

The Role of Culture in Creation of Regional and a Common European Cultural Identity – Istrian Case Study

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This paper explores the processes of imagining the nation and the construction of identity in the competing narratives of the Istrian history, space and culture as the key references of identities derived from the transcultural contact zone at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, Central Europe and Balkans. We will demonstrate how the intellectual elites of this liminal borderland made a use of culture for the nation- and region- building. Our research will be focused on the articulation of the regional cultural identity, narrated in the work of the Istrian polyhistor Mijo Mirković (1898-1963), who used the elements of traditional culture to (re)construct the local identity, seriously endangered in the period of fascism. His work also provides a model for understanding the transition from the pre-industrial oral culture into an unstable modernity which seized Istria in the most barbarous of manners employing the imperial and colonizing trespassing practice, the untypical ideological blend of a mass consumer culture and aggressive interventions of totalitarian ideologies into identity. We will also explore contemporary models of creative use of culture in creation of regional and a common European cultural identity.

THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN CREATION OF REGIONAL AND A COMMON EUROPEAN CULTURAL IDENTITY – ISTRIAN CASE STUDY

The idea of culture which will be dealt with in this paper subsumes questions of values, symbolism, language, tradition, belonging and identity (Eagleton, 2000). Culture has always had two dimensions: the identity associated with heritage in order to preserve our own roots, and openness bound to the history, to reflect the contemporary world. Dominique Wolton defines cultural identity as a dynamic process based on communication with others: "Culture encompasses all environmental elements that allow to be placed in the world, to understand it, to live and not feel threatened or excluded" (Wolton, 2005). Cultural identity as a project of belonging and organization of the sense of life today is based on freedom of cultural choice. Postmodernism has deconstructed the monologue exclusivity of traditional identity formation, so that in the postcolonial globalizing world we are talking about hybrid, multiple, fluid identities, where it is considered that everyone has the ability to choose his/her own identity independently through processes of identification with a particular social group or lifestyle.

In the age of globalization and of late/liquid modernity culture changes the meaning of the concept of identity as a permanent, stable and unchanging means of social integration of individuals and groups. The postcolonial and the postmodern (or late modern) condition and the theories that (re)define it, articulate culture as a dynamic, open structure to build a fundamental (globalized) identity as transnational and hybrid. It is a kind of cultural determinism, which explains the world of globalization as an economic and political hegemony of the economic-political ideology of the West, and at the same time explores strategies of the counter-hegemonic resistance in terms of culture as the bearer of identity and meaning.

Unlike western societies, which have matured from the necessity of collective identity to the civil right on their own choice and convert the construction of identity into a creative bricolage, for marginalized and excluded groups of the oppressed on the global periphery, cultural identity was the only answer to globalization issues. While the postmodern individual continuously reintegrates and rebuilds itself, negotiating in a sovereign way with ideological apparatuses, free of the inertia of traditional authorities, pre-defined routines and unquestionable truths, the vast majority of humanity is trapped in a cage of imposed identity, from which, as natural and historical necessity, can not escape.

If we accept that the identity is the source of meaning and experience of the people (Castells, 2004), it is necessary to explore the ways that various cultural and discursive practices used in the "expansion of the battle zone" in the border and peripheral contact zones of our interest, such as Istria. Choosing a single identity in the fluid modern world, as Bauman points – is a risky operation. Our ancestors had no such choice: in the era of nation-building, identity was a weapon to fight. It was used in defense of small, local knowledge, memories, traditions and habits, but also for the homogenization against different communities. "Identity is at the same time the fight against disintegration and fragmentation, the intention of devouring and a firm refusal to be eaten" (Bauman, 2009). These models are now deprecated: if the fate of the modern world, as Stuart Hall points out, is cultural diversity, ethnic absolutism seems regressive line of late modernity. In this context, the greatest danger are the forms of national and cultural identities that are trying to ensure their survival by adopting closed versions of culture and community, and refusing to deal with difficult problems that arise when trying to live with difference (as we have seen, globalization and multiculturalism influenced the revival of national identities).

A critical look at the concept suggests that the cultural identity, as a local response to the globalization of cultural trends, is constantly being re-constructed or "invented" and conceived with the help of stories, symbols and other forms of representation, based on the basic systems of language, ethnicity, religion, heritage or history.

The process of discursive formation is common in the creation of European and individual national identity. Although such cultural and historical constructions have a certain emancipatory role in the fight for human rights, freedom and democracy, they often justify the use of force, genocide and war.

Specifically, such a process of totalitarian "imagining of community" and the construction of national identity based on grand narratives always as result and side effects has the homogenization and the exclusion of Other and different as a foreign and hostile.

We analyzed how the border area, on the basis of grand narratives, constitutes a very similar literary and cultural models of identity construction as opposed to neighboring culture that is perceived as otherness and difference. As such literature produced border, so the border produces its literature, which it defines and defends. As an opposition to this model, we will introduce and explore sustainability of the contemporary practice of multiculturalism, cultural pluralism and intercultural dialogue, cultural tolerance, interaction and transborder cultural communication.

ISTRIA - A MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE MULTICULTURALITY?

In this paper, Istria is defined as a multicultural, contact zone of mobile boundaries, in which through history continually meet and negotiate different cultures, which opens the possibility of cultural hybridity, exchange and change. Its turbulent history was written at the crossroads of three cultures (Slavic, Roman and Germanic), on the border between the East and West, North and South, which resulted in a wealth of different cultural influences. Political conflicts and frequent changes of borders and colonial (imperial) authorities, economic and social insecurity have caused frequent migration and transformation of the cultural identity. The Mediterranean northernmost peninsula, closest to the Central European region by sea, with the central position at the heart of Europe today is the most important Croatian tourist region and a model for sustainable multiculturalism. A turbulent past has left many traces in the collective consciousness, mentality and cultural identities: Istria is today one of the richest of Europe's regional museums, both of tangible and intangible heritage. Numerous cross-border projects and international cooperation of Croatian westernmost region with its neighbors constantly reconfirm its European identity.

The only constant in the turbulent history of Istria were constant changes of government, from the Roman Empire and Byzantium, through the Frank State, the Aquileian Patriarchy, Venetian Republic, the Pazin County, Illyric Provinces, Austria, Italy, to Yugoslavia. The division of this small area among various states and political influences of dominant European powers, especially between Venice and Austria, decisively influenced the specificity of life and variety of cultural influences and identities. A characteristic of this liminal area is the long history of migration, continuous settling of new groups of "different" in an area that between half of the 14th and the end of the 17th century experienced the ravages of war, epidemics, economic decline and general deterioration (Bertoša, 2006). All this takes place in the broader context of the Mediterranean cultural and historical model, characterized by historical dynamic and continuous transformation. Consequently, the Istrian identities from the early Middle Ages to the present are an amazing sum of "fragmented" identities of the individual parts of (the Croatian and neighboring) ethnic areas that were built in those crucial centuries, influenced by dramatic changes in the Mediterranean, Central and Southeast Europe. The biggest change in this turbulent period occurred in the border areas, which have come under attack of powerful political forces in the expansion - the Ottomans in the East, and Venice and Austria in the West. The Turkish penetration of the Balkans was followed by increased migratory movements and continued ongoing migration to the west and northwest, towards the Adriatic coast, islands and Istria, while immigration has radically changed the characteristics of cultural identity in the region. Heterogeneity of culture/s in Istria is the

result of such migrations in history. With the shift of many rulers, the Istrian history is marked by frequent migration flows and the colonization of many Greeks, Italians, Albanians, Romanians, Montenegrins, and immigrants from different Croatian regions that have come to Istria (or were settled/colonized by Venice) fleeing from the Turks (who invaded Istria nine times between 1470 and 1499!). In Istria two parallel worlds co-existed for centuries: the Roman town and Slavic village, with a few contacts (but there were also recorded processes of mutual acculturation).

After the fall of Venice in 1797, for a short time Istra was a part of Napoleon's Illyrian Provinces. After centuries of stagnation caused by wars, epidemics and famine which devastated the region on the borders of the great empires, the most significant development took place under the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1918. The greatest progress occurred in the south of Istria and Pula, who in 1850 was selected for the main Austrian naval port (during only half a century, the population of Pula increased as much as thirty times!), while on the nearby Brijuni islands at the turn of 19th and 20th century Viennese industrialist Paul Kupelwieser has developed an elite tourism destination.

DISCOVERY OF IDENTITY AND IMAGINING OF THE NATION

National ideas and patriotic speech created a nation state in the 19th century (or, as in the Croatian case, failed to create it), printed the national anthem, built a national cultural institutions and symbols, established colonial empires, started two wars, made the Holocaust and so completed their journey through history. Social-utopian idea with its ideology and imagology raised the revolutions, wrote the engaging song and its novels, created its institutions and symbols, established its type of super state (the Soviet Union, the second Yugoslavia), conducted the purges under Stalin, provide "fraternal assistance" after the World War II and died under Russian tanks in Prague in 1968. (Oraić Tolić, 2006)

Istrian cultural and political history of 19th century was marked by the discovery of national identity/ies and by development of competing and conflicting national narratives. After the 1848 Istria, as a typical border contact zone lived a parallel, double process of national revival, first the Italian and then Croatian. Romantic discourse of national awakening spread in Istria first among Italian bourgeoisie (Croatian bourgeoisie did not exist!), whose national/nationalist narrative was built on stories of a glorious past of "high" Roman civilization. On this track, Italian historiography and publicistics in the second part of the 19th century constructed the cultural imperialistic model, developing the thesis that „most advanced“ nations must assimilate "people without history" (such as the Croatian and Slovenian)! Of course, in the dominant hegemonic model, politically stronger side disposed with discursive apparatus needed for construction of cultural identity in the region.

Claims that Italy was a natural successor to the ancient Roman Empire and medieval Venetian Republic, as well as patriotic fervor of Italian Risorgimento influenced the strengthening of Italian irredentism, which appeared as a request to join the provinces populated by Italians or mixed communities, which were left outside the national state after the unification of Italy: Istria, Trieste, South Tyrol and Dalmatia. The thesis of Istrian Italian liberals and national/nationalist-oriented intellectuals that "civilization", "language", "writing" and "culture" in general are the basic criterion for determining the origin of Istria in the ethnic, national and governmental terms, had to accept their opponents on the Croatian side (Bertoša, 1985). The question of nation and nationalism started a real political fight between the national elites in the peripheral region, politicizing oral, previously apolitical rural Slavic culture of the Istrian village.

So there also started the fight of "people without history" to preserve the survival of their cultural identity, against the hegemonic forces, cultural and political acculturation and its ultimate consequences - assimilation. Istria, which by the administrative and political division of the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the 19th century, was made a separate province directly subordinate to Vienna and detached from its national Slavic corpus, failed to grasp the Illyrian movement, as the culmination of the Croatian National Revival. Without schools in the national language, without the right to their language in everyday public use and without bourgeois intelligence, economically exploited and politically deprived Istrian Slavic (Croatian and Slovene) majority population could not be included in the current national, literary and political agendas. Austrian authorities, however, supported the local authority of the Italian bourgeoisie, while the majority village population, Istrian Croats and Slovenes, did not have any preconditions for the cultural, literary and political activities. (Strčić, 1989). Croatian and Slovenian intellectuals, among which the most numerous were the priests, sought to strengthen the national consciousness among the people of Istria by printing of the first newspapers in the native language. Through literary feuilletons in these newspapers ("Naša sloga" 1870-1915) can be monitored also the process of imagining of the nation in dramatic historical circumstances. (But, in opposition to the grand national narratives, the real regional identities have always been constructed on the local, micro-level, as a difference to the neighbouring village culture, and not on the macro, international level, as national elites wanted).

The cultural and literary life in Istria was suddenly interrupted by the World War I, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Italian occupation of Istria, which prompted the Croatian and Slovenian Istrian intellectuals to live and create in exile. Specifically, after the Italian occupation and in particular after the arrival of Mussolini to power (in 1922), more than 70,000 Croats and Slovenes emigrated from the area called Venezia Giulia to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in several waves, a part of them also in overseas countries. Among them were mostly all Istrian intellectuals, that the new government fiercely persecuted, interned, and condemned to long imprisonment. They continued their political and cultural activity in the League of Yugoslav immigrants from Venezia Giulia, which across Yugoslavia had fifty branches and details, and in the emigre journal "Istra".¹

Emigration intensified by the adoption of the royal decree prohibiting the Croatian and the Slovenian languages in schools and churches (1923), forced changes of surnames and toponyms (1927) and finally by the prohibition of Croatian and Slovene press in 1929. In this context I would like to explore the role of Istrian intellectuals in exile, and especially of their spiritual leader Mate Balota (which is the literary pseudonym of the academician Mijo Mirković) in the most critical moments before the Second World War, and his programme of cultural, political and economic liberation and emancipation from the aggressive totalitarian regime, in the context of the "Mediterranean regionalism" literary and cultural movement between the two world wars .

LONG ISTRIAN 20TH CENTURY OF CULTURAL DIASPORIZATION

The analysis emphasizes the universality of the positions of exile "organic intellectual" as a typical experience for 20th century - a time of cultural identity diasporization (Hall). According to Edward Said, a contemporary intellectual is always in exile and at the margin, his position is characterized by hybridity and "place between" what it takes in exile, living on the borders of transcultural identity (as two typical Istrian intellectual destiny we mentioned

¹ <http://www.ino.com.hr/data/istra/1937/1.pdf>, 15.5.2011.

Mate Balota, as the representative of the Istrian Croats, who under the fascist occupation were forced to exile, and on the other side Fulvio Tomizza, as a writer and “spokesman” of the Italians which after the World War II in a large exodus left Istria).

At the intersection of postmodern and postcolonial theory, identity is defined as a narrative, as the way the community experiences and represents itself to the others through stories. According to postcolonial theory, narratives are the method simultaneously used by colonizers in the creation of an exotic Other, and by colonized peoples in order to confirm their identity and existence of their own history. In these theoretical frameworks the development of competing and conflicting narratives of the border contact zone from romanticism and national revival onwards could be traced.

Istrian narratives have often been politicized and ideologized. The same events were interpreted in different ways, so there are different, even diametrically opposed versions of official and personal histories of this border area. Since the World War II onwards, and especially during the reaffirmation of national identity in the 1990s, the history interpretations depended on the dominant national narrative.

On the other hand, the peculiar regional, "transnational" identity as an opposition to the grand national and totalitarian narratives developed. In contemplating the desirable model of coexistence, modern age again re-invented the Mediterraneanism as a form of hybrid post-identity and a model of sustainable multiculturalism. Mediterranean here appears as an (utopian) metaphor for tolerance, cultural exchange and peaceful co-existence.

So we explored Istria as a typical border zone where different cultures meet and where, depending on the dominant national narrative, coexist opposing versions and interpretations of history.

We were interested in how cultural identities are represented and constructed in a variety of oral and written narratives, assuming that narratives have central role in representation and cultural identity formation.

As the modernism has produced a grand narratives in the function of imagining the nation and the construction of nation states (and possible reallocation of the surplus of identity and culture through the imperialist projects of the colonial empire) postmodernism has to deconstruct a whole system and address the local experience of the history rewriting from the perspective of colonized subjects. Using the methodological tools of contemporary literary and cultural theory we analyzed the painful process of transition of the pre-industrial, oral, non-political, rural culture in uncertain modernity, which in Istria broke in the crudest way, during the fascism, through colonialism and imperial hegemonic practices, an unusual combination of mass culture ideology of consumerism and aggressive intervention of the totalitarian ideologies in the most intimate and most precious elements of cultural identity.

Our research showed how the different narrative techniques in a turbulent cultural and historical context ensured the transfer and "conservation" of cultural forms, the reconstruction of cultural identity and the reproduction of specific ways of life threatened by aggressive hegemonic practices.

We can conclude that Balota, from the position of the exile organic intellectuals gave the voice to his own oral culture to rewrite the history of colonized communities and himself as a subject. Uniting in himself the tradition and the modern literary and scientific approaches and methods (some of them also anticipating) and constantly oscillating between the so-called culturalism and economism, from inspiring doctoral dissertation (About the Causes of Economic Backwardness of the Slavic Peoples, defended in Frankfurt, Germany 1923) to the monumental monograph Flacius, Mirković-Balota laid the foundations for the contemporary theoretical considerations of relationship between of tradition, cultural identity and the modernization processes.

Balota's transcultural criticism, as emancipatory literary and scientific program, articulated the authentic regional culture as resistance to hegemonic discourse, with the ultimate goal of "translation" of communication of cultural patterns and particularities from one community to another.

Humanistic message of the rich life and creative work, in which he designed and aesthetically selected an indispensable contribution of the Istrian traditional culture to the European civilizational matrix, is updated by the integration processes and Croatian accession to the European Union. Especially emphasized in this process are links between Istrian heritage treasures and native elements of cultural identity with the common European values, in the continuity of the Glagolitic culture and contributions of Istrian Protestants to developing literacy in Europe, Istria, Croatia and the wider South Slavic area, through the turbulent centuries in which the modern multicultural Istrian region was built, to the dramatic changes between the two world wars, when the first generation of Istrian intellectuals gathered in new-čakavian poetic movement of «Mediterranean regionalism» created a program that has contributed to the victory over fascism and the association of Istria to the mother country. Witnessing the realization of his vision, including the establishment of the University of Pula, and the total economic and cultural prosperity of the region, which through international cooperation projects continuously affirms its European identity, we can conclude that the Mirković-Balota achieved his lifelong dream: he managed to bring closer to readers in Croatia, but also to the wider European and global environment, after centuries of isolation, his Istria, terra magica.

THE POETICS OF ISTRIAN EXODUS

Mijo Mirković – Mate Balota was a leading Istrian scientist, writer and polyhistor of the 20th century, one of the first modern culturologists, postcolonial authors and organic intellectuals (in the Gramscian sense) in the wider region. The paper analyzes Balota's/Mirković's narrative about Istrian history, space and heritage of the area, as key determinants of identity, culture/cultures emerged at this peculiar place, the crossroads of the Mediterranean, Central Europe and the Balkans.

I defined Mate Balota as an organic intellectual, a spiritual leader and an avant-garde spokesperson who anticipated the times ahead. Having had a specific role of an intellectual, he also had a political and anti-hegemonic influence. Therefore, in this paper he has been perceived as a person who was the voice of the unnamed and the oppressed people of Istria both in exile and in their homeland. After a century of silence and the history held at a standstill, he spoke in the name of the Istrian people, responded to the epistemic violence of the imperialistic project and rewrote the history of his colonized community.

Balota's scientific, cultural and literary interests had been determined by a wider cultural, social, historical and political context of the time when he lived and worked as well as by his living conditions, the cultural environment in which he had grown and intellectually matured, and especially by the scientific and literary initiatives he had encountered in his youth, his schooling years and, later, in a wider Central-European context of his studying period.

The state of exile which he had been almost launched into by the dramatic rush of history from the safety and tradition of his picturesque Mediterranean homeland to a bustling Central-European (post)modernity, significantly influenced the creation of his specific poetics and the narrative strategies of the authorial writing through which we could follow the individualization process and the creation of a modern, organic intellectual.

Balota's literary and cultural platform was published in Miroslav Krleža's (the leading Croatian intellectual of the 20th century) journal *Pečat* (The Seal) in the stormy pre-war year of 1939, questioning the prevailing literary forms and structures of the time while representing the author's antifascist plea for the literature to become a seal, a document and a

portrait of time. It was in 1938 when his socially engaged poetry, which was written in the Čakavian dialect (the base of the oldest Croatian literary language), was integrated within a collection called *Dragi kamen* (The Precious Stone). His poetics had an important social impact on the emancipation on the national and political level. It also had a great role of preserving the endangered cultural identity. Drawing from the Fernand Braudel's model of the Mediterranean culture and defining it in the realm of the space, history and a cultural heritage - that is, in the realm of a conflicting quality and the continuity of the relation towards the Other and the tradition – the hypothesis has been put forward to prove that Balota's poetry, acting within a framework of a new wave of the Čakavian dialect and the Mediterranean regional (neorealistic) movement, marked a successful continuity of the golden years of the Čakavian dialect as the first literary language of the Croats as well as it marked the affirmation of the Mediterranean cultural tradition, simultaneously disputing an aggressive manner of the hegemonic discourses. The book on the Istrian born Protestant theologian Matthias Flacius Illyricus, Flacius, which was published in the same year as *Dragi kamen* (The Precious Stone) in the dramatic pre-war context in 1938, we could read as a metaphor for the cultural revolutionary quality and a reform. In those times of the considerable hopelessness, it represented an ideological platform for the revolutionary solution of the process of cultural, economic and political emancipation, as well as for the liberation from the totalitarian ideologies.

Following the guidelines of the author himself, Balota's novel about the lives of the Istrian people *Tijesna zemlja* (The Narrow Land, 1946) has been read as a document and the seal of time. The novel has been explored as one of the few ethnographic monographs about Istria, where the institutions of people's lives have been documented prior to the colonial and totalitarian interventions into the cultural identity of the local community. Therefore the folklore has been analyzed as an art form representing the grasp of the world and as the opposition to the dominant culture, while the ethnography has been perceived as a true account of the culture itself.

Formation of modern collective identities and imagined communities through the narratives enabled the emergence of "the print capitalism" and "print languages", which at the time of the Reformation laid the foundations for the expansion of national consciousness and creation of national languages and literature. In this context, for our region were extremely important activities of the famous Protestant theologian Matthias Flacius Illyricus, who, as Luther's closest collaborator, with a wide circle of supporters, is responsible for printing the first books in Slavic languages and the spread of literacy in the native language among the Croatian and Istrian people. Among our scholars, Mijo Mirković dealt most extensively with the Flacius's rich opus, devoting to him three monographs, of which a third from 1960 was his life's work. In this unusual hybrid of scientific and literary monograph he explored the activities of Istrian (Croatian, Slovenian and Italian) Protestants, who have significantly contributed to the spread of literacy and culture in the wider region, especially in Istria as a specific multicultural area.

Rich literary pattern was used as a high quality research material for the model of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of cultural identity in Istria, as a typical frontier contact zone, in the dramatic historical circumstances in the past 150 years. Namely, in this period, the westernmost region in Croatia has experienced considerable transformations regarding the elements of traditional and popular culture as well as the models of cultural identification. The most important changes and the most crucial periods during which these changes occurred were documented and artistically transposed by Mate Balota – Mijo Mirković, the most relevant Istrian writer and scientist in 20th century, in his rich and versatile opus. At the same time, from the specific (post)modern position of exile (post)colonial author, he actively participated in the articulation of the modern cultural

identity of Istria. More than once, Balota clearly illustrates how the native regional and national identity was protected, (re)constructed and transformed in Istria for centuries, through using the cultural heritage in the stormy economic, political and cultural context.

Some scholars read his works also as “poetics of the Istrian exodus” (Rabac Čondrić, 1991): he wrote his most famous works such as *Dragi kamen*, (The Precious Stone, the poetry collection), series of feuilletons *Istra se mijenja*, (Istria is Changing), and *Tijesna zemlja*, (The Narrow Land) novel about the common life of the Istrian people, being displaced from his native region. He presented the cultural clash and dramatic changes in Istria during the fascist occupation in his documentary-realistic overview, presenting the everyday life of his own and other similar families in the Istrian countryside. His scientific-literary hybrids: monograph on Matthias Flacius Illyricus, the famous Protestant theologian originating from Istria, and *Puna je Pula* (Pula is Full), literary monograph which documents the turbulent history of the Istrian capital are the part of the emancipatory project of the history re-writing from the perspective of hitherto subordinate people, and confirmation of their identity and cultural continuity.

Many people from Istria experienced changing first and family names by force as a central trauma of denationalization during the fascist ‘ventennio’. Balota wrote about this aggressive intervention in the most personal features of cultural identity in his series of feuilletons *Istra se mijenja* (Istria is Changing) in 1937 and 1938, in particular, in his famous feuilleton *Moj nećak Aldo Emilio* (My Nephew Aldo Emilio). In the text, written in 1938, the author deals with the problem of denationalization and forced change of names of the Slavic population during fascism. He particularly resents the fact that his nephew, of Croatian descent, got an Italian name – Aldo Emilio. As a part of this research and my doctoral dissertation, I found Balota's nephews, who after the war with his father emigrated to America via Italy, and studied their fate. Using the method of oral history I interviewed Aldo Emilio (before he died last year in he age of 72). It turned out that, after liberation from fascism, the new government once again changed his name, and this time in – Miljenko! (Slavic variant of the name Emilio). When I asked him about the experience of personal identity - which name he prefers (Emilio or Miljenko) and how he feels, he said he did not care about his name: in the new U.S. passport after the war the only name left was – Aldo.

So we could compare grand and „little“, written and oral narratives, containing various versions of the (hi)story about the Istrian plural identities. Mirković-Balota told and literary transposed the history of his own and Istrian exoduses until the World War II, liberation from the occupiers and incorporation of Istria into the mother country. The writer's family has survived all the Istrian exoduses in the 20th century. The first large-scale migration to Moravska at the beginning of the First World War, when lots of the Istrians died, the great trauma which remained relatively unprocessed in the collective memory, was depicted in his unfinished prose *Na plodnoj Hani* (On the fertile Hana)². The evacuation to Moravska was shared by his brother Mijo and mother Mara (from May 1915 to late 1917), along with other 30,000 inhabitants from the neighbouring places around Pula, the main Austrian military port; Aldo, Nada and Gino's mother, Zlatka, were also there as well as her sister, aunt Mila.

The second large-scale exodus started when the fascists came to power and the majority of Balota's literary opus considers this painful topic. After the World War I, in particular after the Rapallo Agreement, when the Italian army entered Istria, the forced Italianisation began, including the changes in toponyms, family names and first names: Vjera Slava thus became Fedora Gloria, and Srećko Mihovilović from Pula was then called Fortunato Micheli. During the fascism in Istria, 115,157 Croatian inhabitants and other non-Italian people were forced to

² Edited in *Proza i poezija* (Prose and Poetry), Pododbor matice hrvatske, Rijeka, 1959.

change their names and surnames (Mezulić and Jelić, 2005). According to Tone Peruško, the change in name was aimed at showing, also externally, that only the Italians lived in Istria and in the rest of the Julian March; also that the feeling among the Croats and the Slovenes of belonging to the national community of people in Yugoslavia could not be so strong any more, because the surnames of people on both boundary sides were the same (Peruško, 1968).

The change in name was based on the law dated 8th March 1928, which forbade parents to give their children 'funny and immoral' names. Next year the municipalities made a list of names that had to be changed in the register books, asked parents to change them, and in cases of rejection, names were 'regularly' changed by the authorities themselves. School teachers also changed their pupils' names, said Peruško. However, something similar happened after the World War II as we can see from the story about Balota's nephew, Aldo Emilio, whose name was changed at the Yugoslavian school. His teacher did it on his own initiative, so he became Miljenko. After the capitulation of Italy, the general Istrian uprising and the decision on joining Istria to Croatia and Yugoslavia, one of the first decisions made by the newly-established revolutionary government in Istria referred to the decree issued on 26th September 1943, according to which 'all the violently Italianised surnames, names of places, villages, streets and, in general, all the Italianised signs and inscriptions were to be replaced by their old Croatian names'.

However, a new exodus started when the demarcation line between Croatia and Italy was determined after the international conferences in which Mirković took part as a negotiator (so we could say that he first defined the western Croatian border in his literary work, and then, politically, during the international negotiations process). When the World War II ended, 201,440 refugees³ left Istria, so it can be often heard that there is another Istria living in diaspora. Interestingly, among numerous emigrants, living outside Istria with different identities, there is also Balota's family, including the famous literary character Aldo Emilio. Three nephews along with their mother received the Italian citizenship, as advised by their uncle Mirković, to be able to opt and later, via Italy, join their father in America. Their father, as we found out from the eldest sister Nada, had to go to America, after having run afoul of the new authorities. He supposedly got into a fight with one of the local functionaries at the political meeting.

CONTEMPORARY USE OF CULTURE

Mijo Mirković/Mate Balota was one of the first modern Istrian intellectuals, who represented the interests of Croatian people, rightless for centuries. "A farmer, a fishermen, a sailor, an academic and a poet...first Istrian who wrote 50 books", as it is written on his grave in his native village Rakalj in southern Istria Rakalj... His poetry, in which he reconstructed the traditional culture, endangered by totalitarian practices, is now a part of popular culture. His monographs on Matthias Flacius Illirycus and Pula gave a great contribution to the cultural history of Istria, Croatian and Europe. His novel *The Narow Land* in which he recorded, with the ethnographic precision, key elements of popular culture before the totalitarian project, experienced great popularity and became a part of the school reading. His local history project of creating of Istrian multicultural regional identity (which can be traced in the last monograph on Flacius from 1960) is still alive: political and intellectual elites like to use elements of popular culture, which he reconstructed in his works, in creation of the cultural

³ Based on data obtained from the Historical Research Centre (Rovinj), see also Dukovski, Darko: *Model egzodusa: Istarski Il grande esodo, 1945.-1956. godine. Uzroci i posljedice* (The Model of Exodus, Istrian Il grande esodo 1945-1956. Causes and Consequences), p. 320.

identity of Istria as the modern, tolerant and multicultural European region. Many motifs from his poetry are used in the reconstruction of traditional culture and also in tourism, as cultural identity elements. „Tradition is also the inspiration for numerous artists who remember it, research it, and shape it in a contemporary manner. Their music, written words, figurative and stage expression, witness that homeland values can be and still are universal and lasting, that today's artist can very successfully identify with his/her roots, even at the age of omnipresent globalisation and the creation of new and unique cultural values“⁴. His verses are quoted in popular music, his name carries a department of newly established University of Pula, whose creator he was.

Nowadays, Istria is internationally positioned as the region of culture, thanks to both its rich cultural, intellectual and scientific heritage, his multiculturalism, as well as intensive development of creative industries and the specific culture of everyday living of its people. Its cultural identity is built on the tolerance and respect for the pluricultural history and the European future. Unlike the grand national narratives, which was (re)constructed after the disintegration of the Yugoslavia in 1991, Istrian regional identity is not built in opposition to the Other: our Others from the past have become neighbors with whom we successfully cooperate on cross-border and international projects, searching for the new models of cultural identification, which are not so exclusive (transnational identity: Mediterranean, European, cosmopolitan?). As the opposite to the totalizing monological exclusion of grand competing and contrasting narratives used by the politicians by occasion (the art of storytelling has created a nation, but also conflicts among them), the exchange of conflicting historical and interpretative narratives and conflicting memories could be considered contribution to redefining and re-imagining of alternative, less exclusive cultural identity of the border zone.

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⁴ From the web-sites of the Istrian County, www.istra-istria.hr, 15.5.2011.

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