

# BRITISH COUNCIL'S *FIRST LINES* POETRY TOUR CROATIA & AUSTRIA MARCH 2004

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## Saturday 20 March – London, Zagreb

They fly us into Trieste, in Italy, even though we could quite easily land in Zagreb itself. They'd asked us first, of course, and we'd agreed – the trip through the Italian mountains, down through Slovenia and out into Croatia sounded too fantastic to miss, even if it would add four hours to the trip. And it was a stunning way to start the tour. Extraordinary scenery, turnpikes and border checkpoints made it all feel like being properly abroad. Pulled in at the hotel around 6.00pm, and had to be in reception by 6.30pm to meet Rosana Besednik, Arts and Exchanges Manager for the British Council in Croatia. She took us up into Zagreb old town, past the cathedral, to the offices of one of the city's publishers, and showed us into a back room. There were a few clutches of people standing around with drinks, and we were introduced to them one by one.

"Hi, I'm Antony."  
"Branko."  
"Are you a poet?"  
"Yes."

"Hi, I'm Polly."  
"Tvrtko."  
"Are you a poet?"  
"Yes."  
"Are you coming on the tour?"  
"Yes."

They were all poets and, yes, they were all coming on the tour. The tour in question being the Goranovo proljece, or Goran Spring, the annual four-day poetry tour celebrating the life and work of Ivan Goran Kovacic, Croatia's national poet who was killed fighting for the partisans in the second world war.



Miloš, Branko, Miroslav, Polly, Owen, Clare, Matthew, Antony, Tvrtko

Between the five of us, we manage to talk to most of the people in the room over about half an hour, and it's already apparent how excited they are about the festival and about poetry in general. As we're leaving, each of us is given a bag stuffed with guide books, biscuits, souvenirs and local wine by Branko Cegec, the President of the Festival. Each year they take along a group of foreign poets – it had been the French in 2003 – and our first encounter with the festival's own poets is a bit faltering, but unmistakably warm.

Then we're off to dinner with Rosana, Roy Cross (also of the British Council) and a gaggle of other guests – architects and poets. We have a wonderful evening, and make great new friends. They try and tell us what to expect from our four days on the road. They don't even come close.

Around midnight, the five Brits say goodnight to Roy and his wife, and head for a bar. At last we try out a full sentence in Croatian: *pet pivo molim*. Five beers please.

## Sunday 21 March – Zagreb, Lukovdol, Zadar



Owen & Antony at the Memorial to Ivan Goran Kovacic, Lukovdol

8.30am we gather at the square under the cathedral. There's a lot of waiting around, which gives us a chance to meet some of the people we'll be sharing the coach with. Already we're comparing notes on the differences between poetry publishing in the UK and in Croatia.

It's a two hour drive south to Lukovdol, the tiny village where nothing happens, except for the one day each year when the Goran Spring swamps the place. And it happens here because this is the home of Ivan Goran Kovacic, the national poet. His house has been turned into a Dove Cottage style

museum, with his typewriter, his radio, his bed, all on display. Most striking are the enlarged black and white photos of him during the war, in fatigues, reading, holding a rifle. He's in wasteland, mountains, rocks. While we're in there, with Rosana translating for us, half a dozen other coaches have arrived in the village and the place is heaving.

A couple of hundred people gather in a stone amphitheatre among the trees, with a backdrop of mountains and birdsong. There's a local band, then prizes are presented to some children from local primary and secondary schools. They read their poems to the crowd. Huge applause. The main event is the presentation of two awards for poetry to Milorad Stojevic, a hefty white-haired pony-tailed man born in 1948, and Blaženka Brlošić, a slim 22-year old who reminds Polly of Kate Bush. She's won Goran za mlade pjesnike (a sort of Best Newcomer Award), and her prize is the publication of her first collection of poems. Milorad is receiving Goranovog vijenca, the annually awarded equivalent of the Laureateship – a big cheque and a mayorally chunky silver necklace.

And it's a big deal. The audience, many of whom are poets, are loving it. And we're loving it, even though we only understand occasional sentences translated in a hurry by Rosana or our new friend Miloš Đurđević, out here in the mountains, in the trees, in spring sun.

Just before we get back on the coach to find a four-hour spit-roast lunch and start the four-hour drive south to Zadar, Owen and I photograph the memorial to Ivan Goran Kovacic. We find that he was killed at the age of thirty: one year older than Owen, and the same age as me.

## Monday 22 March – Zadar, Ugljan, Zadar

On the road again at 9.30am, to the harbour in Zadar, then a half-hour ferry ride to the island of Ugljan. We're driven up the mountainside to a primary school, Osnovna škola Valentin Klarin, and the coachload of poets wanders into the lobby. There are several rows of raked benches, packed with young children, facing a few desks in front of wide windows with a view of the Adriatic and the mountains of the Dalmatian coast. The Croatian poets start sitting down among the children. The Brits are dithering, mindful of child protection policy, but Rosana points out that, "Here, we like to keep some faith in human nature." So we sit.

One by one, about twenty poets perform a poem each to the strangely mixed audience. And it includes the first public performance by a First Liner – Polly performs two: *Hedgehog* and *Swan*, both from the manuscript of her next



Owen, Tvrtko, Clare, Rosana, Matthew

book. There's an actor with us, too, who reads Croatian translations of Polly's poems. He's got a fantastic voice – a throatful of velvet gravel – but Miloš is muttering about him being a terrible luvvie or something... Anyway, the kids laugh and applaud throughout the hour and a bit we read to them. Throughout the reading, Tvrtko, in the row behind us, is teaching two girls how to say our names: *Ohven, Clare, Antony, Mattyew, Ohven, Clare, Antony, Mattyew...* It's pretty lively and funny for a poetry reading.

Back into the coach; then a Franciscan monastery for some sightseeing and – more importantly, we suspect – some walnut and herb brandy; then on to a Benedictine convent for a three-hour lunch and much wine; then back to the Zadar ferry and home to the hotel. Where, twenty minutes after we arrive, we start dinner.



The dinner's really an excuse for a kind of open-mic competition. Each poet is allocated a five minute slot (and there are fifty of us, remember) to perform his or her own poems to the others. There's a judging panel of five, and Clare's selected to be in it. She points out that she may not be very helpful, given that her Croatian extends to "Hello" and "Five beers please" at the moment, but she's told that she's there to judge the performance, not the words. Well, that works, anyway.

So we begin. Some of it's obviously very funny, some of it pretty miserable. And the First Liners don't understand any of it. Nonetheless, it's a curiously brilliant experience. We make friends with Davor, a young Croatian who's sold around 600 copies of his first collection of poetry. This would be more than respectable in the UK, but here – where so many of the other poets tell us they sell ten or fifteen copies of their books – it's seems extraordinary. "Well," he says, "I know lots of people."

Down the table, Polly's being given a lesson in Croatian phonetics, having decided that she's going to fill her five minutes by reading one of her own poems in translation. Miloš had translated five poems by each of us before we arrived in the country, and it's strange to see them – the right shape, the right length, with our names at the bottom – entirely unfamiliar.

It's a smoky, winey, long long long evening. Polly's the first of us to take the floor, a couple of hours into the competition. She does it – reads in Croatian – perhaps taking rather more than her allocated five minutes. Ecstatic applause. Later, Matthew and I read a poem each, then Owen gives them some Dylan Thomas from memory. In the early hours, it all comes to an end. The judges are at odds, apparently: Clare, trying to avoid accusations of nepotism, is voting against Polly in the face of an otherwise unanimous verdict. Polly wins, and is given a prize of several dozen books of Croatian poetry. The day ends with the poets weaving back to the hotel building from the bar, with Polly a dervish at the centre, "I won! I won! Does that mean we can talk about *me* for two hours, now?"

## Tuesday 23 March – Zadar

Rosana has to leave us for a couple of days, and it feels very missing-limbish heading off without her...

Morning reading in the rain-dismal old town of Zadar, in an art gallery built into the arched shell of an ancient ruin, the Gradska loža. Again, we're reading mostly to ourselves, but the building's also packed with television crews and photo-journalists, paparazzi with minidisc recorders and notepads. Clare and Owen are among the fifteen or so readers, again followed by our peripatetic luvvie reading their translations.



Then we're off to the sea-edge of the town, where we're taken into the University, and greeted by the Rector. He speaks to us for a long time – and



although, again, the First Liners aren't getting much of it, what's excitingly clear is that he represents a culture that's really keen on its poetry and its poets. The Goran Spring roadshow is genuinely welcome wherever it turns up.

And the festival's unusual for us in a million different ways, but the most striking thing is how this enormous, eclectic gang is hoying up and down the country, in a confined bus, having a fabulous time together. Yes, we've got festivals at home; yes, poets get drunk together a lot at home; yes, when you put poets together at home, often all they want to do is talk poetry at each other because no one else they know gives a damn; but this...

It's hard, though, in a way. The First Liners have had barely five minutes alone together, or alone alone, since we arrived. Each of us, I'd guess, has had a moment when all we wanted to do was stand by the water and chuck stones in, without talking, for half an hour. But it's exhilarating at the same time. To be in a room with Croats, Hungarians, Bosnians, Macedonians, Slovenians. To be making friends with them: Silvestar, Vanda, Sladan, Miroslav, Helena, the relentless Simo and the rest. For us, this far into the trip, it's not really about poetry yet (we've each only read one or two poems out loud in three days, after all), but about swapping tiny bits of our culture. *Oh, you do it like that, do you? We do it like this! Or You think like that, do you? So do we!*



But we're talking a lot about the differences between English-language poetry and Croatian poetry. Miloš ought to know the difference, having translated our work from one to the other: he says ours is denser, more dependent on the muscle of each individual word. From the English translations of Croatian poems we're given, we'd probably say that Croatian poetry is much more concerned with mood and suggestion than with narrative. Perhaps more politically allegorical. But three days isn't enough to start generalising. But we're talking to Croats themselves, learning how to compare. And suffering that classic

embarrassment that everyone has better English than the fingers-of-one-hand Croatian that we've so far managed to acquire. Brits abroad.

Anyway, after lunch we do some sightseeing in the ancient area of Zadar, then take half an hour off. The First Liners end up in a bar with Branko, Vanda and a bunch of others. Suddenly the group goes silent for a second, then there's a cheer, then lots of hushing. On the TV above my head, apparently, is a kind of lifestyle feature programme, starring a poetry publisher from Zagreb – a great friend of everyone in the room. Conversation dies for the half hour that the show's on.

Then it's the coach, again, to a restaurant which seems miles from anything, and a five-hour dinner to celebrate the launch of a local poet's book of poems – one hundred and some pages of poems about tigers. Of course, they're not actually about tigers – there's some monumental allegory going on. Despite the politically inflammatory nature of the work, and the astrologer he's brought with him (who reads an eternal-sounding essay about the poems), all of which forces the massed company of poets into their first and only display of disgruntlement (for which we're soundly scolded), it's a fantastic evening. Traditional music; lots of wine; hours of dancing with anyone who'll dance, which is mostly everyone. That old cliché happens at about 3.00am – back onto the coach, tired but happy, blah blah blah, and so to bed.

## Wednesday 24 March – Zadar, Nin, Zagreb

Croatian poets think nothing of early mornings. Off to Nin, a tiny relic of a place – stunning, by the sea – where we spend a while sightseeing among the eleventh-century ruins and preservations. Then we roll up at something very like an assembly hall attached to a minuscule bar. And the whole



population of Nin seems to be there, packed in at the back of the room so we poets can have all the seats. We're warmed up by an orchestra of local school children playing guitars, ukuleles and all kinds of stringed things. At last, among a dozen other poets, it's time for me and Matthew to give our first official reading. We each get to read two from the five that Miloš has translated... and we discover that our luvvie's going to pick our poems for us. And he's not to be swayed, even though we both end up repeating the poems we read for the competition on Monday. Anyway, it doesn't matter. We get the kind of response we always hope for.

Lunch, then the coach for more hours on the road. It takes almost four hours to get from the spring sun of the Dalmatian coast to the snow of the mountains towards the National Park where, we're disappointed to learn, the bears are still hibernating, to the grey evening rain of Zagreb and the last event of the Goranovo proljece.

In the basement area of a mezzanine bar, there's an unusually focused stage, with four readers: our prizewinners, Milorad Stojevic and Blaženka Brlošić, with Tvrtko Vukovic and Ivica Propadalo. It feels very unusual to hear them reading more than one or two poems each – much more like a reading you'd expect in the UK, somehow.

Then the tour's over. Three of the First Liners celebrate with Davor (who's supposed to be crashing on our floor until his bus leaves for home at 5.30am) and bottles of local wine in the hotel lift, going up and down in airless heat for a couple of hours, trying not to make too much noise on any given floor. Davor misses his bus.

## Thursday 25 March – Zagreb

Well, it's not over for the First Liners. This morning, Clare and I go to run a poetry class at Klasicna gimnazija, a secondary school which specialises in classical languages, and shares its building with three other secondary schools. We're picked up from our hotel by two girls who walk us there, showing us the best spots to have a smoke, a drink or a kiss, then obsess about Clare's trainers.

Matthew and Owen, meanwhile, are being shown into a classroom miles away, in which are forty female trainee teachers in their early twenties, who've spent days reading their poems and researching clever questions to ask. Apparently this is a fairly pleasing experience.

Clare and I run a workshop in English, exactly as we would in a British comprehensive. As ever, we're amazed at the invention and the boldness of the kids' writing. They're funny and warm, there's a couple of boys on the back row who make every exercise into a double-act. Just like home. We use Simon Armitage's poem, *About His Person*, as a springboard into helping the kids write a poem about an experience of their own and, even in English, they're moving and tender, inventive and beguiling. Clare and I leave the school on a high – the 90 minute workshop's stretched to two hours, and the staff can't seem to thank us enough. We're the first British writers they've had at the school, and they're treating it like a big event. A lot's happening to us this week that might make us feel like making trite responses, and this is one: I feel I've learned more here than the kids have, by a long way.

The five First Liners gather in the evening to play pool with two of Owen and Matthew's student teachers, then go to an English language bookshop, where Clare's *Bedtime* is the only one of our books on the shelves. Then dinner at a vegetarian restaurant. Matthew's a vegetarian, and Croatia isn't the best place for it...



Four First Liners make it to Hemingway's, a club decorated with wall-sized black and white photos of Ernest Hemingway. We gatecrash the comedy club upstairs, but only catch the last two minutes of a ventriloquist's act.

Three First Liners end the day with a private poetry reading, on the stairs between the first and second floors of the hotel. More of that local wine, and swapping our new poems, going husky as the birds start to wake up outside about 4.00am.

## Friday 26 March – Zagreb

Clare and I are picked up from the British Council offices, where we meet Rosana for the first time since she left us in Zadar, by a teacher from another Zagreb secondary school. We repeat yesterday's workshop and the same thing happens – the teenagers are fantastic. We're packed off loaded with school t-shirts and books of their poetry, in Croatian. Owen and Polly are teaching in a school outside the city, and I think they have the same feeling.

We're interviewed in our hotel by Sladan Lipovec for one of Croatia's leading literary magazines, and photographed in a big five-on-a-bed moment. Can't wait to see how that looks in a serious literary publication...

And then it's our last event in Croatia: our own First Lines reading in Zagreb. The 22000 Mile Club is a great little place, done up like a submarine on two floors. We're reading in the basement, and there's a PA piped to the upstairs bar. When we arrive there's no one there. We're pretty much a minority interest at home, and we really thought we might read to an empty room here in Zagreb. But by the time Matthew takes the mic to introduce us, the place is rammed. It's full of the poets we last saw on Wednesday evening, and dozens of people we've never met before. And it's a great reading.

Branko Cegec reads a couple of poems after we've finished, to the astonishment of the Croatian poets. Branko's notoriously shy of reading, and no one's heard him read in public in living memory. His English is less good than many of the others, and we've rarely managed to talk to him properly, but when he thanks us in front of the audience, it's extremely moving. As the President of the Goranovo proljece, he's someone we've really wanted to please. He presents us with signed copies of his latest book of poems. He seems pleased.

We're interviewed by an English-language Croatian radio station, by several journalists. We're photographed. People are interested in our thoughts about Croatia, about poetry and poets.

In the end, we feel that we've contributed something to the Goranovo proljece. For myself, I'm grateful to have been immersed in this weirdly intense, hyper-real trip – to have shared the most serious and stupid of thoughts and ideas with this enthusiastic troupe of poets. To have taken part in a festival funded by a country's Ministry of Culture – a festival which doesn't seem to need to tick any boxes, which is allowed and encouraged to be its rambling, expansive, conversational self. To have been brought here by the British Council with the excellent remit of simply mixing with Croatians, and all the other nationalities represented on the tour. To have been on a coach in which we swapped so very many books and e-mail addresses. To have driven through some of the most beautiful landscapes, and the heartbreaking miles of shelled and abandoned villages.

And then we go to a fabulously unpleasant club, which Miloš has warned us about, quite urgently.

Three First Liners end the day, at 4.00am, trying to rescue the parcel-tape which our books were wrapped in when we arrived, to package up the illustrated and framed stanzas of Matthew's and Owen's poems presented to them by the student teachers.

Owen's up again at 5.00am to catch a plane to London, so he can get home to Wales for mid-afternoon. He's meeting a couple of Czech poets, and they're reading in Cardiff that evening.





Clare & Polly, Graz

## Saturday 27 March – Zagreb, Graz

So when we leave Zagreb by taxi in the morning, we're down to four. We drive through Slovenia and into Austria, arriving in Graz late lunchtime. We're guests of the British Council in Austria, reading at the European Centre for Modern Languages, on the river front, to an audience who've already been there for three days, taking part in a conference about the teaching of international languages. We're expecting a tired, lukewarm crowd, but what we find is a fantastically engaged group of, maybe, thirty five people. They represent 26 of the 33 member states.

Within minutes I've talked to women from Armenia, Serbia and Estonia, men from Austria, France and the UK; and I'm revising the set-list of five poems I was going to read to them. I trawl my two books and the new manuscript for poems which are set in, or refer to, European countries. There are about seven. I give the audience a choice of country. When they pick one, I read the relevant poem. It seems to go down well – especially when an Italian delegate nominates an Italy poem, and I announce *Eyeglass* by saying, "This poem is about Galileo." There's a chorus of ooh-ing and ah-ing around the room...

For some reason, the First Liners seem to read differently this evening. Last night intensity, maybe; but our sets all feel unusual, and fresh. We've all heard each other read a lot since we first toured together in 2001, but this one's pretty special. The audience makes the reading, and this one is drinking it in.

The British Council then spoils us with a fantastic dinner, and one too many shots of local spirits. Four First Liners go back to the Hotel Daniel by taxi, raid a minibar, then give up around 3.30am.

## Sunday 28 March – Graz, London

Home. Different.

### Particular thanks to:

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First Lines; Lukovdol, Croatia