

Notes from the Field

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Figure 1: From left: Jelka Vukobratović, Ely Rosenblum, Jana Zoric, Wendy Bergfeldt, and Marcia Ostaszewski in the CBC Workshop.

Introduction

Since 2008, I have been traveling to Cape Breton for field research related to the island's East and Central European immigrant groups and their descendents. This past year, I began working toward the creation of a web portal that attends to the histories and expressive culture of these communities. The web portal, which will be launched in 2014, is designed to reach diverse audiences. It will lead to several distinct websites and sections, integrating interactive multimedia resources and opportunities for technology-enriched learning about the contributions of East and Central European immigrants and their descendents to the rich social and cultural landscape of Cape Breton Island. Museums and heritage organizations around the world are discussing how to integrate intangible cultural heritage into historical interpretation. This web portal project – a model of collaborative research – examines intangible heritage in Cape

Breton society and culture as it relates to the island's Ukrainian, Polish, Croatian, Hungarian, and Jewish groups especially.

The collaborative process values a wide variety of people, their lives, experiences, knowledge, memories, and practices, from the very beginnings of research, through various stages of knowledge mobilization and dissemination, and in continuing relationships afterward. The aims, processes, and deliverables are defined collaboratively by our team of researchers – which includes Michael Frishkopf (Ethnomusicology, University of Alberta) and Tom Urbaniak (Political Science, Cape Breton University) – and community leaders and members, directors and staff of museums and archives, as well as artists who are involved in creative projects. Designed to meet both community-defined needs and academic goals, these aims foster our understandings of the histories, communities, and cultural practices from the “inside out”, from the vantage points of those who live and

create them, and make them meaningful. The collaborative process also provides an opportunity to rethink the research process, where communities are partners in research as well as the focus of study. The web portal, currently in its initial stages, is already becoming a valuable public resource about ethnocultural groups that have been active in Cape Breton since the late 1800s, but who have largely gone unacknowledged. Shedding new light on what it means to do research in Atlantic Canada, this project promotes deeper understanding of cultural identities that resonate beyond their national context.

Supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Public Dissemination grant, the core aims of the web portal project include training and capacity development for both community and academic partners. Close community engagement through the process of web portal production has already provided many opportunities for skills development of staff and/or volunteers, including youth, in Cape Breton. Project funding has also facilitated several graduate and undergraduate students' involvement in the web portal project. Students and non-student researchers have been involved in archival and ethnographic research (especially at CBU's Beaton Institute, which now houses large ethnocultural collections that were donated through my earlier research with Ukrainian communities); online, museum, and gallery exhibit curation and installation; publication preparation; and the creation of multimedia learning resources that will be delivered online.

Three graduate students have recently joined the research team, through different funding opportunities: Ely Rosenblum, Jelka Vukobratovic and Jana Zoric. I first met Ely Rosenblum when he came to Edmonton in the summer of 2012 to work with me at the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village, where I was serving as the Executive Director of the Friends Society. The Friends Society operates many of the interpretive, hospitality, children's camps, fundraising, and public outreach services for this large, open-air, living history museum. While in Edmonton, Ely was also serving as a *folkwaysAlive!* intern at the University of Alberta. In conversation, it came to light that Ely, a student and practitioner of ethnography, sound recording, music, and culture, has ancestral ties to Cape Breton's Jewish communities. Due to his community ties, growing scholarly expertise, and skills with technology and music, I asked him to join our research team. As a partner in the web portal project, the University of Alberta's Wirth Centre for Austrian and Central European Studies committed funding to support a Croatian graduate student's involvement. The long history of relationships between the Wirth

Institute and their partners in Europe, as well as my relationships with scholars at the Institute for Ethnology in Zagreb, facilitated a search for a researcher. After reviewing applications from several excellent emerging scholars at various international locations, Jelka Vukobratovic was offered the position of our team's Wirth Institute Research Fellow. Through this search, we learned of the excellent work that Jana Zoric has been doing while a graduate student at the City University of New York – and I was thrilled when she also accepted our invitation to join our team. She, too, has a special personal interest in this work, which enriches her perspective. Jana immigrated to Canada from the former Yugoslavia as a child. Also, remarkably, her grandfather had come to Cape Breton in the early 1900s to work, before ultimately returning to his home in Croatia. All through her childhood, Jana had heard stories of her grandfather's Cape Breton adventures, and was glad to have the opportunity to visit the island herself. In addition to conducting research that connects with their own graduate studies and interests, these researchers have been involved in aspects of project management, research, digitization, multimedia, and web portal creation. The relationships they have been developing with our research partners also means they play an important role in liaising with community members on behalf of the research team and the university community more broadly. I am also very pleased that, since we arranged for the three researchers to come to Cape Breton at the same time, they developed supportive relationships between themselves. The relationships that sometimes grow out of collaborating with our colleagues can be wonderfully productive, and can be very precious throughout our careers.

Among the materials being created for the web portal that are already available are [CBC radio segments](#). Local CBC announcer and producer Wendy Bergfeldt worked with our research team, first providing training for the production of radio segments for her regular weekly show *Island Echoes*. This project allowed our researchers to share some of the rich interview material from their field recordings with a wider public. Our training session augmented our skills and awareness as interviewers, and provides us with new tools and opportunities for research production. It also inspired rich discussions about the practice, ethics, and aims of field research – topics we often theorize about in graduate courses – in the context of very concrete application. This is a prime example of how this project, which engages community partners from across sectors, leads to valuable research experiences for students and scholars.

In what follows, Ely, Jelka, and Jana provide examples of their field research experiences in Cape Breton. They also describe some of the work and materials they are developing in relation to the web portal. While most of the material they are creating will be delivered on the web portal, we are also producing creative works of different kinds, and writing articles for academic journal publication and conference papers – including forums like this one in the *Canadian Folk Music* magazine!

- Marcia Ostashewski

Jelka Vukobratović and Jana Zoric

JELKA: Coming to Cape Breton was a new experience for me in more ways than one. It was my first trip to Canada, first flight over the Atlantic, first time doing research in a community I previously knew nothing about, first experience of working on a university-based project, and first contact with some of the North American research methods that differ from what I was used to in Croatia.

For example, I never spent more than a week in the field in Croatia, and it is common for Croatian ethnographers to travel back and forth while doing research in their country, since it is a small country. Another big difference, however incidental to the research process it may seem, is the use of consent forms. Croatian ethnographers do not use consent forms and all the potential ethical problems are ideally resolved on a more personal level, in a direct agreement between the ethnographer and his/her interlocutors. There were also some new issues that were more directly connected to the online nature of our project. Since the goal of our project is building a web portal, we would consider any collected material for publication on that project. Consequently, this brought additional pressure on both of us (because we had to pay more attention to sound and recording quality) and our project participants (because it raised concerns about sharing more personal experiences). The collaborative work in the field was also a new experience for Jana and me, and I believe it proved to be beneficial to us, and hopefully, to the whole project as well.

JANA: My first impressions of Sydney were shaped by my budding friendship with Jelka. She had already been there for several days before I arrived and was happy to share with me her impressions of Sydney and her ideas about our project. As we started organizing and planning our research, questions were raised that resulted from the collaborative process: How would we divide up the work? Should the work be divided or should it be done together? What about

our differing interests, especially during the interview process? How would we deal with different interview styles?

Finding balance was a little challenging initially, but as we got to know each other and the community we were working with, it became easier. We learned that there were many benefits to working as a team. We had someone to talk to about emotional and intellectual frustrations we experienced in the field. We also came up with more ideas for future directions of our research when in discussion. Lastly, through our conversations, we were ultimately more creative and produced richer analyses of our findings and interviews. In retrospect, this kind of a collaborative ethnography might not work for everyone, due to the delicate equilibrium necessary for fruitful collaboration. We were fortunate to have understood each other as both people and scholars, and we hope that our work will reflect that.

JELKA: In my opinion, the real challenge of our fieldwork was not synchronizing our methods, but getting to know the community in the relatively short time period of one month. Given the fact that neither of us was familiar with the “territory”, getting started and finding the first contacts was probably the most difficult part, which we gradually overcame with the help of Marcia Ostashewski, project coordinator, and some of her contacts. During our time in Sydney, we interviewed 14 people, had telephone conversations with some of the members of the community no longer living in Sydney, and went through documents housed at the Beaton Institute archives for information regarding Croatians in Cape Breton.

JANA: As Jelka mentioned, one month of fieldwork was a real challenge in a new community. Some community members were ready and available to help us right away, while others were away or dealing with personal hardships or other matters.

Another issue that we reflected on after we conducted the first few interviews was the way our research participants related to us. The mandatory, yet clunky, consent forms we introduced and explained to our interviewees framed the relationship between us in a very specific way. They emphasized difference between ethnographer and research participant and defined the relationship as professional rather than personal, when, in reality, it is both. This also had an impact on the ways memories and personal family stories were shared. I feel that it would have been more fruitful to have introductory meetings prior to the introduction of consent forms and recording equipment. Unfortunately, the time constraint did not allow for that. For me, ethnography is a very

personal process of forming trusting relationships with local communities, and I feel that the relatively short time period combined with consent forms and audio recorders might have somewhat hindered this process. During the initial period of interviewing, we received rather “official” versions of family histories and the history of Whitney Pier. While this was also useful in the beginning stages of our research, the more personal reflections and opinions of “history” were what we found most interesting. However, we gathered these insights only after several meetings with our interlocutors.



Figure 2: Bridge to Whitney Pier.

JELKA: Earlier in the interview process it became clear that informants’ main focus was going to be on memories and the past, not the present. Either we directly asked people about their family histories, the community, and their experiences growing up, or they directed the conversation towards the past. In retrospect, I believe we could have urged people to talk more about the present and their lives today, but there were important reasons for the focus on past throughout our research.



Figure 3: Pier view from cemetery.

First of all, we induced talk on family histories, trying to get the basic information on genealogies. This was also important for drawing connections between some of the families descending from the same regions in Croatia or Bosnia and Herzegovina. Second, we started conversation on childhood memories, which in some cases provided good information on the ways culture was transmitted within the family home, but also on the mechanisms of “balancing” between two identities – Croatian and Canadian – and the troubles of trying to fit in, which sometimes meant intentional neglect of cultural markers like the language. Another important reason for focusing on the past could be the experience of some of Sydney’s recent dramatic social changes.



Figure 4: Park on steel plant lot.

Sydney was a town that expanded in the first half of the 20th Century due to the steel plant, which dominated the town both economically and physically for a whole century. The growing steel industry was also the reason for most of the migrations from other countries, including Croatia. The steel plant structured social life in Sydney in many fascinating ways, one of which was that the size and location of houses reflected the steel plant workplace hierarchy. The closing of the factory in the 1990s had dramatic consequences for the town, which in one period of its industrial progress employed thousands of workers from all over the world, and now has almost no jobs to offer. Many people, especially the younger generation, left Cape Breton Island, and are still leaving, to settle in more prosperous Canadian provinces. Locations of houses, except for the workplace hierarchy, also reflected (and sometimes still do) the descent of the people. Most of the steel plant workers who moved to Sydney from Newfoundland, Europe, or the West Indies settled in the Whitney Pier, a part of

town in which both the steel plant and the harbour are located. It's interesting to note that the settlers from Eastern Europe, Asia, and West Indies are sometimes referred to as "ethnic" communities or ethnic people as if the people with Scottish, English or French descent have no ethnicity. One of the ladies with Croatian ancestry that we interviewed commented on this fact and said that when some of her friends of Scottish or English descent ask her when her family first moved to Canada, she asks *them* the same question, reminding them that they all moved to Cape Breton from somewhere.

JANA: The most striking aspect of our research has been the very limited amount of musical performance and cultural events within the community of Croatian descendants in Sydney. We heard from the Croatian community that life was so hard in the times of their parents' generation that no one had time for dancing, singing, or performing. Moreover, they explained that the community was not large enough for a rich musical culture. Did Croatians here really neglect the continuation of musical traditions from "the old country" or were we asking the wrong questions?

An important consideration for the loss of musical traditions within this community might be the way they felt in Sydney as new immigrants. We were told that many did not speak English very well, particularly the women who worked at home, and that many experienced discrimination. These immigrants have probably felt they were perceived as being backward or uncultivated and therefore were self-conscious

about practicing musical traditions that would emphasize their difference and foreign-ness.

JELKA: The information on some of the music activities we found often described very private and intimate practices, like songs parents and grandparents used to sing at home, lullabies or nursery rhymes, or the old records families used to listen to at home. An exception to these private practices was the Croatian Tamburitza Orchestra that used to be active in Sydney.

JANA: As we conducted our interviews, we learned that there was a tamburica ensemble that was active for a brief period of time beginning in 1939.* The group was formed by Joe Jelenich, an Ontario Croat who came to Sydney for work. He saw potential in six young men and taught them to play string instruments that make up a tamburica orchestra. Jelenich sought to create a professional music group. He ordered instruments from Montreal, and had beautiful costumes made for all members of the ensemble. We were also told that he insisted on an intense practising schedule while the group was most active. They performed at the waterfront park on Esplanade every other weekend, at the Croatian Hall, and traveled to nearby Croatian communities for performances. We learned that they were featured on a radio program, and that they even recorded an album, but our search thus far hasn't uncovered any audio records of these events.



Figure 5: Tamburaski Orkestar.

The performance activities of the group were put on hold during WWII, as some of the band members volunteered for or were enlisted in the war effort. Sadly, they returned with physical and psychological injuries and were unable to continue playing their instruments. The only material documents we were able to find are a picture of the group when it first formed and an old tamburica preserved by the family of a former member. Unfortunately, there were no other attempts to organize performance of Croatian music in Sydney after Jelenich's project with the Croatian Tamburitza Orchestra.

The only other memory of a musical event was a performance of *ganga*¹ on a Ben Eoin beach on a late summer evening. One research participant remembered her mother telling the story of when she and her husband, together with another Croatian couple, went to the beach to entertain themselves after everyone has left the summer cottages for the season. After they got back to their bungalow, they noticed a neighbor sitting on his porch. He started talking to them and mentioned that he heard them singing on the beach and that he was interested in the unusual style of music they performed. The mother remembered this experience as uncomfortable or even embarrassing, because she made a point in saying that they never sang together after that day.

This unexpected recollection of one of our interlocutors really captivated our imagination. Did they sing *ganga* frequently as a group? Was it mostly in private? Why were they so secretive? Were they embarrassed about singing it in public? Did they feel that singing *ganga* was in some way incongruent with their new lives in Canada?

Unfortunately, we haven't heard any other stories of those couples singing together or separately anywhere else. However, it did make us think about the private lives of these early immigrants, and about the aspects of individual lives that evade memorialization.

JELKA: I believe there is a really strong point this *ganga* story is telling, about traditions from "the old country" being perceived and lived very intimately. Much of the Croatian culture was being practised only within families and included, besides the musical experience we already mentioned, Croatian cooking and recipes and the tradition of having vegetable gardens in the backyard, which was perceived as being odd by some of the other ethnic groups in that time. Regarding the record collections, we heard many stories about the first-generation Croatians in Cape Breton having recordings of [gusle playing](#), which is a rural string instrument used for the accompaniment of epic² songs and, much like *ganga*, is not

easily culturally translatable. Unlike these intimate music practices, the music that was being played at parties, weddings, and celebrations, whether by the tamburica orchestra or by some of the other local musicians, included polkas, waltzes, and other dance music, and didn't differ much from the music played at other ethnic community events. Of course, many of the parties were also mixed and were not ethnically exclusive.

JANA: Socialization within one's own ethnic community was more common with the first generation immigrants from Croatia. They were all neighbors in the Pier and helped each other in times of need. Some families took in Croatian boarders, a common practice that continued well into the 1960s and '70s. Women of the house would cook and clean for the working single men, or men with families back home, in exchange for a moderate monthly fee. Many women were able to supplement their incomes this way if their husbands were out of work, injured, or had passed away.



Figure 6: Pier houses next to plant.



Figure 7: Pier houses.

For the first generation, it was important to marry within the Croatian community. When this was im-

possible due to the sheer lack of women in Sydney in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, eligible bachelors would send word back to their old village, where the families would try to find an appropriate and willing young bride. The subsequent generation placed less importance on marriage in general. Some have formed lasting bonds with Ukrainians and Poles from the Pier, because many attended the Polish church and some attended the Ukrainian church.

As we talked with descendants of Croatian immigrants, we realized that their contributions to the local community are generally overlooked. Because they presently don't have their own church or a community hall that would spatially and culturally define them within the Whitney Pier community, their participation in community life is often unrecognized.

We learned that Croatian immigrants were members of the Polish and Ukrainian church choirs and that their donations to local churches helped promote many community events and causes. Yet, in the various celebrations of "multiculturalism", Croatians are neglected. Actually, it was Marcia Ostashewski who recognized this situation while she was doing research on the Ukrainian community in Sydney. It is due to her interest in the Croatian community that both Jelka and I were invited to learn more about them. We hope that the final product – the web portal – will provide an opportunity for their representation in the community and show their unique contributions to the larger Whitney Pier neighborhood. It will also serve as an archive for their stories and family documents they shared with us.

**Please [have a listen to the supplementary audio file of a U.S. tamburica orchestra from the 1940s](#), found in the online version of this article.*

Notes

¹ *Ganga* is a two-part rural vocal style performed in mountainous regions of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. It emphasizes close harmonies that produce the desirable and characteristic "beating" between the two melody lines. Audio example:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGqv_ArevDE.

² The term "epic" in Croatian defines a specific literary genre. It is narrative literature in verse or prose which is commonly used for telling long stories from the past. The songs accompanied by *gusle* playing usually consist of octosyllabic or decasyllabic verses, can last for several hours and sometimes (but not always) describe local legends and myths.

- Jelka Vukobratovic
- Jana Zoric

Ely Rosenblum

When I was approached to conduct research on the Jewish community on Cape Breton Island, I couldn't pass up the opportunity. My great-grandparents arrived on the island in the late 19th Century, and started a general store. In the 1940s this would become Rosenblum's Ladieswear, which operated until the 1990s, when my grandparents moved to Toronto. Working on this research project meant I could return to the childhood home of my father and work on a family history, along with an oral history of the community. While my research generally focuses on music and media, my experience in ethnographic film, field recording, and curating would become essential skills for working with the community.

For the residents of Cape Breton Island, good research is often correlated with amount of time spent within the community. This proved to be problematic from the outset: the majority of the Jewish community has left Sydney, Glace Bay and New Waterford over the last 20 years. Conducting regional research in a place with only a few residents left, rarely forming a minion for Shabbat services, would prove to be a challenge.

How might I approach this community, which I have been chosen to work with because of my academic experience and familial connection to the region, yet am only peripherally a part of? How would the Jewish community want me to represent them?

With only a few remaining leaders of the community left on the island, I quickly realized that these resourceful few had collected hundreds, if not thousands, of photos, documents, and recordings of community activities between the 1930s and today. The Chernin collection of photographs and documents, which is now housed at the Beaton Institute and is being digitized quickly, proved especially useful. CBC audio and video recordings of the Dubinsky family from the 1970s and 1980s have also been an essential part of piecing together the cultural history of Jews on the island.

In order to fully understand these communities, I found my ethnographic fieldwork to be heavily reliant upon the archive. Rather than treating the materials as supplementary information for later interviews, I made the archive take on a larger role. In this research, the archive not only contributes to the ethnography, it is an integral part of it.

To represent the Jews of Cape Breton with a written cultural history felt as though it might usurp their own authority, one that has been developed through decades of community involvement, and in many cases charitable work for other ethnic communities in the region. My intention is to use curatorial and com-

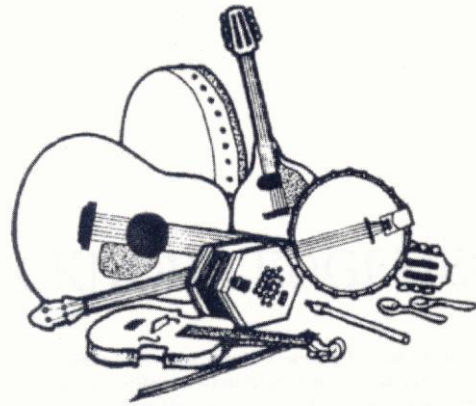
putational techniques that might not ordinarily be considered for archiving and historiography to enrich the documents, photos, video, and audio recordings. This provides members of the community and researchers with a way to interact with the materials, thus encouraging new insights.

What has resulted from conversations I had prior to arriving on the island is the decision to create a web portal and exhibit that would provide an interactive forum for former Cape Breton residents. It will trigger memories and foster a community that might be thought of only as a historical one.

Digitized materials from the community will be organized through cybercartographic techniques. With the recent availability of open-source application programming interfaces for digital mapping, programmers have been able to create applications that literally put music and sound on the map. Since the mid-2000s, sound artists, electroacoustic composers, and archivists have been able to use digital resources to map their field recordings. Many of these maps allow for users to upload their own recordings, creating maps with thousands of sound clips. But the tradition of sound mapping comes from a desire to establish discourses surrounding particular histories of listening: a sound map's immediate purpose is to allow us to navigate through these sonic historiographies. Accordingly, using Google Maps programming interfaces, such as their new Tourbuilders feature, historical narratives will be constructed through attaching archival materials to time vectors and points on a map of Cape Breton. Conducting research and organizing field notes in the same manner as they are presented online to the community provides a fluidity to the operation of turning data into description.

In the spring of 2014, a curatorial endeavor supported by Cape Breton University and the Beaton Institute will honor the collections made by members of the Jewish community who still reside on Cape Breton Island by presenting media and objects from the collection at the Centre for Imaginative Ethnography, York University. This exhibit will be interactive, encouraging visitors to contribute their own memories to the exhibit. In turn, it will be updated to include the new oral accounts of Jewish immigrants living in Ontario. The exhibition will find a permanent home in Sydney, Nova Scotia, providing the community with a living record and homage to Jewish life on the island.

- Ely Rosenblum



Canadian Society
for Traditional Music

Société canadienne pour
les traditions musicales