduction of ethnic television SBS in 1980, Croats also participated in one of the programs, *Vox populi*.

One of the biggest cultural events was the 1988 performance of the Croatian opera *Nikola Šubić Zrinski* at the famous Sydney Opera House, under the direction of Croatian conductor Ivan Cerovac; it was a comprehensive Croatian contribution to the celebration of two hundred years since the founding of Australia.

This is just a brief overview of the diverse cultural activities of the Croatian community in Australia in the years before the establishment of the Republic of Croatia. After that historic event, cultural activity virtually doubled at first, as it led to the merging of the two previously separate communities, with former Yugoslav organizations and clubs joining the official Croatian community.

This significantly increased participation and interest, and secondly, with the establishment of the Croatian state, the Republic of Croatia, the Croatian community was no longer isolated in its work and could finally connect with the homeland and jointly organize various cultural events. Thus, in Western Australia, the Croatian Cultural Week was held for about a decade, during which a cultural event was organized each year featuring performances by artists and various representatives from both the Republic of Croatia and the Croatian community in Australia.

For example, the exhibition of Contemporary Croatian Graphics from Klovićevi dvori Gallery<sup>3</sup> or the performance of the folklore group Venčec from Zagreb were also visited in other cities and Croatian communities in Australia. At the famous Perth City Festival, a Croatian drama was performed for the first time, *The Corporal's Wife* by Vlaho Stulli, a Dubrovnik playwright from the 18th-19th century.

Considering that most Croats in Australia will not return to Croatia, it is important that these Croatian enclaves remain alive and active, and for that it is especially important to preserve the learning of the Croatian language, organize regular cultural events, and strengthen mutual connections.

“Little Croatia” is still present in Australia as well as around the world. It is important not to lose sight of this, and to give these communities as much support as possible so that their voice is heard in the homeland.

They are part of a larger, modern, global Croatia and deserve no less attention than that given to those at home, because with their experience, knowledge, and wealth they can greatly contribute not only to the preservation but also to the improvement of Croatian identity, language, and culture in the world.

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<sup>3</sup> “Klovićevi dvori” is a well-known art gallery in the old part of the city of Zagreb, named after Croatian-born miniaturist painter of the 16th Century Giorgio Giulio Clovio.