

Primary school Gradac (Croatia)

HISTORY IS (SOMETIMES) THE TEACHER OF LIFE

We love history, but not only information about wars, battles, revolutions. We are interested in how everyday life looked like, how ordinary people lived, what they did, how they performed certain jobs, how children had fun and play, how women lived, how people lived in the area where we live today... All people love stories and it seems that there is even a physiological explanation for this - when we hear a story that resonates with us, our levels of a hormone called oxytocin increase which boosts our feelings of things like trust, compassion, and empathy. Beside this, stories also offers an effective mechanism for knowledge transfer. Through stories, the most serious events from history could be presented in an interesting way, but also learn a lot about modern times.

This is the reason why we in our school for the last two years have developed the project *Stories from Gradac*. The focus was on three almost forgotten stories from Gradac from the past.

The first story is related to the production and trade of salt, and we named it after the already forgotten saying " A KILO OF TOBACCO - A KILO OF THE ADRIATIC" ie „a kilo of sea salt for a kilo of tobacco“. This saying which is preserved in this area, best describes the value of salt in the past. If we compare today's prices of these two products, it is clear that the "white gold", for which wars were fought, roads and cities were built, has faded today. The production of salt, "white gold" as it was called in the past, on the shores of the Adriatic Sea began in prehistoric times. Numerous toponyms on our coast indicate this tradition, so the central square in Gradac is still called Soline (Croatian sol - salt). The subject of our interest was the production of salt in the area of the Municipality of Gradac, where produced salt in several smaller saltworks, but also in households. It is assumed that the oldest salt pan in the Gradac Municipality was built on the site where the remains of a Roman villa are located. In the memory of the oldest inhabitants, salt was as valuable as money and represented a valuable means of exchange, in which **women played an important role. The story was a starting points to discuss the ordinary life from the antic times and the value of some products and to compare it with the nowadays as well as comparing the production of salt in the past and nowadays with the emphasis on the role in the society of the women in the past and now.**

The second story refers to the votive procession in honor of St Roch which was held in Gradac for the 110th time. Saint Roch is one of the most venerated medieval saints of the Catholic Church. It protects against epidemics, leprosy, wounds, cholera, and animal diseases, especially dogs. It is interesting that the citizen of Gradac do not celebrate the festivity of St. Roch on his feast day, 16th August, but on 3rd January. The reason for that is an unknown disease whose epidemic started in Decembre 1911 and continued in the first days of 1912. It took 14 children's lives. The medicine then did not have the ability to answer this challenge, so the people turned to St. Roch, the patron from infectious diseases, so that by his intercession God helps their children. The then pastor has suggested penitential prayer throughout the parish, worship and procession with cross and statue of St. Roch carried

throughout the village. The first procession was held on 3rd January 1912. The prayers of all citizens were granted and children stopped dying. Since then religious people fast on bread and water every 2nd January and on 3rd January participate in the votive procession in honor of patron St. Roch. **The story was a starting point to discuss the way of fighting diseases in the past and now (quarantine, vaccination, disinfection...) with special emphasis on COVID pandemic.**

The third story refers to the complex of refugee camps in the desert on the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, collectively known as El Shatt. In September 1943, while running away from fascist terror in Dalmatia, there happened a big emigration of people to which allies insured accommodation on Sinai peninsula close to the city of El Shatt. In the beginning of 1944 almost 40000 people from Dalmatia went to uncertainty, firstly to Dalmatian islands, then to south Italy. Finally 30000 people arrived to Egypt, 623 of them from Gradac municipality. That exodus is a part of collective memory in Dalmatia. Refugees were welcomed by endless desert, hot sand, wind and huge temperature differences between day and night. Regardless, in the camp there were established schools, hospitals, craft workshops, cultural-artistic groups and churches. There were even 5 newspapers coming out. Marriages were formed and around 500 children were born. Unfortunately, more than 850 people, mostly children, stayed there to rest forever. Some of them were brothers and sisters of our pupils' grandparents who told us the story about their stay in the camp. Their unmarked graves are protected by a statue of Mother Dalmatia. The last convoy from El Shatt left on 24th March 1946. **The story was a starting point to discuss the problem of refugees as one of the main outcome of wars with emphasis on the wars in former Yugoslavia in 90th-ies and the war in Ukraine.**

In addition to making several short films and making power point and SWAY presentations and a „mini salt work“, we presented the results of our research through three trilingual info boards placed at appropriate locations in the town and leaflets. **Each panel contains a short information/story, old photos related to the story and the narration of the tellers - a witnesses from the time of the events the story is about.** In this way, an effort was made not only to preserve these stories from the history of our place from being forgotten, but also to familiarize the guests of the Municipality of Gradac with them and in this way to enrich contents tourism, especially when we have in mind that tourism is the main economy in our town.

Through the conversation with the students, each of the stories was connected to today's situation and today's problems. We observed that, although the position of women has changed, women still, in addition to their work outside of the house for which they are paid less than men on average, do the most of the house work. The problem of such undervalued and unpaid work and women's pensions, which do not take this part into account, is problematized. When we discussed the fight against epidemics, we noticed that, although today's medicine has made great progress, it is still not all-powerful, and we also problematized the negative attitude towards vaccination and quarantine among part of the population. The third story reminded us of the consequences of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, when many parents and grandparents of our grandfathers fled from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Gradac (Croatia) and stayed here. We talked about the problems they faced

and the reasons for their decision not to return to their homeland. The war in Ukraine brought new refugees to our country and to our school and an incentive to talk about the problems they face. During the project we also improved our presentation and the IT skills, entrepreneurial competences. We also learned how to produce the salt and that this process more or less stayed the same as in the ancient times.

“He who has seen the present has seen everything, that which happened in the most distant past and that which will happen in the future.” is quote of Roman emperor and stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius and we could agree with him. Eventhough it seems the things were changing during the time, some basic problems seem to stay at least similar if not the same. History is teaching us a lot of things but it seems that we are not always good listeners. We realized that history is more funny to learn by starting with current situations and problems and that stories are one of the best ways to learn. It is up to us to try to make changes which can make the conditions of our lives more fair, better or at least less miserable. We believe that an answer is always in proactive behaviour, engagement and active participation in society. And to listen what the history has to say.