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Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

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In Search of Identity: Burgenland-Croatian Perspective

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Burgenland Croats are members of a Croatian minority who have been living in Austria (and neighbouring countries) for more than 500 years. As opposed to some Croatian minorities in other countries, in case of which various assimilation processes are visible already in the second or third generation, Burgenland Croats managed to preserve their language, culture and tradition for several centuries.

Our paper aims to give an insight into the strategies of identity construction in this Croatian community. The main issues we are dealing with are “collective” versus “individual” Burgenland Croatian identity, how this identity or these identities are constructed and what lies “beneath”.

The corpus comprises materials collected when conducting a study on German-Croatian language contacts in Burgenland, notes and observations made in Burgenland. Our examples were found in literary works, media (transcripts of TV and radio programs and newspaper articles) and personal stories of some of our informants.

In our analysis two perspectives were taken into consideration: the perspective of Burgenland Croats and outsiders’ perspective(s), be they Austrians, people from other (neighbouring) countries or Croats from their “old homeland”. In some cases informants discuss their experience and “how the others perceive them”, so in this context we could also talk about “embodied” perspectives or perspectives within perspectives.

Our analysis has shown that for the community in question the identity and nationality are closely intertwined and that identity often bears, implicitly and explicitly, a strong political dimension.

Key words: Burgenland Croats, minority, identity, language, culture

1. Introduction

Identity is a very complex phenomenon which we negotiate throughout our lives. Although it is crucial for each individual, it is often difficult to define it or comprehend its real importance and impact. Identity is a multilayered construct closely connected with language, culture and ethnicity, and the identity issues thus raise even more questions and pose more problems for the members of minority groups.

In this paper we will discuss how Burgenland Croats, the members of a Croatian minority group, cope with their identity. In our research several perspectives were taken into consideration. We will primarily focus on Burgenland Croats who live in Austria and analyzed their points of view. They express their own opinion and attitudes, but at the same time mention how “the others” see and perceive them. In order to give a better insight into the issues discussed, we will also include the observations of Burgenland Croats from the USA. In the analysis we will present our own notes and observations as to give an outsider’s perspective on the construction of Burgenland-Croatian identity.

2. Burgenland Croats

Burgenland Croats are among the oldest Croatian minority communitiesⁱ which have been known to live outside its homeland for more than five centuries. The majority of Burgenland Croats today live in the Austrian province Burgenland and elsewhere in Austria, but a considerable number of them are also found in Hungary, the Slovak Republic and even in the USA.

The migration of Burgenland Croats started at the end of the 15th century and lasted until 1650. The historians mention three migration periods. Although the exact number of immigrants is not known, according to some estimations in the three migration waves between 150.000 and 200.000 Croats left their homeland and settled in former West Hungary, Lower Austria, southern parts of Moravia and southern areas of today's Slovak Republic. The main reason of their migration was the war against the Turks.

In the period between the First and the Second World War and after the Second World War due to poverty many Burgenland Croats went to the USA in the search of better life. Most of them never returned and now make one of the Croatian communities in the USA with a significantly different background and history from the other Croatian communities.ⁱⁱ

3. Methodology

Since the majority of materials was collected during a large study on German-Croatian (socio)linguistic contacts, a variety of methodological tools was used. Our corpus comprises written materials which include newspaper articles, literary works and transcripts of television and radio programs. Since the study ended in 2009, for this paper we also analyzed more up-to-date materials.

32 informants participated in our study, and 5 of them were Burgenland Croats from the USA. We interviewed them and obtained their language biographies. Franceschini (2004: 228-229) defines the narrative interview / language biography as the story of an informant's life with a special attention given to the language dimension. All our informants dedicated large chunks of their biographies to identity issues, both implicitly and explicitly.

In the course of data analysis we applied the methods found in Fix / Barth (2000: 20-64) and Franceschini (2004: 123-125, 131, 137) with slight modifications. We modified our approach according to our informants. Most language biographies were obtained as an interview, but since some younger informants were shy or not comfortable to be recorded, we made a combination of interview and language biography in written form. They were asked to additionally write whatever they wish regarding the topics discussed in the interviews. Such approach gave them more time and enabled them to express all they wanted in as many words as they wanted. This proved to be useful approach since we obtained some information we did not expect but which were very useful to get a better insight in the everyday life of this community.

4. Socio-political situation in Burgenland

As already mentioned, Croats came to the areas they today inhabit because of the Turkish invasion. Some historians claim that the Croatian noble families such as Zrinski or Frankopani had their estates there and they invited Croats to come and revive their land. They got a certain level of autonomy and, what was extremely important for the preservation of language and culture, they were allowed to use their language in the church.

At the end of the 16th century, Croats from the Lower Austria experienced forceful assimilation, especially under the rule of the emperor Maximilian II. In the 18th century the assimilation processes were sweeping through the whole area resulting in German language only in schools, and officially in the church.

In the so called Westungarn (Western Hungary), Croats were not under assimilation pressure. There was even a tendency that the local priests know the language, i.e. dialect of the village they are “doing their service” in. But from the end of the 19th century there were some attempts to ban Croatian from schools and all the teaching should be done in Hungarian only.

After the First World War and the major political changes in Europe, Burgenland Croats also experienced significant changes. Until 1919 Burgenland Croats lived in the former Habsburg Empire. The Treaty of Saint Germain and Trianon brought the end of the Burgenland, and Austria got Burgenland parts of Westungarn. At the same time the Czechoslovakia was founded, and Burgenland Croats were separated into three states. Today they also have different rights depending on the state they live in (Austria, Hungary or the Slovak Republic).ⁱⁱⁱ

New borders and the new political map had a major impact on the Burgenland Croats. Over the night they lost their cultural centres, their capital and had to adapt to new conditions. That also had the influence on their identity, which is even today mentioned by the old generation.

At this point it is also important to mention the great migration wave from Burgenland to the USA. Soritsch (1987: 77) claims that due to poor economic conditions, around 1900 some 33.000 Burgenland Croats left for the USA, Canada and South America. One fifth returned 1929 because of the major US crisis. Between the First and the Second World War another 25.000 Burgenland Croats went to the USA, followed by 6.000 after the Second World War. According to some estimation, today there are 100.000 Burgenland Croats in the USA. The largest number of them lives in Chicago.

5. (Ethnic / minority) identity

In the analysis of our materials we tried to make a clear distinction between the individual and collective identity. But we came to the conclusion that based on the stories and features of individual identities / identities of individuals we could draw conclusions on the Burgenland Croatian identity in general / collective identity. It is not always possible to make general remarks, but in most cases we could easily single out similarities or even same opinions and attitudes, especially among the members of the same generation.^{iv} Nevertheless, the more time we spend in with this community, the more obvious it became that in some aspects we could recognise not only *intergenerational identity* but *intragenerational identity*. These terms suggest that not only the members of the same generation display common identity features, but the same building blocks of Burgenland Croatian identity are found in all generations.

For Burgenland Croats, regardless of the generation, the most important factor which forms their identity is the language, but they also stress the importance of their tradition and culture for its preservation. Although in the course of our study we have focused on Burgenland Croats from Austria, with the exception of the five informants from the USA, in the narratives and language biographies of most of our informants several layers of ethnic identity can be recognized. The dominant identity would be their *local identity*. They express close connection with their birthplace, i.e. their village. Their local identity constitute their families, the local community, the language, be it their idiolect or local dialect, and cultural and artistic associations. On the second level there is *Burgenland Croatian identity* both in the narrow and in the broad sense. Burgenland Croatian identity in the narrow sense signifies the identity of Burgenland Croats in Austria, whereas in broad sense it comprises Burgenland Croats from all three states. Although Burgenland Croats do not identify themselves with the Croats form their *old homeland*, the majority still feels the connection to their roots and, the identity in broad sense could even be labelled as *Croatian identity*. The third level would be *Austrian identity*, since our informants do not consider themselves a minority group, but Austrians, which is primarily the case with younger generations.

6. Burgenland Croats in Burgenland on identity

Most of our informants and other members of the Burgenland Croatian community we came in contact with are very proud of their roots which, in their opinion, constitute the pillars of their identity. They say that they are Burgenland Croats as long as they nurture their mother tongue, which is Burgenland Croatian.

In the magazine *Novi glas* (2/2011: 4) Lukas Kornfeind summarizes opinions we have heard from many different sides and read about in their language biographies and personal narratives:

“[...] our identity is most important for the survival of our community... The following factors are crucial for establishing and strengthening our identity: language use in general, language prestige and its economic value, but also relations to the *old home* and presence in the media. As far as the language use is concerned, the number of speakers is dropping, and consequently the language has less positive influence on our identity. But we all have the opportunity to encourage our friends to learn our language or to use it again, although some of them have already *lost* it.

The prestige of our language directly depends on the language use. We have to enhance its prestige both within our community and on the outside. Over the last few decades our language has been gaining on prestige, but we have to show the others, that it is *in* to talk Burgenland Croatian.

The economic value has been put aside. There are numerous Burgenland Croatian companies, but their owners neglect their roots. How could our people learn the value of our language? All the Burgenland Croatian companies should have Burgenland Croatian signs and choose Burgenland Croats as their workers and partners.

As for the representation in media, we all know that there should be much more media.

Our relations with the *old homeland* are still not the way they should be. We feel stronger bonds with Austria (at least we, Burgenland Croats on the Austrian side). But for the last few years we can observe growing identification with the *old homeland* which should not be underestimated. Our identity has suffered a great deal due to alienation and detachment both from the *old* and the *current homeland*. We were not Croats because we spoke differently, but we were not Austrians because we had a bad command of German. Politicians took advantage of this disparity and assimilated a significant number of Burgenland Croats...”^v

But some younger Burgenland Croats admit that they are feeling more comfortable when speaking German. Even in their personal stories it seems that they are still uncertain about their mother tongue. Our informant who is now 31 in her language biography wrote:

Burgenland Croatian is definitely my mother tongue. It is for me the language of family and everything connected to the family. But since I've obtained my education in German only, I have to admit that I feel more confident with German because in German I can express everything I want. I guess I could also express myself equally in Burgenland Croatian... I think I am bilingual and I could say that German is also my mother tongue to a certain extend.

Our 27-year-old informant is also aware of the close connection of language and identity, and feels the need to say that she is still Burgenland Croat regardless the language:

In my dreams I speak German, when I am thinking about something, I think in German, when I started writing poetry, all my poems were in German. I find Burgenland Croatian to be my mother tongue, but the first language that always crosses my mind is German. This does not mean that I am less Burgenland Croatian than the others. I am a Burgenland Croat with all my heart, maybe even bigger one than the ones who do not come from a bilingual family.

When discussing identity issues, most informants dwell upon Burgenland Croatian identity in the Austrian context. Here is a part from the language biography of a 31-year-old informant in which she compares Burgenland Croatian and “Austrian community”.

In my opinion, Burgenland Croats are not so different from the “rest” of the Austrian community; they only have an additional language. The situation is rather homogenous, but I would say that Burgenland Croats in general are the constituent part of the Austrian society.

Maybe I could divide it like this (that is only my thesis): their political identity is Austrian – they participate in the Austrian society, politics, etc., but their cultural identity is Burgenland Croatian, i. e. some kind of mixture of the Austrian and Burgenland Croatian. I would say the same for the language identity.

This informant recognises another Burgenland Croatian community in Austria – the one in Vienna.

The Burgenland Croatian community in Vienna is pretty interesting: on one side there are Burgenland Croats who have been living in the capital for two or three generations, and on the other side there are the ones who came later, for example to study.

It seems to me that Vienna became “cultural centre” of Burgenland Croats. This is at the same time rather problematic because Vienna and Burgenland are now “in conflict”.

Our 23-year-old informant mentions the aspects in which he can see that Burgenland Croats are different from Austrians:

According to some criteria Burgenland Croats are probably different from Austrians. The culture as such is a very wide concept, and I think that there are certain differences in some parts of „culture“ we live. The customs, mostly the ones connected to the catholic year, are in some points different from the Austrian. The weddings and similar events have a different tradition. A great difference is national music and dance, folklore, although, like everywhere, we can observe foreign influences – German, Slovak and Hungarian culture...

One of our youngest informants, who was 19 when we interviewed her, claims that Burgenland Croats resemble more Croats in Croatia than Austrians.

I think that Burgenland Croats in general are different from others, since every part of Austria has different mentality. But when we are together, we sing and dance a lot, which is more similar to Croatian ways.

The best conclusion of this part would be a quote from Michael Hirschler’s text on pessimism among Burgenland Croats found in *Novi glas* (2/2012: 19):

We are not allowed to fall into resignation due to our current situation. We have to pick up our strength and continue to cherish the value of our language instead of complaints that everything was lost. Because if we keep complaining, everything will be lost and the language, culture and identity of Burgenland Croats would disappear.

Once again we see how the trefoil of language, culture and identity, which most Burgenland Croats are aware of.

7. Burgenland Croats in the USA on identity

In our study we came into contact with five informants whose parents or grandparents left the Hungarian part of Burgenland for the USA. As opposed to Burgenland Croats in Austria, our informants from the USA assimilated

to the mainstream culture. Although they are aware of their roots and are familiar with personal stories and history of their ancestors and family, they consider themselves Americans^{vi}. Especially in terms of language use, the situation is very similar in all Croatian communities abroad. In some cases the second generation already does not speak Croatian, or speaks it rather poorly. Even though they usually keep at least a part of their Croatian identity, it is something they inherited. In this context, Burgenland Croats in Austria are really unique group.

Our informant S.G. (53) claims:

I feel like a Hungarian-Croat. My parents and grandparents would feel the same. I don't feel like a member of a minority group in America. I do feel this way though if I visit Burgenland, Austria. I have no negative experiences, and I have never been ashamed of my roots... if anything... just the opposite.

Informant J.L. (42) shares a similar view:

I feel like both. I am American with 50% of my ethnic heritage from the Burgenland/West Hungarian Croatian community. I am very proud of my roots. When I was a child, some children from different ethnic backgrounds would make fun of the names ending in “-its” but it never bothered me since our community was so strong.

Informant J.D. (43) also expresses a pride of her background, but remembers that she had some problems with it when she was a child:

I know that I'm an American but think of myself differently than others because of my background. I have a Hungarian flag that I fly on Hungarian national holidays but know I'm Croatian too. I have great pride in my ancestry and appreciate how much my parents have accomplished. My parents always spoke about “the Hungarians” when talking about growing up, which were people from outside Szentpeterfa.

There were so many people in my town growing up that were Croats from Hungary and I knew of quite of few children my age whose parents were from Szentpeterfa, so I didn't have any negative experiences as I grew up. When I was little I used to be a little embarrassed when my mom would yell at me in Croatian and say she was going to use the “kuhaca” (wooden spoon, unsure of spelling) when I was playing with my “American” friends.

The oldest of our American informants, F.T. (70), gave us a very detailed interview. E will quote just a part which deals with the identity.

We live and feel as Americans with an ethnic background and do not in the least considered ourselves to be a minority. Our nation is truly a “melting pot” of humanity and we accept each other for what we are and question not where we are from. Even if an individual speaks with a noticeable accent would anyone question them as to who they are and where they come from. We consider them to be an American and accept them for whom they are!

I would suspect that was not the case with our parents or grandparents who initially “broke ground” in America. They spoke a different language, lived in groupings of people with similar ethnic backgrounds, and worked their way into being accepted as Americans. They were hard working, God fearing people who instilled that same culture into so many of us.

I can remember being called a “Kroboten” in my youth which was not meant to be taken as a token of esteem! However, we were quick to refer to our antagonists in similar ethnic ways and for the most part, such expressions just “rolled off of our backs” and left no stigmas. I can state with the utmost candor that I was never ashamed of my heritage or roots. I consider that my heritage was an assist and not a detriment [...]

We should also point out that Burgenland Croats from the USA are “twice removed” from their original homeland which resulted in a significant change of perspective. Whereas Burgenland Croats from Burgenland see Croatia as their old homeland, for those in the USA the old homeland is Burgenland, and they do not mention Croatia at all.

8. Outsiders’ perspective on Burgenland Croatian identity

The attitude of one informant who wrote her personal story at the age of 24 at first came as a surprise, but in discussions with other Burgenland Croats, we noticed that some others, though in much milder form, share her opinion. Young people from active and vocal Burgenland Croatian families are under strong influence of their parents, grandparents and older generation in general. Although most of them are really proud of their Burgenland Croatian identity, whichever form it may take, with some of them at some instances it seemed that they are anxious to say all they wanted to share. This may be due to the fact that almost everyone knows everyone in the community and no anonymity could be guaranteed. But at the same time some feel responsibility and obligation towards their family and community and do not want to let anyone down.

80% of my friends are not Burgenland Croats because many Burgenland Croats are very conservative. They play *tamburica* or dance in one of the Burgenland Croatian societies, and I have aversion to it. For me, it does not represent the Burgenland Croatian culture. I am ashamed of it because most of people “outside” have an impression that we are all like that. We are always smiling, we are a bit silly, we are singing and dancing and that is it... I am convinced that many Croats who come to Burgenland think that we are “slow” and funny caricatures. I do not blame them – I would share their opinion.

This passage from a language biography introduces another point of interest: Burgenland Croats dwell upon how people from “outside” perceive Burgenland Croats, in which we get perspective within perspective.

In this context the (family) name as a powerful mechanism of identity construction comes into play.

Many Burgenland Croats with family names in which the Croatian origin is still recognizable write their family names in two versions^{vii} – (Burgenland) Croatian and “foreign”, e.g. Sučić and Szucsich. This phenomenon should be examined more thoroughly, but we have not noticed that any of our informants were ashamed of their roots or that any of them were trying to “camouflage” their family names. One of the reasons they often mention is simply to make it easier for Austrians to pronounce them.

When discussing family names, we have to mention that in Burgenland we met a Croat who came to Burgenland as a young boy during the war in Croatia. He stayed there, learned Burgenland Croatian and married a Burgenland Croat. Though it is not a custom for a husband to have his wife’s family name, he now has two family names, and his wife’s comes first. He says that he decided to do that because Austrians could not pronounce his family name.

But in the course of our research we noticed that (family) name for Burgenland Croats is an important feature of their identity. In all our correspondence they used Croatian version of their names, especially the older ones, because this made it more intimate. It was a sign that we all our Croats.

As for those who today bear Austrian surnames, they usually have Austrian names too, or at least “austrianized” or internationalized version (e.g. Katharina). Younger informants admit that it is much easier when they have Austrian names because German is their first language or second mother tongue and with Austrian names no one notices that they are foreigners.

Although this is not the case with our informants, cases like the one we will mention obviously do exist, since we find it in a relative new novel written by Petar Tažky (1995: 11). One of the protagonists, Heidi Petrovits, is ashamed of her roots, and she is hiding behind her name. She says that Heidi was an old German name, and that she “adjusted” her family name to sound more Austrian than Petrović. But at the funeral, when all the emotions come to surface and when she meets other Burgenland Croats, she is not ashamed anymore.

Grandma Reza also wrote her surname Petrovits, but she pronounced it Petrović. But in school I say I am Petrovic. First, I do not want that people think I am a child of some guest worker from Bosna, and secondly Petrovic sounds more Austrian than Petrović. Besides, Heidi is an old German name. Why should I mix German name with Croatian surname? Yes, I admit, I am a bit of ashamed of my background. But on the funeral of grandma Reza I did not feel ashamed.

9. Conclusion

In this paper we have discussed various aspects of Burgenland Croatian community. As it can be seen from our research, this is a very complex topic which cannot be covered by only one paper. Some language biographies can be analyzed as case studies for themselves, but our aim was to give a general overview and to show which factors came into play when discussing the issues of (minority or ethnic) identity of Burgenland Croats ranging from language and culture through tradition to the (family) name.

The overall situation gets even more complicated when we (re)consider all the socio-political and historical aspects which have posed additional problems. Ultimately, we cannot neglect a large number of Burgenland Croats who today live in the USA. Even though they are more similar to other Croatian minority groups, their ancestors are still Burgenland Croats and they have Burgenland Croatian roots.

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ⁱ Karaševo Croats in Rumania are the oldest Croatian Diaspora.

ⁱⁱ A historical overview and more about Burgenland and Burgenland Croats can be found in Ernst (1987: 201-202; 249), Ščukanec (2011: 17-50), Tobler (1995: 38-42), Ujević (1934: 8-9), Valentić (1970), Vranješ-Šoljan (2005), etc.

ⁱⁱⁱ On normative minority protection in Austria see Polzer Srienz, Mirjam (2009: 63-66)

^{iv} See also Treichel, Bärbel (2004: 75-77)

^v Translated from Burgenland Croatian by the author.

^{vi} In our talks our informants said that they are both Americans and Croats, but all the informants are members of a group called *Burgenland bunch* and they are rather active members of their communities. But at the same time they described the situation and in this melting-pot-society the younger ones forget their roots.

^{vii} One of our informants, whose language biography is not discussed in this paper, provided a possible explanation for this “phenomenon”. His parents came to the USA from the Hungarian part of Burgenland. He studies the genealogy of the area that also includes the study of last names. He noticed that the spelling of a last name was variable over 100 years ago and it was dependent on the “inclination” of the record keeper who maintained birth, marriage and death records. Typically, this would be the village priest and would vary depending on the ethnic leaning of the priest.