

11-25-2016

## Latent Memories of a Sacred Place Emerge in a Sacred Space

Mirko Petricevic  
*Waterloo Lutheran Seminary*, [mpetricevic@wlu.ca](mailto:mpetricevic@wlu.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

---

### Recommended Citation

Petricevic, Mirko (2016) "Latent Memories of a Sacred Place Emerge in a Sacred Space," *Consensus*: Vol. 37 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol37/iss2/9>

This Studies and Observations is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

## Latent Memories of a Sacred Place Emerge in a Sacred Space

Mirko Petricevic

Each year at the height of mid-summer heat, pilgrims stream along roads and paths crisscrossing Eastern Croatia to a town where, devotees say, the Virgin Mary appeared in a villager's dream more than a century ago. In the dream, the Mother of God declared that a recently discovered local water spring belonged to her. As the faithful gathered at the spring, washed in the water and prayed to the Virgin for healing, stories of miraculous cures spread. So devotees built a church by her well, and pilgrims have been drawn to the water ever since.

The sacred place is a five-minute walk from the house where my father was born in a town called Ilača – a town plunked just north of the railroad tracks travelled by countless trains including an Orient Express that shuttled between Paris and Istanbul.

I rode a train on those tracks as the autumn of 1984 waned. It was my first trip to Ilača (pronounced Ee'-luh-chuh). I didn't know anyone living there at the time. I didn't have a hotel reservation, the town was too small for a hotel, but I knew the name of one of my distant cousins. My aunt back in Toronto gave him notice that I would be dropping by for a visit. Being the only tourist standing at the train doors as it slowed to a stop, I asked a fellow passenger if she knew my cousin (of course she did!) and then hitched a ride to my cousin's front door.

While growing up in southern Ontario, Ilača was a mythological place for me. The town and its colourful characters were constant topics of conversation whenever my dad and his sister gathered around the kitchen table. She laughed whenever she told the story of my dad chasing her through the village and back home before he would stoop to washing a single dirty dish. (Gender roles at the time dictated that washing dishes was exclusively women's work.) There was the story of the elderly neighbour who sold her house with the proviso that she could live in it until her death. To the consternation of the buyers, she continued to live for decades before dying in her mid-90s. And there was the often-told story of my aunt, a hungry orphan in post-war Yugoslavia, nearly slicing off her finger while trying to steal a chunk of smoked sausage. Most of the tales ended with belly laughs bouncing off the walls. Tell a story, laugh, and repeat. Tell a story, laugh, and repeat. But the stories never grew boring. Rather, they stoked my curiosity for the legendary village and its people...my people.

So years later while backpacking through Europe I eventually found myself in that village, standing at my cousin's front door. And as my short stay stretched to six weeks that mythical place turned, for me, into a sacred place.

No doubt, Ilača was a religious place. The town's tiny population (300 families) was served by two Roman Catholic churches; women crossed themselves and men doffed their hats whenever they walked past a church; and people usually greeted each other by saying, "praise Jesus." But religious devotion and ritual practices weren't the reasons Ilača became a sacred place for me.

Rather, it was the place where an old woman stopped me on the street and told me I was the spitting image of my grandfather Mirko, who never returned from the war but whose name lives on with me. It was the place I sang in a choir loft during midnight mass on Christmas Eve, then returned to my cousin's home and wrestled with the younger ones in straw that carpeted the kitchen in homage to Jesus's birthplace. And it was the first place that I recalled dreaming in Croatian, which was my mother tongue but was superseded by English before I can remember.

Less than a decade after my first visit to Ilača, bullets, tanks and mortars desecrated the homes, churches and graveyard where my ancestors were buried. My cousins – thankfully most of them survived – were scattered for years before returning to their decimated town. It's where my aunt rebuilt the house where she was born, then died too young to enjoy it. And it's the place my father, brother and I planted a maple-wood urn containing her ashes – finally at rest alongside her mother.

Back in Canada I turned memories of my pilgrimages into photographs. In the days before digital photography I worked in a darkroom – a cave-like sanctuary lit dimly in an orange glow. It was a quiet place where the sound of running water flowed under radio broadcasts and classic rock marathons. Frequent “clicks” signalled the photo enlarger's light switching on, passing through black-and-white negatives and casting my latent memories onto photosensitive paper. It was a workspace where art and science, passion and self-discovery combined to create a place that was sacred in its own right.





