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Religion and the politics of identity in Kosovo

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Publication date
1999

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Duijzings, G. H. J. (1999). *Religion and the politics of identity in Kosovo*.

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CHAPTER 1

The Exodus of Kosovo Croats: a Chronicle of Ethnic Unmixing

The war in the former Yugoslavia, and the transformation of this multinational state into a number of new national states, has resulted in large-scale population movements across the newly established borders. Through ethnic cleansing and other, less violent but equally efficient forms of ethno-demographic 'engineering', the war has resulted in a seemingly irreversible process of ethnic 'unmixing' (Brubaker 1995), which has radically altered the ethno-demographic picture of the whole region. Yugoslavia, which, as Roux has noted, was perhaps the only country in East-Central Europe where a complex ethnic picture had not been 'simplified' during the great wars of the 20th century (Roux 1992:30) is now sharing the dubious fate of many other European states. Many areas in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Serbia, which have had mixed populations for many generations and longstanding traditions of ethnic coexistence, have now been exclusively appropriated by one or the other group (Serbs being the main land grabbers, closely followed by the Croats, while Muslims have largely picked up the pieces that were left behind). Besides removing those who do not belong to the nation, the procedure of ethnic cleansing also has involved the appropriation and 'cultural' purification of the landscape, destroying churches and mosques, and eliminating the cultural heritage of the 'Other(s)'.

The most drastic and painful consequence of this process of ethnic unmixing and national homogenisation has been the enormous flow of refugees, who were either dumped in the West, or were 'sent home' to their respective 'native' countries. While Muslims in Bosnia have carried the main burden of human suffering, we should not forget that also numerous Serbs and Croats have been expelled from their homes. This chapter describes my own particular experiences with this process while I was doing fieldwork in Letnica, a Croat village in Kosovo, on the present-day border with Macedonia. Although there was no war going on in Kosovo, within a few months (between July and December 1992), the majority of the Croat population of Letnica and the surrounding villages decided to flee, abandoning their houses and leaving their possessions behind.

They went as refugees to Croatia, where most of them have been resettled in Western Slavonia. As I was in the position to witness and observe these events at first hand, I wrote this chronicle, in which I have attempted to describe and document these events as factually and as faithfully as possible, my first aim being to save them from oblivion. While writing this chronicle, I have put most (not all) of my anthropological preoccupations in the background, although I want to stress that it still reflects primarily my own point of view. It is the account which I hope does justice to the chaotic and distressing experiences of the people most concerned.

An ethnographic sketch of Letnica prior to the exodus

Letnica is a small and remote mountain village hidden away in the Black Mountains or Montenegro of Skopje¹, at the very fringe of present-day rump Yugoslavia. This mountainous area is still also known under the old Turkish name *Karadag*. Letnica is situated at the upper end of a long and narrow valley, surrounded by green and flattened mountains which form a natural frontier with Macedonia. The new Yugoslav-Macedonian frontier is within a stone's throw distance, only half an hour walking up hill or along the brook which goes through the village. Not very long ago, the border did not have the importance which it has gained now. When I came here first, in the summer of 1991, it was an unguarded administrative border between Kosovo and the Yugoslav Socialist Republic of Macedonia. Letnica's residents were able to cross the border freely, for example those pilgrims who used to walk to Skopje every year in June, to visit the Catholic Church there. In 1992, however, the border was "upgraded": it became the new state border between the republics of Yugoslavia and Macedonia.

Letnica is —or I should say was—the geographical centre of a number of villages and hamlets, which together form a Croat and Catholic enclave in an area that is mainly inhabited by Muslim Albanians. Letnica was not the largest Croat settlement here, but thanks to its central geographical position (in the valley), its importance in the economic, administrative as well as in the religious sense surpassed that of nearby Šašare, which had twice as many inhabitants as Letnica.

¹ *Mali i Zi i Shkupit* in Albanian or *Skopska Crna Gora* in Serbian and Croatian.

For long, the church of Letnica was the only Catholic church in this area, and on Sundays —when people used to visit church— a market was held around the village green. Letnica was also the administrative centre of this Croat enclave, housing the *mesna zajednica* (local community office) where for instance the municipal registers were kept. But in the first place, Letnica earned its reputation as a pilgrimage site, visited every year by thousands of pilgrims of various ethnic and religious background.² The huge white Church of *Majka Božja Letnička* (the Mother God's of Letnica), built on a hill, dominates the whole village.³ It was erected more than sixty years ago on the site of a nineteenth century church which had been damaged by a land slide (Turk 1973:18). In the middle of the 1980s, in Vrnez and Vrnjavokolo —two nearby villages that border on one another— a second modern church was built, dedicated to the Croatian saint Leopold Mandić (who was canonised by Rome in 1982).

Five kilometres away lies Stubla, one of the few Catholic Albanian villages in the province, high and splendidly situated on a mountain terrace, overlooking the plain of Kosovo. Stubla is larger than any Croatian settlement, and since the beginning of the twentieth century it has its own church, forming a separate Albanian parish. Prior to this, it was part of the parish of Letnica like all other Catholic settlements in *Karadag*. Stubla has a special historical reputation as the village of the 'Albanian martyrs'. In the middle of the nineteenth century, many Albanian families from Stubla were deported to Anatolia after they had publicly declared themselves to be Catholics. Until then, they had been *laraman-s* or crypto-Catholics, who had feigned to be Muslims, especially in contacts with the Turks and neighbouring Muslim Albanian clans (Turk 1973:33-47). Many

² This sanctuary was visited not only by (Croat and Albanian) Catholics, it was and still is also extremely popular among Gypsies, who are predominantly Muslim. Letnica was also —but to a lesser extent— visited by Orthodox Serbs and Muslim Albanians. Already between the two World Wars, Letnica was the main Catholic Marian centre in Southern Serbia, visited by Catholics, Orthodoxs and Muslims from Kosovo and beyond. Letnica was of such a crucial importance to the diocese that the first eucharistic congress of the Skopje bishopric was organised in Letnica, in 1931 (Urošević 1933:161).

³ The Madonna of Letnica is popularly called *Letnička Gospa* (by Croats) or *Nëna e Letnicës* (by Catholic Albanians). One also encounters the names *Majka Božja Crnagorska* (Croatian) and *Zoja Cërnegore* (Albanian).

Catholics in Stubla claim to be the direct descendants of these *laraman*-s, and some of them still carry names of a irrefutable Islamic origin. In the mountainous hinterland of Stubla, in some remote and almost deserted hamlets, there are still some crypto-Catholic families left. As some informants told me, they have kept their Muslim appearance because of traditional marital ties with Muslim clans. As far as I know, at least until 1925, many *laraman*-s let their children be baptised by the Catholic priest of Letnica or Stubla, who gave them a Catholic name apart from the Muslim name which was the one used in public (the church mostly referred to them as *occulti*). However, most of the *laraman* families moved to the plains, where many of them gave up their double religious identity. Some openly converted to Catholicism, while others became full-fledged Muslims, dependent on which of the two religions was dominant in their new environment.

Stubla, Letnica and all other Croat settlements are part of the municipality (*opština*) of Vitina, where political power is now entirely in Serb hands, although Serbs comprise no more than 17% of the total population of the municipality. Their most important stronghold is Vitina itself, a small town situated on the plain, some 12 kilometres from Letnica. In this town, which has only a few thousand inhabitants, Serbs form the absolute majority.⁴ Since 1990, they have assumed complete control over the administrative bodies of the municipality, expelling all the Albanians — to a lesser extent also the Croats— from all important and less important positions. Apart from Vitina, there are two other Serb settlements on the road to Letnica, the two villages Vrbovac and Grnčar. When from the summer of 1991 tensions between local Serbs and Croats were on the rise,

⁴ According to the census of 1981, the municipality of Vitina counted 47.839 inhabitants. Almost three quarter were Albanians (35.105 persons), Serbs accounted for 17% (8.369) and the Croats for 8% (3.722) of the total population (Grabeljšek 1991:332). The last census of 1991, which was massively boycotted by the Albanians of Kosovo, shows the following results. In that year the Croatian community of Vitina (including the settlements Letnica, Šašare, Vrnez, Vrnovokolo and the predominantly Croat hamlet Kabaš) counted 4.324 persons, on a total (and estimated) population of 57.290 inhabitants (*Popis '91 Stanovništvo. Vol.1: Nacionalni pripadnost. Podaci po naseljima i opštinama*. 1993. Beograd: Savezni zavod za statistiku. p.118). Šašare was by far the largest Croat settlement with 1.606 inhabitants, while the villages Letnica (808), Vrnez (835) and Vrnovokolo (885) were more or less of the same size. Almost all residents were Croats. The mixed Croat-Albanian settlement of Kabaš, near Vitina, counted

due to the war in Croatia, the strategic position of these two Serb villages —at the very entrance of the valley that leads to Letnica— was seen as a potential danger. In case violent clashes would occur, for which the people of Letnica increasingly feared, the Serbs had a very important strategic advantage. They were able to cut off the main communication roads. For the Croats in Letnica, as well as for the Albanians in Stubla, this road was the only connection to the outside world.

Listening to the stories of my informants, I realised Serbs and Croats had been on friendly terms with each other until quite recently. Often, Serbs would offer shelter and meals to those Croats from Letnica who possessed land near Vrbovac and Grnčar, and who came here to work their land or to reap the harvest. Every year in the middle of August, many Serbs would visit Letnica, during the Assumption Day pilgrimage. Some of them would come here primarily for trading or to sell their agricultural surpluses. Others, especially women, would visit Letnica for religious reasons as well. Even Serbs from more remote places like Gnjilane (30 kilometres away) were eager to visit Letnica; particularly young people considered it one of the main opportunities for fun and courtship in this part of Kosovo. A young Serb politician from Gnjilane (member of Milošević's Socialist Party), told me with nostalgia in his voice how he —during one of his visits to Letnica— had fallen in love with a Catholic Croat girl. His passionate attempts to marry her failed since the parents of the girl disapproved of a marriage with a non-Catholic. Though mutual ties of marriage seem to have been an exception, the relation between Serbs and Croats was one of affinity and mutual support, since both were very much aware of their shared position as an ethnic and religious minority among a vast majority of Albanian Muslims. During my fieldwork in 1992, many Croats from Letnica told me that the relations with Serbs had deteriorated only the last two to three years. Traditionally, as older people remembered, there had been more problems with the Muslim Albanians, who used to raid houses, to steal cattle, and to start blood feuds.

What I found most striking in this area was the ambiguity and convertibility of identities. I was often asking myself “Who is actually what, and what were they originally?”. The Albanians in Stubla are Catholics at present, but they were Muslims before, or to be more precise they were

351 inhabitants, of which the vast majority (248) were Croats. Most inhabitants of Kabaš had settled there recently, and had largely come from Albanian and Croat villages in *Karadag*.

Catholics and Muslims at the same time. Depending on the particular requirements of a situation, they would choose for one or the other option. The Catholic women of Stubla still wear the *dimije*, the harem trousers that nowadays are worn only by Muslim women, and also other Muslim habits have been preserved. Some individuals from Letnica claim, however, that the Albanians in Stubla are Catholic Croats by origin, who in Turkish times were Islamicized and subsequently Albanianized.⁵

Next, at the time of my fieldwork in 1992, the inhabitants of Vrnavokolo, a village next to Stubla which is now almost deserted, were Croats. But I heard many of them speak perfectly Albanian, in contrast to other Croats here, who normally did not know and simply did not want to know Albanian. They had traditional marital ties with the Albanians in Stubla, and were much more oriented towards Stubla than the Croat parish of Letnica, to which they formally belonged. Also here, most women wore the *dimije*, whereas literally two houses further on—in the adjoining village of Vrnez—the women dressed in the typical red-white costume that is considered the traditional Croatian costume of the area.⁶ Some inhabitants of Letnica sneered at the people of Vrnavokolo for their old-fashioned and patriarchal way of life, which they claimed was very similar to that of the Albanians. I started to wonder whether or not the Croats of Vrnavokolo were perhaps Albanians before, who had been Croatized as a result of being under the jurisdiction of the parish of Letnica. This was at least the view held by some Albanian Catholics from Stubla.⁷

⁵ This claim seems to be untenable in the light of historical evidence provided by Urošević. On the basis of his own research Urošević concluded that the ancestors of Stubla's inhabitants were Catholic Albanians who came from Topojane in Northern Albania in the middle of the eighteenth century (Urošević 1933:165).

⁶ The border between Vrnez and Vrnavokolo was once indicated to me by a inhabitant of Vrnavokolo, who drew a imaginary line between two houses that were built next to each other. There is no better example to show that boundaries are primarily constructed in people's heads.

⁷ Processes of osmosis and mutual assimilation between Catholic Croats and Albanians in Kosovo have been noted by Rizaj (1987:378). In 1922, Baerlein pointed out that the Austrians tried for 30 years to Albanianize the Catholic Croats in Janjevo, and that the Janjevci resisted this, boycotting church and school. Their priest, called Lazar, who defended Slav national consciousness, was forced to flee to Serbia. After Kosovo was conquered by Serbia in 1912,

Also the 'Croat' identity of the inhabitants of Letnica and Šašare was not completely beyond doubt. Although local tradition says that they are Croats who many centuries ago came from Dalmatia, they were formerly called *latini* instead of 'Croats' by most other groups (Urošević 1933). This term, which is still used for (Albanian and Croat) Catholics in Kosovo, but less frequently than before, shows that they were seen in the first place as followers of the Roman Catholic Church (which until the 1960s used the Latin liturgy here like elsewhere in the Catholic world). Some Croats, especially those living in Šašare, are believed to be partially of Saxon origin, while Serbs, on the other hand, have claimed that the Croats in Letnica are actually Catholic Serbs who have forgotten their original Serb identity. They maintain that the Croats of Letnica observe some old Serbian habits, in particular the *Slava*.⁸ In short, nobody here was what he seemed to be at first sight, and everybody was in fact contesting the identity claims of others.

Letnica 1992

Back to more recent events. The wars in Croatia (since the summer of 1991) and in Bosnia-Herzegovina (since the spring of 1992) clearly pushed the complexities and ambiguities of these

he became mayor of Janjevo. The Austrians were afraid that Slav identity could bridge the gap between Catholicism and Orthodoxy, which occasionally happened: if no Catholic priest was available in a Catholic village his place would be taken by an Orthodox priest from a neighbouring Serbian village (Baerlein 1922:42-43).

⁸ For instance, in the 1930s, the Serbian ethnographer Atanasije Urošević labelled them as *Srbi katolici*, Catholic Serbs, hardly mentioning the fact that, at that time, some (if not most) regarded themselves as Croats. Only in one place he writes: "There are also those who because of their Catholic religion want to call themselves Croats" (Urošević 1993:144). As far as the village of Šašare is concerned, he suggests that some inhabitants are of Orthodox origin. There are some Orthodox families in other nearby villages which trace their origins from Šašare, although there are no Orthodox left in Šašare, he writes. His main source is the nineteenth century Russian consul Jastrebov, who claimed that there were a number of Orthodox families in Šašare which had been Catholicized. This is confirmed, according to Urošević, by a legend which says that a rich inhabitant from Letnica was the driving force behind this conversion process. The tradition adds that this was caused also by the marital ties that existed between Catholics and Orthodox. (1993:114-115).

local identities to the background. National and international events started to dictate daily life, while local peculiarities lost their immediate importance. When I visited Letnica in April 1992 (the first time after my short fieldwork trip in August 1991), most village men were listening interminably to their transistor radios, in particular during the evenings and nights, when they could catch Radio Zagreb most easily. They devoured the countless reports on the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia and I was impressed by their detailed knowledge of fights, frontlines and weaponry, as well as of the main leading figures that were orchestrating the Yugoslav drama. They were completely absorbed by the events of the war, and with good reason. Every move of Tudjman, Milošević, Izetbegović, or whatever international actor or mediator, was bound to have immediate repercussions for themselves. At my arrival, I also feared finding Yugoslav army units, which just had started to retreat from the Republic of Macedonia (in the spring of 1992). Their presence at this new and delicate border would have made my work difficult if not impossible. In addition, the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) did not have—to say the least—a very good record of conduct in non-Serb areas. But in April 1992, life in Letnica had still not been affected by a Yugoslav army presence; apparently, events evolved sometimes too fast also for the JNA itself; the first soldiers did not arrive until August 1992. Then, there were indeed reports of misdemeanours by Yugoslav army personnel, of which the Croats in Letnica became the main victims (see for instance: Nedeljkov 1995).

Most Croats in Letnica identified strongly with the independent Croatia of Franjo Tudjman and its difficult struggle for survival at that time. Nevertheless, there had been mixed feelings towards Croatia. On the one hand people regarded it as the land of milk and honey, where life was easier and more affluent. On the other hand it was also a place where secularisation and modern western influences, especially mass tourism, had led to decadence and an erosion of the traditional Catholic family values. Nonetheless, in these times of hardship, people forgot their usual prejudices and felt solidarity with their co-nationals who were suffering the consequences of war. Many feared that a similar tragedy could happen to Kosovo, possibly sweeping Letnica from the map.

The Croats from Letnica had some reason to be afraid. Prior to the war in Croatia, they had not concealed their enthusiasm for Tudjman. His victory during the elections of April 1990 had led to positive and even euphoric reactions. Tudjman's image and other Croatian national symbols

could be seen in many houses, in shops and on the streets. However, when the war started, in 1991, these expressions of sympathy for Croatian nationalism began to cause serious troubles. At once, the Croats of Letnica were “on the wrong side”: they began to be seen by the Serbs as quislings and the local fifth column of the Croatian *Ustaše* or ‘fascists’. The Serbian police started to remove Croat national symbols, posters of Tudjman had to be taken from the walls, and some people started to hide other paraphernalia that could easily be interpreted as expressions of Croatian nationalist sympathies.⁹ Some houses were searched by the police, who hoped to find weapons and propaganda material. Some ‘loyal’ Croats continued to work together with the Serbs, but they became to be increasingly regarded as collaborators of the Milošević regime.

One of the most immediate consequences of the war was the flight of many young men to Croatia, especially those who had still not served in the Yugoslav People’s Army and expected to receive a call every moment. When staying in Letnica, they risked being sent to the front in Slavonia or elsewhere. If they had to fight at all, they preferred to join the Croats on the other side of the frontline. A crucial moment, as I was told, had been the death of a young Croat soldier from nearby Vrnavokolo, who had served in the army and was brought home in a coffin. The official cause of death was suicide, but most people believe he had been killed by Serb recruits. When I visited Letnica in August 1991, most young men had already left the village. I was told that they had fled Kosovo in a rush at the outbreak of the war in Croatia. Most of them went to Skopje, where they found shelter in the parks of the Macedonian capital, waiting for a possibility to go to Croatia.

During my next visit to Letnica, in April 1992, a new element was added to an already tense situation. Just a few weeks before, Vojislav Šešelj —leader of the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party— publicly declared that Croats from Serbia should be deported to ‘their’ Croatia. There were only few people who did not take this threat seriously, as Šešelj was (and still) is considered a man of his word (for which he was openly lauded at that time by Milošević). Since April 1992, the Croat

⁹ One of my informants told me that he, as a precautionary measure, destroyed an old Croatian bank note, a ‘relic’ from the Independent State of Croatia (1941-1945).

minority from the Vojvodina experienced what this meant. Serbian Radicals exploited the revengeful feelings of Serb refugees from Croatia, and together with them started to raid Croat houses. In many cases the Croat residents were 'offered' houses in Croatia, i.e. those that the refugees had been forced to leave. In anonymous threats they were urged to leave immediately in order to avoid more serious measures. And in some cases bombs were thrown in the yards of the houses. As the authorities did next to nothing to prevent these threats and incidents or to prosecute the perpetrators, many Croats were forced to flee to Croatia. The most notorious example—the one that has attracted most attention—is that of the small town of Hrtkovci in the area of Srem (Srijem in Croatian), where almost all Croats were expelled by spring 1992. Serb refugees from Croatia and local nationalists, who took over local power, gave Hrtkovci (which somehow sounds *Hrvatski* i.e. 'Croatian') a new 'Serbian' name: Srbislavci. When I arrived in Letnica, in April 1992, Šešelj's threats to the Croats in Serbia were on everyone's lips, causing a great deal of fear and desperation. "They are going to deport us, we will have to leave here", was the first thing I was told by my hostess upon my arrival. On May 17, Šešelj paid a visit to Vitina for an election meeting, and some Croats from Letnica claim to have seen him in their village, anonymously, in a car accompanied by body guards. From that moment on, fears in Letnica rose to an unprecedented level.

The exodus

Following Šešelj's threats and visit to Vitina, panic started to spread among the inhabitants of Letnica. Shortly after Šešelj's visit, a few houses and sheds were burnt down by unknown persons. Most people assumed that this was the work of Serb extremists, who had felt encouraged by Šešelj's statements. There was also a widespread rumour that the arsonist was a mentally ill Croat from Letnica who had been pushed by the Serbs. As some residents from Letnica—those few who have stayed behind—suggested to me in August 1994, it might as well have been the work of Croat nationalist fanatics, who wanted to spread fear among the inhabitants of Letnica in order to incite them to leave for Croatia. In any case, the men of the village started to organise an armed guard, which patrolled during the night and was equipped with no more than a few guns for hunting. Shortly after these first incidents, panic rose again in the village: a small group of armed

Serbs arrived by car in the middle of the night and moved into the forests around Letnica. They left their car in the centre of the village, where the inhabitants of Letnica started to gather and to discuss what should be done. In the morning, when the Serbs returned from their nightly excursion, they told the crowd that they had been drinking the previous evening and had very much felt like going on a nightly hunt. They had chosen Letnica —Croat territory— for this. Their message left little space for doubt.

There were also concerns about the possibility that Letnica might be cut off from the outside world by the Serbs in nearby Vrbovac. There were all kinds of wild rumours circulating that these Serbs —with whom relations had always been quite cordial— were heavily armed and that extremists were planning to carry out a massive carnage among the Croats of Letnica. Although I did not take these rumours very seriously, I still listened with pricked-up ears when people were discussing escape routes through the nearby mountains to Macedonia. In short, life in Letnica became disrupted by existential fear and insecurity, and many people started to consider the possibility of leaving Kosovo and going to Croatia. Obviously, some had already taken that decision: two days after Šešelj's visit to Vitina, I saw a big lorry parked on the village square, in which some families were already packing furniture and other belongings.

The reasons to leave became more pressing. Apart from the incidents mentioned before, which caused great anxiety among the population, life was made increasingly difficult by problems and 'inconveniences' that were partly the result of the UN-sanctions against Serbia. Electricity was cut off almost on a daily basis, usually for several hours, and often there was no water for days. The Serb authorities in Vitina were held responsible for this, especially when it happened on Catholic holidays such as Easter or Christmas. There were shortages of almost everything: petrol, soap, flour, edible oil and other basic foodstuffs. The most essential medicines and medical appliances, like tetanus injections and antibiotics, were completely lacking. Already in 1991, the medical centre (*ambulanta*) of Letnica had been closed down, forcing people to go to Vitina for whatever small check-up or vaccination they or their children needed.

Also the economic conditions became more and more wretched. The possibilities to make a living had always been quite limited in Letnica itself. In the past, many male inhabitants had sought their luck elsewhere, often finding a job as construction workers in the Macedonian capital Skopje

or in Belgrade, or even further away in Germany or Switzerland. Not so long ago, some men even went to the United States, most of them not returning for years. In most cases, however, they continued to foster their ties with Letnica, normally leaving behind their wives and children, and returning once or twice a year. The money that was earned abroad was invested in building a new home or a small shop. For those who were working abroad nothing changed, at least in the economic sense, but for the others who had a job in Skopje or Belgrade all the more, since their wages were reduced drastically, especially after the war began. Most of them were left almost with empty hands, earning no more than 10 to 20 Deutschmarks a month, while prices were rocketing due to war inflation. For the many young jobless men, perspectives were even grimmer in an area where non-Serbs hardly could hope for a job. And the pensioners saw their sources of income dry up more or less completely; pensions did not arrive, and if at all, their value had crumbled down to nothing due to the inflation.

The departure of most of the young men —usually followed by their families— as well as the exodus of the population of Janjevo (a small Croat town not far from Priština) intensified the emigration fever. Already at Christmas 1991, I was told, more than half of the inhabitants of Janjevo had left for Croatia, where most of them ended up in the famous Dubrava quarter of Zagreb, which was a bastion of Croats from Janjevo many years before the war started. This had a major psychological effect on the population of Letnica, since the presence of the *Janjevci*, who used to make a living by the production and trade of plastic trinkets and other kitsch objects¹⁰, was for most people a reassuring thought. Although there were clear rivalries between these two Croat communities —the simple peasant folk of Letnica regarded the Croats from Janjevo as arrogant, impulsive and impudent— the *Janjevci* were also regarded as smart and world-wise, which was some kind of guarantee when things would turn to the worse.¹¹ Their massive departure was seen as a bad omen, inciting others to follow their example. Some individuals had more pressing reasons to

¹⁰ In Kosovo this is jokingly called *Ari i Janjevës* (in Albanian) or *Janjevačko zlato* (in Serbo-Croatian): “Gold of Janjevo”.

¹¹ Traditionally, the Croats of Janjevo were also the main providers of priests for the small (Albanian and Croat) Catholic community of Kosovo.

leave; the only baker of Letnica for instance fled from the Serbian police, after they had learned that he had hidden a weapon at home. In general terms, the war prevented people making any further plans for the future. They continued to work the land, harvesting what they had sown in spring, but other more demanding activities like the construction of a new house came completely to a halt.

The calls to leave became louder, especially during the months of July and August 1992. For most people the situation had become much too insecure, not promising anything good for the future: "If Kosovo stays in Serbian hands, there is no place for us, and if the Albanians get their republic, we will be even worse off", I was often told. Nonetheless, there was sometimes strong disagreement—notably between men and women—whether to leave immediately or to await still further developments. In most cases, women preferred to stay: their lives had always been confined to the home—their primary source of pride and symbol of achievement—and they rarely had set their feet out of the village. They dreaded the prospect of leaving their homes to go to a distant land where almost none of them had ever been.¹² Most men, however, were in favour of leaving: they had always been faced to the wider world, and tended to perceive migration as a chance to open up new opportunities. The disagreement between men and women resulted in fierce discussions, even to the extent of physical confrontations, in which men tried to induce their women—together with the children—to leave for Croatia. Sometimes the attempts to persuade wives did not succeed immediately, or even not at all. I know of an older couple, of which the husband finally left his wife behind in their home in Letnica. She wanted to take care of her old and sick parents, who had decided to stay too.

In the end, most people chose to leave Kosovo "before it is too late". They used the opportunity offered by a Croatian Catholic charity, the Foundation of St Isidorus (*Fond Svetog Izidora*), to be evacuated to Croatia without the requirement of passports or other travel documents. The majority of people were transported by bus from Skopje via Bulgaria, Rumania and Hungary,

¹² This corresponds with the findings of Peter Loizos, who, in his book on Cypriot war refugees, notes that the loss of a home is particularly painful for women, who almost experience it as a kind of personal amputation (Loizos 1981:176-177).

while some of the ill and the old were flown over directly to Zagreb by aeroplane.¹³ Almost all of them —except the more well-off who could afford a lorry— left behind everything, their houses and almost all of their possessions. Some sold their furniture and cattle to Albanians, for too low prices. Older people who remained were asked to keep still an eye on their property, in the theoretical case they would return. From May 1992 on, the Catholic priests of Letnica handed out hundreds or even thousands of so-called *krsni listovi* (baptismal certificates) in the presbytery of Letnica. Since the Croatian authorities refused Yugoslav citizens entrance into Croatia, proof of Catholic Croat identity was the only ticket of admission to Croatia. In June 1992, the first buses with refugees arrived in Croatia, and half a year later the majority of the population of Letnica had left. Between May 1992 and May 1993, there were about ten organised convoys, transporting more than 2.200 persons.¹⁴

¹³ *Fond Svetog Izidora* had been set up as a charity organisation some years before the outbreak of the war (1986) to help the Croats in Kosovo (in the Catholic church, St Isidorus is the patron saint of peasants and agricultural labourers). Baretić (1993) writes that this foundation organised the transports of people completely independently, without any prior agreement with the Catholic church and the Croatian state authorities. Also the main initiator and organiser of this massive resettlement, Eugen Šooš, declared in 1993 in an interview that he had not received any co-operation from the state (Majetić 1993:9). To me this seems quite unlikely: how can a charitable organisation transport hundreds or even thousands of refugees (many without travel documents) to Croatia through four other Balkan states, and how can it resettle them in a deserted and strategic area, without the assent and co-operation of some important institutions, such as the Croatian government, the Catholic church, the local authorities in Djulovac and Voćin, and the Red Cross, to mention only the most obvious ones? In 1995, the Croatian minister Adalbert Rebić indeed admitted that his *Bureau for displaced persons and refugees* had given the green light to the Fond Svetog Izidora to resettle the Croats from Kosovo in Djulovac (Kovačić 1995).

¹⁴ I visited Letnica again in December 1992. Then more than half of the population had left. My last visit took place in August 1994, at the time of the pilgrimage. At that time there were about 20 households left in Letnica itself (similar numbers in other Croat villages nearby), many of them consisting of old married couples not willing to start a new life as refugees. Approximately 15% of the Croat population has stayed (800 people). In August 1997, Nikola Dučkić, former parish priest of Letnica and now diocesan vicar for the Croat parishes in Kosovo, declared in an interview to the Zagreb daily *Večernji list* that in the last two years or so the situation of the remaining Croats in Kosovo had improved '180 degrees' and that the attitude of the Serb authorities was much better than before (internet <http://www.suc.org/news/b92/arhiva/AVGUST_1997/3_AVGUST_1997.html>).

Resettlement in Western Slavonia

After I returned to the Netherlands, I did not hear much from my friends for almost one year, until I decided to go to Croatia to find out what exactly happened to them. Some had mentioned to me plans to resettle the inhabitants of Letnica in a number of villages in Western Slavonia. I even heard the names of some of those villages, without knowing what was the situation on site. I only knew that some people had visited these villages, feeding the imagination of those who considered leaving Letnica and going to live in a new environment. Nonetheless, I doubt whether people knew all the details of these resettlement plans. During my work in Letnica in the summer of 1992, most people were speculating about the living conditions they would encounter 'abroad': the only things they were sure of was that food and shelter were provided, and that they probably would have to go to school to learn 'Croatian', for their own local dialect, a peculiar mixture of Serbian, Croatian and Macedonian, is everything but standard Croatian.

In December 1993, I went for the first time to visit Western Slavonia where they had been resettled. As the war in Croatia had developed, in 1991, I had not followed where fighting had been going on and who held exactly which territories. So I was ignorant of the fact that this area (between the towns Pakrac, Virovitica and Podravska Slatina) had been the stage of atrocities and violent confrontations between Croats and Serbs. Before the war started, Western Slavonia had a substantial Serb minority —there were many villages that were predominantly Serb— and therefore, in August 1991, it was taken by Serbian paramilitary forces who incorporated it into the Krajina.¹⁵ It formed a kind of Serbian wedge in Croatian territory, stretching almost as far as the Hungarian border near Virovitica and Podravska Slatina, and threatening to cut off Eastern Slavonia from the rest of Croatia. In line with Serb nationalist aspirations, this area was supposed to

¹⁵ In the historical literature, this area is also called the *Pakračko-voćinska krajina* ('the frontier of Pakrac and Voćin') or *Mala Vlačka*. In the sixteenth and the seventeenth century, when the Turks occupied Slavonia, Orthodox Serbs from Bosnia (together with numerous Muslims) were settled here by the Ottomans to defend the border with the Habsburg empire. At that time, the area was completely deserted by the original Catholic Croat population. The Catholics who stayed converted to Islam (Šuvak 1994:13).

become the new border area of Greater Serbia, which would also include the rest of Slavonia.¹⁶ In November of the same year, however, Croatian forces started an offensive in order to recapture this strategic area, and they managed to reconquer half of it, at the price of a high number of Croatian casualties. When Serbian paramilitary troops were forced to retreat from Western Slavonia, they killed many Croat civilians—who had already been living under Serb terror for almost five months—and they destroyed a great number of houses and churches. Since then, this part of Western Slavonia has been in Croatian hands, initially under the supervision of the United Nations. Western Slavonia was in fact the only United Nations Protected Area in Croatia that was de facto partly controlled by the Croats. The rest of the UNPA zones—comprising Krajina and Eastern Slavonia—were in Serb hands.¹⁷ The UN permitted Croatian police forces in the area, but a Croatian military presence was not allowed.

So, in December 1993, I went by train to Virovitica, and from there I entered Sector West in an old and shaky wooden train. Next to me in the train was sitting a small group of Kosovo Croat refugees, an old woman wearing the *dimije* (the baggy harem trousers), and a young couple with a baby tightly wrapped up in swaddling clothes, which was being breastfed by its mother. It seemed as if the woman just had given birth to the baby; she looked weak and could not sit well. They were being stared at by the other passengers, who were clearly displeased by the 'dirty' look and lack of civilisation displayed by these refugees. The train brought us to Djulovac, a village formerly called Miokovičevo, as was still written on my train ticket. Previously, it had been inhabited by a mixed population of Croats and Serbs, and according to the census of 1981 there had also been a considerable number of 'Yugoslavs'. The name of this village changed frequently—from the original Hungarian name Gjulaves into Miokovičevo (1928), into Djulovac (1940) and again into

¹⁶ According to the Serbian nationalist designs of people like Šešelj, the borders of Greater Serbia should have been drawn roughly along the line of the towns Virovitica - Karlovac - Karlobag.

¹⁷ In the spring of 1995, the United Nations negotiated a new mandate for the former UNPA zones, and their mission in Croatia was renamed UNCRO. As a result of this, the UN withdrew a substantial part of its forces in accordance with Croatian demands. In the beginning of May 1995, in a two-day offensive, Croatian government forces took the remaining part of Western Slavonia.

Miokovićevo (1944)— as did the ethnic composition of its population. Before World War II, Croats, Germans and Hungarians and only a few Serbs lived there. After that war, the communists dispelled the Germans and the Hungarians and their place was taken by Serbs who had come from Bosnia-Herzegovina and from villages in the nearby mountain range Papuk (Baretić 1993). During the most recent war (1991), all the Serbs left again, and their place was taken Croats from Kosovo, who presently form the majority in the municipality of Djulovac.¹⁸

In August 1991, Djulovac (or Miokovićevo at that time), became part of Serb held Western Slavonia. It was a Chetnik stronghold, and a prison or concentration camp was established in the village. Here some Croats were detained, among them the Catholic priest of the village. During those months of Serb occupation, thirty Croats were killed (Baretić 1993).¹⁹ Finally, at the end of 1991, the Croatian army took the village and the Serb inhabitants fled en masse, leaving their houses and most of their possessions behind. During the fighting Croat houses were burnt down and many were damaged. When the Croatian forces were advancing, the Serbs also blew the Catholic Church into the air. They had requisitioned it as a 'storage place' for weapons and ammunition, which was detonated only one or two days later (Kostović & Judaš 1992:248 and Baretić 1993). Now, only the clock tower is left, standing beside the ruins of the church, the most outstanding reminder of the war here.

Nonetheless, Djulovac was not as much devastated by the war as was for instance Voćin, some 20 kilometres to the east. There, most houses and public buildings were destroyed or heavily damaged, including the monumental Catholic church, which met with the same fate as the church in Djulovac (Kostović & Judaš 1992:68; *Le livre noir* 1993:160). There is no stone left of this building, which had been a popular Marian pilgrimage centre since the 1880s, dedicated to the

¹⁸ According to Baretić, there are roughly 1.200 native Croats living in the municipality of Djulovac, whereas the number of 'imported' Croats (mostly from Kosovo) is 1.652 (Baretić 1993).

¹⁹ The book of Kostović & Judaš contains a chapter on Serbian camps in which the Miokovićevo concentration camp is mentioned in testimonies given by former prisoners (1992:183-193 passim).

Virgin of Lourdes (Lukinović 1986:80-99).²⁰ Apart from the enormous level of material destruction, Voćin and two nearby villages had also been the scene of a brutal massacre of 43 Croat civilians when the Serbs withdrew from the area on 13 December 1991 (Kostović & Judaš 1992:118-121). After that, the invading Croat forces for their part burnt many houses of former Serbian residents.²¹

Voćin and Djulovac are only two of the five villages where the Croats from Letnica have found shelter. There is also the village of Čeralije near Voćin, and the villages Koreničani and Bastaji not far from Djulovac.²² Until 1991, all those settlements had a clear Serb majority, with Djulovac (the former Miokovićevo) as the only exception.²³ For the time being, the Croats from

²⁰ This was already the second time this century that this church had been destroyed: in May 1944, the Germans ravaged Voćin, burning the Catholic and the Orthodox church and devastating the rest of the village (Lukinović 1986:34-37). The Papuk mountain area, of which Voćin is part, was a Partisan stronghold. After the war, under the communists, it took about twenty years before parish life in Voćin could start anew: until 1963, Voćin did not have a Catholic priest. Also the pilgrimage to Voćin came to a halt, beginning again in the 1960s. The church was rebuilt in the 1970s, and again consecrated in 1984 (Lukinović 1986:41-47).

²¹ The excesses committed by the Croatian forces during their 1991 campaign in Western Slavonia led to protests by the human rights organisation Helsinki Watch. On 13 February 1992, this organisation sent a protest letter to President Franjo Tuđman (Le livre noir 1993:75-76, nt.2; see also Kostović & Judaš 1992:263). In November and December 1991, more than 20.000 Serb civilians fled the area following the retreat of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Serbian paramilitary forces. Most of them ended up in Banja Luka (Bosnia), from where they later were resettled in Serb-held Eastern Slavonia (see: Le livre noir 1993:159-160; Judah 1997: 285-288).

²² According to the information I got on the spot, the former inhabitants of Vrnez and Vrnakovolo have been mainly resettled in Djulovac and Čeralije, and those of Letnica in Voćin. The former residents of Šašare have been divided between Bastaji, Voćin and Koreničani.

²³ According to the 1981 census, the ethnic composition of these villages was as follows. Čeralije had 376 inhabitants, of which 325 were Serbs, 41 Yugoslavs and 8 Croats. Voćin 1558 inhabitants, 904 Serbs, 404 Croats and 226 Yugoslavs. Koreničani 409 inhabitants, 304 Serbs, 71 Yugoslavs and 29 Croats. Miokovićevo 541 inhabitants, 201 Serbs, 200 Croats and 118 Yugoslavs. And finally, Bastaji had 530 inhabitants, 375 Serbs, 97 Yugoslavs and 33 Croats (source: Gabeljšek 1991).

Kosovo found a new home in former Serb houses, those that were not destroyed by the violence of the war. Most of these houses were in poor condition, due to war damage and subsequent negligence. Officially, their stay in these Serb houses was temporary, and they were obliged to leave as soon as the original owner turned up to reclaim it. Although this was not very likely to happen, many people nevertheless believed that this might occur. Therefore, they were usually not motivated to maintain the houses, except for the most urgent and necessary repairs (like putting glass in windows). They did not have the energy or the financial possibility of fixing or improving the houses. At the time of my visits, many houses were without running water, some of them did not even have elementary heating, and electricity was often the only luxury.²⁴

Though the Croats from Letnica were happy they did not end up in refugee camps, most of them felt highly embarrassed occupying the dwellings and using the furniture of people who had fled their homes too. For most of them, the fact that they themselves abandoned their homes and possessions did not offer much consolation. They felt like intruders in the personal domains of other people whose presence could be felt in every corner of the house, and in the objects and the big gardens that they left behind. A woman told me that, in the beginning, she often would 'hear' voices or knocks on the door in the middle of the night, expecting the previous inhabitants to return (there were many accounts at that time of Serbs crossing the Serbian-Croatian lines at night to find out what had happened to their villages and houses). Above all, to enter somebody else's home was (and is) considered a dishonourable act which will in the end cause misfortune: "Tudje nikome nije donijelo sreću" - "Somebody else's property never has brought luck to anybody", people often say.²⁵ Ideally, the Croats from Letnica would prefer to build new houses for themselves. But for the moment this is not feasible, so they have to remain where they are until all private property issues can be solved in a mutual agreement between Croatia and Serbia, or they have to find another solution. Since the Croatian authorities are confronted with a growing resistance among the Croat

²⁴ This description refers to the situation during my last visit to the area in the spring of 1995.

²⁵ Stories about the destiny of the refugees in Croatia also reached the stay-behinds in Letnica. During my last visit to Letnica, in August 1994, some of them condemned the fact that refugees had entered Serb houses. I know at least of two persons who refused to go to Croatia because of moral objections of this kind.

refugees from Kosovo against staying in these Serb houses permanently, there was some debate about building new houses for them in parallel settlements. However, the Croatian government never seems to have taken these plans very seriously, for obvious reasons.²⁶

During those few days that I was there, nobody openly admitted regretting the decision to leave Letnica and go to Croatia. Nevertheless, here as well as in Kosovo, I heard concealed criticism of the Catholic church, which is alleged to have encouraged the exodus, or at least not to have done anything to prevent it. Also the independent Croatian weekly Feral Tribune —the *enfant terrible* of the Croatian press— published two very critical texts on this whole population resettlement and its unfavourable results. The first was written by Drago Hedl (1993), the second by Domagoj Horvat (1995). Let me first quote from the latter, which conveys an image of political manipulation and instrumentalisation of the fate of the Kosovo Croats, and expresses some of the painful truths and disillusiones which these refugees have encountered:

“The history of the arrival of the Croats from Kosovo is covered up with a veil of silence and patriotic hypocrisy: the newcomers tell how already at the end of the 1980s many people [from Croatia GD] visited them and told them fairy tales about the wonderful life in their original homeland, from where they had fled for the Turks sometime in the Middle Ages. At the beginning of the 1990s, the Serbian war against Croatia and the racist repression of non-Serbs in Kosovo have particularly encouraged this dubious idea of a delayed repatriation. It was not very difficult to induce these poor and frightened Croats to ‘go home’. There, they were told, everything was waiting for them: houses, a job, land, and flocks of sheep were already being brought from Australia, only for them... Three years later, the promises are of course behind them. They live in Serb houses, houses that are not theirs and which are everything but warm homes. With the natives they hardly get along or not at all. Jobs they do not have, and if they find a job, they are badly paid. They are convinced that people steal humanitarian aid from them. And they live amidst 3000 hectares of unfarmed land which they are not allowed to cultivate. In short, there are millions of problems, but they can not articulate them, neither do they know whom to address to get help. While the capital roars of demographic renewal, the children of Djulovac, who are the most numerous to be born in this state, are coughing painfully under photos of the Pope’s healthy face.” (Horvat 1995)

²⁶ In October 1995, the Croatian minister for reconstruction and development Jure Radić declared that the building of new settlements is out of the question because “[N]owadays, Croatia has many more empty houses and apartments than people interested in living in them” (Kovačić 1995).

Hedl (1993) points to the political background of these population exchanges. In the first half of 1992, as Hedl points out, they were agreed upon between the president of Croatia, Franjo Tuđman, and the president of Yugoslavia at that time, Dobrica Ćosić. They had a meeting in Geneva, in which they both agreed to 'humane' exchanges of populations.²⁷ Since then, the Croatian and the Serbian leadership have been working closely together in what Hedl calls the practice of 'demographic engineering', exchanging and resettling populations in order to achieve their desired version of a homogenous national state. More recently, Kosovo Croats have once again proven useful in this respect: since March 1997, the Croatian government has resettled Croats from Janjevo in Kistanje, a small town near Knin which was emptied of its Serb population during Operation Storm in August 1995. The plan is to rename Kistanje as Janjevo or Novo (New) Janjevo (Despot 1997). The Croatian government has received the full support of the church for this operation.²⁸

Besides repopulating areas that were abandoned by Serbs, the Croatian regime has had one other important motive for bringing Croats from Kosovo to Croatia. In the eyes of conservative nationalists, one of the gravest maladies of modern Croatian society is the so-called 'white plague' (*bijela kuga*) of small and childless families. Croatia has a very low birth rate: in most areas the demographic growth is even negative. This is regarded as an issue of national importance, which threatens the existence of Croatia and the Croatian nation as much as the war did.²⁹ As the

²⁷ It is widely believed that the partition of Bosnia and the exchange of populations between Serb and Croat territories were already agreed between Franjo Tuđman and Slobodan Milošević before the start of the war, on a meeting in Karadordevo in March 1991 (Silber & Little 1996:143-144).

²⁸ As the journalist Jelena Lovrić writes, church representatives played a significant role in the Croat colonisation of Kistanje. Priests and bishops encouraged Croats from Janjevo to resettle in Kistanje. The Church organised special meetings to prepare the *Janjevci* 'spiritually' for their resettlement. On occasion the Archbishop of Zadar, Ivan Prendja, said to the people from Janjevo that their "moving to Kistanje was the will of God" (Jelena Lovrić, "The church in election campaign", internet <<http://www.aimpress.ch/dyn/trae/archive/data/199704/70414-003-trae-zag.htm>>).

²⁹ One of the champions of the 'demographic renewal' of the Croatia is the conservative and nationalist Catholic priest Anto Baković, who has been the leader of the Croatian population movement (*Hrvatski populacijski pokret*). This

conservatives within the Catholic Church and the government attempt to counter this development, by propagating the so-called 'demographic renewal' of Croatia, it is very likely that they thought that the Croatian nation could benefit from the high birth rate among the Croats from Kosovo, directly as a demographic 'push', and indirectly as a shining example for other Croats as well. Families with five, six, or more children are no exception among the Kosovo Croats. That this is more than mere speculation was shown by a statement of a Croatian government minister. In October 1995, the Croatian minister of reconstruction and development Jure Radić claimed that the high birth rate of the Croats from Kosovo was a blessing for Croatia (Kovačić 1995).

Since this is a politically delicate subject, it has been difficult for me to find out what are the details and circumstances of the exodus of Croats from Letnica, and their massive resettlement in Western Slavonia, and who were the main organisers. But it is clear that it was not an entirely 'spontaneous' process caused only by the threat of Serbian terror in Letnica. Serbian designs to cleanse Serbia of Croats and other non-Serbs, and Croatian blueprints to repopulate Western Slavonia and to give Croatia a new demographic 'push' seem to have gone hand in hand. This policy of demographic engineering has led to hideous results, as Hedl writes, especially in the case of the Croats from Kosovo, who seem to be extremely unhappy in this sinister environment of ruins and burnt houses. They have huge problems in adjusting to this hostile environment, in which they are not accepted by the autochthonous Croats. Though they are proud of having upheld a strong Croat and Catholic identity in a much more hostile environment than the Croats ever had in Croatia, they are now called and treated by the latter as *Šiptari* (a pejorative synonym for Albanians). Native Croats see them as primitive and dirty, as impulsive and unreliable, as 'oriental' Croats who are not and simply never will be part of the civilised world. These are two cultures in collision: the original inhabitants who try to do their best to resume their life as it was before —although it has been changed irreversibly by the traumatic experiences and the huge material damage of the war— and those 'damned newcomers' who did not go through the terrors of war, and yet settled down in great numbers in the middle of the ruins left behind by this war.

obsession with reproduction and demographic renewal of the nation is not typical for Croatia alone. For an analysis of nationalist moral majority and pro-life movements in Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia, see Sofos 1996:77-79.

The tensions between natives and newcomers have been most serious in the villages where natives still form a considerable group, as in Voćin and Djulovac. There, the huge influx of Croat refugees from Kosovo (and from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Eastern Slavonia) has changed the demographic make-up drastically without completely eliminating the native component.³⁰ This has resulted in serious frictions, for instance in Djulovac where refugees accused local dignitaries of withholding humanitarian aid and other goods (for instance glass for windows, stoves, tractors and other agricultural materials), distributing it among their own people or selling it. Since these accusations were expressed openly and Croats from Kosovo took matters up with the higher authorities, a lot of bad blood developed between natives and newcomers. According to the refugees, local dignitaries—notably the mayor and the Catholic priest—used their ordeals in the war as a justification to rule the roost and claim preferential treatment with regard to humanitarian aid and other benefits. They had difficulties in accepting that the situation in the village had changed, and they were afraid to lose their predominance and positions. In an interview, the mayor of Djulovac made this very clear by complaining that the Croats from Kosovo want to take over power in Djulovac (Horvat 1995). The same tensions have been reported from Voćin, where the numerical preponderance of the Kosovo Croats in comparison with the native Croats is more pronounced than in Djulovac. As a result, the native Catholic priest in Voćin was replaced by a Croat from Kosovo (in 1994). In Koreničani, Bastaji and Čeralije—villages that were almost entirely Serb before the war—these problems have been less serious, because there are hardly any natives left. Here, the people from Kosovo stick to their traditional community life in splendid isolation, almost without adapting to the new situation (Mustapić 1995).

As far as my latest information goes (the last time I visited the area was in April 1995), the situation has improved. For approximately two years after their arrival, the Croats from Letnica were formally refugees, which meant that they could not find or apply for jobs, and they were largely dependent on humanitarian aid. Since this did not satisfy their needs, they started to work

³⁰ According to Mustapić, Voćin numbers 353 autochthonous Croats and 1.247 newcomers (Mustapić 1995). In the municipality of Djulovac, in 1993, the number of 'imported' Croats was 1.652 (it is certainly higher now), whereas the number of natives was roughly 1.200 (Baretić 1993).

small plots of land, at least to provide for a minimum of subsistence. Since the beginning of 1995, however, they have received Croatian citizenship (the *domovnica* or the Croatian identity card), which means that most of the formal obstacles to their integration into Croatian society have been taken away. They now can find jobs, get the normal health insurance, and obtain Croatian passports. Despite these clear improvements, for most of them it will be very hard and even impossible to make a living in this devastated part of Croatia —where nothing is functioning normally and where the economy has to be built up almost literally from the ground— without the help of the state.

I would like to conclude this chapter with a few more general observations, in order to assess the prospects for the future integration of the Croats from Kosovo. I want to refer briefly to the work of the Polish anthropologist Mach, who in his essay “Migration, Ethnic Identity, and the Significance of Territory” (see Mach 1993) provides us with some very useful ideas based on examples in Poland after World War II. Mach gives a kind of inventory of conditions and factors that determine whether a migration is successful or not. He starts with the idea that territory —the idea of the homeland— is a main component of ethnic identity. Since ethnic and national groups organise their territory culturally (for instance in architecture), the homeland is part of a group’s model of the world, and the only proper place for the community to live. Migration undermines the territorial rootedness of identity, and it takes a huge effort for migrants to reconcile their own identity and cultural traditions with the new cultural landscape. Much depends, according to Mach, on whether migration is voluntary or enforced. If it is voluntary, then migrants will be ready to reconstruct their life in the new land, and all efforts are made to reconstruct the identity in such a way that the new land becomes part of it. If it is enforced, as is the case with most refugees, this will often lead to prolonged passiveness and indifference, and also to the refusal to create a new identity in a new environment. The refugees will not accept the new land as their own, and there is little hope left for their ultimate integration.

According to Mach, the prospects for a successful integration of migrants depend on many factors. Dissatisfaction with former conditions of life and the lack of emotional attachment to the land of origin may help successful integration. When migrants can choose their new land, they will be more motivated to integrate since they themselves have made the choice instead of a force above

them. The process will also be easier when there are similarities between the new and the old land. This has natural and cultural dimensions: the natural terrain is important as well as the cultural organisation of that natural landscape. If the new territory is inhabited by a community, the willingness of the natives to accept newcomers is crucial, and the cultural differences between the two groups should not be too pronounced in order to enable successful integration. Another contributing factor for successful integration are legal guarantees that the new land is the property of the new settlers, and that this arrangement is stable and permanent. What is also essential is that legal, social and political conditions allow for independent, spontaneous forms of organisation and self-government among the migrants. Last but not least, the existence of funds for investment and other economic opportunities are of crucial value.

When we look at the situation of the Kosovo Croats in Western Slavonia, some of these elements are present and others absent. From my description it is clear that the cultural rift between the Kosovo Croats and the native Croats, as well as the unwillingness of the latter to accept the former, are inhibiting further integration. On the other hand, the fact that the Croat communities in and around Letnica have been transplanted into an area that is very similar to Letnica, leaving those communities more or less intact, will considerably mitigate the difficulties connected to the exodus. Apart from the resemblances in natural landscape —the Papuk area is almost as hilly but not so barren as the Skopska Crna Gora— there is a clear correspondence in cultural landscape, an important factor which should not be underestimated. As the Croats from Letnica are very religious, viewing the church and Madonna of Letnica as their main source of identity, it is of vital importance that they have found themselves again in a place where the Marian devotion is central and alive.

Nevertheless, there are many questions and ambiguities which complicate this case. Are these people refugees or simply migrants who have tried their luck elsewhere? Was the exodus voluntary or forced? What does the concept of homeland Croatia mean to these 'Diaspora Croats' who have now, as it were, 'returned home' after several centuries? Is being in Croatia really being at home or is there any sense of a homeland lost in Kosovo? What to think about the huge differences in view between the men and the women? And what about the emotional attachment to the land of origin? Does the fact that it is named Serbia make the emotional bond less strong? I do

not know the answers, and I wonder whether anyone among the Croats from Letnica really does either.