

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DR-25

Other Borders, Other Minorities:
The Croats of the Burgenland

Vienna

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7 September 1959

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers:

They came here in the 1520's and 1530's, these Croats of the Burgenland, invited by a Hungarian Prince to settle in a German land laid waste and depopulated by a Turkish invasion. In the South, their old homeland lay on the very borders of the Ottoman Empire, which would not retreat from neighboring Bosnia until 1878. Here in the North the farms were empty and inviting and the Imperial capital and Imperial armies at Vienna were comfortingly close. The peasants from Croatia settled down wherever the land was deserted, in the Burgenland and in neighboring districts of Lower Austria.

Over four hundred years have gone by. For over three hundred of these years there was little consciousness of Croat nationhood, there were never real links with the Habsburg Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia, and in an age when national feelings were being born everywhere, the area in which they lived was subject to the ruthless Magyarization programs decreed in Budapest.

But the Croats survived. The descendants of the 16th century colonists, 30,600 of them by the last census, live in 42 pure-Croat villages and about 18 mixed German-Croat villages of Austria's easternmost province. They speak Croat at home, to one another in the villages, and with Croat officials in the provincial government. In the churches the sermons are in Croat, in school instruction is given in Croat, there is a weekly newspaper in their language. The faces in the villages are broad and Slavic, and when they speak German they tend to roll their 'r's, as the Slavs do. And there is something about the Way of Life in a Croat village and home that is different.

They build a minority of 11.1% of the Burgenland population, 0.4% of the population of Austria.

If the problems and attitudes of this minority are different from those of other minorities in Central Europe, it is largely because of history and geography. In the South Tyrol and in pre-war Sudetenland, problems were created because Germans lived on the wrong side of the political frontier between a German and a Slav country. In the Banat and in the Siebenengebirge (Transylvania) the German minorities live (or lived) in compact islands in a Slav or a Magyar ocean. But here, a Slav people live in scattered villages in a German-speaking land, near the language border between German and Magyar: no Slav land adjoins, and one Croat village may be twenty miles from the next.

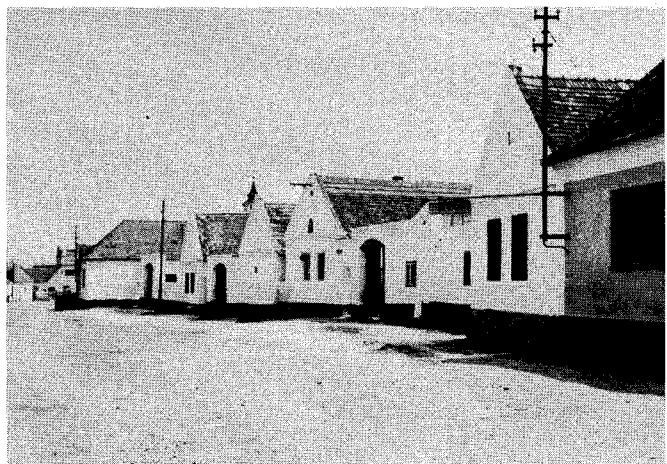
"You see," one of their leaders told me, "geography makes it impossible for us to be irredentist, even if we wanted to be. So when we say we are not irredentist, the Austrians believe us. When the Slovenes (in Carinthia) say it, they are not sure. It makes all our problems much easier."

Since the last minority group I had talked to was the South Tyrolean (DR-14 to 20), it was inevitable that I should find myself comparing the situation in the Burgenland with that in the Province of Bolzano. Burgenland Croats are fond of declaring, in print, in public and in private, that "there is no likeness between our situation and the South Tyrolean," and this is essentially true. A Croat village after the South Tyrol is like a healthy household after a visit to a sanatorium.

So the Austrians are justified in calling the Burgenland their "showwindow" of how the nationality problem should be handled. The credit must be divided between Austrian liberalism and Croat realism.

Oberlehrer Kornfeind runs the elementary school in the Croat village of Traisdorf (population 1400), on the road from Eisenstadt to the Neusiedler Lake. He was described to me as one of a small handful of Croat nationalist fanatics ("the most enthusiastic Croats have German names," I was told, and remembered that the leader of the German nationalists in Italy is named Magnago), almost all of whom are teachers or parish priests.

I found Herr Kornfeind out at the edge of the village, spending the summer finishing a new brick house he is building for his family. "The apartment in the schoolhouse is getting too small as the family grows," he explained. We walked back to the schoolhouse to talk, down a village street between rows of whitewashed farmhouses, while the village geese glared at us irritably. The schoolhouse stands on a crossroad that is the center of the village, and on the other corners are the town hall, the church, and the village Gasthaus, in front of which some friends who had come down from Vienna with me were bargaining with a Croat farmwife for a wheelbarrow full of apricots. The Gasthaus loungers, including the village idiot, came out to watch the clash of Viennese and Burgenland dialects. It was summer in the country.



Teacher Kornfeind began by talking about the history of his people, and his version was passionless and objective - except that when he added up the Croats in the various districts of the province he got a total of 40,000 in contrast with the official 30,000. He noted that the Burgenland Croats speak two distinct dialects (north and south of Ödenburg), neither of which is quite the Croat of Yugoslavia, and that most of the industrial workers among them are employed in Vienna, for the greater part in the building trades, and spend only their week-ends at home.

Then he got to the point: "We feel fully at home here, have full freedom, can do whatever we want to. If anything is not exactly right - from the nationalist point of view - the fault is ours, that we are not united in asking for it. This is because the Socialist Croats are not interested in their Croatism. The Austrian government cannot be blamed."

In the Croat villages there is Croat instruction in the schools. Each village decides how much. In Traisdorf, for example, the lessons in the first grade are entirely in Croat, since the children have up to then learned no German. From the second grade on German is taught and gradually replaces Croat as the language of instruction, until, after the fourth grade, Croat takes the position of a "foreign" language in the curriculum.

"We make this change, not because we must, but because we want to be competitive as a people in a German-speaking society."

There was no discrimination, he added, pointing out that from 1945-55 the Governor of the Province, Dr. Lovro Karall, was a Croat, "elected neither because he was a Croat, nor in spite of it, but because he was an able man," and that the present Suffragan Bishop for the Burgenland, Dr. Laszlo, is from a Croat-Magyar family.

"Before 1938 there was some nationalist hatred (between Croat and German). Of the Hitler time it is better that we do not speak at all. But since 1945 we have no complaints, we feel neither in the schools nor anywhere else any pressure." And Yugoslavia? "Four hundred years have gone by, and we have grown very separate, so there is hardly any connection for us. We are against Titoism even as much as we are against Moscow-Communism."

"We will disappear (as a minority group). Only let us die ourselves, do not force us to.... We don't break our heads over the fact that we are going under."

This was a "Croat fanatic"? He had been cited to me and in the press as one of the three leaders of the extremist wing. (Another is Father Karlo Prec, a Parish priest who has had rather close contact with the Yugoslav Embassy in Vienna, to the distress of his superiors; the third is Croat School Inspector Klaudus, who was a Titoist and editor of a Communist newspaper.) There is some evidence that Kornfeind was speaking

more moderately than usual. He has been under intensive fire from the church and his own (Catholic) party because he has consented to lead a group of one hundred Burgenland Croat children down to Dalmatia every summer as the holiday guests of the Croat People's Republic. But, on balance, his "extremism" seems to consist in his insistence that Croats continue to be taught in the schools in the Croat villages, and that there is nothing wrong with accepting the Yugoslav invitations.

For the Socialist Croats the Yugoslav-sponsored holidays on the Adriatic are a thinly-disguised Titoist trick to get at the young Burgenlanders and subvert them for Communism. The SPÖ leadership says bluntly: "no contact with the Yugoslavs, we will not be misused as a minority."

These non-nationalist Croats are in the majority: 64% of the Burgenland Slavs vote Socialist, and by no means all of the ÖVP Croats are behind Kornfeind and Father Prec. Chief spokesman for the Socialist majority is Fritz Robak, who began life as a railroad laborer and is now mayor of his village and a Socialist member of the Provincial Legislature. He is also one of the most alert and progressive-minded politicians I have met in Austria. "Kornfeind," he told me, "belongs to the group that wants to be put in a reservation, like the American Indians, and preserved for millennia."

For Herr Robak there is no "Croat problem". The Croats are being assimilated, and the faster the better. "As to what concerns the use of the (Croat) language at home and in the family," he told the Croat nationalists in the Provincial legislature, "there we are in agreement. I would defend myself against it, if someone were to forbid me to speak Croat at home. I don't want to be misunderstood; I am a Croat and I will openly declare myself everywhere as a Croat, but I refuse to demand Croat instruction in the schools."

His favorite analogy to the Croat situation in Austria is the position of national minorities he talked to in Pennsylvania during a visit to America last year. "I asked (the Germans of Philadelphia) whether they have German schools. They said: we don't need them, we want to be Americans! We want to earn our bread in America and to speak good English. At home we speak in our mother tongue, that we brought with us. We want to be assimilated, because we came here to become Americans, but not to found a German, a Hungarian or an Italian state in America."

There has been something of a running feud on the school question between the Croat mayors in the Burgenland for whom Herr Robak is usually the spokesman, and the self-styled "Croat Cultural Society", which claims to have a membership of 10,000. The Cultural Society had sent memoranda twice - in 1955 and in November, 1957 - to the four signatories of the Austrian State Treaty (the U.S.A., the U.K., the U.S.S.R. and France) protesting that Article Seven of the Treaty, covering the rights of the Croat and Slovene minorities, has not been implemented.

(Paragraph two of this article states that the minorities "are entitled to elementary instruction in the Slovene or Croat language and to a proportional number of their own secondary schools." Paragraph three provides that "in the administrative and judicial districts of Carinthia, Burgenland and Styria, where there are Slovene, Croat or mixed populations, the Slovene or Croat language shall be accepted as an official language in addition to German..." There are at the moment no secondary schools and the Croat language has no official status.)

After the submission of the first memorandum by the Cultural Society, the mayors and vice-mayors of the Croat and mixed villages of the Burgenland assembled (26 November 1955) and, by a vote of 29-16, approved a statement denying in strong terms the right of the Cultural Society to speak for the Croat community. "Because the demands of the Croat Cultural Society are likely to disturb the friendly understanding that has existed between the Croatish- and German-speaking people of the Burgenland and cause unrest," the assembled officials pointed out that only the elected representatives of the Croat community have a mandate to speak for the minority.

"The regulations of the State Treaty can only be applied to the extent to which the Croat Burgenlanders want to make use of the rights guaranteed them in Article 7. In these questions there can be no general rule for all Croat and mixed language communities of the Burgenland. One must leave the decision to the individual communities, how far they want to lay claim to the rights set down for them in the State Treaty.... We are and we remain good Burgenlanders and true Austrians."

Herr Robak's own view is that any special provisions under Article 7 would tend to separate the Croat Austrians from their fellow-countrymen and therefore would do them harm. On the school question, while he personally (and the Socialist Croats officially) believe that "Croat elementary schools are not necessary", Herr Robak is quite willing to make concession to the villages that want them. But he points out that it is the purely agricultural villages, like Traisdorf, which have little contact with the outside world, that want the Croat schools, and not the industrial villages like his own, whose men work in Vienna or Wiener Neustadt and want to speak and read German as well as their factory comrades.

In considering the Croat question in the Burgenland, I have made heavy use of the views of Teacher Kornfeind and Mayor Robak. This is because they are the acknowledged spokesmen of their factions, but also because I think they have articulated both fairly and completely the political ideas of their people.

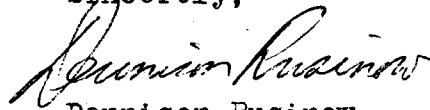
Discontented intellectuals and politicians without prospects are often accused of being the carriers of the disease of nationalism. In the case of the Burgenland Croats there

seems to be some truth in the charge, made evident by the failure of Croat nationalism to spread beyond the immediate circles of some teachers and priests - or, at most, the isolated farm communities served by these priests and teachers.

"I must say," Mayor Robak told the Provincial legislature during the school debate, "that neither the teachers nor the Burgenland parents have any interest in obtaining Croat instruction. One man has interest in it because, for example, he wants to get a job in the county administration, another, because he wants in addition to be an instructor in Croat, and the third wants something else of this sort. We defend ourselves against these things."

Among the Slovenes of Carinthia the story is not so one-sided and simple. There, Yugoslavia is just next door and has a standing claim to the territory. So the Slovenes are encouraged to make nationalist noises, and the Austrians are persuaded to regard them with suspicion as potential irredenta. This comparison with Carinthia makes it all the more comforting to learn from the Burgenland that the Nationalities Problem is not always and necessarily an insoluble one.

Sincerely,



Dennison Rusinow

Received New York September 18, 1959

BURGENLAND VILLAGES - ST. MARGARETHEN



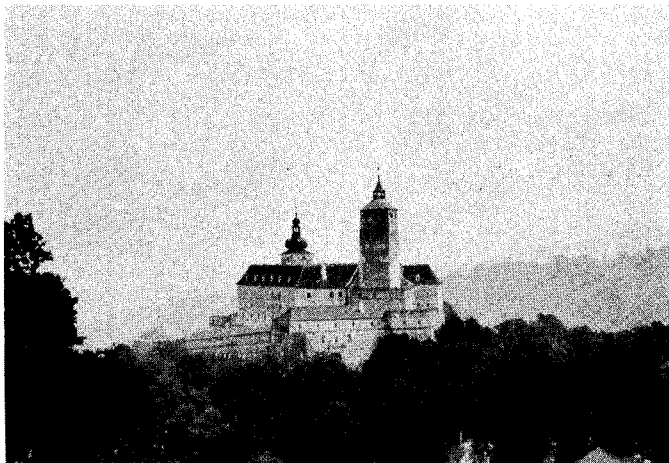
Michael Hekanos
farm laborer of
St. Margarethen



Burgenland Main Street



Behind the Main Street Entranceway - a
Courtyard



Castles -
Burg Forchtenstein



Towns -
Rust and Its Storks



The Lake of the Steppes -
Neusiedlersee at Rust